

## By Whose Authority?

In the prologue we looked first at the role of scripture in the historical Christian church and then at how today's understanding of that role is impacted by contemporary culture. In this first chapter we will look at the "authority of scripture" as part of a larger divine authority.

### 'Authority of Scripture' Is a Shorthand for "God's Authority Exercised *through* Scripture"

We now arrive at the central claim of this book: that the phrase "authority of scripture" can make Christian sense only if it is a shorthand for "the authority of the triune God, exercised somehow *through* scripture." Once we think this through, several other things become clear.

All authority is from God, declares Paul in relation to governments (Romans 13:1); Jesus says something very similar in John 9:11. In Matthew 28:18, the risen Jesus makes the still more striking claim that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him, a statement echoed elsewhere—for instance, in Philippians 2:9–11. A quick glance through many other texts in both the Old Testament (e.g., Isaiah 40–55) and the New (e.g., Revelation 4 and 5) would confirm this kind of picture. When John declares that in the beginning was the word," he does not reach a climax with "and the word was written down" but "and the word became flesh." The letter to the Hebrews speaks glowingly of God speaking through scripture in time past, but insists that now, at last, God has spoken through his own son (1:1–2). Since these are themselves "scriptural" statements, that means that scripture itself points—authoritatively, if it does indeed possess authority!—away from itself and to the fact that final and true authority belongs to God himself, now delegated to Jesus Christ. It is Jesus, according to John 8:39–40, who speaks the truth which he has heard from God.

The familiar phrase "the authority of scripture" thus turns out to be more complicated than it might at first sight appear. This hidden complication may perhaps be the reason why some current debates remain so sterile.

This kind of problem, though, is endemic in many disciplines, and we ought to be grown-up enough to cope with it. Slogans and clichés are often shorthand ways of making more complex statements. In Christian theology, such phrases regularly act as "portable stories"—that is, ways of packing up longer narratives about God, Jesus, the church and the world, folding them away into convenient suitcases, and then carrying them about with us. (A good example is the phrase "the atonement." This phrase is rare in the Bible itself; instead, we find things like "The Messiah died for our sins according to the scriptures"; "God so loved the world that he gave his only son," and so on. But if we are to discuss the atonement, it is easier to do so with a single phrase, assumed to "contain" all these sentences, than by repeating one or more of them each time.) Shorthands, in other words, are useful in the same way that suitcases are. They enable us to pick up lots of complicated things and carry them around all together. But we should never forget the real point of doing so, like the point of carrying belongings in a suitcase, is that what has been packed away can then be unpacked and put to use in the new location. Too much debate about scriptural authority has had the form of people hitting one another with locked suitcases. It is time to unpack our shorthand doctrines, to lay them out and inspect them. Long years in a suitcase may have made some of the contents go moldy. They will benefit from fresh air, and perhaps a hot iron.

When we take the phrase "the authority of scripture" out of its suitcase, then, we recognize that it can have Christian meaning only if we are referring to scripture's authority *in a delegated or mediated sense* from that which God himself possesses and that which Jesus possesses as the risen Lord and Son of God, the Immanuel. It must mean, if it means anything Christian, "the authority of God exercised *through* scripture." The question then becomes: What might we mean by the authority of God, or of Jesus? What roles does scripture have *within that*? Where does the Spirit come into the picture? And, not least, how does this "authority" actually *work*? How does it relate, if at all, to the "authority" of leaders or office-bearers within the church?

## Authority and Story

Before we begin to answer these questions, we must face another complication. Not only does the Bible itself declare that all authority belongs to the God revealed in Jesus and the Spirit; the Bible itself, as a whole and in most of its parts, is not the sort of thing that many people envisage today when they hear the word “authority.”

It is not, for a start, a list of rules, though it contains many commandments of various sorts and in various contexts. Nor is it a compendium of true doctrines, though of course many parts of the Bible declare great truths about God, Jesus, the world, and ourselves in no uncertain terms. Most of its constituent parts, and all of it when put together (whether in the Jewish canonical form or the Christian one), can best be described as *story*. This is a complicated and much-discussed theme, but there is nothing to be gained by ignoring it.

The question is, How can a story be authoritative? If the commanding officer walks into the barrack-room and begins “Once upon a time,” the soldiers are likely to be puzzled. If the secretary of the cycling club pins up a notice which, instead of listing times for meetings, offers a short story, the members will not know when to turn up. At first sight, what we think of as “authority” and what we now as “story” do not readily fit together.

But a moment’s thought suggests that, at deeper levels, there is more to it than that. For a start, the commanding officer might well need to brief the soldiers about what has been going on over the past few weeks, so that they will understand the sensitivities and internal dynamics of the peace-keeping task they are now to undertake. The narrative will bring them up to date; now it will be their task to act out the next chapter in the ongoing saga. Or supposing the secretary of the club, having attempted unsuccessfully to make the members more conscious of safety procedures, decides to try a different tack, and puts up a notice consisting simply of a tragic story, without further comment, of a cyclist who ignored the rules and came to grief. In both cases we would understand that some kind of “authority” was being exercised, and probably all the more effectively than through a simple list of commands.

There are other ways, too, in which stories can wield the power to change the way people think and behave—in other words, an exercise power and/or authority. (The relationship between those two concepts is of course another well-known nest of puzzles, but I hope the point I am making is clear enough.) A familiar story told with a new twist in the tail jolts people into thinking differently about themselves and the world. A story told with pathos, humor, or drama opens the imagination and invites readers and hearers to imagine themselves in similar situations, offering new insights about God and human beings which enable them then to order their own lives more wisely.

All of these examples, and many more besides which one might easily think of, are ways in which the Bible does in fact work, does in fact exercise authority. This strongly suggests that for the Bible to have the effect it seems to be designed to have it will be necessary for the church to hear it as it is, not to chop it up in an effort to make it into something else. To this we shall return.

## “Authority of Scripture” as the Language of Protest

One more introductory remark on the way in which the phrase “authority of scripture” has functioned and developed in recent centuries. It is my impression that it has emerged in situations of protest, whether that of Martin Luther against the pope, of the great free church movements against Anglicanism (I think of the nineteenth-century Baptist Charles H. Spurgeon appealing to scripture to explain why he opposed so much in the established church), or, within various denominations, of a would-be “biblical” minority against a supposed “liberal” leadership. In other words, the phrase is invoked when something is proposed or done in the church to which others object: “You can’t do that, because the Bible says...” Of course, there is a positive use as well, exemplified in the teaching and preaching of scripture. But it has often been observed that when people who insist on the authority of scripture have things all to themselves—perhaps by leaving a supposedly unbiblical denomination and setting up on their own—they quickly subdivide into those who read the Bible *this* way against those who read it *that* way. This itself suggests that an over-hasty appeal to scripture all by itself does not in fact work. We need to set scripture within the larger context which the biblical writers themselves insist upon: that of the authority of God himself.

But what does the Bible itself have to say about the authority of God?

## Authority in God’s “Kingdom”

When we say or hear the word “authority,” we by no means always think of the sort of thing that the Bible has in mind when speaking of the way in which the one true God exercises “authority” over the world. Scripture’s own preferred way of referring to such matter and indeed to the saving rule of Jesus himself, is within the more dynamic concept of God’s sovereignty, or *Kingdom*. It is not, that is the kind of “authority” which consists solely in a final court of appeal, or a commanding officer giving orders for the day, or a list of rules pinned up on the wall of the cycling club. This emerges clearly in the gospels, where Jesus’s “authority” consists both in healing power and in a different kind of teaching, all of which the gospel writers—and Jesus himself—understood as part of the breaking-in of

God's Kingdom. And the notion of God's Kingdom is itself to be understood not, first and foremost, within the very different usage of the last two or three centuries in *our* culture, but within the setting and aspirations of Israel both in the Old Testament (the Psalms, Isaiah, Daniel, and so on) and in the world of Jesus's own day. (I and others have explored this world and these meanings at length; see, e.g., *Jesus and the Victory of God* [Fortress Press, 1996], Part II.)

The biblical writers live with the tension of believing both that in one sense God has always been sovereign over the world and that in another sense this sovereignty, this saving rule, is something which must break afresh into the world of corruption, decay, and death, and the human rebellion, idolatry, and sin which are so closely linked with it. "In that day," says the prophet, "YHWH will be king over all the world; he will be one and his name one" (Zechariah 14:9)—with the clear sense, however paradoxical when speaking of the creator God, that this state of affairs has not yet come about. The Jewish hope was that God's Kingdom would break into the world, to set them free from oppression and put the whole world to rights. When Revelation speaks of God and the Lamb receiving all power, glory, honor, and so forth, it is because through the Lamb's victory the whole of creation is being brought back into its intended harmony, rescued from evil and death. God's *authority*, if we are to locate it at this point, is his sovereign power accomplishing this renewal of all creation. Specific authority over human beings, notably the church, must be seen as part of that large whole.

This is where I go beyond the very helpful thesis of Telford Work, who examines, in *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Eerdmans, 2002), the way in which scripture functions dynamically within the complex events of human salvation. This is fine as far as it goes. But in scripture itself God's purpose is not just to save human beings, but to renew the whole world. This is the unfinished story in which readers of scripture are invited to become actors in their own right. "The authority of scripture" is thus a sub-branch of several other theological topics: the mission of the church, the work of the Spirit, the ultimate future hope and the way it is anticipated in the present, and of course the nature of the church. Failure to pay attention to all of these in discussing how scripture functions is part of the problem, as we can see when people, hearing the word "scripture," instantly think of rule-book—and then, according to taste, either assume that all the rules are to be followed without question or assume that they can all now be broken.

The question addressed in Work's book, however, remains the right one: What *role* does scripture play *within* God's accomplishment of this goal? It is enormously important that we see the role of scripture not simply as being to provide *true information about*, or even an accurate running commentary upon, the work of God in salvation and new creation, but as taking an active part *within* that ongoing purpose. If we are to discover a fully rounded—and itself biblical!—meaning of "the authority of scripture," it will be within this setting. Short-circuiting the question of biblical authority by ignoring these opening moves is one of the root causes of our continuing puzzles and polarizations. Scripture is there to be a means of God's action in and through us—which we include, but go far beyond, the mere conveying of information.

## Transcending "Revelation"

All this alerts us to the fact that scripture is more than simply "revelation" in the sense of "conveying information"; more even than "divine self-communication"; more, certainly, than simply a "record of revelation." Those categories come to us today primarily from an older framework of thought, in which the key question was conceived to be about a mostly absent God choosing to send the world certain messages about himself and his purposes. That usurped the richer biblical picture of a present, albeit transcendent, God, celebrating with the rich dynamic life of his creation and grieving over its shame and pain.

Of course, there is a much older notion of "revelation," according to which God is continually revealing himself to and within the world he has made, and particularly to and within his people Israel. This would accord much better with the richer image I have in mind. But in much post-Enlightenment thought this gave way to a shrunken version of the idea, namely a picture of God merely conveying true religious, theological, or ethical information. That, in turn, gave birth to the alternative hypothesis, popular not least within existentialist movements, that scripture was simply the "record" of a revelation which had taken place elsewhere, presumably in events in the life of God's people, or in their personal religious experience. This then gave rise to the false antithesis of seeing scripture either as a convenient repository of timeless truth, a vehicle for imparting "true information," or as a take-it-or-leave-it resource, itself to be removed from the reality of which it spoke, some of which might come in handy from time to time within a strategy whose outline, purpose, and energy derived from elsewhere, but which could be dispensed with, at least in part, if it seemed unhelpful for those purposes. A fully Christian view of the Bible includes the idea of God's self-revelation but, by setting it in a larger context, transforms it. Precisely because the God who reveals himself is the world's lover and judge, rather than its absentee landlord, that self-revelation is always to be understood within the category of God's mission to the world, God's saving sovereignty let loose through Jesus and the Spirit and aimed at the healing and renewal of all creation.

## More Than a Devotional Manual

The Bible is not simply “revelation,” neither is it simply a devotional aid, even the primary devotional aid. It does of course play that role within many traditions, including my own. Indeed, I cannot conceive of daily communion with God without scripture at its center. There have been many different traditions of using scripture as the fuel and raw material of personal prayer, adoration, meditation, and devotion. The monastic *lectio divina*, the evangelical “quiet time,” and the increasingly popular “Ignatian” meditation all provide examples. In those communities that use a daily office, there is often a time of silence following one or all of the readings, designed to allow for prayerful reflection. Such uses of scripture, I fully believe, embody something which is vital for healthy Christian living.

But all this is not primarily what is meant by “the authority of scripture.” Confusion can arise at this point, not least within the Protestant emphasis, articulated afresh in some circles today, that “God speaks only through scripture.” This arises, I think, in relation particularly to questions of personal guidance, where a warning is being given not to believe or follow ideas and impulses which do not come from, or at least cannot be backed up by, scripture itself.

But it is wrong to confuse *devotion* with *authority*. All sorts of things happen in prayer, not least when it is based on scripture. Connections are made as sparks jump to and fro between a passage of scripture and one’s own life and circumstances. Sometimes these are deeply compelling. But by itself this process is neither a sufficient nor a necessary part of letting scripture be *authoritative* in the church. The flying sparks of prayerful interpretation can still, alas, lead us astray. Self-deceit remains a powerful and dangerous possibility (as Wittgenstein said, “Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself”). Those individuals and churches which have “heard God speaking” through a passage of scripture, and have acted accordingly, tend to be those where division is most apparent. Equally the strong testimony both of scripture itself and of Christian (and other) experience is that God speaks in many and various ways, including through creation itself (Psalm 19; Romans 1:20; 10:18), and supremely through the Living Word, the word become flesh (John 1:14; Hebrews 1:1–2).

God does indeed speak through scripture. But we cannot either reduce God’s speech to scripture alone, or for that matter ignore the fact (which much recent writing has emphasized) that “speech” must itself be thought of in terms of “speech-acts,” the deeds which are performed by the fact of speaking at all, in particular saying certain types of things (“I promise,” “I find the defendant innocent,” and so on). And we must not confuse the idea of God speaking, in this or any other way, with the notion of *authority*. Authority, particularly when we locate it within the notion of God’s Kingdom, is much more than that. It is the sovereign rule of God sweeping through creation to judge and to heal. It is the powerful love of God in Jesus Christ, putting sin to death and launching new creation. It is the fresh, bracing and energizing wind of the Spirit.

In particular, the role of the Bible within the church and the individual Christian life indicates three things which are of central importance as we proceed. To begin with, it reminds us that the God Christians worship is characterized not least as a God who *speaks*, who communicates with his human creatures in words. This differentiates the God of the Old and New Testaments from some other gods known in the worlds of the time, and indeed today. It means that the idea of reading a book to hear and know God is not far-fetched, but cognate with the nature of God himself.

Second, it is central to early Christian instruction that we be transformed by the renewal of our minds (Romans 12:1–2). In other words, it is important that God’s transforming grace is given to us not least through enabling us to *think* in new ways. Again, this means that the idea of reading a book in order to have one’s life reordered by the wisdom of God is not counter-intuitive, but is cognate with the nature of Christian holiness itself.

Third, it reminds us that the God we worship is the God whose world-conquering power, seen in action in the resurrection of Jesus, is on offer to all those who ask for it in order thereby to work for the gospel in the world (Ephesians 1:15–23). The idea of reading a book in order to be energized for the task of mission is not a distraction, but flows directly from the fact that we humans are made in God’s image, and that, as we hear his word and obey his call, we are able to live out our calling to reflect the creator into his world.