The Nature and Authority of Scripture: Historical Sources and Theological Engagement for Congregational Awareness and Reflection

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THE NATURE AND AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE:
HISTORICAL SOURCES AND THEOLOGICAL
ENGAGEMENT FOR CONGREGATIONAL
AWARENESS AND REFLECTION

by
Carson E. Reed
THE NATURE AND AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE: HISTORICAL SOURCES AND THEOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT FOR CONGREGATIONAL AWARENESS AND REFLECTION

An Abstract of a Project/Thesis

Presented to
The Faculty of the Graduate School
Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by

Carson E. Reed

May 1995
ABSTRACT

For many Christians, biblical authority is rooted in the concept of inerrancy or in historical veracity. But within an increasingly postmodern culture, the church faces a crisis in both of these foundations. The modern presuppositions that undergird the inerrancy doctrine and the historical-critical method are showing distinct cracks in the once seamless confidence placed in both approaches. Additionally, for Churches of Christ, understandings about the nature and authority of Scripture are just below the surface of a number of issues confronting congregations. This project/thesis seeks to address this growing dilemma within the context of the Westlake Church of Christ in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Foundational to the project/thesis is the exploration of historical and theological resources that are a part of the rich legacy the church possesses. Thus, the heart of this thesis is comprised of two related endeavors. First, an historical review of the major themes and issues that are related to the nature and authority of Scripture is presented. Through the church fathers and the reformers, certain themes such as accommodation and "faith seeking understanding" inform current understandings about Scripture. Second, a theological reflection is offered, which takes up the historical legacy and integrates it into some contemporary postures. This exploration results in concluding that Scripture's authority rests in the concept of "witness," and to hear the
“witness” of Scripture the church must rely on literary, historical, and theological spheres of inquiry.

With this groundwork in place, a specific intervention was developed for Westlake. Utilizing the written historical and theological reflection, a document was formed. Interjecting primary readings from persons such as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and authors from within Churches of Christ, this eight unit document served as the text for a focus group of eleven persons from Westlake. In addition to reading this document, each member of the focus group was called on to engage in discussion and dialogue throughout eight one-hour meetings held in as many weeks.

This intervention produced significant shifts in thought for the participants. Additionally, this project created an opening for incorporating the subject matter of this project/thesis into the training of adult teachers and into Westlake’s general adult education program.

Abstract approved: 

Primary advisor 

Secondary advisor 

Date
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Carson E. Reed
May 1995
This project/thesis, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the Graduate council of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td></td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>THE NATURE AND AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE: BEGINNINGS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Ministry Context</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Problem Defined</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assumptions</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outline</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.</td>
<td>THE NATURE AND AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE: AN HISTORICAL REVIEW</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Canon and Authority</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Early Church</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Augustine</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Move to Scholasticism</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mysticism</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Martin Luther</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John Calvin</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summary of Luther and Calvin</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Francis Turretin and His American Legacy</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Contemporary Landscape</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Churches of Christ</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.</td>
<td>THE NATURE AND AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Nature of Scripture</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discerning Scripture's Authority</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interpretation: Hearing the Voice of Scripture</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREFACE

My interest in the issue of the authority of Scripture has been with me in various ways for a decade. However, that interest first surfaced in two distinct ways while I was living in Memphis, Tennessee. First, a colleague and I elected to teach a Wednesday night class on "How to Study the Bible." We selected for a text Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart's book, *How to Read the Bible For All it's Worth*. We should have known we were in for a rough time when one class member grumbled about the title of this little volume and said, "It sounds like the authors don't think the Bible is worth much!" But we stumbled through a quarter, teaching some things that helped most of the class and learning a lot ourselves. I left that congregation soon after, and my colleague continued to offer the course to others. Within a few weeks after my departure, several people had complained to the elders about this radical book. A couple of them reviewed and deemed it unfit. My colleague was then ordered to collect them all and destroy them. What is it about studying the Bible with our eyes open that threatens us so?

The second influence is the ongoing role that Karl Barth has had on my thinking. Ever since I was introduced to him by Doug Brown at Harding Graduate School, I have found him to be a perceptive and insightful witness. Part of my interest is simple intrigue with Karl Barth as a person. I marvel at the wonderful stories about him. No story impacts me more than the night he wrote the Barmen Confession for the Confessing Church to aid them in offering a clear "no" to Hitler's
takeover of German churches. It is a great confessional statement and to think he wrote it while smoking two Brazilian cigars! But what draws me back to Barth repeatedly is his complete rejection of the historical-critical method as the key for approaching Scripture.

Though he was thoroughly trained in classical liberalism, he recognized the poverty it brought to task of understanding God’s word. Yet surprisingly enough, he was not comfortable with fundamentalism either. Barth lived in the tension between the poles--drawing from the bounty of both, but bowing to neither. I admire that.

This work has been a long time coming. Many thanks are due to several who have been particularly helpful in bringing it to fruition. I am grateful to Ellen Miller, Diana Paige, and Wanda Vandeventer--secretaries past and present--who have protected my time and encouraged me in ministry by their own efficiency and resourceful skills. I have been honored to labor with good elders. To the elders of the Fountain Square Church of Christ I say thank you for allowing me to begin the doctoral journey. To the elders of the Westlake Church of Christ I say thank you for allowing the freedom to complete the trip.

I acknowledge Dana Qualls and Edna Moore, who diligently read every word of this document and had the audacity to mark various drafts with red ink. Thanks are due to the Focus Group for their participation and insight. It truly was an exciting adventure. And to Morris Cromer, project monitor and good brother in the faith, I offer warm gratitude. To Leslie, William, Lauren, and Megan, I say--Daddy will be home soon! Most of all, to Vickie, I say thanks for your faithful love.

viii
CHAPTER I
THE NATURE AND AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE: BEGINNINGS

Introduction

Churches of Christ face a time of transition and change.¹ Methodologies and ministries, worship and women, outreach to the world, and reaching out to believers in different traditions—these and much more confront churches and church leaders. Underneath these changes and challenges to the status quo is the fundamental question of how Scripture is to function authoritatively. The dilemma is heightened by the reality that the authority of Scripture within the Restoration tradition has received some criticism in recent years. This trend suggests the need to explore historical and biblical resources; such an exploration should give rise to a firmer foundation for theological reflection.

The need for a clear articulation of historical and biblical themes on the authority of Scripture is highlighted by a fundamental reality. Namely, the assumptions one holds about Scripture affect interpretation.² A greater historical awareness of how the church has


²“Despite a somewhat popular feeling that hermeneutics is a red herring, it is quite an important matter. How we read the Bible impacts to one degree or another what we believe, the topics we focus on, the emphases we make, how preachers choose and construct their sermons, and the way we all deal with people.” Gary Collier, *The Forgotten*
understood the authority of the Bible would greatly enhance contemporary attempts to bring Scripture to bear on issues facing the church.

This project proposes to explore how Scripture has been understood to function authoritatively by the church. Additionally, the project will offer some preliminary trajectories to guide the interpretive process. Then, with my specific ministry context in view, I will present an approach to appropriating Scripture that is consistent with historical and theological realities. The resulting document will offer a modest cornerstone for Westlake and other Churches of Christ to build a constructive dialogue about the issues confronting the people of God at the dawn of a new millennium.

The Ministry Context

The primary ministry context is the Westlake Church of Christ in Indianapolis, Indiana. The population of Indianapolis is 741,952 in the city, 797,159 in Marion County, and 1,249,822 in the metropolitan statistical area. Westlake is one of thirty-six Churches of Christ in Marion County. It is the fourth largest in the area.

In the late 1960's no mainline Church of Christ existed on the westside of Indianapolis. Albert Galyan, an elder of the Franklin Road Church of Christ on the east side of the city, was a west side resident and had a vision for a church to serve the community in which he lived. In 1968 property was acquired on North High School Road. A group

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Treasure: Reading the Bible Like Jesus (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 1993), 27.

began meeting in the home of Albert and Naomi Galyan in April of 1970. The congregation moved into a brick colonial-style building in October of 1970. Highly visible to the community because of its location adjacent to the beltway that circles Indianapolis, Westlake quickly attracted a number of persons from Churches of Christ who lived on the westside of the city.

For the first fifteen years of her life, Westlake struggled with a diversity originating from the Restoration Movement which has flourished in Indiana since the 1820’s. With that long history a broad spectrum of attitudes and beliefs has emerged, affecting fellowship, mission, direction, and leadership. In 1987, the minister and elders began a clear call for a Jesus-centered life and ministry. This theme countered a tradition-bound “church-centered” focus. About sixty people left over a six-month period. A new church formed, and another church received about twenty persons. Westlake then began to enjoy a sense of harmony and unity about her work and worship.

Presently Westlake is comprised of 141 families and 360 individuals. Sunday mornings average 285 in worship. Westlake is a relatively young church; seventy percent of the congregation are under the age of forty. Only four percent are over the age of sixty. The development of long-range planning and a recent restructuring of the leadership system have brought focus and direction to the future of the church. At this time Westlake has two elders, six deacons who lead six ministry teams, one minister, one staff associate/executive secretary.

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and one church secretary. Two additional full-time ministers and one part-time support person should be on staff by the second quarter of 1996. I am the minister at Westlake. My role in the church’s life is characterized by the following areas: preaching and teaching, leadership, administration, and pastoral care.

The congregation pursues a number of mission efforts. Westlake is involved significantly in Christ’s Prison Fellowship, providing a majority of the financial support for the regional director and one staff person. Other active ministries include Sojourners (a home for women suffering from abuse), programs at the local girls’ and boys’ homes, and a leading role in a regional lectureship. Westlake offers a day school to the community that averages 100 students each year. Small groups are an integral part of church life. Currently 18 groups are meeting, with an average of 183 persons meeting each week. Other service and support groups meet regularly.

Due to the youthfulness of the congregation and its history, Westlake demonstrates a progressive spirit. Though Westlake has some professional people, many members are entrepreneurs. Westlake is a church of action. Westlake is a church quick to perceive a need and respond to it. Nike’s slogan, “Just do it,” is emblazoned on a poster that hangs in one of the adult classrooms. Reflectiveness, deliberation, and planning quickly give way to immediacy, felt needs, and pragmatism.

Problem Defined
The Crisis of Biblical Authority

Pannenberg’s statement twenty-five years ago suggests the critical nature of this project: “The dissolution of the traditional doctrine of
Scripture constitutes a crisis at the very foundation of modern Protestant theology."5 From Gordon Kaufmann's pronouncement in 1971 that in this modern age the Bible was no longer the Word of God to the growing number of statements affirming Scripture's authority from inerrancy adherents, the issue of Biblical authority looms large over contemporary discussions of the Christian faith.6

The issue of the authority of Scripture has occupied a prominent place on America's theological table since the late nineteenth century.7 The growing controversy over the nature of Scripture's authority found its origins in the growing use of modern critical thought. This debate emerged with the rise of modern historiography in nineteenth-century European8 and American9 universities and continued to be divisive in American churches as historical-critical scholarship made its way westward over the Atlantic.


7See David H. Kelsey, The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975); Hugh Dermot McDonald, in Theories of Revelation (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963), presents a historical survey that helpfully distinguishes this tension. He pays particular attention to British and European scholarship.


Leopold von Ranke represents several nineteenth-century historians who refined historiography by inaugurating the seminar and emphasizing the use of primary sources to obtain objectivity. However, it was Ernst Troeltsch who clarified the essence of modern historiography to theological circles, focusing attention on the tension between critical reason and traditional faith. In his significant essay, "On Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology," he identified three principles that continue to serve as guideposts for modern historiography. They are: (1) the principle of criticism or methodological doubt, which makes it necessary to observe history in degrees of probability; (2) the principle of analogy, which allows insight into present experience to be the method of knowing about the past; and (3) the principle of correlation, which implies an interconnectedness of all events, i.e., the role of cause and effect.

Basing historical research on these principles produced significant problems for understanding the Bible’s authority. Christians had traditionally affirmed their faith to be rooted in events that had occurred in human history. But with the acceptance of critical thought,


supernatural events and the possibility of the unique in history became suspect, calling into question the veracity of Scripture. Thus, the polarization between verification and faith emerged, creating for many the need to establish, by the use of reason, a way of upholding the authority of Scripture.

By the late nineteenth century, two distinct postures emerged. For some persons the use of reason led them to embrace historical-critical methodology. This point of view anchored the authority of Scripture to whatever could be historically verified. Other persons took reason and developed a framework to protect Scripture from the devastating effects of historical-critical thought. This framework of inerrancy, quickly became the hallmark of fundamentalists.13

The reality, however, is not simply divided into two clear categories. Within the evangelical world, a great diversity exists concerning the authority of Scripture. The locus of authority is clear: “Whatever subsidiary sources may be recognized--the role of the church and its traditions or the place of the world of human experience--
Scripture is primary.14 What creates the great diversity among evangelicals is how Scripture is authoritative.15

The gray landscape turns to fog in the contemporary, post-modern setting. A person can no longer say “the Bible says so,” much less, “this is the clear historical-critical understanding of the text.” With the rise of canon criticism and, more recently, the introduction of structuralism, the idea of a single meaning for a text has come under serious attack.16 Thus, reason has fallen from grace; and objectivism, which was integral to both classical liberalism and inerrancy, is suspect.17

In an attempt to mark signposts in the fog, Darrell Jodock, in his book, The Church’s Bible, delineates the plethora of positions being taken in understanding the authority of the Bible.18 Of particular note


16John Barton, in Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), presents a review of the various methods of study, ranging from form criticism to more recent approaches. He effectively demonstrates the limitations that occur when the exegete attempts to present a single method as the method.


18He suggests six: rationalism, supernaturalism, evangelicalism, ecclesial developmentalism, analogical developmentalism, and dynamic humanism. Jodock, 31; within the evangelical world Gabriel Fackre suggests four broad categories--oracularity, inerrancy, infallibility, and
are two primary assumptions that he makes. First, is that "each position was influenced by the context in which it was developed." 19 Second, "each position employs assumptions or makes theological assertions that influence the way the Bible is understood but that are not mandated by the Bible itself." 20 In other words, everyone comes to the table from some specific context, and everyone brings some philosophical or theological framework to begin the task of hearing Scripture.

The question is how does the church hear Scripture in a way that it functions authoritatively for the church’s proclamation and life. This issue is heightened by the, at times, crumbling and, undoubtedly, fracturing attempts to maintain the authority of Scripture through the use of modern rational thinking. 21

Francis Schüssler Fiorenza observes these effects of modernity in an insightful article on the authority of Scripture. 22 Though noting secularization and alienation as the two usual culprits for the poverty that modernity has placed upon the world, Fiorenza proffers an additional feature. Increasing professionalization and specialization in culture have fragmented the unity and the interconnectedness of the

19 Jodock, 32.

20 Jodock, 32.

21 Jodock, 15-30; Fackre, 117-29; also Johnston, Evangelicals at an Impasse; Johnston, ed., The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options.

22 Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Crisis of Scriptural Authority: Interpretation and Reception” Interpretation 44 (October 1990): 353-68.
world. As Fiorenza states: "The fourfold division of theological disciplines in the nineteenth century into biblical, historical, systematic, and practical shattered the unity of the theological task." Though this increased specialization brought knowledge, this newfound knowledge carries a price tag. Scientific objectivity and neutral values reduce the range of Scripture's spirituality and vitality. "For the sake of exactitude the historical method excludes seeking the meaning of the text for our contemporary situation or for our faith." The result of all this is an interpretation of Scripture that has nothing to do with ethics or theology. There is a growing distance between the halls of exegesis and the church's life. With that, Fiorenza argues, comes a singular emphasis on the literal meaning of the text.

The striking result of this emphasis on the literal interpretation of Scripture is that inerrantists and liberals seek the literal meaning of the text. Fiorenza notes that the current concern over inerrancy among fundamentalists is a mirror of the concern for literal meaning for historical-critical scholarship. "The priority of the literal sense led to a split in which literal came to mean either literal as inerrant truth or literal as historical contextual truth."

The tension and debate about the nature of Scripture create a dilemma for contemporary churches and Christians. With a vast

23Fiorenza, 356.
24Fiorenza, 356.
25Eugene Peterson has pointed this out in pastoral work in his book, Working the Angles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).
26Fiorenza, 357.
spectrum of approaches to Scripture, the temptation is simply to pick and choose from the menu offerings, or, worse yet, to let go of a clear authoritative role of Scripture all-together. Jodock states the confusion well:

Persons wrestling with contemporary issues often work with unexamined, inappropriate, and sometimes even contradictory assumptions about the authority of the Bible. They are convinced that the Bible is important but, lacking a coherent explanation of its relevance, have patched together mismatched procedures and biblical interpretations.27

This crisis in the authority of Scripture has surfaced among Churches of Christ and has contributed significantly to an ongoing struggle to establish a clear identity in the closing years of the twentieth century. In recent years, reviews of hermeneutical assumptions within Churches of Christ have revealed the need for scrutiny, constructive critique, and ultimately, new formations.28 Though biblical scholarship within Churches of Christ has matured, offering to the fellowship and to scholarship credible work, the nagging question remains: “How does the Word of God function as the Word of God to the church?”

Church in Crisis: How Does the Bible Function?

Westlake faces a number of significant issues in the near future. The nature of evangelism, worship styles, and the role women play in the


church’s life are a few already on the table. For example, in the summer of 1993, the elders and I embarked on a major study of the worship practices and patterns in earliest Christianity. This resulted in three presentations to the church on music during the month of August. Today, contemporary music dominates a typical worship service at Westlake, and it is common for a group of singers to lead the congregation in worship. Deliberate reflection continues to grow at Westlake. In October 1994, Westlake hosted the first annual Christ and Culture Conference. One hundred seventy-five registrants from Indiana and seven mid-Western states gathered to hear Carroll Osburn address the topic “Women in the Church.” These and other issues will inevitably be confronted. As these new and largely unexplored territories are engaged, Scripture has a distinct and powerful role to play.

However, simply affirming the Bible as God’s Word is inadequate. Such naiveté results in an interpretation of Scripture that functions no longer as an interpretation, but becomes biblical itself. Westlake’s task to bring salt and light to Indianapolis and be faithful to the heritage of Scripture requires a careful and thoughtful understanding of how Scripture functions. On nearly every hand—leadership, worship, mission, and fellowship—Westlake is rethinking what it means to be the church. Given the legacy of Churches of Christ—“we are people of the Book”—how will Scripture function as an authority in the congregation’s life?

The critical nature of the problem surfaces in two distinct ways. First, as a young church Westlake has many persons whose link to traditional positions and interpretive postures within Churches of Christ is weak or nonexistent. Though they demonstrate a relatively high
degree of loyalty to Westlake, loyalty to historical hermeneutics is low. Additionally, Westlake possesses a growing number of people who simply have no background within the Restoration tradition at all. Through various ministries, people are coming to faith and are assimilated into the Westlake family. They know more about Charles Swindoll or Tony Campolo than they do about Alexander Campbell or Walter Scott. To this growing number a sensible, ordered understanding about Scripture is necessary for Christian nurturing and maturity.

Second, Westlake has a small but dedicated group of persons who are cautious about anything which brings change to established patterns of thought and practice. Resistance to new ideas and beliefs comes quickly and is usually rooted in an appeal to tradition, often revealing a personal fear of stretched comfort zones rather than an informed understanding of the Restoration heritage. Among the older population, Restoration history and traditional understandings of hermeneutics are not well known. 29

Thus, among those who are younger and have not been exposed to a clear understanding of Scripture’s authority and to those whose understanding of Scripture’s authority is deeply rooted in a traditionalism that is increasingly under fire, the need for an informed doctrine of the authority of Scripture exists. Ignoring this set of circumstances at Westlake will set the stage for conflict and the danger of losing Scripture as truly the church’s book.

29In the summer of 1993, I taught a quarter on the Restoration Movement at Westlake. The class size averaged about forty persons and included many of our older members.
Methodology

To address the dilemma of Scripture's role as the church's book and to engage in a proactive intervention the following approach emerged.

1. To establish clear parameters for theological reflection, I shall do an historical review of how the issue of authority has been handled at significant points in the church's life.

2. Using the historical review as a foundation, I shall develop a theological statement regarding the nature and authority of Scripture.

3. These two related efforts shall interact with significant literature relevant to the discussion; this would include issues such as authority, revelation, inspiration and interpretation.

4. To bring to bear these historical and theological resources into the congregational setting, I will develop a document designed to introduce and explore the nature and authority of Scripture. Additionally, a focus group, comprised of approximately a dozen people will be asked to participate in an eight-week study of the material.

Limitations

Throughout this project I have established the following limitations.

1. In doing historical analysis I will rely on the major secondary sources to identify major shifts. The enormity of working through primary sources alone to identify those shifts is too immense for the nature of this project. Though Rogers and McKim have been challenged
in their conclusions, I find their thesis persuasive and will rely heavily on the results of their work.30

2. I do not intend to present a detailed hermeneutic. My goal is to present a foundational scheme that will utilize other established interpretive methodologies, for example, textual criticism, literary analysis, historical-critical approaches.

3. The material entitled, “The Work of Witness,” will be limited to an introductory presentation of the history and scope of the authority of Scripture. The document will not attempt to be inclusive; rather it will create insight and perspective into the nature and authority of Scripture.

Assumptions

Throughout this project I will work with the following assumptions.

1. Great wisdom and precedent for hearing the historic voice of the church exists. Though I am aware there are many voices and postures, I am seeking the dominant voice of orthodox Christianity.31

30 Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979); their work has been critiqued by John D. Woodbridge in Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

31 See Thomas C. Oden, After Modernity . . . What? Agenda for Theology (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1990); this conviction about theology is reflected in his systematic reflection, Systematic Theology, 3 vols. (San Francisco: Harper, 1987). In the preface to volume one, Oden states: “My basic purpose is to set forth an ordered view of the faith of the Christian community upon which there has generally been substantial agreement between the traditions of East and West, including Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox. My purpose is not to present the views of a particular branch of modern Christian teaching,
2. This process will not have a direct effect on every member at Westlake. However, working with a relatively small group offers the opportunity for significant interaction, evaluation, and feedback.

An Outline

With these introductory issues in place, a simple review of what lies ahead is in order. Chapter two offers an historical review of some major issues relating to authority. Chapter three provides theological reflection and interaction with biblical and historical material. Chapter four summarizes the ministry intervention within Westlake’s life and furnishes some comment on the implications of this exercise in reflective and theologically aware ministry. The document, “The Work of Witness,” which was used at Westlake, is included in the appendix.

such as Roman Catholic or Baptist or Episcopal. Rather it is to listen single-mindedly for the voice of that deeper, ecumenical consensus that has been gratefully celebrated as received teaching by believers of vastly different cultural settings—whether African or European, Eastern or Western, sixth or sixteenth century” (p. ix).
CHAPTER II
THE NATURE AND AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE: AN HISTORICAL REVIEW

To find some route through the impasse that modernity has fostered within the various postures already alluded to, I found myself seeking some historical star by which to steer. What have Christians believed about the authority of the Bible? Is the rational, literalistic position of inerrancy really the legacy bequeathed to contemporary articulations of the Christian faith? Can a person embrace the methods of modern scholarship and hold on to traditional Christian doctrine? By charting a historical map of how the Bible has been seen as authoritative, I will set the parameters for the theological reflection in the following chapter.

Canon and Authority

The formation of the Bible itself sets the stage for a discussion of its authority. Unique among the world religions, the Bible is a collection of documents with many authors spanning one and a half millennia. It contains many forms of literature and reflects many cultural environments. The history of the canon’s development reflects the early church’s long struggle over what documents were really inspired. ¹

¹Excellent sources for the development of the canon include Lee Martin McDonald, The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988); William Barclay, The Making of the Bible (Nashville: Abingdon, 1961); Hans von Campenhausen, The Formation of
The Bible of the early church was really the Old Testament. The Christian faith rose from within Judaism, and early Christians had already claimed the Hebrew Bible as their own. Though some struggles existed for Jews and Christians about the third section of Hebrew Scripture, the Writings, both Jews and Christians accepted the Torah and the Prophets. In 132 B.C., the prologue of ben Sira describes his grandfather as a student of the law and the prophets and “the other books of our fathers.” Jesus apparently knew the Bible well—from Genesis to Chronicles. Josephus, near the end of the first century, treats the Hebrew Bible as a closed list, identifying twenty-two books corresponding with the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

During the days of the apostles and until the end of the first century, preaching and oral tradition conveyed the Christian faith. Though most of Paul’s letters were written in the middle of the century, little tangible evidence exists to demonstrate they had any wide circulation until the end of the first century. The guiding, authoritative source for the earliest church was the message and sayings of Jesus and the rule of faith. As would be expected, the church preferred the oral tradition of the message of Jesus over the written tradition.

But with the passing of the apostles, eyewitnesses, and others who were close to such people, the church began to seek out sources that


2McDonald, 60.

3Chronicles was typically the last book in the Hebrew canon.
could solidify and uphold the Christian faith. The need for sources for worship, instruction, and apologetics began to make demands on the church. During the closing decades of the first century, the four gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—were written. Paul’s letters began to be circulated together; undoubtedly they were the first collection of any specifically Christian group of documents. Many other documents began to surface and had some usefulness in the early church. Some of these documents are included in the church’s Bible today. Other documents, such as the Gospel of Peter, the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, the Letter of Clement to Rome, the Letter of Barnabas, and the Shepherd of Hermas are not. What sort of criteria did the early church use? How did they determine which documents possessed an authority that should be heard in the church?

Factors Determining the Canon

1. The Primacy of Jesus.

Perhaps the most important factor determining the process of the canon was the message of Jesus. As Martin McDonald states,

the primary authority of the earliest Christian community was Jesus himself. Not only was the early Church’s faith related to his death and resurrection, but it was also focused on the sayings of Jesus. These sayings were at first and for some time later passed on in oral form in the Church, but many of them were also written down quite early and circulated among the Christians, even though the books in

4I am following the lead of McDonald in presenting these factors.
which they were found (the Gospels) were not yet viewed as Scripture.  

For example, Ignatius (ca. 110-117), in a passage from the Letter to the Philadelphians, demonstrates his preference for the message of Jesus against the Old Testament Scripture:

But I beseech you to do nothing in factiousness, but after the teaching of Christ. For I heard some men saying, "If I find it not in the charters, I do not believe in the Gospel." And when I said to them that it is in the Scripture, they answered me, "That is exactly the question." But to me the charters are Jesus Christ, the inviolable charter is his cross, and death, and resurrection, and the faith which is through him; --in these I desire to be justified by your prayers. 6

Ignatius sees the gospel as on par with, or superior to, the authority of the Old Testament. More important, the text shows that the primary center for authority was in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, not in any specific text.

2. The Rule of Faith

Anything that conveyed the message of Jesus was significant because at the heart of the Christian faith was the Living Word, the Christ. Irenaeus of Lyons (writing ca. 170-180) most clearly demonstrated a supportive principle at work. The Christian faith was primarily defined by a central core of convictions that was often called the rule of faith. This statement of belief was anchored in the primacy of Jesus and what the apostles had proclaimed. Thus, this rule quickly became the standard by which writings and practices were measured. Irenaeus affirmed the scriptural authority of various Christian writings. However,

5McDonald, 116.

6Ign. Phld. 8.2.
what gave these writings authority was not their place in an inspired book list; they were authoritative because they conveyed the truth about Jesus. These books passed on the tradition of the apostles. For Irenaeus and for the early church, it was “the faith” of the church that was foundational for the life of the church. Irenaeus’ goal was to defend and uphold the Christian message. To do so, he looked to writings that would affirm the apostolic message. Thus the Old Testament and various Christian writings were seen as authoritative since they were consistent with the rule of faith.

3. Use in Worship and Instruction

In the second century a number of Christian writings offered admonition and instruction in the assembly. For example, the Gospels, very early on, carried weight and authority for the life of the church. Justin Martyr, from the middle of the second century, gave one of the earliest glances into Christian worship and the use of Christian writings:

After these [services] we constantly remind each other of these things. Those who have more come to the aid of those who lack, and we are constantly together. Over all that we receive we bless the Maker of all things through his Son Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. And on the day called Sunday there is a meeting in one place of those who live in cities or the country, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. When the reader has finished, the president in a discourse urges and invites [us] to the imitation of these noble things. Then we all stand up together and offer prayers. And, as said before, when we have finished the prayer, bread is brought, and wine and water, and the president similarly sends up prayers and thanksgivings to the best of his ability, and the congregation assents, saying the Amen; the distribution, and reception of the consecrated [elements] by each one, takes place and they are sent to the absent by the deacons. Those who prosper, and who so wish, contribute, each one as much as he chooses to. What is collected is deposited with the president, and he takes care of orphans and widows, and those who are in want on account of sickness or any other cause, and those who are in bonds, and the
strangers who are sojourners among [us], and, briefly he is the protector of all those in need. We all hold this common gathering on Sunday, since it is the first day, on which God transforming darkness and matter made the universe, and Jesus Christ our Saviour rose from the dead on the same day. For they crucified him on the day before Saturday, and on the day after Saturday, he appeared to his apostles and disciples and taught them these things which I have passed on to you also for your serious consideration. 7

4. Apostolic Connections

Another factor that determined the status of a document was its connection with an apostle. As F. F. Bruce suggests,

The principal criterion of New Testament canonicity imposed in the early church was not prophetic inspiration but apostolic authorship--or, if not authorship, then authority. In an environment where apostolic tradition counted for so much, the source and norm of that tradition were naturally found in the writings of apostles or of men closely associated with apostles. Mark and Luke, for instance, were known not to be apostles, but their close association with Peter and Paul respectively was emphasized. As for the epistles, however, the tendency was for canonicity to be tied to the ascription of apostolic authorship. The Letter to the Hebrews, for example, was known in the Roman church earlier than anywhere else (so far as our evidence goes), but Rome was one of the last important churches to acknowledge it as canonical, just as Rome was one of the last important churches to ascribe Pauline authorship to it—not out of conviction, but out of an unwillingness to be out of step in this regard with Alexandria and the other great eastern churches.8

5. The Contributions of a Heretic

One of the reasons it became important for the early church to identify clearly what properly could be called the church’s Scripture was the emergence of diverse understandings of the Christian faith. Most

7 1 Apol. 67.

notable was the work of Marcion. Marcion, a wealthy shipowner from Sinope, arrived in Rome around A.D. 140. His gnostic line of thinking led Marcion to conclude that the God of the Old Testament was really not God, but a god hostile to the God of Jesus. This god, the Demiurge, had created the physical world and had ushered in sin and suffering. The Demiurge was ignorant and evil. The God of Jesus was Spirit. The God of Jesus was Love.

Marcion produced his own list or canon of Scripture; not surprisingly, he left out the Old Testament. In addition to the horrendous stories of the Demiurge, the Old Testament possessed Law, and Law was earthly. In its place Marcion put the Gospel. He discarded Matthew, Mark and John (too Jewish!) and used an edited version of Luke. The second section of Marcion’s scriptures was the Apostle. Here he placed ten of Paul’s letters since Paul was the advocate of grace against law. The third section was the Antitheses. This was a compilation of Old Testament passages with Christian writings that contradicted them.

Marcion was not the only one who pressured the church to decide what the canon of Scripture would be. A group, called the Montanists, developed the conviction that the Spirit continued to bring fresh and new revelation to the church. This movement, which really hit stride by the early third century, raised the issue of whether the canon was open or closed. Could there be a continual and ongoing authoritative word offered? The answer of the church was no.

6. Diocletian

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9 He took out all Old Testament references!
In 303, Diocletian, the Roman emperor, unleashed the last widespread persecution of the church. Diocletian struck at the organizational structure of the church; he sought to destroy the books, buildings, and offices of the Christians. This brought some serious reflection to the Christian community about what was truly sacred literature. If a document was acknowledged to be sacred or authoritative, the church official was required to hand it over for destruction. This refinement process undoubtedly forced some conclusions about various texts.

Thus, with these varied influences at work, the concept of the canon did not come to a completely settled state until Athanasius of Alexandria wrote a festal letter in A.D. 367. Athanasius, in this letter, presented a list that is the same as today's list. He also used the term "canon" or "list" for the first time as a way of describing some special, authoritative role that these documents had in the life of the church. Interestingly, the concept of a closed canon continued to find objectors within the church, periodically heightening the issue of how the "canon," or list of books, function as an authority for the church.

The Early Church

The early church had much to do. To determine what materials should be considered, many of the church fathers relied on some fundamental principles. Was the author an apostle? Did the book have some connection to an apostolic church? Did the book conform to the regula fide (rule of faith)? Appropriating the Hebrew scriptures to the reality of Jesus and then making the Christian message understood in a world where Greek philosophical categories were in place were not easy.
Heresies from within and opposition from without forced the church fathers to speak with clarity and power.10 They had to find some authoritative source to validate their teaching and belief.

By the second half of the second century, Irenaeus and others began to speak of a New Testament.11 In Against Heresies, Irenaeus wrote of the Great Church and noted a growing conformity among Christians. Namely, this conformity focused on forms of ministry, on the events of baptism and the Eucharist, and on the apostolic faith. The apostolic faith was preserved in the sacred writings and was effectively summarized in the rule of faith. According to Irenaeus these sacred writings would have included the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. Distinctively Christian writings were the four gospels, Paul's letters, Acts, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation.

Irenaeus keenly felt the need for an interpretive key. The key was rule of faith and the saving work of Christ. Irenaeus believed that this key, contained in the *regula fide*, had to be used by those who were of apostolic succession, whose life and doctrine exhibited the "charism of

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10Walter Bauer, in 1934, presented the remarkable thesis that it was out of heresy that orthodoxy was formed. In *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971); Henry Ernest William Turner, in *The Pattern of Christian Truth* (London: Mowbray, 1954), responded to Bauer. He affirmed that orthodoxy was often shaped and defined by resistance to heresy. But Turner posited that there were some fixed elements of thinking, particularly in the rule of faith, that were unchanging and guided the church fathers. See also David J. Hawkin, “A Reflective Look at the Recent Debate on Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity,” *Eglise et Theologie* 7 (1976): 367-378; Thomas A. Robinson, *The Bauer Thesis Examined: The Geography of Heresy in the Early Christian Church* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988).

11Kugel and Greer, 113-16.
It was this differentiating rule of faith that provided for the church fathers an interpretive tool to understand the authority of Scripture in their day.

To demonstrate the vitality of this approach, I will point out three distinctive concepts that were generally held by early generations of the church. I believe that these three ideas facilitate an understanding of not only the nature of Scripture, but also how Scripture functioned authoritatively in the first four Christian centuries.

The Bible as Evidence

Simply put, the church fathers saw the Bible as recorded tradition that witnessed to the truth of the saving message of Jesus. As Rogers and McKim suggest: “The Bible, for Clement, was a resource of primary data, accepted in faith, from which persons could then draw reasoned conclusions.” Likewise, Irenaeus made extensive use of the New Testament. He appealed to it as a reliable, historical resource. Scripture was indeed a trustworthy witness to what God had done. But one must distinguish this idea of witness. As John Barton points out:

12 Against Heresies 4.26.2. 1.10.1-2. Irenaeus employs “the notion of a salvation history that focuses on the story of the incarnate Word of God but relates that story to the Word’s activity in creation and in the history of Israel. By defining the incarnate Lord, Irenaeus clarifies the identity of the hero of the Christian story, a story that includes all of human history. This, in turn, enables him to give a coherent account of the story as a whole, that is, of what he calls the apostolic faith. And the clarified view of the Christian preaching embodied in the Rule of faith supplies him with a framework of interpretation that orders Christian transformations of the Hebrew Scriptures into a coherent pattern” Kugel and Greer, 156.

13 Rogers and McKim, 8.

14 von Campenhausen, 181ff.
“What he [Irenaeus] finds is really testimony in the ancient sense rather than evidence in the modern sense: friends you can trust, rather than sources you can torture.”

John Chrysostom represented yet another person who perceived the value of Scripture’s witness to the saving message of God. Chrysostom’s homiletical and exegetical abilities well characterized his commitment to present the divine message of Scripture; yet he was well aware of the human element that shaped Scripture. For example, he recognized differences in events described in the Gospels, and he clearly distinguished between the divine message and human form. For these significant representatives of Christian thought, the Bible possessed authority because it revealed the divine story. The Bible bore witness to the work that God had accomplished in Christ.

The Bible and Interpretive Methodology

Having a fundamental concern to show the unity of the Old and New Testaments, the church fathers took great pains to demonstrate that Jesus was the fulfillment of Old Testament predictions. They were also very dedicated to presenting Christianity to a world in which Hellenistic philosophy dominated the thinking of many. To address these issues they resorted to a special form to interpret Scripture. Rooted in rabbinic Judaism and in Greek philosophy, typology became a refined and dominant force to interpret Scripture:


16 See Rogers and McKim, 20-21, and footnotes 74, 75.
Typology was thus neither literal exegesis concerned only with past historical events themselves, nor allegorical exegesis that treated past happenings only as symbols to be spiritually interpreted. Rather, typology stressed the historical interrelationship of a past event as promise and a later event as fulfillment.17

Along with the use of typology, allegorical approaches to Scripture were commonly used. Allegory found its most eloquent expression in the work of Origen. In responding to various groups whose literal interpretations of Scripture left the Christian faith weak and perverted, Origen sought to understand the spiritual meaning of Scripture. “The task of the exegete was to peel off the husk of the letter and get at the kernel of the spiritual meaning, in order to share it with others.”18 This allowed Origen to deal with the ambiguities he found in Scripture. The allegorical method also served him well in making the Christian message contemporary and relevant to his culture.19

Though allegorical exegesis was the dominant approach to understanding Scripture during the early centuries of the church, another voice made itself heard from Syrian Antioch. The Antiochene school of theology represented the East and vied with the Alexandrian

17 Rogers and McKim, 9.

18 Ibid., 13.

19 Ibid., 14. The Antiochene school of thought was less enamoured with allegorical categories. Grammatical-historical concerns were stressed. This does not mean they rejected allegory; Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Nestorius were more likely rejecting the sometimes extreme results of Origen’s work. Rogers and McKim, 11-22; Kugel and Greer, 177-99; also Bruce Vawter, Biblical Inspiration (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 28-33.
school in the West as the dominant source of thought in the church. In response to the highly allegorical approaches to Scripture, which were rooted in Platonic thought, the Antiochenes chose to begin with "the natural historical meaning of the biblical text." Though they used typology to interpret Old Testament texts in light of the work of Christ, they tended to work with a more literal rendering of the text. When literal renderings resulted in a jolting interpretation, they would rely on rationalistic interpretations to hold things together.

Through these multi-faceted approaches to Scripture the issue at stake is clear. For the church fathers, Scripture can be misunderstood and misinterpreted if literal or atomistic approaches are taken. Scripture is a spiritual document; its specific purpose is to disclose God. Literalism, to the early church, restricted the free flow of the spirit and its work in affirming the gospel message. If the gospel message is what is to be heard, then in what way does God speak through Scripture? How can He be understood? Such questions lead to the next insight into Scripture that the early church possessed.

The Bible as Accommodation

The frail and limited nature of humanity was well established in the thought of the early church. Out of that perspective the question was often raised how God could communicate to people whose perspectives had been perverted by sin. Rogers and McKim responded:

\[20\] Rogers and McKim, 16.

\[21\] Ibid., 16.
To communicate effectively with human beings, God condescended, humbled, and accommodated himself to human categories of thought and speech. This was not a matter of deception, but of necessary adaptation on God's part if humans were to be able to understand His will for them. In the incarnation, God humbled himself and became a weak and helpless baby to identify with and communicate with human beings. This incarnational principle had always been God's style according to the early Christian theologians.22

The concept of accommodation is foundational to Origen. It explained the human characteristics of Scripture and pointed to the importance of the meaning of the text. John Chrysostom was also well acquainted with the concept of accommodation. He often used the word συγκατάβοσις, condescension, to describe the way God related to humanity through Scripture.23

And if a father considers not his own dignity, but talks lispingly with his children and calls their meat and drink not by their Greek names, but by some childish and barbarous words, much more doth God .... In every part of Scripture there are instances of His condescension both in words and actions.24

Accommodation was the way that Origen, Chrysostom and others were able to emphasize the worthiness of God and his desire to make known his saving message. It also recognized the human qualities of Scripture. Perhaps, most fundamentally, accommodation encouraged the need to approach the interpretation of Scripture from the posture of faith, not reason.

22Rogers and McKim, 10.

23Vawter, 40-42.

24As cited by Rogers and McKim, 19.
Augustine

In Augustine the varied traditions of the early church found integration. Augustine's clear affirmation of the primacy of faith affected his understanding of Scripture's role and function for the church. Relying on Platonic philosophy, Augustine accepted knowledge from the eternal world by faith, which in turn led to understanding in the temporal world. His biblical foundation for the primacy of faith was the often quoted Latin translation of the Septuagint version of Isaiah 7.9: “Unless you believe, you shall not understand.” Thus, Augustine seldom sought to demonstrate the inspiration of the Bible. Its inspiration was readily apparent in the faith-producing effect the Bible had on people.

Augustine continued to use the concept of accommodation to explain God's work. For Augustine the primary purpose of Scripture was to bring people into a right relationship with God. Thus the parent and child imagery was often employed. He incorporated the use of allegory in his interpretation. Though he was well aware of the historical meaning of a text, he was concerned about discovering the spiritual meaning of a text. To safeguard against distortions he modified some principles that Tyconius had presented as hermeneutical keys. These are the


26 See Augustine's, On Free Choice of the Will, 1.2; 2.2.

27 Rogers and McKim, 32.

28 Ibid., 33.
well-known fourfold "senses" of Scripture: historical, aetiological, analogical and allegorical.  

Finally, the evidential nature of Scripture for Augustine was a continuation of earlier ideas. He could speak with great conviction that Scripture was without error. By that he meant something different from what modern people mean. For Augustine to say that Scripture was free from error meant that the biblical authors did not set out to deceive or to tell a lie.  

Augustine generally gave both a literal and allegorical interpretation of a text, demonstrating the interrelationship between the two. What generally safeguarded Augustine and other early Christian writers in their understanding of Scripture was the high role that the central, saving message of Jesus had in the exegesis. Faith, not rationalism, was the foundation for hearing the voice of Scripture.  

To summarize, it might be best to hear Anthony and Richard Hanson:  

Most impressive perhaps is the fact that the ancient Fathers grasped firmly and never betrayed what we might call the main burden or drift or message of the Bible, however fantastic may have been their misunderstanding of its details. . . . Once they had distanced themselves a little from the entrancing details, the deceptive individual trees, they saw the shape of the wood clearly enough. When they

29 As Augustine stated: "In every sacred book one should note the things of eternity which are communicated, the facts of history which are recounted, future events which are foretold, moral precepts which are enjoined or counseled" (as quoted by Rogers and McKim, 33). This fourfold interpretive schema was well developed throughout the Middle Ages. Fiorenza, 357, note 11, furnishes a medieval form: "The literal teaches events, the allegorical what you should believe, the moral what you should do, the angoge the goal toward which you should strive."

30 Rogers and McKim, 30-31.
withdrew a little from the intoxicating business of allegorizing the details, they then perceived the true import of the Bible, undistracted by philosophy, undrugged by allegory. There is perhaps a moral for us today in this achievement.31

The Move to Scholasticism

Augustine, in the spirit of Plato, had invoked an approach to the Christian faith that could best be summarized by “faith seeking understanding.” However, in the middle ages, a shift began to occur. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Crusades brought back into Europe the world of Islamic culture. With the entrance of Islamic culture into the European worldview, the works of Aristotle were introduced into the relatively recent innovation called universities. Aristotle’s works focused on metaphysics, natural history, and inductive thought. For Aristotle, all knowledge began with human sense impressions of the world. One started with what can be known and then proceeded to what can be believed. Aristotle’s empirical approach to the world clashed with Plato’s worldview. Reason was first, then came faith. This new philosophical current gave rise to what is called scholasticism.

In theology this shift created new ways of understanding the authority of the Bible. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) marked this new shift.32 Working with philosophical categories and the priority of reason, Aquinas set forth a complete and extensive system of knowledge. With God as the center and all branches of learning stemming outward


from the center, Aquinas presented the Christian faith and the Bible in rational ways. This served the culture of his day well. For example, Aquinas was concerned that Christianity addressed the climate of the university and could evangelistically engage the Muslim world which accepted Aristotelian thought.

For Aquinas, Scripture took on a scientific element. He moved away from allegorical speculation to a more literal sense of the text. To do this, he used considerable historical awareness. He placed the most emphasis on the "natural" sense that was intended by the author. This approach, though, was augmented by an understanding of Scripture that saw Scripture as words to be understood and ideas to be classified properly. Thus, when Aquinas spoke of the Bible as not having any error, he took a differing view from Augustine. As Rogers and McKim suggested, "the context in which Thomas used the concept of error was one of logical science rather than Augustine's own context of ethical Christian living."33

In more modern times one can see the evidence of Aquinas' influence in the emphasis on the proofs for the existence of God, on reason over faith, and for a tendency to interpret the Bible according to a system or pattern. A certain irony exists here. On 6 December 1273, Aquinas fell into a trance while in worship celebrating the feast of St. Nicholas. He had a vision of heaven; suddenly he knew that all efforts to speak about God were worthless. When his secretary urged him to write, he replied, "I can do no more. Such things have been revealed to me that

33Rogers and McKim, 46.
all I have written seems as so much straw." Summoned to Rome he fell ill along the way and was taken to an abbey. There, on his deathbed, he expounded the Song of Songs with the monks. The greatest Scholastic theologian of the middle ages turned toward mysticism at the end of his life.

Mysticism

In response to the rise and dominance of scholasticism, a reform began to occur--primarily in monastic communities. The search for piety and a hunger for a real encounter with God led to another option for Christians in the middle ages. This response to scholasticism was clearly evidenced in Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153).

While scholastics were concerned with reason, Bernard encouraged prayer and experience. Bernard stated, "We search in a worthier manner, we discover with greater facility through prayer than through disputa­tion."

Again, in his commentary on the Song of Songs: "Lend your inner ear, gaze with the eyes of your heart and you will grasp by your

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34 See Weisheipl, 320-23.

35 For biographical material on Bernard of Clairvaux, see Watkin Williams, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1952); to consider his theological, monastic, and ecclesiastical work, see G. R. Evans, The Mind of St. Bernard of Clairvaux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983); also Thomas Merton, Thomas Merton on Saint Bernard (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980).

36 As quoted by Rogers and McKim, 52.
own experience what is meant here.”

This experiential approach to faith and Scripture gave rise to mysticism.

Mysticism, as illustrated by Bernard, had its own distinctive understanding of Scripture. Best summarized by Bernard’s own motto: “I believe in order that I may experience,” the concept of encountering God in Scripture was the goal. The Holy Spirit was the insurer of authority in Scripture; one’s encounter with God in Scripture authenticated the word.

As for us, in the commentary of mystical and sacred words, let us proceed with caution and simplicity. Let us model ourselves on Scripture which expresses the wisdom hidden in mystery in our own words: when Scripture portrays God for us it suggests Him in terms of our own feelings. The invisible and hidden realities of God which are of such great price are rendered accessible to human minds, vessels, as it were, of little worth, by means of comparisons taken from the realities we know through our senses.

Martin Luther

With Martin Luther and other Reformation voices, a clear continuity with earlier attitudes toward the authority of Scripture developed. For Luther, the function of the Bible was to present the saving work of Christ. The Bible led people to Christ. This christo-centric reading of Scripture was thoroughly applied by Luther, as reflected in his well-known perception about the epistle of James. He was convinced that the “Bible’s authority was in its content--Christ--and its function--bringing

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37 As quoted by Rogers and McKim, 53.

38 Bernard of Clairvaux, as quoted by Rogers and McKim, 51.
The importance of this christo-centric approach to Scripture is depicted in Luther's emphasis on theologia crucis—a theology of the cross. Christ is the telos of hermeneutical work.

Luther continued the theme of accommodation in articulating the content and function of Scripture, though he preferred to talk of incarnation:

the divinity and power of God are embedded in the vessel of Christ's incarnate body, so the same divinity and power of God are embedded in Scripture, a vessel made of letters, composed of paper and printer's ink. In order to grasp the biblical revelation in its fulness it is necessary to conceive of Scripture in terms of the divine-human nature of Christ.

This divine-human nature of Scripture used the active role of the Spirit. For Luther, the Spirit was the "inspirer of Scripture in the past and the interpreter of Scripture in the present."

Luther, with his exposure to scholastic and humanistic trends of his day, found much value in a more literal understanding of Scripture. This move away from a reliance on allegory did not change the goal of interpretation. Scripture still needed to be exposited so that the saving message might be known. But literal understandings supply what is

39 Rogers and McKim, 78; Luther's christocentric attitude toward Scripture is explored in Miikka Ruokanen, Doctrina Divinitus Inspirata: Martin Luther's Position in the Ecumenical Problem of Biblical Inspiration (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola Society, 1985).


41 As cited by Rogers and McKim, 78.

42 Rogers and McKim, 79.
needful for sound doctrine. As Johnson rightfully points out, literal for Luther meant historically grounded and grammatically informed. Scripture texts must be interpreted within context.

I have until now held that when one would prove something with the Scriptures, the Scriptures must really be relevant to the point. But now I learn that it is enough to throw the texts together in any crazy way, whether they agree or not--and, if this is to be the way, I can prove from the Scriptures that bad beer is better than good wine.

Luther firmly upheld the authority of Scripture. He believed its authority was located in its content, and he used his Christology as an interpretive key to ascertain it. Or, as Beker states, Luther’s understanding of Scripture was bound “by two basic convictions: the historicity of the gospel and the harmonious unity of the gospel as witnessed in Scripture.” Because Luther affirmed an incarnational stance regarding the Bible, his attempts to do critical reflection were not hindered by incongruities and difficulties in the text. “When discrepancies occur in the Holy Scriptures and I cannot harmonize them, let it pass, it does not endanger the articles of the Christian faith.”

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43Ibid., 85.

44“It is interesting that at one point he turns aside to observe that 'literal' is not a very satisfactory term, either in German or in Latin, for what he is insisting upon, and that it would be better if it were called the ‘lingual or spoken sense,’ or the ‘grammatical, historical sense’” Johnson, 30; see Rogers and McKim, 85.

45As cited by Johnson, 28-29.


47As cited by Rogers and McKim, 87.
John Calvin

John Calvin's humanistic education fostered in him the logical and procedural talents that he brought to bear in the Reformation. For example, his law training opened up the reality of discerning authorial intent and the importance of context in understanding a text. The concept of accommodation was used in legal settings and by rhetoricians to describe the “process of fitting, adapting, and adjusting language to the capacity of the hearers.”

Calvin employed this idea in continuing this long standing approach to Scripture.

His employment of accommodation brought some interesting developments. Calvin concluded that form was subordinate to function. The content of Scripture was the decisive thing. Related to that was the evidential nature of Scripture. Scripture’s purpose was to persuade persons to be saved. Inconsistencies or human inaccuracies were unimportant.

What was important was a fundamental conviction of faith that propels one to believe in the saving Word of Scripture.

The Word of God, therefore, is the object and target of faith at which one ought to aim; and the base to prop and support it, without which it could not even stand. And thus this true faith—which can at last be called “Christian”—is nothing else than a firm conviction of mind whereby we determine with ourselves that God’s truth is so certain that it is incapable of not accomplishing what it has pledged to do by his holy Word (Rom. 10:11).

48 Rogers and McKim, 98.

49 Ibid., 109.

50 As cited by Rogers and McKim, 102-103.
Summary of Luther and Calvin

Luther and Calvin, the leading thinkers of the Reformation, both adopted Augustine's method—faith seeks understanding. Though they used the best of the scholastic tradition in their reading of Scripture, the source of truth was the Bible. Luther and Calvin affirmed with the church fathers that the authority of Scripture rested in its function of bringing persons to a saving relationship with God through Jesus. Both posited a Christological center for Scripture. Thus, Scripture was not meant to teach science or history. Scripture was meant to address human beings who are in desperate need for a word of transformation.

This word was presented through the accommodating word of Scripture. For Luther and Calvin, “the Incarnation exemplified God's style of communication.” God used human language and thought processes to communicate the truth. Following the church fathers, it was the message or content of Scripture that was normative for the church, not the particular form in which the message was found. How does the church know that Scripture contains the Word of God? For Luther and Calvin it was the Holy Spirit:

The Reformers' persuasion that Scripture was the Word of God came from the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit witnessed to the divine. Christological content of Scripture, not its human, linguistic form. Scripture was self-authenticating. It was foolish to try to prove to unbelievers what could only be known by faith. External arguments for the Bible's validity were helpful only after persons had accepted Scripture in faith. The Holy Spirit also illumined the minds of interpreters of Scripture. Luther and Calvin refuted rational scholasticism, which demanded proofs before faith. They rejected with equal firmness the spiritualistic sectarians who claimed leadings of the Holy Spirit.

51 Rogers and McKim, 126.
Spirit apart from the Word. The Word and the Spirit together served as a hallmark of the Reformation.  

Francis Turretin and His American Legacy

A century after John Calvin, many of the assumptions made about Scripture had changed. The scholastic method had resumed its dominant role in determining the manner of theology. Rogers and McKim described the change:

Theology was no longer viewed as a practical, moral discipline exclusively directed toward the salvation of people and their guidance in the life of faith. Theology now became an abstract, speculative, technical science that attempted to lay foundations for philosophical mastery of all areas of thought and life. Further, and equally far-reaching in its consequences, the concept of accommodation was discarded.

While scholastic theologians did not claim to know all that God knew extensively, they claimed a one-to-one correspondence between the theological knowledge they had and the way in which God himself knew it. Precision replaced piety as the goal of theology.

This shift in thought is well represented by Francis Turretin, whose influence in seventeenth-century Geneva continues to be felt in various forms in America today. As a preacher and a professor of theology in Geneva, Turretin took up the ominous task of opposing many of the forces that threatened to destroy the gains of the Reformation. His allies in this endeavor were Aristotle and Aquinas; with their aid he produced “a scholastic theology that placed great emphasis on precise definition and systematic, scientific statement.” Thus, Turretin would argue, “Before faith can believe, it must have the divinity of the witness, to

52 Rogers and McKim, 126-27.

53 Rogers and McKim, 187.

54 Rogers and McKim, 173.
whom faith is to be given, clearly established, from certain true marks which are apprehended to it, otherwise it cannot believe.”  

For Turretin, the authority of Scripture relied on the external, rational proofs of an inerrant Scripture to make faith valid. This is a major shift from Calvin who professed that it was the internal witness of the Spirit that persuaded people to believe that Scripture was the Word of God. Turretin’s concern for an inerrant Scripture went so far as to state that the vowel points in the Hebrew text were authentic. 

What makes Turretin’s approach to Scripture particularly significant is that his major work, the *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, became the theological text for an infant seminary that through the nineteenth century grew to great influence in American theological circles. With the founding of Princeton Seminary in 1812, the Presbyterian Church in America set up a center to train their ministers. Archibald Alexander became the first professor and installed Turretin’s work as the theological text. Alexander, and his successors, Charles Hodge, Archibald Alexander Hodge, and Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, developed the Turretin model of the doctrine of Scripture. This doctrine, though possessing great logical prowess, rational finesse, and at times a sensitivity to the humanity of Scripture, nevertheless articulated a rigid defense of a strict, verbal inerrancy.

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56 See Rogers and McKim, 180-181.

57 A helpful anthology of the Princeton scholars is Mark A. Noll, ed., *The Princeton Theology, 1812-1921: Scripture, Science, and*
With the onslaught on modern critical scholarship, the influence of Princeton theology was pervasive. The conflict between B. B. Warfield and Charles A. Briggs, which led to Briggs' heresy trial in 1893 and the much publicized John Scopes trial in 1925, were among the watershed points in this controversy. The reorganization of Princeton Seminary that occurred in 1929 led J. Gresham Machen, Robert Wilson, Oswald T. Allis and Cornelius Van Til to leave and form Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. This move was a direct response to the perceived abdication on the issue of inerrancy and authority of Scripture. It was to this newly formed seminary that many students from evangelical colleges came. The original class included Carl McIntire and Harold J. Ockenga, both destined to be prominent conservative spokesmen.

The Contemporary Landscape

Much more could be said about the legacy of Turretin, and certainly something ought to be said about the contributions of classical liberal thought to the discussions of biblical authority. However, to provide a clearer focus, I prefer to first consider several recent efforts to outline the contemporary landscape. Following this brief review I shall offer my own observations.

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Theological Method from Archibald Alexander to Benjamin Warfield (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983); See also Hanson, 67-69; Rogers and McKim, 305-310, 323-348.


59 Rogers and McKim, 367.

Several writers have attempted to sketch out the different approaches to the question of Scripture's authority. David Kelsey utilized the work of seven theologians who hold to seven distinctive ways in which Scripture functions. Kelsey suggests that the theologians fall into three categories of understanding the authority of Scripture: 1) doctrinal and conceptual, 2) recital or narrative, or 3) mythic, symbolic or imagistic expression.

Another significant work that contributes heavily to understanding and correlating differing approaches is Avery Dulles' Models of Revelation. As in his earlier work, Models of the Church, Dulles works with the concept of models to describe the diverse varieties of revelation theology. Dulles posits five major groups that distinguish themselves from the others by their conviction about the nature of revelation. Dulles' five models are 1) revelation as doctrine—Scripture as clear propositional statements from God; 2) revelation as history—God is revealed through His great acts; 3) revelation as inner experience—revelation is centered in a personal, mystical encounter with God; 4) revelation as dialectical presence—God encounters humanity through the Word; 5) revelation as new awareness—revelation occurs in those moments when paradigm shifts occur in human consciousness.

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Robert Gnuse offers another way of understanding the contemporary landscape. With plenty of bibliographical resources, Gnuse offers five categories of models for the authority of Scripture. They are inspiration, salvation history, existentialism, christocentric models, and models of limited authority.

William C. Placher furnishes an alternative approach in a lecture presented at Christian Theological Seminary. He suggests that the question is not whether or how much authority Scripture possesses. He proposes that persons simply see Scripture functioning as authority in different ways. Drawing on Kelsey’s work, Placher then offers three approaches of how Scripture functions authoritatively: 1) as a set of propositions, 2) as a transforming word or power, or 3) as narrative. The notable feature to Placher’s work is the awareness that Scripture functions in all three ways. Though a person may be rooted in one model, much can be learned from hearing and using the other models.

Recently released is Donald K. McKim’s work, The Bible in Theology and Preaching. This revision of an earlier work, What Christians Believe About the Bible, offers fourteen different approaches to Scripture. Two items make McKim’s work especially helpful. First, he includes chapters on liberation, black, Asian, and feminist theology.

63 Robert Gnuse, in The Authority of the Bible: Theories of Inspiration, Revelation and the Canon of Scripture (New York: Paulist, 1985).


65 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).
Second, in an effort to demonstrate how a particular attitude about Scripture shapes theology, McKim provides a sermon at the end of each chapter by a proponent of the model being considered.

Within the evangelical world alone exists a great deal of diversity regarding how Scripture functions authoritatively for the church. Gabriel Fackre helpfully delineates the plethora of positions that are being taken among evangelicals today. He suggests four broad categories—oracularity, inerrancy, infallibility, and catholicity.

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66 Fackre, “Evangelical Hermeneutics,” 117-29; Marshall presents some of the range of postures as well, Biblical Inspiration; also Johnston, Evangelicals.

67 Fackre finds very few contemporaries who are intellectually defending oracularity today.

68 Fackre suggests that inerrantists do acknowledge the human factor in the writing of the documents. The Holy Spirit superintends the author’s words but allows for particular human expression. “Such oversight assures the deliverance of revealed propositional truth in the ‘autographs,’” 121. Since the autographs are plenarily inspired they are without error in all matters—historical, scientific, doctrinal, and moral. Fackre notes at least three variations of inerrancy. The first he calls transmissive inerrancy. Modern scholarship and methodological approaches to Scripture are suspect. God has supernaturally safeguarded the editing and translation of Scripture. Second, Fackre defines a moderate inerrancy position as trajectory. Trajectory inerrantists allow a modest role for critical scholarship. Grammatical-historical studies help to reveal the propositional truths of Scripture. Exegetical concerns and textual criticism are significant endeavors serving the desire to attain autobiographical levels of knowledge. Third, there are some who are reluctant to use the term inerrancy and who allow more freedom for human experience and endeavor in the text. “The distinguishing feature is on authorial intention” (123). These representatives Fackre calls intentional inerrantists.

69 This group of evangelicals upholds the authority of Scripture but without appealing to inerrancy. As would be expected, infallibilists admit that there are errors in the texts. But these errors do not affect the Word of God. Quoting 2 Timothy 3.16, they emphasize the concept “profitable.” Infallibilists cite the Westminster Confession’s statement
Fackre’s last category, catholicity, raises a fundamental concern in the discussion of authority. No matter what posture one champions, some assumptions are inevitable regarding the interrelationship of Scripture, tradition, reason, and human experience. Those assumptions profoundly impact one’s understanding of authority.

These are broad strokes at best; I recognize that overgeneralization is inevitable. Yet, with the resources mentioned above in view, I would make a modest proposal at identifying four broad categories that function today. The importance of seeing the continued development of the doctrine of Scripture is great, for this brief glance will demonstrate both the continuity and discontinuity of historical positions.

1. The Bible is authoritative because of supernatural origins. As a response to critical and often destructive attacks on the Bible’s historicity that arose in the mid to late 1800s, a number of Protestant Christians began to insist that every book, chapter, verse, and word of the Bible was without any discrepancy or error. The Bible was judged to be completely in line with contemporary historical and scientific disciplines. Thus, the term inerrancy has become a defining concept in understanding Scripture’s authority.

In recent times this approach to Scripture’s authority has received a lot of attention among fundamentalist and conservative evangelicals.

that “the whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture” (Fackre, 124).

Evangelicals in this camp give a greater role to other historic sources of authority—experience and church tradition (Fackre, 127-28).

One notable event was the development of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. At a three-day meeting in October 1978, nearly three hundred scholars committed to biblical inerrancy signed the document. Sponsored by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, the group gathered largely in response to a controversy developing in American evangelicalism. The controversy was whether institutions such as Christianity Today, Fuller Theological Seminary, and the Evangelical Theology Society were betraying their evangelical heritage by failing to affirm the inerrancy of the Bible.

Soon after the release of the Chicago Statement of Inerrancy, Norman Geisler edited a book that provides additional resources for the inerrancy posture. His book could be best described as defining the far right side of a continuum of inerrantists. More moderate sources for this approach would include the editorial work of D. A. Carson, John D. Woodbridge, and Ronald Youngblood. Efforts to develop an historical

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perspective about inerrancy include a book sponsored by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy entitled *Inerrancy and the Church*.75

However, this approach relies on the Bible’s authority being identified as divine words, not on whether God has something to say that transforms life. Scripture, via inerrancy, is often reduced to a data base of files to be arranged in whatever fashion is needed to authenticate a point of view.76

2. The Bible’s authority rests on its historical accuracy. With the rise of historical awareness and the need to understand the Bible in its historical contexts, this approach seeks to establish the authority of Scripture based on the veracity of Scripture’s claims. From an historical point of view, Henning Graf Reventlow’s work *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World* is unsurpassed in understanding the fundamental roots of the modern consciousness that gave the impetus to biblical criticism.77

Historical-critical methodology’s development preceded the placing of Scripture’s authority in historical realities. William Abraham works

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76 Those who have offered critiques on the fundamentalist posture include Kathleen C. Boone, *The Bible Tells Them So: The Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism*; James Barr, *Beyond Fundamentalism*; see also the work of Paul Achtemeier and John Barton cited in this chapter.

77 Trans. John W. Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); also Robert Clyde Johnson’s, *Authority in Protestant Theology*. 

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with historical and scientific categories and asks questions concerning revelation in *Divine Revelation and the Limits of Historical Criticism*. Paul J. Achtemeier, though rejecting a traditional liberal approach to authority, still posits the importance of historical truth to authority.

The importance of historical and critical questions finds support from evangelicals as well. Steering clear of the radical conclusions of classical liberal thought, but still engaging in critical thinking to understand Scripture’s authority include I. Howard Marshall’s work.

Some things are simply not verifiable to the standards of modern historical method. This results in leaving some key themes of Scripture; e.g., the resurrection, without any real authority. Additionally, Scripture becomes secondary to the historians interest in “what really happened.”

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3. The Bible's authority is rooted in its literary and philosophical value. To put it another way, the Bible is a "classic" and should be read and appreciated for the moral truths it presents and the insight into humanity it offers.\(^1\) This approach places the Bible along with other significant literature; the Bible becomes a captivating and compelling intersection of drama and prose.

4. The Bible's authority is found in the way it speaks to people in their private devotional life. The Bible addresses the individual, assuring one of God's love and providing direction for life. Or, as seen with a growing number of approaches, the Bible's authority is related to the degree in which it resonates with the reader's particular world view. Those world views can include feminism, liberation theology, or Asian perspectives. Cultural relativity and existential concerns become paramount in determining Scripture's voice.\(^2\)

However, this approach loses the objective nature of revelation. Individualistic interpretation improperly restricts the concept of community and the historical perspective of the church.

**Churches of Christ**

Within Churches of Christ throughout this century, the strict inerrancy posture generally held sway. I suspect this position is the result of two related factors. First was the prominent and persuasive influence of B. B. Warfield and his predecessors. Much of the

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\(^2\) These are well illustrated by McKim's book mentioned above---*The Bible in Theology and Preaching*. 
controversy about the authority of the Bible was front page news during the early years of this century. Second, the legacy that was handed on in the Restoration movement possessed a remarkably British accent. Francis Bacon, John Locke, and Thomas Reid with his Scottish Common Sense Philosophy furnished the Restoration movement with its philosophical and methodological foundations. Those foundations, based on reason and inductive thinking, set up the framework to assume an external set of proofs for inerrancy. There has been a minority voice, though, and it has surfaced from time to time.


CHAPTER III
THE NATURE AND AUTHORITY OF SCRIpTURE: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

What sense can be made from the historical legacy bequeathed to yet another generation? How do contemporary Christians hear the voices of the past and speak with clarity to the future about Scripture's authority within the life of the church? Using the trailmarkers noted in the historical survey of the previous chapter, this chapter is an attempt to chart a course for the tough and yet indispensable task of sailing in the contemporary world while hearing the Word of God for the church.

The Nature of Scripture
Scripture as Witness

What is Scripture? Scripture bears witness to the past revelation of God. That is its role. Barth was fond of referring to a painting by Grünwald of the Crucifixion. John the Baptist stands to the side with his long index finger pointing toward the Crucified One.¹ That is the

role of Scripture. The prophets and the apostles all attest to the work of God.

Standing in this service, the biblical witnesses point beyond themselves. If we understand them as witnesses, and only as such do we authentically understand them, i.e., as they understand themselves. . . . They do not speak and write for their own sakes, nor for the sake of their deepest inner possession or need; they speak and write, as ordered, about that other. . . . Why and in what respect does the biblical witness have authority? Because and in the fact that he claims no authority for himself, that his witness amounts to letting that other itself be its own authority. We thus do the Bible poor and unwelcome honour if we equate it directly with this other, with revelation itself.2

This posture helpfully directs us away from the ever present temptation of bibliolatry.3 By unequivocally affirming that authority is rooted in God's revelatory work and not in the Bible, we remind ourselves of where our own loyalty lies. By confessing that Scripture is witness to God's work, we confront the temptation to read the Bible as a compendium of propositional truth and open the possibility to hear the Word of God as did the primary, biblical witnesses.

Such a confession allows one to affirm that the Bible is indeed the Word of God--when we cease to procure for it some external authority and begin to listen. Perhaps much of the modern fundamentalist attempts to establish the authority of scripture fall short simply because they have failed to take the historic Scripture principle seriously enough. In order to validate Scripture, external proofs and propositions are manufactured. Remembering Calvin and affirming the work of the Holy

2CD, 1.1.111-112.

3Barton, People of the Book, 82.
Spirit, the more biblical claim is that the Bible is the Word of God
because it attests to God's saving work in Christ.

The work of preaching is an excellent way to explore Scripture's
role as witness. Proclamation is a continuation of witness in the
contemporary Christian community. Such a conviction reflects on the
truth that the Hebrew prophets and the apostles were humans called on
to bear witness to the Word and Deed of God.4

Thomas Long's recent book, entitled The Witness of Preaching,
previews a cogent argument for the metaphor of witness to be applied to
the preaching task.5 I am aware that the term "witness" does not curry
much favor in many circles. To witness or to testify has certainly seen
abuse and misuse. In addition to that, the term witness conjures up a
legal setting in some court of law. Fearing the thought of legalism and
pontification, others have avoided the word.

But Long argues that it is the courtroom scene that makes the
metaphor of witness viable. The preacher is not the judge, the jury, or
the police officer. He is the witness--one of the people who are called on
to speak. "Now this witness is in every way one of the people, but he or
she is placed on the stand because of two credentials: The witness has
seen something, and the witness is willing to tell the truth about it--the

4For a discussion of the biblical witnesses' proclamation of the
"Word and Deed," see Donald G. Miller, Fire in Thy Mouth (New York:
Abingdon Press, 1954), 16-24; also Sidney Greidanus, The Modern
Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical

whole truth and nothing but the truth."⁶ This witness, the preacher, is the truth-bearer. He speaks about what he has seen and heard. It is no mere mental or intellectual exercise; the witness, believing in the truth, stakes his life upon the validity of his claims.⁷

Long then notes how the image of witness shapes the preaching task.⁸ First, it locates the authority of the preacher in what he has heard, not in his own personality or power.⁹ Second, the image speaks about the event and the encounter between God and humanity. It is not facts but a Person that the preacher proclaims. Third, the concept of witness relates to the rhetorical work of making known what has been seen and heard. What words, what forms, and what styles should be used? Long points out the importance of correlation between the style of the sermon and the “character of the testimony.”¹⁰ Fourth, the witness is not a neutral observer. A personal faith and the contours of his own past shape his testimony. It engages his whole life.

The witness metaphor is consistent with Scripture’s own relationship to God. Preaching, like Scripture, can be the avenue by which

⁶Long, Witness, 43.
⁷As Long points out, it is no accident that the New Testament word for witness is “martyr” (44).
⁸Ibid., 44-46; see Leander E. Keck’s discussion of the preacher as witness in The Bible in the Pulpit: The Renewal of Biblical Preaching (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 53-68.
⁹“God’s authority has to be revealed before it can be apprehended, and the apprehension is of faith and must be freely made. Ministers of the Word cannot use open violence or subtle coercion to compel people to submit to the authority of God” (Browne, 37).
¹⁰Ibid., 46.
the Word of God is heard today. But it is important to remember that
the best that the preacher can do is to be a faithful and reliable truth-teller of what he finds in Scripture. For even at his best the preacher is
removed from the primary witness of Scripture. That gap will always remain.11

Because of that distinction the preacher must begin with faith:
faith that believes that God will speak again through Scripture as He has
done before.12 As the preacher seeks understanding he will undoubtedly
use the customary literary and historical tools and methodologies. But
he does so in order to understand what he has heard. Thus, faith
precedes reason as the preacher approaches Scripture.

Scripture as Divine Words

Intricately connected to the affirmation that Scripture is the
witness to the revelation of God is the affirmation that only through
Scripture that we can come to know this Word of God.13 To declare
freedom from rationalism for a theological method does not mean that

11 As Barth declares, “Theology is neither prophecy nor apostolate. Its relationship to God’s Word cannot be compared to the position of the biblical witnesses because it can know the Word of God only at second hand, only in the mirror and echo of the biblical witness,” in Evangelical Theology: An Introduction (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 31.

12 “The authority of Scripture, therefore, and hence the authority of what we preach, is grounded in the Christian community’s trust in the faithfulness of God to speak to us, and to send his Spirit so we may hear and understand what God says to us in his Son.” Paul J. Achtemeier, “The Authority of the Bible: What Shall We Then Preach?” TSF Bulletin 10 (November-December 1986): 19-20.

13 “There is authority and freedom in the church only because Scripture has already told us what we are asking about when we ask about God’s revelation.” CD, 1.2.462.
one casts off from shore without a compass. Rather, what I affirm is a radical allegiance to hear Scripture speak. Though recognizing the historic conflux of authoritative sources--Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience--I am convinced of the necessity of the absolute priority of Scripture. It possesses that authority because it is the primary witness to God's work. Tradition, human experience, and reason, as valid as they are, must not overpower or ignore the primary role that Scripture has in shaping a contemporary message and directing the contemporary life.

Scripture has been and will continue to be the source of encounter with God. To understand that Scripture is inspired, that it is God-breathed, is appropriate. But to shape an understanding of inspiration in a mechanical way will reduce the Word of God to a mere codebook full of propositional statements.

How then are we to understand inspiration? Two realities come to mind. First, by the grace of God we come to know Him. Inspiration is an act of grace. Second, the past, present, and future work of the Holy Spirit insures the illumination of the Word of God for us.

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14 Thomas C. Oden, in The Living God: Systematic Theology vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1987), 331, develops the relationship between these sources of authority, connecting them back to the revelatory work of God in Jesus Christ.

15 Karl Barth, Evangelical Theology, 30-36.

16 Barth was quite comfortable with the concept of inspiration.

17 As in much of post-Reformation scholastic Protestantism. See Rogers and McKim, 147-99.

18 As Hanson states: "The question of biblical authority thus is resolved by being directed away from the realm of verification theory..."
suggest that this leaves inspiration without any rational or logical foundation. I would maintain that understanding inspiration as an act of grace and mediated by the Spirit is quite rational—once one resolves to live by faith and not by the sight of scientific reasoning.\textsuperscript{19}

**Scripture as Human Words**

Scripture is not only Divine; it is also human. Luther made the comparison between the nature of Scripture and the incarnational nature of Christ. To ignore the historical realities of Scripture is to bury our heads in the sand. Christians are unwilling to accept a Docetic compromise in Christology; likewise, Doceticism has no place in appropriating Scripture. Scripture’s humanness must be acknowledged.\textsuperscript{20}

towards the realm of covenant fidelity: to acknowledge the authority of the Bible is to accept the claim God places on believers through God’s self-revelation in Scripture, a claim that becomes particularly personal and poignant in the relationship of Christians to Christ. Acknowledgement of biblical authority is thus an aspect of faith’s response to God’s gracious initiative. As in the reception of divine grace in all of its forms, it is self-authenticating, or put another way, it arises from the testimony of the Holy Spirit within the believer and within the gathering of the faithful called the church.” Hanson, 70-71. This concept finds its classic expression in John Calvin. See *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.1.7.

\textsuperscript{19}To recognize the divine nature of Scripture opens the door to powerful concepts about proclamation, worship, and ethics. For example, if the Bible, as the Word of God, bears witness to the revealed Word of God, then preaching as the proclaimed Word of God sallies forth with great power and authority. Working with the assumptions that a doctrine of inerrancy contains, preaching becomes errant human words and approximations of the inerrant Word. What I am suggesting is that the power of the Divine Word is not limited to any human words but transcends the limitations of time and text to work in the present.

\textsuperscript{20}Johnson, 187.
When confronted by the critics with the human side of Scripture, many conservatives run quickly under the shelter of inerrancy. Then, to protect their shelter, they shore it up with attempts to harmonize and minimize the ambiguities of Scripture. I propose another approach. Between the giants of historical-critical results and experiential authority on the one hand and the doctrine of inerrancy on the other stands a David. Both modern critical study of the Bible and inerrancy rely on the Goliath-like strength of reason and logical thought, albeit expressed in radically different ways. But the David in the middle acts in faith. He admits that Scripture is human words (much to the chagrin of the conservatives), but he refuses to capitulate to liberal scholarship to thrash about in the modern muck and mire of subjective expression.

I conclude that historical inquiry, exegesis, and biblical theology are proper endeavors. Historical-critical methodology, textual criticism, historical and systematic theology are valuable and useful tools. But these endeavors are limited by and are subservient to the Word of God. Ramm's maxim for Barth is instructive: "Revelation generates history;  

21David H. Bobo is an example among thinkers in Churches of Christ who have proposed an alternative. As early as 1960, Bobo demonstrated the willingness to deal with the human realities of Scripture and concluded that "the issue is not a Biblical issue, as the Bible itself never claims to be non-discrepant. Biblical freedom from discrepancy, while it has a certain rational value, is an arbitrary and humanly imposed standard, and all efforts to prove it are gratuitious" (Bobo, 89).

22See Barth's, comments on exegesis, CD, 1.1.106. See also the noted correspondence between Barth and Adolf von Harnack for a clear exposition of the debate between the priority of faith and the priority of historical-critical method. H. Martin Rumscheidt, Revelation and Theology: An Analysis of the Barth-Harnack Correspondence of 1923 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972).
history does not generate revelation. Likewise, the priority of faith in the Word of God is necessary to keep the blindness out of biblical exegesis and to prevent the now popular individual reading (from a white or black or male or female) from dictating to Scripture.

Discerning Scripture's Authority

Where do these observations lead? How do we appropriate the past for the present? How does one decide what trajectory of tradition from which to draw resources? These and other questions have constantly accompanied me as I have considered the contributions of the church fathers and others. But perhaps, most fundamentally, why should anyone turn to the Bible for an authoritative source? The breakthrough for me came with the asking of yet one more question. Where, or more properly, who is the ultimate source of authority?

I am confident it is not a particular text. Nor is the ultimate source of authority an anthology of texts, compiled through the years by Christians. The source of authority lies behind and beyond any texts. The authority is God. Before an Old Testament or a New Testament

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24 As Darrell Jodock notes: “The problem is instead that the text is made to conform to the worldview or codified experience and thereby loses its integrity and its ability to challenge and confront our present priorities, including even our most noble aspirations.” In “The Reciprocity Between Scripture and Theology: The Role of Scripture in Contemporary Theological Reflection,” *Interpretation* 44 (October 1990): 377.

existed, before canons of Scripture were debated or decided. God was. The authority that Scripture possesses is derivative—directly linked to the reality that it discloses God. Historically, the church has always recognized that the power lies in the saving work of God through Christ. The Bible’s role is witness; it attests to what God has done.

Significantly, Scripture as witness is rooted in the primacy of faith. Scripture does not need the authentication of reason, logic or science to perform its divinely ordained task. Assured by the legacy left by earlier Christian spokespersons, the church begins with faith and seeks to understand God’s work as disclosed through Scripture. Such an approach is particularly relevant in a day where the foundations of modernity are showing distinct signs of decay. Despite the protestations of much of the evangelical world, I am convinced that a return to the primacy of faith as a starting point to do theology is not only an appropriate approach biblically and historically, but is the only valid sociological method in our present world.27

With faith as the primary assumption regarding the authority of Scripture, the modern attempts to establish the authority of Scripture by positing its inerrancy seem particularly useless. To do so is asking an ancient document to stand under the criteria of modern theory.28 It

26Barton, 81-82.

27Thomas C. Oden, After Modernity.

28One difficulty with inerrancy of the Bible in scientific matters is that scientific 'truth,' i.e., statements about 'the way things are objectively,' tends to change from time to time. Can the Bible be 'inerrant' for its contemporary readers in the time of both pre-Galilean and post-Galilean astronomy? Or was the Bible written to be inerrant
certainly seems to be foreign to the Bible itself. That is to say, Scripture never makes the claim that it is inerrant. Perhaps there is some other way to understand Scripture’s authority.

Christ at the Center

What claims does Scripture make that are relevant to the issue of authority? Certainly 2 Timothy 3.16 is a clear reminder that Scripture is inspired--God breathed--and is profitable for teaching, instruction, and doctrine. What is Scripture’s “profitable” nature? If Scripture ultimately derives its authority from God, then perhaps those events that reveal God most clearly are pivotal. Taking a cue from Paul, one learns that some expressions about God’s work exist that he can get quite upset about--namely a distorted expression of the gospel.  

Paul is especially helpful on this point. He was among the first persons to articulate the Christian faith. As he sought to make sense of the Old Testament and of the startling revelation in Jesus, what is pivotal and essential to him becomes evident. Most notable is his statement in the Corinthian correspondence:

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you-- unless you have come to believe in vain. For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised

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only for late twentieth-century Western civilization?” Paul J. Achtemeier, The Inspiration of Scripture, 169, fn. 32.

29Galatians 1.6-9.
on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.\footnote{Corinthians 15.1-8. All English quotations of the Bible in this paper are from the New Revised Standard Version, copyrighted, 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA.}

For Paul the gospel, the message of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, was paramount to his ministry. For Paul this message functioned as a key to understanding the Old Testament.\footnote{Christ is the telos of the law, as in Romans 10.4: "Τέλος γὰρ νόμον Χριστός εἰς δικαιοσύνην παντί τῷ πιστεύοντι." All Greek quotations of the New Testament are from the Greek New Testament, Third Edition (Corrected) (United Bible Societies, 1983).} It was the key to his understanding of how faith was developed.\footnote{"Ἀρα ἡ πίστις εξ ἀκοῆς, ἡ δὲ ἀκοὴ διὰ ῥήματος Χριστοῦ" (Rom. 10.17). Unfortunately, many earlier English translations neglect the preferred rendering. For Paul it was the preaching of Christ (not some modern understanding of the Bible as the Word of God) that when heard created faith.} This kerygmatic message was the key to his ethics.\footnote{The structure of Paul's letters, especially Romans and Ephesians, confirms this idea.} Throughout Paul's ministry, the message of the gospel was central to his preaching.\footnote{"For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake." 2 Corinthians 4.5.} Ultimately, this message was central for how Paul lived.\footnote{"And it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me," Galatians 2.20.}

Paul was not alone on this matter. Peter and Jesus demonstrate an awareness of the difference between Scripture and the core of
The early church fathers, as they attempted to articulate the Christian faith, merely continued this interpretive approach to Scripture. As noted earlier, Scripture was seen as authoritative because it affirmed the rule of faith or the saving message of God. Thus, Scripture became a divine and indispensable tool for teaching and instruction and doctrine.

Any attempt to understand Scripture begins with some assumption. For the early church, that assumption was the message of the gospel. Therefore, any attempt to formulate a systematic statement about the authority of Scripture must recognize that its authority rests on the proclaimed message of Jesus Christ. Scripture itself attests to this all-important centering event. I see no reason to ignore the witness of Scripture and the church and to attempt to anchor Scripture's authority in the doctrine of inerrancy, human experience or any other source. Karl Barth makes this point quite poignantly:

If the crucified Jesus Christ lives, and if the church is the gathering of those who know this, have taken it seriously, and among whom it has rightly become the one axiom of all axiom, they cannot rely upon any other word that God may have spoken, before, after, in juxtaposition to, or outside of this Word--words that he willed to have proclaimed by this Word. The church hears and proclaims this one Jesus Christ as the one Word, the first and the last Word, of the true God. It hears in him the fullness of God's Word of comfort, commandment, and power. It is therefore completely bound to him, and completely free in him. Thus it interprets creation, the course of the world, the nature of

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36Peter demonstrates this distinction in the sermons recorded in Acts. Of special interest is the material in Acts 10 where he conveys to Cornelius' household the essentials of the faith. Jesus takes to task the poor interpretative work of the scribes in John 5.39-40, "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life."
man, his grandeur and his misery, in the light which comes from him; and not somehow vice versa. It need hear no voice beside this voice as authoritative, because the evaluation of all other voices is contingent upon whether they are, or are not, an echo of this voice. It is quite true that, as the church seeks this voice, it also has both the permission and the command to hear other voices. And it can do so without hesitation or anxiety, because they may be permitted a share in his authority as an echo of his voice. However, it will always wish to return once again to hear this special, original voice, and place itself in its service. And, because he lives, the church will always be permitted to hear this voice, and effectively commit itself to its service. In this sense we can say with Zwingli (and against all alleged "natural theology"): "The holy Christian church, whose sole head is Jesus Christ, is born of the Word of God; and in this same Word it remains, and hears not the voice of a stranger.37

Such a christocentric assertion steers a discussion away from utilizing categories of modern philosophy or historical method as fundamental assumptions. The question of Scripture's authority is the church's question, not the university's. By making this assertion I am fully aware that one brings philosophical and methodological resources to Scripture. What I am proposing is an awareness of these assumptions and the need for them to be contained and harnessed by a proper Christology.

To illustrate, I turn again to the task of preaching. The starting point for preaching is the revelation of God through Jesus Christ. It is the message of the cross that functions as the interpretive key in the preacher's approach to Scripture and to the pulpit. "The criterion of past, future and therefore present Christian utterance is thus the being

37Karl Barth, as cited by Robert Clyde Johnson, 179.
of the Church, namely, Jesus Christ, God in His gracious revealing and reconciling address to man."38

Stating that Christ is at the center of our proclamation, as he is the center of the biblical witness, is not new; the difficulty is that it is very seldom practiced.39 Those who rely on historical methodology seek a historical Jesus (who turns out to be whoever they want him to be), and those who pursue a traditional Christianity count on an inerrant Bible. The tragedy of both is that human reason determines the center.

I am suggesting that foundational to the preaching enterprise is the reminder that “yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.”40 I have already mentioned the idea of an incarnational God and the idea of an incarnational Bible. Preaching, consistent with that model, must be incarnational as well. For as James Daane states,

The best ministers, churches, and evangelists, recognizing that God himself speaks his Word through the proclamation of the church, therefore do not say “I say to you,” or “the Bible says,” but “Thus saith the Lord!” In biblical thought what the Bible actually says can only be heard at the point where God speaks his own Word in and through the proclamation of the church. The Bible is indeed the written form of the Word of God. But the Word finds a higher expression in that personal form of it which takes place in the pulpit of the church, for the pulpit expression which is true to the Written Word approximates more closely that Word which became flesh in Jesus Christ, because it is itself

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38CD, 1.1.4; see 6, 12, 13, 15.

39Barton. People of the Book, 81-84.

40Phil. 3.7.
an expression of that fleshly, human form in which the
Word of God is present in Jesus Christ.  

Incarnational preaching, in continuity with the witness of Scripture, is
God’s way of revealing to this and every age his gracious will.  

And an approach to preaching, as with theology, that is christocentric will lend
itself well to the task of being a faithful witness in the twenty-first
century--as it has in the past.

The Contextual Nature of Authority and the Church

As stated earlier, Scripture’s authority is derivative; that is to say,
Scripture’s authority rests in and on the One who is disclosed.
Following the implications of this reality leads to yet another vital truth:
Scripture functions as an authority only within a community of people--
the church.  

Jodock reflects on the connectedness of the church and authority:

A community also provides the context for the Bible’s
authority: the community of faith. In the community of
faith the Bible makes its claim on persons—to be taken
seriously in their decision making and to inform their sense
of direction and purpose. Those outside the community of
faith can respect the Bible as a document of religious
significance for others, they can study it, and they may even
appeal to it if they want to persuade Christians to act in a
certain way (this frequently happens in political discourse),
but for them it does not, properly speaking, exercise

41 Preaching with Confidence: A Theological Essay on the Power of
the Pulpit (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 14-15.

42 “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God
through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our
proclamation, to save those who believe” (1 Cor. 1:21).

43 “Beyond the dead letter of biblicism, the uncritical assumptions
of historicism, the Narrowness of bourgeois privatism and the
detachment of aestheticism lies the real authority of Scripture in the life
of the community of faith” (Migliore, 46).
authority. It makes no claims on their own decision making or sense of direction.\textsuperscript{44}

For an individual to accept Scripture as authoritative for life, he must come into contact with someone who is a part of the community. The believer is a conduit; through the authenticity of a life given to God, God speaks and draws the other into the community. Only within the community then does the individual come to accept the authority of Scripture. This commonly repeated reality affirms the incarnational nature of the Christian faith and highlights the centrality of the message of Jesus for appropriating the authority of Scripture.

Jodock points out that even in the reading of Scripture faith is mediated through a member of the community of faith.\textsuperscript{45} Reading the biblical documents is an “overhearing” of a conversation between Paul or Luke or John and some church community. Thus, in observing the validity of truth claims in the life of the community and in the act of reading Scripture itself, authority comes as a result of these experiences, not as a presupposition to seeing and hearing.\textsuperscript{46}

Herein lies the poverty of prominent theories of Scriptural authority that rely on external frameworks such as inerrancy. In an attempt to convince others of the Bible’s accuracy and usefulness, a void

\textsuperscript{44}The Church’s Bible, 106-07; see also Kelsey, 91, 208ff.

\textsuperscript{45}The Church’s Bible, 107.

\textsuperscript{46}I am indebted to Jodock for this idea, 107. Beyond the scope of this document but of great importance is the necessary recognition of the need for ethic, holy living, and social responsibility to be squarely placed on the shoulders of the church. If the authority of the Word will only be seen in the life and ministry of the church, the time has come for a renewed and vigorous ecclesiology that supports this truth. See Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, Resident Aliens (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989).
develops at the real heart of the issue of authority: Is it trustworthy? Will Scripture bring transformation, meaning, and hope? Instead, argument and debate often rule the agenda, making statements and offering conclusions about the Bible that many contemporary persons find intellectually dishonest and devoid of real meaning. 47

Stanley Hauerwas takes the disparity between the reality of Scripture’s authority within the church and presuppositions made about the Bible’s authority quite seriously. In a recently released book, Unleashing Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America, Hauerwas boldly states that the real problem in American Christianity is the casual way in which all people are encouraged to read the Bible for themselves—indeed independent of any church community. 48 By making the Bible its own standard, “then the authority of the Bible is not privileged. Instead the authority of our private judgment will prevail.” 49 The Protestant tradition has consistently called for sola Scriptura—often in reaction to the teaching office of the Catholic tradition. But the loss of community that has accompanied this individualistic manifestation of the Reformation legacy points out the need to regain some sense of

47Both Jodock, The Church’s Bible, 108, and Barton, People of the Book, 89-90, speak of the danger of overstatement.

48“North American Christians are trained to believe that they are capable of reading the Bible without spiritual and moral transformation. They read the Bible not as Christians, not as a people set apart, but as democratic citizens who think their ‘common sense’ is sufficient for ‘understanding’ the Scripture. They feel no need to stand under the authority of a truthful community to be told how to read.” (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 15.

49Hauerwas, 29.
orthodox and historic tradition. I do not argue for a move to Catholicism, with its formal teaching office. Rather, I would suggest that *sola Scriptura*, as important and indispensable as it is, does not stand at the center of the church’s understanding of authority. Only the presence of Jesus Christ, living among His people, the church, can properly be understood to be the authority for faith, life, and practice.

The Relational Nature of Authority and the Church

Authority implies relationship. Authority defines the relationship between a person or persons and another person, persons, a book, or a set of ideas. It requires time and experience to develop. But the Bible is not the one who initiates and ushers in a relationship between God and humanity. Rather, it is the work of the Spirit of God. “who works through the message of grace proclaimed by human beings belonging to the community.” Thus, Scripture, in a very real sense, does not possess authority; Scripture is the conduit for the authoritative work of God within the church. As Darrell Jodock relates:

No contemporary theory of the authority of the Bible can assume that a person will be convinced of the Bible’s authority apart from participation in the community of

50 Hauerwas, 23-25.
52 “[T]he principle of *sola scriptura* . . . has become the basis for all sorts of maximalizing claims about the Bible.” Barton, 84; Beker makes a similar observation in “The Authority of Scripture,” 378-79.
53 Jodock, 108; this reference and all following references to Jodock are from *The Church’s Bible*.
54 Jodock, 110.
faith. As Jaroslav Pelikan observed after hearing his eight-year-old daughter sing, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so," the lyrics of the children's song were incorrect for her. She had not read the Bible. She knew that Jesus loved her because her mother, her father, her Sunday-school teacher, her pastor, and others in the Christian community had told her so. Only later would she come into contact with the Bible.

The Tradition of Authority and the Church

At first glance the following observation is simple enough. The Bible functioned authoritatively in the church because the church allowed it to do so. But underneath that simple observation lies an eye-opening reality. Before a Bible existed, the work, ministry, and life of the church were upheld by the gospel message and the rule of faith. As noted elsewhere in this work, the church developed a canon out of a response to a series of factors in the second and third centuries. Through consensus and usefulness, Scripture's authoritative role evolved in the life of the church.

Jodock utilizes a term from Michael Polanyi to describe this reality. Jodock asserts that authority is "tacit." By "tacit," he means that authority is "established not consciously and deliberately but implicitly as attention is focused on the tasks of the community." In the work and life of the early church, the documents that comprise the New Testament canon came to be seen as God-breathed--useful and profitable. Why does the contemporary church turn to the Bible? With

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55 Jodock, 74.
56 Jodock, 111.
57 Jodock, 111.
the passing of each generation, the church would be hard-pressed to reject the claim of tradition to the authority of Scripture in offering guidance to present day issues.

**Interpretation: Hearing the Voice of Scripture**

So what does it mean to say that Scripture is the primary witness to God's revelation? What ramifications develop in affirming both the divinity and the humanity of Scripture? How does the church speak an authoritative Word? Or, on the other hand, can a person who affirms the veracity of Scripture's ancient witness have anything relevant to say to contemporary life? How can one approach Scripture in a way that is consistent with its nature and attentive to its authority? To answer these kinds of pertinent questions, I plan to propose a general interpretive approach to Scripture that correlates with some of the discoveries and affirmations made above. This correlation is really quite imperative as Robert Browne indicates about preaching: "What a preacher believes about the mode of divine revelation determines the mode of his preaching." 58

The place to begin is with Scripture itself. The church must allow the "Word of God" to critique our presuppositions, using Scripture and prayer to review the questions brought to the text. Additional controls

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58Robert E. C. Browne, *The Ministry of the Word* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 15. He continues, "Those who believe in the literal inspiration of the Scriptures do so by doctrines which must also govern their work as preachers. That is, those who hold that divine revelation is given in propositional form will regard preaching as the statement of doctrine in a series of propositions expressed in definable terms."
to the presuppositions include the history of Christian thought. The Word of God finds greater freedom where it is heard in the large circle of historic Christian witness. Though many different interpretations exist, the differences can be helpful as long as persons respectfully hear each other and are open to change. Variations become destructive only when fixed points are rejected or when the “living hope” is threatened.

Scripture Sets the Agenda

So what does that mean? It means that the nature of Scripture dictates how we interpret Scripture. And the nature of Scripture can be encountered through three distinct convictions. First, Scripture is God’s book. It is the revelation of God. That means that the Bible has everything to do with disclosing who God is to humanity. And God is the One who willed it into being. Second, this book about God from God is not some metaphysical theory or exercise in philosophy. God’s revelation is action—concrete actions within human history. God reveals himself in Word and Deed; God works in history. Third, these acts in history, by his will and purpose, have been recorded by humans in human forms with human words. The ancient Christian thinkers spoke of accommodation; God reveals himself in modes and methods that humans can perceive and hear. Thus, the Bible is filled with literary


60 New Testament writers were cognizant of this. The writer of 1 John writes to affirm the humanity of Jesus in the face of gnostic leanings, and Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15, is completely unyielding about the resurrection.
documents, material written using literary structures that were in common vogue. It means going to Scripture with three interrelated, but distinct interests. These interests or approaches are used not because they are enlightening or instructive—though they are both. I propose these three avenues of inquiry because they approximate three realities about Scripture.

**Nature of Scripture**

- God's revelation
  - Words and Deeds (in history)
    - Recorded in literary forms

**Approach to Scripture**

- Theological and Christological questions
  - Historical questions
    - Literary questions

**A Threefold Approach**

The first avenue is foundational. One must begin with the recognition of the literary form that a particular text or book possesses. Every book of the Bible is fashioned in a distinct, literary form. The Psalms are poetry, Genesis is narrative, and Romans is a letter. To hear the Word of God one must first realize the form that God used to preserve and present his message.

For example, to understand the truth that the gospel of Luke or the Roman letter presents, we must hear it on its own terms. To read
Luke like a cookbook or Romans like the newspaper will only create a distance between us and the message. Literary analysis, or asking questions that aid in discerning the form that a biblical writer is using, paves the way to understanding the message.

The second avenue builds on the first. Beyond recognizing and understanding the literary forms of Scripture, one must understand the historical setting of the text. These biblical documents are products of distinct, historical happenings. They are nestled in the wrap of human experience. These events and experiences are the warp and woof of God's revelation, and these distinct, historical happenings took place a long time ago. Thus the distance between the "then" and the "now" must be negotiated. Thus, the historical questions--internal and external to the text--are necessary.

The third avenue is the theological one. The broad and clear themes of Scripture establish the framework to hear correctly the specific claims that a particular text may make. Specifically we begin to discover that the life and message of Jesus were and are normative for the life of the church. The church's interpretive work must not neglect to remember that humans are ultimately not the interpreters--God is. Or to put it in another way, God is not the object of study; He is the subject. Humility, devotion, and an open heart to the message of God are imperative tools.

By confessing that life is found in God, not in the study of Scripture, then we will be most interested in the overall themes of Scripture and the voice of God. The church will take particular interest in the big picture, being wary of atomistic approaches that lead to
peculiar understandings that do not reflect the collective chorus of Scripture.

The Threefold Approach at Work

If the church is to respond to the authority of Scripture, then she must regain a clear sense of being biblical in her theology. Preaching and teaching must be biblical or else lose its connection with any divine authority. A grave danger exists in contemporary culture for a gap to develop between life and the Bible, thus dissolving the opportunity for the Word to be heard in the church. Thus I am suggesting the vital need for biblical, expositional work in our churches. Let me be clear about what I mean when I speak of exposition. For example, expository preaching is often misconstrued; it often is used to describe a form of preaching that in reality is exegesis. When I use the word “expositional,” I mean a way of handling the text so that the truth it bears witness to in its ancient setting will be heard anew in a contemporary setting. As Long suggests about preaching:

Preaching is biblical whenever the preacher allows a text from the Bible to serve as the leading force in shaping the content and purpose of the sermon. More dynamically, biblical preaching involves telling the truth about--bearing witness to--what happens when a biblical text intersects some aspect of our life and exerts a claim upon us. Biblical preaching does not mean merely talking about the Bible.

61 Greidanus, 13.

62 More than one book has appeared in the past forty years noting the demise of preaching that is anchored to the Bible. Leander Keck’s chapter “On the Malaise of Biblical Preaching,” in The Bible in the Pulpit, is illustrative.

using the Bible to bolster doctrinal arguments, or applying biblical "principles" to everyday life. . . . Biblical preaching has almost nothing to do with how many times the Bible is quoted in a sermon and everything to do with how faithfully the Bible is interpreted in relation to contemporary experience.64

This conviction about expository work leads to a growing realization of the importance of grammatical, historical and literary endeavors. If the authority of Scripture is to be properly appropriated, then it must be heard in its original setting—with the church’s ears attuned for its original message. That does not reduce Scripture to a mere historical document subject to the ambiguities of historical-critical method.65 Rather it gives serious weight to the incarnational work of God in Jesus and in Scripture. That is to say, God accommodated himself to work in and through human history; the church longs to bear witness to that Work and Word of God, and she must engage in some literary and historical thinking to hear and see.

64 Long, 48. John R. W. Stott suggests, in Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 126, that expositors are to open a text “up in such a way that it speaks its message clearly, plainly, accurately, relevantly, without addition, subtraction or falsification. In expository preaching the biblical text is neither a conventional introduction to a sermon on a largely different theme, nor a convenient peg on which to hang a ragbag of miscellaneous thoughts, but a master which dictates and controls what is said.” See Gustaf Wingren, The Living Word: A Theological Study of Preaching and the Church (London: SCM, 1960), 201. See Karl Barth, Homiletics, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 44.

65 See Migliore’s comments on the need for Scripture to be “interpreted with the help of literary and historical criticism” (49).
Foundational then to this vital work is exegesis. Bringing linguistic, grammatical, textual, historical, and theological resources to bear is essential for the one who is called on to bear witness to the Word. Much could be said about exegetical work, but I want to point out only one theme that is often overlooked.

Typically the stress in doing exegesis is on discovering the message of Scripture. The specific form of the text matters little. However, in recent years, a growing emphasis on literary criticism and, therefore, a growing appreciation of the various forms that Scripture takes is emerging. The literary forms of Scripture are not merely vehicles for some message, but they are an intricate part of the message. The form itself and the impact that form has on the reader must be considered as a part of the message. Concerning the authority of Scripture, David Bartlett has helpfully pointed out that the different forms of Scripture, by virtue of their form, make different claims of authority for the

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68 This has found popular expression in Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).
Christian community. Likewise, the student should consider the form of his text—allowing the content and the form to guide his work. Many fruitful possibilities exist. For example, Thomas Long encourages preachers to let the form of the text shape the form of the sermon.

If Scripture is the primary witness to God's saving work, then the serious work of historical and literary disciplines is necessary to put the preacher in the position to hear the Word of God. Without asking what is the truth which the text bears witness to, one will be hard pressed to have an authoritative word for the church to hear today.

Conclusion

In the midst of an ongoing controversy over the nature of Scripture's authority in contemporary life, I suggested some concepts that I believe lead to a biblical understanding. First, using the history of Christian thought as a backdrop, I pointed out that attempts to establish the authority of Scripture by the doctrine of inerrancy are historically late and were efforts to shore up a sagging image of the Bible with the coming of the modern age. Second, the church fathers and reformers affirmed the authority of Scripture. They affirmed the

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70 This I believe is the genius of Sidney Greidanus' work The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text; see Keck's comments, 106.

authority of Scripture as the primary witness to God’s saving Word and Deed by working from the primacy of faith and with such concepts as the evidential nature of Scripture, accommodation, and the use of the rule of faith.

I proposed that a contemporary affirmation of the authority of Scripture begins with an understanding that God is the ultimate authority. Additionally, Scripture is both divine and human--the Word of God in the words of humanity. Scripture’s authority is related to its task of bearing witness to what God has done. Fundamental to hearing the Word of God in Scripture is the belief that most significantly the Word of God was incarnate. A christocentric understanding of Scripture continues to be the interpretive key for the church.

Not only does the authority of Scripture rest in its telling the story of Jesus, but I have also argued that this authority functions within the community of faith. It is to those who believe that the Bible has authority to speak and to guide. Scripture is indeed the church’s book.

To bring this reflection to a close, John Barton’s remarks are appropriate:

Central to my own thinking about the authority of the Bible is the conviction that we can say nothing worthwhile about the Bible except by beginning with the Christian gospel that existed before there ever was a Bible and [that] could survive if every Bible was destroyed.\textsuperscript{72}

As a minister of the gospel and as a disciple of Jesus, I can do no less than allow Scripture to set its own agenda for how it should be heard. Thus, whatever remarks I have offered have been an attempt to allow the nature of Scripture to establish authority and inform interpretation.

\textsuperscript{72}Barton, People of the Book, 89.
With a clear voice from history affirming the priority of the gospel, the concept of accommodation, and the idea of witness, the challenge for the church today rests in reaching beyond the last fifty years to determine how Scripture should be heard. The bankruptcy of both inerrancy and modern critical approaches will indeed leave Christians impoverished in a post-modern world. With the rich legacy of the fathers and reformers, the church would be wise to invest in the durable understandings of Scripture that are rooted in Scripture itself. This investment is made imperative by the reality that Scripture is not an end to itself; it exists to bear witness to the truth about God. Likewise, the church stands as truth-bearer in a world that shows no fondness for truth and yet longs for the healing and hope that the truth of God provides.

If the church is to bear witness to the truth, then my hope is that by properly discerning the locus of authority the world will come to hear and see Jesus. Such a goal is easily distinguished from an approach to Scripture based on reason and external proofs such as inerrancy. Well-known in many evangelical circles and in Churches of Christ, that approach to Scripture can often lead to legalism and sectarianism. I call the church to allegiance to God, not the Bible. I call the church to Jesus, not to a plan. I call the church to a life in the Spirit, not to a system of doctrine. Such a task begins with a proper understanding of biblical authority, and understanding begins and ends with the Incarnate Word. Barth's concluding observations about his life's work are appropriate:

The last word which I have to say as a theologian and as a politician is not a term like "grace," but a name, "Jesus
Christ.” He is grace, and he is the last, beyond the world and the church and even theology. What I have been concerned to do in my long life has been increasingly to emphasize this name and to say: There is no salvation in any other name than this. For grace, too, is there. There, too, is the impulse to work, to struggle, and also the impulse towards fellowship, towards human solidarity. Everything that I have tested in my life, in weakness and in foolishness, is there. But it is there. 73

73 Karl Barth, just a few days before his death in a tape recording intended for broadcast on Swiss radio, as cited by Busch, 496.
CHAPTER IV
MINISTRY INTERVENTION: METHOD, SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Methodology

After the exploration and discovery of the previous chapters the ministerial task of addressing the concrete situation of people still remained. To address the dilemma of Scripture's role as the church's book and to engage in a proactive intervention, the following approach emerged.

1. As is included in this document, I first engaged significant historical sources to gather some insight to the church's voice on the nature and authority of Scripture. Then, I developed a theological reflection on the nature of Scripture, the authority of Scripture, and some interpretive trajectories for an approach to Scripture that is consistent with its nature. This dual task set the framework for the project and engaged significant literature in the areas of inspiration, authority, and revelation. To accomplish this task I used the following sources: biblical sources relating to Scripture's role, major historical shifts in how Scripture's authority has been understood through the history of the church, and contemporary expressions of biblical authority.

2. Using the historical review and the theological reflection as a foundation, I developed another document. Entitled "The Work of Witness," this document served as an introduction to Scripture's role in the church. Its design and content were to assist lay persons in
assimilating an informed understanding of the nature and authority of Scripture. To accomplish this task, “The Work of Witness” was rooted in historical and theological issues. Comprised of eight units, “The Work of Witness” included a collection of readings from various primary sources; they were introduced and intertwined with my own reflection and analysis. Generally, each unit possessed three components: 1) an introduction and summary statement, 2) a reading or readings from primary sources, and 3) a set of thought questions suitable for group discussion.

3. A group of eleven persons at Westlake formed a discussion group to read “The Work of Witness” and engaged in discussion. Eight weekly, one-hour meetings were held during the months of October and November 1994. Only one unit of “The Work of Witness” was assigned each week; every participant read the materials and considered the thought questions before the next meeting.

The discussion group, known as the Focus Group, was composed of both opinion leaders at Westlake that were specifically selected and others who responded to announcements in the church bulletin. The group began with eleven and concluded with the same eleven. Other than an occasional absence due to travel or sickness, the Focus Group showed a high degree of commitment to the project.

The group was comprised of a preschool teacher, a homemaker, a counselor, a retired food service manager, an audiologist/homemaker, a university administrator, a program staff person from Westlake, a statistician from a major industry, an administrator for the FAA, an insurance agent, and a microbiologist. Four persons held master’s degrees, and an additional four persons held bachelor’s degrees.
4. Evaluation occurred in three ways. First, through the informal feedback and interaction of the weekly meetings, I received an immediate response to the materials presented. Second, the Focus Group completed a questionnaire designed to measure the clarity and utility of “The Work of Witness.” This questionnaire also assessed what the Focus Group learned and the strengths and weaknesses of the facilitator. Third, one week after the completion of the Focus Group, the group reassembled for a one-hour session to assess and evaluate “The Work of Witness” and the process.

5. Based on the feedback of the Focus Group and on the results of the questionnaire, I made minor revisions to “The Work of Witness.”

Results

“The Work of Witness” allowed eleven people to explore some of the historical and theological issues that surround the nature and authority of Scripture. What now? Does this document, or this subject, have any role to play at Westlake and for Churches of Christ? What value can the study of the nature and authority of Scripture possess for the church as it moves into a new century?

Focus Group Response

Initial Data

One way to begin to answer the questions raised above is to review the response of the Focus Group to their experience. At the conclusion of the eight-week study, each participant was asked to fill out a questionnaire. On a scale from one to ten (one meaning disagree strongly and ten meaning agree strongly), they responded to several
statements about the written materials. Here are five of those statements and the composite scores:


4. I possess a clearer understanding of how Scripture functions authoritatively for the church. Score: 8.4.


In addition to responding to each statement, participants were provided space to make comments. Through those written comments and through informal conversation several themes emerged. First, reading from primary sources such as Augustine or Luther was a profound and powerful experience for most of the group. Second, historical awareness and some sensitivity to theological issues created an entirely new way of looking at doctrinal and ecclesiastical issues. Rethinking the Scripture’s authority opened new vistas for hearing the Word of God afresh. Third, the study established a new respect for Scripture. Scripture is a living voice, not dead words.

In addition to the statements that each participant was asked to score, six open-ended questions were asked. These questions surfaced several significant observations. Through the reading of “The Work of Witness” and through class discussion times, participants found learning about the formation of the canon to be a new experience and
helpful in understanding the Scripture's role for the church. Being able
to connect history with faith was affirming for several participants. The
concept of accommodation and the function of the rule of faith were
often noted as important discoveries. As one person stated, "I love the
idea of God accommodating himself to us. It amazes and thrills me."

Inerrancy was often mentioned in participants' responses.
Understanding the historical development of the doctrine presented
opportunity for people to consider its validity and truthfulness. For two
of the participants who had never had a name for this approach to
Scripture, raising questions about inerrancy was disturbing. "The
inerrancy materials infuriated me--probably because I have heard these
arguments all my life and have seen what it does to churches." Or,
"inerrancy bothered me the most because in the past I have seen how the
church has used this to support doctrine."

Perhaps the way to understand what "The Work of Witness" and
the class discussions provided is capsulated by this response:

This study forced me to stop and consider what I really
believe rather than just take things for granted. Then I had
to find out why I believed it and what I was basing my faith
on. It gave my faith a much firmer foundation and bolstered
by belief in the changes I've been going through as being
good changes.

Beyond such substantive comments and themes, the Focus Group
noted the need for some changes in the document itself. First, the
original title of the document, "The Path of Discovery," was not well
liked. The group suggested something more descriptive. Thus, the title
of the document was changed to "The Work of Witness." Second, a
number of minor revisions and a reduction in footnotes were made.
Third, the group wanted to see an example of a liberal handling of
Scripture. Thus, a sermon that represented a feminist point of view was added.

Reflection on Focus Group Response

What sort of summary and reflection can be made from the participation and response of the Focus Group? One clear thought to emerge from both the written response and the oral discussion that followed the class was the value of this kind of study for a larger circle of people at Westlake. One person suggested that the course should be required for all teachers in the education program. Others saw it as a foundation course for the whole educational system. The high regard for this subject matter reflects an awareness from participants of the value of one's paradigms and the interpreting task.

Being able to read and discuss concepts about the nature and authority of Scripture offered the opportunity for faith development. As one participant said, "The class made me think through why I place trust in the Bible. But I found a growing confidence in expressing what I believe about the Bible." Another stated, "Though I have often taken Scripture for granted, I now have valuable reasons for turning to Scripture and listening to what God is saying." Yet another said, "It is okay to ask questions. Our faith makes it okay to live without all the answers." Rather than simply accepting what has always been said, participants in the Focus Group entered into an environment where it was safe to explore. The result was stronger faith in God and confidence in Scripture.

In a recent conversation with a colleague, he commented that one's ethics are only as old as the books on one's shelf. That
observation holds true to understanding authority and in hearing the Word of Scripture. As the Focus Group repeatedly observed, encounters with history and persons from history created a structure wherein reflection could safely and positively occur. One participant put it this way: “I can’t explain the impact of the primary readings; they affirmed my own thoughts and instilled confidence in our attempts to understand the Bible today.” Such was the interest in historical material that I made a commitment to the group that I would offer a class on early Christian writings within the year. Could it be that hearing the historic voice of the Church would strengthen faith, ethics and mission in the contemporary church? My conclusion based on this limited foray into church history is that it would bless the contemporary church immensely.

In practical terms “The Work of Witness” and the discussion it engendered developed a healthy respect for thoughtful and prayerful exegetical work. Though beyond the scope of this present work, learning about literary and historical methods was a clearly expressed interest. Understanding the nature of Scripture and its vital role as witness heightens its value and promise to the church.

Implications of “The Work of Witness”

Where do I go from here? What impact can this ministry intervention have in Westlake’s life? Upon reflection, several trajectories can be projected. What follows is a brief synopsis of those possibilities.

Education

“The Work of Witness” in some form will find its way into the adult education curriculum at Westlake within the year. It will be expanded
into a thirteen week study, which will allow for more time to be taken and perhaps the addition of more material in the areas of canon and post-modern approaches to Scripture. The primary readings will probably be optional but highly encouraged.

Additionally, Morris Cromer, who served as the monitor for this project, has called for this material to be required for teachers in the adult education program at Westlake. Morris, who is one of Westlake’s elders, will undoubtedly encourage such a use. I concur with Morris; “The Work of Witness” will probably find its way into either a future teacher training series or into some informal discussion settings for teachers and other key opinion leaders. Discussion groups have an established history at Westlake and could be used with profit in widening the circle of influence the material could have in this congregation.

Nurturing Faith among the Youth

Nurturing the faith and spiritual development of our young people is a vital task for the church. This task at Westlake is carried out at in a number of ways. In addition to the usual educational programs that offer instruction to children, Westlake encourages all children to participate in a program called REACH (Racing for Excellence at Church and Home). REACH provides yet another setting for spiritual formation. In particular, REACH offers an opportunity for Scripture to be heard. At present, REACH is primarily a way for students to memorize Scripture. However, in light of this work, REACH will be broadened to incorporate some other features. In particular, REACH will include structured times for parent and child interaction, for the oral reading of Scripture in
group settings, more opportunities for art work to express Bible stories, and some teaching about the role and life of the community.

Community

Significant to the thesis of this work is the role that the community plays in hearing Scripture. Scripture, as the church's book, must be given voice within the church's worship and life. Likewise, within the faithful community, the work of the Spirit nurtures and supports the Word. For Westlake, the role of the community in hearing the Word with authority finds at least three distinct opportunities.

First, Westlake's worship reflects a growing use of Scripture in worship. Scripture is an active, vital part of what is heard each week. Through responsive readings, congregational readings, and dramatic readings, Scripture receives a significant hearing each week in worship. Additionally, a psalm is read as a part of the call to worship.

Second, my work as preacher places within weekly duties the opportunity for preaching and teaching. For me, this responsibility is rooted in understanding that God, mediated through the Son, is the sole source of authority for the church. Thus, working through the themes of this project, a clearer vision about preaching is evolving. Notably, as a result of this project, I am becoming aware of the vital role that the proclamation of the gospel has for creating and nurturing the community.

Third, Westlake utilizes small groups that are centered in Bible study. Each week approximately eighteen groups meet for study and fellowship. The purpose of these groups is to nurture one another through study and "care-giving." As a result of this thesis, a renewed
emphasis on community development will be forthcoming. These small groups are ideally suited for Scripture to be heard within the context of real living. Additionally, small groups provide the context for accountability to the word that is heard each week.

**Discipleship and Interpretation**

Yet another implication of this work is a growing awareness that the theological controls supporting the interpretive process need expansion. Though the message of Jesus or the rule of faith stands as the starting point for all reflection, some other validation must take place for interpretive work. I propose to begin working an approach that posits that validation within the community of God’s people.

I suggest community as the place of validation because the community is place of God’s Spirit. From earliest times the church has affirmed the work of the Spirit affirming the proclamation of God’s message. Should not the practice and life of the church today be seen as the place to see whether the voice of Scripture is affirmed? Certainly, literary and historical controls to the study of Scripture are indispensable. However, simple literary and historical controls as an approach to Scripture are insufficient to always recognize the authority of God in the text. Thus, the life of the community becomes the place where the word of Scripture converges with the work of the Spirit.

The role of community as the place where an authoritative word is heard heightens the significance of discipleship. Obedience and distinctively Christian lifestyles will be the evidence of Scripture’s authority. Saying that the Bible is authoritative possesses little power; only when a community of people live out the truth does the truth find
validation. For Westlake, interpretation of Scripture must come to the test of whether the community will respond and live out the Word.

Churches of Christ

Is there a viable need for "The Work of Witness" or the historical and theological work contained in this volume to have a larger exposure? If the continued confusion and debate observed in many churches today is any indication, then serious and careful reflection about the nature of Scripture is foundational to the health of the Restoration tradition. For underneath all the talk about worship, women, small groups, mission, and all the other issues that are creating points of tension is the fundamental concern about authority. Though Churches of Christ have long claimed the Bible as the sole source of authority, how the Bible functions and why it functions as an authority, receives poor and inadequate response. And if understanding the authority of Scripture is foundational to the church's concerns, then what is to become of a fellowship whose awareness and articulation about Scripture suffers historical amnesia and theological anemia?

Perhaps "The Work of Witness" document can serve as a modest tool in other churches. With some additions and revisions to limit the "academic" flavor, "The Work of Witness" could prove helpful for individuals, small groups, and Bible classes desiring to grapple with Scripture's nature and authority. I hope to prepare a new and fuller draft of "The Work of Witness" in conjunction to teaching the material at Westlake in the fall of 1995 or the winter of 1996. From there, I will seek out possibilities for publishing the material.
Within scholarly and more reflective circles I anticipate the revision and attempt to publish the early chapters of this document. The work that this document represents is critical for spiritual vitality and clear-headed theological reflection for persons within Churches of Christ. I want to enter into wider circles of discussion about authority and interpretation. The voice with which I speak is one that is rooted in the realities of the church's call to carry out the mission of Jesus. The issue of the nature and authority of Scripture is not a question of the university; it is the question facing the church. Hopefully, through the reflection begun in these pages, another modest and constructive voice will be of service to the church's struggle to be a people of the book.

Finally, the most concrete and vital result of this study and intervention into the life of a church is a personal, deepening appreciation about the authority of Scripture. To recognize that the authority of Scripture has to do with the witness it bears to God and His work through Jesus sets the parameters to hear the message with vitality. With Scripture as my guide I long ever to be bearing witness to the truth.
Appendix 1: The Work of Witness

The Work of Witness: An Introduction to the Nature and Authority of Scripture
Unit One

“In the beginning ...”

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this project. My hope is that you will be blessed with a greater appreciation for the role of Scripture in the church’s life.

The focus of the study is to help you have a greater awareness and understanding into the nature and authority of Scripture for the church. Though at first blush such a goal sounds a little dull and academic, I believe that you will find this exploration to be quite interesting. More significantly, I believe that your faith will find opportunity for growth.

To understand Scripture’s proper role and to begin thinking about how we should use it in the church today, we will let two important sources be our guide. First, Scripture itself will set the groundwork for an understanding of how the Bible should be used. Second, the voice of the church throughout history will be utilized. How have Christians throughout the history of the church heard and used Scripture? Throughout the course of our class, you will interact with biblical and historical material. You will learn what others have said and use that experience to express and explore your own convictions about Scripture’s authoritative role and how Scripture should be heard in the church today.
Each week you will be given a handout to prepare for next week’s class. I will ask you to read the material carefully and give some time considering the thought questions that conclude each handout. Though there may be some variance from week to week, generally each handout will have 1) an opening section that will introduce the theme for the week, 2) a reading or readings from some other source, 3) some concluding remarks or observations, and 4) a set of thought questions for group discussion.

The class will meet for eight Wednesday nights, beginning on Wednesday, 5 October, and running through the last Wednesday in November. We will not meet as a class on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. At the end of the course you will be asked to do two things. First, you will be asked to fill out a questionnaire designed to measure the clarity and utility of handouts each week. Second, the Wednesday after the completion of the class, 7 December, you are asked to participate in a one-hour session to assess and evaluate the handouts and the whole course. We will meet at 8:15 p.m., after other classes on this day. These two requests are a part of the overall evaluation process necessary for my doctoral work. Your help with these requests and your participation in the class is deeply appreciated. I thank you for your willingness to partner with me in this learning experience.

Some Initial Considerations:
1. What sort of experiences have you had that shape your understanding of the Bible’s role in your life and for the church?
2. Have you had some “paradigm shifts” in your understanding of the Bible? In what ways have you made changes in your perceptions of the Bible?

3. Does the Bible's authority rest in its historical accuracy, its poetic and literary quality, its remarkable history, its truthfulness about the human condition, or its divine origins? Or does its authority come from somewhere else? Explain your convictions. Are you prepared to re-examine your point of view?
I. What Does Your Map Look Like?

We all have some presuppositions or preunderstandings about the study of Scripture. Each of us has some convictions about the authority of Scripture. These assumptions are like a map that we use to chart our way through the world of the Bible. The question is how good are they? How well does our "map" reflect the actual terrain of Scripture?

How do we go about understanding this ancient, but authoritative book? Everyone has a model or an approach to Scripture. All interpretation of Scripture possesses some set of presuppositions. These presuppositions include definitions, questions, needs, philosophical constructs, tools, skills, traditional formations, and personal convictions.

Some persons fail to recognize their presuppositions, simply saying that God said it. Others use their historical skills to preclude some possible interpretations of Scripture. Some play pick a verse, any verse, and let that verse be the guiding principle. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who possess an elaborate doctrinal system and then go to the Bible to back up whatever position they happen to espouse. Most people are in between. But wherever you are, you can not escape asking the question of how is the Bible going to be heard in your life.

It seems more proper to allow the "Word of God" to critique our presuppositions, using Scripture and prayer to review what questions we bring to the text. Additional controls to the presuppositions include the history of Christian thought. The word of God finds greater freedom where it is heard in the large circle of historic Christian witness. Though different
points of view are heard through history, a general consensus exists on most issues. Besides, differences can be helpful as long as people respectfully hear the other and are open to change. Variations become destructive only when fixed points are rejected (1 John) or when the living hope is threatened (1 Cor 15).

Here is our approach. To allow the Word of God to critique our approach to Scripture, we believe that we must reckon with some fundamental observations about the nature of Scripture. We want to let the Bible speak to us on its terms, not ours. Now we know we can’t do this completely; no one is ever completely objective about important and significant matters. (Have you ever heard a mother say, “Here is my newborn baby; isn’t she the ugliest thing you ever saw!”) But our goal is to let the Bible set the agenda, the approach for us.

We believe allowing the Bible to set the agenda to be the credible way to begin for at least two reasons. First, from a historical point of view, any ancient document should be understood primarily on its own grounds. That is to say we do a great injustice if we should take maritime industry of the first century and scrutinize it by standards of modern ship building and transportation. It is only fair--and right--that the Bible be heard by its own terms. Let’s be honest. The Bible is not a self-help book or the original pop-psychology manual.

Second, if a person believes that the Bible is somehow or another God’s book, then is it not logical to think that God might be best heard in His book by our listening to the Bible. God chose to reveal something vitally important to
humanity. He chose to do so through written materials. The content of those materials—long recognized as authoritative to the Christian community—have, we believe, a form that is also important to the meaning that God intended for us to know. The way God revealed his purposes should not be overlooked. Thus our approach to the Bible should take into account the form and nature that the Bible takes.

So what does that mean? It means that the nature of Scripture dictates how we interpret and hear the message of Scripture.

II. The Nature and Authority of Scripture: A Look at Scripture

Please read the following texts from Scripture and interact with the observations provided:

What were Jesus’ attitudes toward Scripture?
1. For Jesus, Scripture is an indispensable resource for making ethical choices. Jesus’ second temptation reminds us that Scripture must be interpreted with theological awareness (Matthew 4.1-11).

2. Theological themes exist in Scripture. The Sadducees had the preunderstanding that there was no resurrection. Therefore, they failed to hear correctly the message of Scripture. In dialogue with the Pharisees, Jesus affirms that there is one law that sums the whole law (Matthew 22.23-40).

3. Jesus was devoted to Scripture and taught Scripture to his followers (Luke 24.32,45; John 2.22).
4. Scripture is not the source of life. However, Scripture does speak the truth about the One who does bring life (John 5.39).

What were Paul's attitudes toward Scripture?
1. Scripture was written for instruction and hope (Romans 15.4).

2. Jesus is the logical extension of the message of the Old Testament (1 Corinthians 15.3, 4).

3. Scripture instructs and is inspired (God-breathed) (2 Timothy 3.14-17).

What were Peter's attitudes toward Scripture?
1. God originates Scripture. Scripture does not originate with humans (2 Peter 1.20-21).

2. Scripture can be poorly interpreted (2 Peter 3.15-16).

III. Some Beginning Points

Based on some observations from Scripture, I would suggest several beginning points in understanding the nature of Scripture and how it functions as an authority for the church:
1. **Divine Words.** Scripture is “of God.” Scripture is God-breathed; it is God-given. We study and obey Scripture because Scripture is divine revelation.

2. **Human Words.** Though Scripture is divine, God has accommodated Himself to human expression, words, and ambiguities. Thus 1) Scripture can be misunderstood, and 2) Scripture requires our best efforts to understand what God is disclosing to us.

3. **The purpose or intent that God has for Scripture is to teach, reveal, and instruct humanity.** Scripture is the tool that God has chosen to use to reveal His will to us. It is the way that God has chosen to disclose his love and gracious kindness to us.

4. **Scripture as Witness.** Scripture is not an end, but the means to a greater end--entering and nurturing a relationship with God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Scripture is the witness to what God has done. It speaks the truth about the God we seek to know. Witness is an appropriate metaphor to understanding Scripture's function. Scripture tells us the truth about God and His revelation to humanity.

5. **At the center of what Scripture bears witness to is the truth about Jesus of Nazareth.** For Paul the gospel, the message of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection, was paramount to his ministry. It seems to me that for Paul this message functioned as a key to understanding the Old Testament.\(^1\) It was the key to his understanding of how faith was developed.\(^2\) This kerygmatic message was the key to his ethics.\(^3\) Throughout Paul’s ministry, the message of the gospel was central to his preaching.\(^4\) Ultimately, this message was central for how Paul lived.\(^5\)

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\(^1\)Christ is the telos of the law, as in Romans 10.4.

\(^2\)“faith comes by hearing and hearing by the preaching of Christ” (Romans 10.17). It is unfortunate that many earlier English translations neglect the preferred rendering. For Paul it was the preaching of Christ (not some modern understanding of the Bible as the Word of God) that when heard created faith.

\(^3\)The structure of Paul’s letters, especially Romans and Ephesians, confirm this idea.

\(^4\)“For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake” (2 Corinthians 4.5).

\(^5\)“And it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2.20).
Paul was not alone on this matter. Peter and Jesus demonstrate an awareness of the difference between Scripture and the core of Scripture. The early church fathers, as they attempted to articulate the Christian faith, merely continued this interpretive approach to Scripture. As noted earlier, the rule of faith and the saving message of God became helpful tools to understanding Scripture's meaning and import for teaching and instruction.

As I attempt to formulate a systematic statement about the authority of Scripture, I believe that fundamentally there must be the recognition that its authority rests on the proclaimed message of Jesus Christ. Scripture itself attests to this all important centering event. Any attempt to understand Scripture begins with some assumption. For the early church that assumption was the message of the gospel. I see no reason to ignore the witness of scripture and the church and attempt to anchor Scripture's authority in the doctrine of inerrancy, human experience or any other source.

Such a christocentric assertion steers a discussion away from utilizing categories of modern philosophy or historical method as fundamental assumptions. The question of Scripture's authority is the church's question, not the university's. By making this assertion I am fully aware that one brings philosophical and methodological resources to Scripture. What I am proposing is an awareness of these assumptions and the need for them to be contained and harnessed by a proper Christology.

6. If Jesus, Paul, and Peter regarded the Scriptures as normative for their lives, and if the early church regarded the Scriptures as normative for belief and practice, then can we do less? If Scripture is not normative, then one of two directions is taken. Something else becomes normative for the church. First is the crystallization of tradition. How we have always done things becomes more significant than hearing the Word. Second is the substitution of various cultural values as the path to knowing God.

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6For Peter consider his sermons as recorded in Acts. Of special interest is the material in Acts 10 where he conveys to Cornelius' household the essentials of the faith. Jesus takes to task the poor interpretative work of the scribes in John 5.39-40. "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life."
7. Because of these things we must approach the study of Scripture based on what Scripture says about itself. External argument and supposition are secondary. The authority of Scripture must ultimately rest on the work of the Spirit and our acceptance of the witness of Scripture in faith. Hearing the Word is a gift. No amount of argument and debate in logical and rational terms will ultimately persuade the pagan. As John Calvin said, “These Christians who wish to prove to unbelievers that Scripture is the Word of God are acting foolishly for only by faith can this be known.”

IV. Thought Questions

1. What assumptions about the Bible’s authority do you bring to the study of Scripture? Where did you acquire these assumptions? How helpful have they been to your understanding of Scripture?

2. State in your own words some points of understanding about the nature, purpose, and authority of Scripture from the texts you were asked to read.

3. This handout proposes seven beginning points based on reflection on Scripture about the authority and role of Scripture for the church. Identify one or two of these points that 1) are new to you; 2) are already are part of your “map”; 3) are confusing or unclear; and also 4) with which you would take some issue. Be prepared to explain your answers.

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How did the church come to have a Bible? What determined what documents of the early Christian era were included into the list, or “canon,” of accepted and authoritative sources for the Christian faith? Though there existed an “Old Testament”—that is, the holy scriptures of the Jews, how did these twenty seven books of the New Testament come to be accepted as binding in some way or another over the church? Does the way the Bible came into existence have any impact on its authority?

It certainly took some time. The first time a list that matches our contemporary Bible is found is in A.D. 367, when Athanasius wrote an Easter Letter.

The Old Testament

The beginning point for the formation of the Old Testament occurred during the reign of the young Israelite king Josiah. During the reconstruction of the temple in 621 B.C., a book—likely the book of Deuteronomy—was found. The book when heard was accepted as the word of God and taken to be the authoritative law for the nation (2 Kings 22.3-23.3). This is the first time in human history that a document was recognized as sacred. Other documents were identified. Scribes and editors began the process of shaping ancient narratives and law codes into the Law, or Torah. By the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (about 400 B.C.), the Law had acquired the status of sacred scripture (Neh. 7.73b-8.18). The Law was comprised of five books—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Though more documents would be recognized as sacred writings, the Law stood at the center of Jewish faith and life.

The second division of the Hebrew Bible was the prophets. The prophets were divided into two broad categories. The former prophets were the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings (Samuel and Kings were generally considered one book). The latter prophets were the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve (the minor prophets were lumped together into one book). This section of the sacred scripture was considered closed with
the passing of Malachi in the middle of the fifth century B. C. By common Jewish conviction, prophecy was silenced, never to be heard again. This is affirmed by the interesting fact that Daniel is not a part of the minor prophets. Daniel is in the section to be considered below. Daniel appeared on the scene in about 165 B. C.--much too late to be considered a part of the prophets. Thus, by the second century B. C. the prophets were clearly recognized as a closed group of materials.

The third and final division of the Hebrew Bible was the writings. This is a collection of varied materials that are divided in many different ways. Jerome, the Christian writer, divided them as follows: three books of poetry--Psalms, Proverbs, and Job; the Megilloth, or the five rolls, which were connected to the five national feast days of Israel--The Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther; one prophetic book--Daniel; and two books of history--Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles.

Twenty years after the fall of Jerusalem, in A. D. 90, a council of rabbis gathered at Jamnia to shape the direction and destiny of a faith that had lost its central identity--the temple and Jerusalem. At the Council of Jamnia the books of the Old Testament were clearly established for the Jewish faith. What is striking is the length of time that it took to develop a consensus about these sacred writings--700 years is a long time.

Though the Christian faith had already risen from within Judaism, early Christians had already claimed the Hebrew Bible as their own and to this day the Christian Old Testament is the same as the Hebrew Bible. In 132 B. C. the prologue of ben Sira describes his grandfather as a student of the law and the prophets and "the other books of our fathers." Jesus apparently knew the Bible well--from Genesis to Chronicles. Josephus, near the end of the first century, treats the Hebrew Bible as a closed list, identifying twenty two books corresponding with the twenty two letters of the Hebrew alphabet:

It therefore naturally, or rather necessarily, follows (seeing that with us it is not open to everybody to write the records, and that there is no discrepancy in what is written; seeing that, on the contrary, the prophets alone had this privilege, obtaining their knowledge of the most remote and ancient history

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8Chronicles was typically the last book in the Hebrew canon.
through the inspiration which they owed to God, and committing to writing a clear account of the events of their own time just as they occurred) – it follows, I saw, that we do not possess myriads of inconsistent books, conflicting with each other. Our books, those which are justly accredited, are but two and twenty, and contain the record of all time.

Of these, five are the books of Moses [Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy], comprising the law and the traditional history from the birth of man down to the death of the lawgiver. This period falls only a little short of three thousand years. From the death of Moses until Artaxerxes, who succeeded Zerxes as king of Persia, the prophets subsequent to Moses wrote the history of the events of their own times in thirteen books (probably 1) Joshua, 2) Judges and Ruth, 3) Samuel, 4) Kings, 5) Chronicles, 6) Ezra and Nehemiah, 7) Esther, 8) Job, 9) Isaiah, 10) Jeremiah and Lamentations, 11) Ezekiel, 12) Minor Prophets, 13) Daniel]. The remaining four books (probably 1) Psalms, 2) Song of Songs, 3) Proverbs, 4) Ecclesiastes] contain hymns to God and precepts for the conduct of human life.

From Artaxerxes to our own time the complete history has been written, but has not been deemed worthy of equal credit with the earlier records, because of the failure of the exact succession of the prophets.

We have given practical proof of our reverence for our own Scriptures. For although such long ages have now passed, no one has ventured either to add, or to remove, or to alter a syllable; and it is an instinct with every Jew, from the day of his birth, to regard them as the decrees of God, to abide by them, and, if need be, cheerfully to die for them. Time and again are how the sight has been witnessed of prisoners enduring tortures and death in every form in the theatres, rather than utter a single word against the laws and the allied documents.  

The New Testament

The Bible of the early church was really the Old Testament. During the days of the apostles and until the end of the first century, the Christian faith was conveyed through preaching and oral tradition. Though most of Paul’s letters were written in the middle of the first century, there is little evidence

9Against Apion 1. 7, 8.
that they had any wide circulation until the end of the century. The guiding
and authoritative source for the earliest church was the message and sayings
of Jesus and the rule of faith. The oral tradition of the message of Jesus was
strongly preferred over the written tradition.

But with the passing of the apostles, eyewitnesses, and others who
were close to such people, the church began to seek out sources that could
solidify and uphold the Christian faith. The need for sources for worship,
instruction, and apologetics began to make demands on the church. During
the closing decades of the first century, the four gospels--Matthew, Mark,
Luke, and John--were written. Paul’s letters began to be circulated together;
undoubtedly they were the first collection of any specifically Christian group
of documents. Many other documents began to surface and have some use in
the early church. Some of these documents are in our Bible today. Other
documents, such as the Gospel of Peter, the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles,
the Letter of Clement to Rome, the Letter of Barnabas, and the Shepherd of
Hermas are not. What sort of criteria did the early church use? How did
the early church determine which documents possessed an authority that
should be heard in the church?

**Factors Determining the Canon**

1. **The Primacy of Jesus.** Perhaps most important was the message of Jesus.
As Martin McDonald states, “the primary authority of the earliest Christian
community was Jesus himself. Not only was the early Church’s faith related
to his death and resurrection, but it was also focused on the sayings of Jesus.
These sayings were at first and for some time later passed on in oral form in
the Church, but many of them were also written down quite early and
circulated among the Christians, even though the books in which they were
found (the Gospels) were not yet viewed as Scripture.”

Ignatius (ca. 110-117), in a passage from the Letter to the Philadel-
phians, demonstrates his preference for the message of Jesus against the Old
Testament Scripture:

116.
But I beseech you to do nothing in factiousness, but after the teaching of Christ. For I heard some men saying, "If I find it not in the charters, I do not believe in the Gospel." And when I said to them that it is in the Scripture, they answered me, "That is exactly the question." But to me the charters are Jesus Christ, the inviolable charter is his cross, and death, and resurrection, and the faith which is through him; --in these I desire to be justified by your prayers.\textsuperscript{11}

Ignatius saw the gospel as on par with or superior to the authority of the Old Testament. More importantly, the text shows that the primary center for authority was in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ--not in any specific text.

\textbf{2. The Rule of Faith.} Anything that conveyed the message of Jesus was significant because at the heart of the Christian faith was the Living Word, the Christ. Irenaeus of Lyons (writing ca. 170-80) most clearly demonstrated a supportive principle at work. The Christian faith was primarily defined by a central core of convictions that were often called the rule of faith. The statement of belief was anchored in the primacy of Jesus and what the apostles had proclaimed. Thus, this rule quickly became the standard by which writings and practices were measured. Irenaeus affirmed the scriptural authority of various Christian writings. But what gave these writings authority was not their place in an inspired book list, but because they conveyed the truth about Jesus. These books passed on the tradition of the apostles. For Irenaeus and for the early church, "the faith" of the church was foundational for the life of the church. Irenaeus summarized the faith in the following well-known and significant text:

\begin{quote}
The Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: It believes in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth and the sea and all things that are in them and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God, the advents, the birth from a virgin, the passion, the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord. He also proclaimed through the prophets his
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{11}Ign. Phld. 8.2
future manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father “to gather all things in one” and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord, God, Savior, and King, according to the will of the invisible Father, “every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess” to him, and that he should execute just judgment toward all sending into everlasting fire “spiritual wickednesses,” and the angels who transgressed and became apostates, together with the ungodly, and unrighteous, and wicked, and profane among men. But that he may, in the exercise of his grace, confer immortality on the righteous and holy, and those who have kept his commandments and have persevered in his love, some from the beginning of their Christian course and others from the date of their repentance. He will surround them with everlasting glory.12

Irenaeus’ goal was to defend and uphold the Christian message. To do so he then looked to writings that would affirm the apostolic message. Thus the Old Testament and various Christian writings were authoritative since they were consistent with the rule of faith.

3. Use in Worship and Instruction. In the second century a number of Christian writings were looked to for admonition. For example, the Gospels, very early on, carried weight and authority for the life of the church. Justin Martyr, from the middle of the second century, gives us one of the earliest glances into Christian worship and the use of Christian writings:

After these [services] we constantly remind each other of these things. Those who have more come to the aid of those who lack, and we are constantly together. Over all that we receive we bless the Maker of all things through his Son Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. And on the day called Sunday there is a meeting in one place of those who live in cities or the country, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. When the reader has finished, the president in a discourse urges and invites [us] to the imitation of

12Adv. Haer., 1.10.1. The rule of faith, in its simplest form, is probably found in the old Roman creed of the fourth century. Today it is usually called the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth; And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. He descended to hell, on the third day rose again from the dead, ascended to heaven, sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty, thence He will come to judge the living and the dead; I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.”
these noble things. Then we all stand up together and offer prayers. And, as said before, when we have finished the prayer, bread is brought, and wine and water, and the president similarly sends up prayers and thanksgivings to the best of his ability, and the congregation assents, saying the Amen; the distribution, and reception of the consecrated [elements] by each one, takes place and they are sent to the absent by the deacons. Those who prosper, and who so wish, contribute, each one as much as he chooses to. What is collected is deposited with the president, and he takes care of orphans and widows, and those who are in want on account of sickness or any other cause, and those who are in bonds, and the strangers who are sojourners among [us], and, briefly he is the protector of all those in need. We all hold this common gathering on Sunday, since it is the first day, on which God transforming darkness and matter made the universe, and Jesus Christ our Saviour rose from the dead on the same day. For they crucified him on the day before Saturday, and on the day after Saturday, he appeared to his apostles and disciples and taught them these things which I have passed on to you also for your serious consideration.13

4. Apostolic Connections. Another factor that determined the status of a document was its connection with an apostle. As F. F. Bruce suggests

The principal criterion of New Testament canonicity imposed in the early church was not prophetic inspiration but apostolic authorship--or, if not authorship, then authority. In an environment where apostolic tradition counted for so much, the source and norm of that tradition were naturally found in the writings of apostles or of men closely associated with apostles. Mark and Luke, for instance, were known not to be apostles, but their close association with Peter and Paul respectively was emphasized. As for the epistles, however, the tendency was for canonicity to be tied to the ascription of apostolic authorship. The Letter to the Hebrews, for example, was known in the roman church earlier than anywhere else (so far as our evidence goes), but Rome was one of the last important churches to acknowledge it as canonical, just as Rome was one of the last important churches to ascribe

13 I Apol. 67.
5. The Contributions of a Heretic. One of the reasons it became important for the early church to identify clearly what could properly be called the church's scripture was the emergence of diverse understandings of the Christian faith. Most notable was the work of Marcion. Marcion, a wealthy ship-owner from Sinope, arrived in Rome around A.D. 140. He was a gnostic; he saw the world through the lens of dualism. Notably, this dualism expressed itself in this way: Spirit is good and matter is bad. God is good and fleshly, worldly things are bad. This line of thinking led Marcion to conclude that the God of the Old Testament was really not God, but a god that was in fact hostile to the God of Jesus. This god, the Demiurge, created the physical world and ushered in sin and suffering. The Demiurge was ignorant and evil. The God of Jesus was Spirit. The God of Jesus was Love.

Marcion soon had quite a following and he produced his own list or canon or Scripture. As one might expect, the Old Testament was not included. In addition to the horrendous stories of the Demiurge, the Old Testament possessed Law, and Law was earthly. In its place Marcion put the Gospel. He discarded Matthew, Mark and John (too Jewish!) and used an edited version of Luke. The second section of Marcion's scriptures was the Apostle. Here he placed ten of Paul's letters, since Paul was the advocate of grace against law. The third section was the Antitheses. This was a compilation of Old Testament passages with Christian writings that contradicted them.

Marcion was not the only one who pressured the church to decide what the canon of Scripture would be. A group called the Montanists developed the conviction that the Spirit continued to bring fresh and new revelation to the church. This movement, which was quite visible by the early third century, raised the issue of whether the canon was open or closed. Can there be a

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15He took out all Old Testament references!
continual and ongoing authoritative word offered? The answer of the church was no.

6. Diocletian. In 303, Diocletian, the Roman emperor, unleashed the last wide-spread persecution of the church. Diocletian struck at the organizational structure of the church; he sought to destroy the books, buildings, and offices of the Christians. This brought some serious reflection to the Christian community about what was truly sacred literature. If a document was acknowledged to be sacred or authoritative, the church official was required to hand it over for destruction. This refinement process undoubtedly forced some conclusions about various texts.

Books, Lists, . . . . Canon

To determine when a particular document was properly considered a part of the canon, or official list, of scripture was not a simple matter. Just because a church father quoted from a book did not necessarily mean that he was quoting it as “scripture.” Throughout the second century we see a rising conformity on certain areas; in other areas, there is a lack of consensus. Irenaeus, for example, is quite convinced about the gospels.

It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For, since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, which the Church is scattered throughout all the world, and the ‘pillar and ground’ of the Church is the Gospel and the spirit of life; it is fitting that she should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying men afresh.16

As time passed a clearer definition as to which books should be included in the “list” of Scripture developed.

The Muratorian Fragment (traditionally ca. 180)
Called the Muratorian Fragment, it takes its name from Lodovico Antonio Muratori, who discovered and published it in 1740. For years this fragment was believed to come from the late second century. More recent work suggests

16Against Heresies 3.11.8.
a later date—mid fourth century. It probably represents the church in Rome. The beginning of the document is missing; what still remains begins with Luke:

[1] At which, however, he was present and so he has set it down. The third Gospel book [is] that according to Luke. This physician Luke after Christ’s ascension (resurrection?), since Paul had taken him with him as an expert in the way (of the teaching), composed it in his own name according to (his) thinking. Yet neither did he himself see the Lord in the flesh; and therefore, as he was able to ascertain it, so he begins to tell the story from the birth of John.

[2] The fourth of the Gospels [was written by] John [who was one] of the disciples. When his fellow-disciples and bishops urged him, he said: Fast with me from today for three days, and what will be revealed to each one let us relate to one another. In the same night it was revealed to Andrew, one of the apostles, that whilst all [of them] were to go over (it; John in his own name should write everything down. And therefore, though various [elements] (or tendencies?) are taught in the several Gospel books, [nevertheless] that matters nothing for the faith of believers, since by the one and [sovereign] Spirit everything is declared in all [of the Gospels]: concerning the birth, concerning the passion, concerning the resurrection, concerning the [life] with his disciples and concerning his two comings, the first [time he came he was] despised in lowliness, which has come to pass [but] the second [time he will come] glorious[ly] in kingly power, which is yet to come. What wonder [is it] then if John, being thus always true to himself, adduces particular points in his epistles also, where he says of himself: What we have seen with our eyes and have heard with our ears and our hands have handled, that have we written to you. For so he confesses (himself) not merely [to be] an eye and ear witness, but also a writer of all the marvels of the Lord in [their] order.

[3] But the acts of all the apostles are written in one book. For the “most excellent Theophilus” Luke summarizes the several things that in his own presence have come to pass, as also by the omission of the passion [death] of Peter he makes quite clear, and equally by (the omission) of the journey of Paul, who from the city (of Rome) proceeded to Spain. The epistles, however, of Paul themselves make clear to those who wish to know it which there are (i.e. from Paul), from what place and for what [purpose] they were written. First of all to the Corinthians (to whom he forbids) circumcision, and then to the Romans, (to whom) he explains that Christ
is the rule of the Scriptures and moreover their principle, he has written at considerable length.

[4] We must deal with these [individually], since the blessed apostle Paul himself, following the rule of his predecessor John, writes by name only to seven churches in the following order: to the Corinthians the first (epistle), to the Ephesians the second, to the Philippians the third, to the Colossians the fourth, to the Galatians the fifth, to the Thessalonians the sixth, to the Romans the seventh. Although he wrote to the Corinthians and to the Thessalonians once more for their reproof, it is yet clearly recognizable that over the whole earth one church is spread. For John also in the Revelation writes indeed to seven churches, yet speaks to all. But to Philemon [Paul wrote] one [letter], and to Titus one, and to Timothy two, (written) out of goodwill and love, are yet held sacred to the glory of the catholic Church for the ordering of ecclesiastical discipline.

[5] There is current also (an epistle) to the Laodiceans, another to the Alexandrians, forged in Paul's name for the sect of Marcion, and several others, which cannot be received in the catholic Church; for it will not do to mix gall with honey. Further an epistle of Jude and two with the title. . . John are accepted in the catholic Church, and the Wisdom written by friends of Solomon in his honour. Also of the revelations we accept only those of John and Peter, which (latter) some of our people do not want to have read in the Church.

[6] But Hermas wrote the Shepherd quite [recently] in our time in the city of Rome, when on the throne of the church of the city of Rome the bishop Pus, his brother, was seated. And therefore it ought indeed to be read, but it cannot be read publicly in the Church to the people either among the prophets, whose number is settled, or among the apostles to the end of time.

[7] But we accept nothing whatever from Arsinous or Valentinus and Miliades(?), who have also composed a new psalm book for Marcion, together with Basilides of Asia Minor, the founder of the Cataphrygians.17

**Eusebius** (ca. 325-330 for his Ecclesiastical History)

At this point it seems reasonable to summarize the writings of the New Testament which have been quoted. In the first place should be put the holy tetrad of the Gospels. To them follows the writing of the Acts of the Apostles. After this

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17As cited by McDonald, 135-37.
should be reckoned the Epistles of Paul. Following them the Epistle of John called the first, and in the same way should be recognized the Epistle of Peter. In addition, to these should be put, if it seem desirable, the Revelation of John, the arguments concerning which we will expound at the proper time. These belong to the Recognized Books. Of the Disputed Books which are nevertheless known to most are the Epistle called of James, that of Jude, the second Epistle of Peter, and the so-called second and third Epistles of John which may be the work of the evangelist or of some other with the same name. Among the books which are not genuine must be reckoned the Acts of Paul, the work entitled the Shepherd, the Apocalypse of Peter, and in addition to them the letter called of Barnabas and the so-called Teachings of the Apostles. And in addition, as I said, the Revelation of John, if this view prevail. For, as I said, some reject it, but others count it among the Recognized Books. Some have also counted the Gospel according to the Hebrews in which those of the Hebrews who have accepted Christ take a special pleasure. These would all belong to the disputed books, but we have nevertheless been obliged to make a list of them, distinguishing between those writings which, according to the tradition of the Church, are true, genuine, and recognized, and those which differ from them in that they are not canonical but disputed, yet nevertheless are known to most of the writers of the Church, in order that we might know them and the writings which are put forward by heretics under the name of the apostles containing gospels such as those of Peter, and Thomas, and Matthias, and some others besides, or Acts such as those of Andrew and John and the other apostles. To none of these has any who belonged to the succession of the orthodox every thought it right to refer in his writings. Moreover, the type of phraseology differs from apostolic style, and the opinion and tendency of their contents is widely dissonant from true orthodoxy and clearly shows that they are forgeries of heretics. They ought, therefore, to be reckoned not even among spurious books but shunned as altogether wicked and impious.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{Athanasius of Alexandria, Festal Letter (A.D. 367)}

Athanasius, in this letter, presents a list that is the same as ours today. He also uses the term “canon” or “list” for the first time, as a way of

\textsuperscript{18}\textit{Hist. eccl. 3.25.1-7; see also 3.3.1-2, 6.}
describing some special, authoritative role that these documents have in the life of the church.

(1.) Since, however, I have spoken of the heretics as dead but of ourselves as possessors of the divine writings unto salvation, I am actually afraid lest in any way, as Paul said in writing to the Corinthians, a few of the undefiled may be led astray from their simplicity and purity by the craftiness of certain men and thereafter begin to pay attention to other books, the so-called sacred books. Therefore, because of this fear of your being deceived by these books possessing the same names of the genuine books and because of the present stress of the Church, I exhort you to bear with me for your own benefit as I actually make mention of these heretical writings, which you already know about.

(2.) As I am about to mention such matters, I will back up my venturesome-ness by following the example of the evangelist Luke. And I will also say that since certain men have attempted to arrange for themselves the so-called secret writings and mingle them with the God-inspired Scripture, concerning which we have been fully informed even as they were handed down to our fathers by those who were eye-witnesses and servants of the word from the beginning, having been encouraged by true brethren and learning all from the beginning, I also resolved to set forth in order the writings that are in the list and handed down and believed to be divine. I have done this so that each person, if he has been deceived, may condemn those who led him astray, and that he who has remained stainless may rejoice, being again reminded of the truth.

(3.) There are then of the Old Testament books... [omitted here].

(7.) Those of the New Testament I must not shrink from mentioning in their turn. They are these: four Gospels, according to Matthew, according to Mark, according to Luke, and according to John.

(8.) Then after these are the Acts of the Apostles and the seven letters of the apostles, called the “Catholic” letters, which are as follows: one from James, two from Peter, three from John, and after these one from Jude.

(9.) In addition, there are fourteen letters of Paul the apostle, written in the following order: the first to the Romans, then two to the Corinthians, and thereafter one to the Galatians, one to the Ephesians, one to the Philippians, one to the Colossians, two to the Thessalonians, one to the Hebrews, and, without a
break, two letters to Timothy, one to Titus, and one written to Philemon. Last, from John again comes the Revelation.

(10.) These are springs of salvation, so that he who is thirsty may be filled with the divine responses in them; in these alone is the good news of the teaching of true religion proclaimed; let no one add to them or take anything away from them. It was in regard to these that the Lord was ashamed of the Sadducees, saying: “You are being led astray, since you do know not the scripture,” and he exhorted the Jews, saying, “Search the scriptures, for they are the very writings that witness concerning me.”

(11.) But for the sake of being more exact in detail, I also add this admonition, writing out of necessity, that there are also other books apart from these that are not indeed in the above list, but were produced by our ancestors to be read by those who are just coming forward to receive oral instruction in the word of true religion. These include: The Wisdom of Solomon, the Wisdom of Sirach, Esther, Judith, Tobias, the so-called Teaching of the Apostles, and the Shepherd.

(12.) And nevertheless, beloved, though the former writings be in the list [or “are listed,”] and the latter are read, nowhere is there any mention of the secret writings (the apocrypha). They are, rather, a device of heretics, who write them when they choose, furnishing them with dates and adding them, in order that by bringing them forth as ancient books they may thus have an excuse for deceiving the undefiled.19

**Thought Questions**

1. Our task in this study is to inquire into the authority of Scripture. Would second century Christians have had the same concerns?

2. Before there was a “Bible,” there existed the rule of faith. This rule of faith was a critical tool in determining the make-up of Scripture. Do you find that to be a threatening thought? What implications does it have for discussing the authority of Scripture?

19As cited by McDonald, 140-41.
3. How would you describe God's role in bringing to the contemporary church a canon of scripture?

**Additional Reading**


The Work of Witness: The First Millennia
Unit Four

The Early Church

The early church had much to do. To determine what materials should be considered, many of the church fathers relied on some fundamental principles. Was the author an apostle? Did the book have some connection to an apostolic church? Does the book conform to the *regula fide* (rule of faith)? Appropriating the Hebrew scriptures to the reality of Jesus and then making the Christian message understood in a world where Greek philosophical categories were in place was not easy. Heresies from within and opposition from without forced the church fathers to speak with clarity and power. They had to find some authoritative source to validate their teaching and belief.

By the second half of the second century, Irenaeus and others began to speak of a New Testament. In *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus writes of the Great Church and notes a growing conformity among Christians. Namely this conformity focused on forms of ministry, on the events of baptism and the Eucharist, and on the apostolic faith. The apostolic faith was preserved in the sacred writings and was effectively summarized in the rule of faith. According to Irenaeus these sacred writings would have included the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. Distinctively Christian writings were the four gospels, Paul’s letters, Acts, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation.

Irenaeus keenly felt the need for an interpretive key. Here the rule of faith and more particularly the saving work of Christ came to be used. Irenaeus believed that this key, contained in the *regula fide*, must be used by those who are of apostolic succession, whose life and doctrine exhibit the “charism of truth.” This differentiating rule of faith provided for the church

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20Walter Bauer, in 1934, presented the remarkable thesis that it was out of heresy that orthodoxy was formed. In *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971); Henry Ernest William Turner, in *The Pattern of Christian Truth* (London: Mowbray, 1954), responded to Bauer. He affirmed that orthodoxy was often shaped and defined by resistance to heresy. But Turner posited that there were some fixed elements of thinking, particularly in the rule of faith, that were unchanging and guided the church fathers.
fathers an interpretive tool to understand the authority of Scripture in their day.

To demonstrate the vitality of this approach I want to point out three distinctive concepts that were generally held by early generations of the church. I believe that these three ideas facilitate an understanding of not only the nature of Scripture, but how Scripture functioned authoritatively in the first four Christian centuries.

### The Bible as Evidence

The church fathers saw the Bible as recorded tradition that witnessed to the truth of the saving message about Jesus. As Rogers and McKim suggest: “The Bible, for Clement, was a resource of primary data, accepted in faith, from which persons could then draw reasoned conclusions.”21 Likewise, Irenaeus made extensive use of the New Testament. He appealed to it as a reliable historical resource. Scripture was indeed a trustworthy witness to what God had done. But it is important to distinguish this idea of witness. As John Barton points out: “What he [Irenaeus] finds is really testimony in the ancient sense rather than evidence in the modern sense; friends you can trust, rather than sources you can torture.”22

John Chrysostom represents yet another person who perceived the value of Scripture’s witness to the saving message of God. Chrysostom’s homiletical and exegetical abilities represent well his commitment to present the divine message of Scripture. He was well aware of the human element that the form of Scripture took. For example, he recognized differences in events described in the Gospels. He clearly distinguished between the divine message and human form.23 For these significant representatives of Christian thought, the Bible possessed authority because it revealed the divine story. The Bible bore witness to the work that God had accomplished in Christ.

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21 Rogers and McKim, 8.
23 See Rogers and McKim, 20-21 and footnotes 74, 75.
The Bible and Interpretive Methodology

Having a fundamental concern to show the unity of the Old and New Testaments, the church fathers took great pains to demonstrate that Jesus was the fulfillment of Old Testament predictions. They were also very dedicated to presenting Christianity to a world in which Hellenistic philosophy dominated the thinking of many. To address these issues, they resorted to a special form to interpret Scripture. Having roots in rabbinic Judaism and in Greek philosophy, this method was rooted in typology.

Typology was thus neither literal exegesis concerned only with past historical events themselves, nor allegorical exegesis that treated past happenings only as symbols to be spiritually interpreted. Rather, typology stressed the historical interrelationship of a past event as promise and a later event as fulfillment.24

The use of typology finds its most eloquent expression in the allegorical work of Origen. In responding to various groups whose literal interpretations of Scripture left the Christian faith weak and perverted, Origen sought to understand the spiritual meaning of Scripture. “The task of the exegete was to peel off the husk of the letter and get at the kernel of the spiritual meaning, in order to share it with others.”25 This allowed Origen to deal with the ambiguities he found in Scripture. The allegorical method also served him well in making the Christian message contemporary and relevant to his culture.26

Though allegorical exegesis was the dominant approach to understanding Scripture during the early centuries of the church, another voice made itself heard from Syrian Antioch. The Antiochene school of theology represented the East and vied with the Alexandrian school in the West as the dominant source of thought in the church.27 In response to the

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24Rogers and McKim, 9.
25Ibid., 13.
26Ibid., 14. The Antiochene school of thought was less enamoured with allegorical categories. Grammatical-historical concerns were stressed. This does not mean they rejected allegory; Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Nestorius were more likely rejecting the sometimes extreme results of Origen’s work. Rogers and McKim, 11-22; Kugel and Greer, 177-99; Vawter, 28-33.
27Rogers and McKim, 16.
highly allegorical approaches to Scripture, which were rooted in Platonic thought, the Antiochenes chose to begin with “the natural historical meaning of the biblical text.” Though they used typology to interpret Old Testament texts in light of the work of Christ, they tended to work with a more literal rendering of the text. When literal understandings rendered a jolting interpretation, they would rely on rationalistic interpretations to hold things together.

Through these multifaceted approaches to Scripture, the issue at stake is clear. For the church fathers, Scripture can be misunderstood and misinterpreted if literal or atomistic approaches are taken. Scripture is a spiritual document; its specific purpose is to disclose God. Literalism, to the early church, restricted the free flow of the spirit and its work in affirming the gospel message. If the gospel message is what is to be heard, then in what way does God speak through Scripture? How can He be understood? Such questions lead to the next insight into Scripture that the early church possessed.

**The Bible as Accommodation**

The frailty and limited nature of humanity was well established in the thought of the early church. Out of that perspective the question was often raised how God could communicate to people whose perspectives had been perverted by sin. Rogers and McKim respond:

To communicate effectively with human beings, God condescended, humbled, and accommodated himself to human categories of thought and speech. This was not a matter of deception, but of necessary adaptation on God's part if humans were to be able to understand His will for them. In the incarnation, God humbled himself and became a weak and helpless baby to identify with and communicate with human beings. This incarnational principle had always been God's style according to the early Christian theologians.

The concept of accommodation is foundational to Origen. It explained the human characteristics of Scripture and pointed to the importance of the meaning of the text. John Chrysostom was also well acquainted with the

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28Ibid., 16.  
29Rogers and McKim, 10.
concept of accommodation. He often used the word condescension, to describe the way God related to humanity through Scripture.30

And if a father considers not his own dignity, but talks lispingly with his children and calls their meat and drink not by their Greek names, but by some childish and barbarous words, much more doth God. . . . In every part of Scripture there are instances of His condescension both in words and actions.31

Accommodation was the way that Origen, Chrysostom and others were able to emphasize the worthiness of God and his desire to make known his saving message. It also recognized the human qualities of Scripture. Perhaps, most fundamentally, accommodation encouraged the need to approach the interpretation of Scripture from the posture of faith, not reason.

_Augustine_

In Augustine the varied traditions of the early church found integration.32 By looking briefly at Augustine, we can make some generalizations about the early church.

It is Augustine’s clear affirmation of the primacy of faith that affects his understanding of Scripture’s role and function for the church. Relying on Platonic philosophy, Augustine accepted knowledge from the eternal world by faith which in turn led to understanding in the temporal world. His biblical foundation for this was the often quoted Latin translation of the Septuagint version of Isaiah 7.9: “Unless you believe, you shall not understand.”33 Thus, Augustine seldom sought to demonstrate the inspiration of the Bible. Its inspiration was readily apparent in the faith-producing effect the Bible had on people.

Augustine continued to use the concept of accommodation to explain God’s work. For Augustine the primary purpose of Scripture was to bring people into a right relationship with God. Thus, the parent and child imagery

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30Vawter, 40-42.
31As cited by Rogers and McKim, 19.
33See Augustine’s, _On Free Will_, Bk.II, 4, 6.
was often employed. He incorporated the use of allegory in his interpretation. Though he was well aware of the historical meaning of a text, he was concerned about discovering the spiritual meaning of a text.\textsuperscript{34} To safeguard against distortions, he modified some principles that Tyconius had presented as hermeneutical keys.\textsuperscript{35} These are the well-known fourfold "senses" of Scripture: historical, aetiological, analogical and allegorical.\textsuperscript{36}

Finally, the evidential nature of Scripture for Augustine was a continuation of earlier ideas. He could speak with great conviction that Scripture was without error. By that he meant something different from what modern people mean. For Augustine to say that Scripture is free from error meant that the biblical authors did not set out to deceive or to tell a lie.\textsuperscript{37}

Augustine generally gave both a literal and allegorical interpretation of a text—demonstrating the interrelationship between the two. What generally safeguarded Augustine, and other early Christian writers, in their understanding of Scripture was the high role that central, saving message of Jesus had in the exegesis. Faith, not rationalism, was the foundation for hearing the voice of Scripture.

To summarize it might be best to hear Anthony and Richard Hanson: Most impressive perhaps is the fact that the ancient Fathers grasped firmly and never betrayed what we might call the main burden or drift or message of the Bible, however fantastic may have been their misunderstanding of its details... Once they had distanced themselves a little from the entrancing details, the deceptive individual trees, they saw the shape of the wood clearly enough. When they withdrew a little from the intoxicating business of allegorizing the details, they then perceived the true import of the Bible,

\textsuperscript{34}Rogers and McKim, 32.
\textsuperscript{35}Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{36}As Augustine stated it: "In every sacred book one should note the things of eternity which are communicated, the facts of history which are recounted, future events which are foretold, moral precepts which are enjoined or counseled." As quoted by Rogers and McKim, 33.
\textsuperscript{37}Rogers and McKim, 30-31.
undistracted by philosophy, undrugged by allegory. There is perhaps a moral for us today in this achievement.38

The Move to Scholasticism

Augustine, in the spirit of Plato, had invoked an approach to the Christian faith that could best be summarized by “faith seeking understanding.” However, in the middle ages, a shift began to occur. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Crusades brought back into Europe the world of Islamic culture. With that culture the works of Aristotle were introduced into the relatively recent innovation called universities. Aristotle’s works focused on metaphysics, natural history, and inductive thought. For Aristotle all knowledge begins with human sense impressions of the world. One begins with what can be known and then proceeds to what can be believed. Aristotle’s empirical approach to the world clashed with Plato’s worldview. Reason was first, then comes faith. This new philosophical current gave rise to what is called scholasticism.

In theology this created new ways of understanding the authority of the Bible. Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) marks this new shift.39 Working with philosophical categories and the priority of reason, Aquinas set forth a complete and extensive system of knowledge. With God as the center and all branches of learning stemming outward from the center, Aquinas presented the Christian faith and the Bible in rational ways. This served the culture of his day well. For example, Aquinas was concerned that Christianity address the climate of the university and could evangelistically engage the Muslim world which accepted Aristotelian thought.

For Aquinas, Scripture took on a scientific element. He moved away from allegorical speculation to a more literal sense of the text. To do this he used considerable historical awareness. He would begin by placing the most emphasis on the “natural” sense that was intended by the author. This approach, though, was augmented by an understanding of Scripture that saw

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it as words to be understood and ideas to be classified properly. Thus, when Aquinas spoke of the Bible not having any error, he took a differing view from Augustine. As Rogers and McKim suggest, “the context in which Thomas used the concept of error was one of logical science rather than Augustine’s own context of ethical Christian living.”

In more modern times one can see the evidence of Aquinas’ influence in the emphasis on the proofs for the existence of God, reason over faith, and a tendency to interpret the Bible according to a system or pattern. A certain irony exists here. On 6 December 1273, Aquinas fell into a trance while in worship celebrating the feast of St. Nicholas. He had a vision of heaven; suddenly he knew that all efforts to speak about God were worthless. When his secretary urged him to write, he replied, “I can do no more. Such things have been revealed to me that all I have written seems as so much straw.” Summoned to Rome he fell ill along the way and was taken to an abbey. There, on his deathbed, he expounded the Song of Songs with the monks. The greatest Scholastic theologian of the middle ages turned toward mysticism at the end of his life.

**Mysticism**

In response to the rise and dominance of scholasticism a reform began to occur—primarily in monastic communities. The search for piety and a hunger for a real encounter with God led to another option for Christians in the middle ages. This response to scholasticism was clearly evidenced in Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153).

While scholastics were concerned with reason, Bernard encouraged prayer and experience. Bernard stated, “We search in a worthier manner, we discover with greater facility through prayer than through disputation.” Again, in his commentary on the Song of Songs: “Lend your inner ear, gaze with the eyes of your heart and you will grasp by your own experience what is

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40Rogers and McKim, 46.
41See Weisheipl, 320-23.
43As quoted by Rogers and McKim, 52.
meant here." This experiential approach to faith and Scripture gave rise to mysticism.

Mysticism, as illustrated by Bernard, had its own distinctive understanding of Scripture. Best summarized by Bernard's own motto: "I believe in order that I may experience," the concept of encountering God in Scripture was the goal. The Holy Spirit was the insurer of authority in Scripture; one's encounter with God in Scripture authenticated the word.

As for us, in the commentary of mystical and sacred words, let us proceed with caution and simplicity. Let us model ourselves on Scripture which expresses the wisdom hidden in mystery in our own words: when Scripture portrays God for us it suggests Him in terms of our own feelings. The invisible and hidden realities of God which are of such great price are rendered accessible to human minds, vessels, as it were, of little worth, by means of comparisons taken from the realities we know through our senses.45

Conclusion

Utilizing the message of Jesus and the rule of faith, the earliest Christians sought to hear the voice of God in Scripture. They recognized that God had accommodated Himself in human experience and language. Thus, though they honored the integrity of Scripture, they did not expect Scripture to be perfect or complete in a modern way.

Varieties of approaches to Scripture emerged in the early church. Both Chrysostom and Augustine characterize that variety. But both of them recognized the distinction between the form of Scripture from the truth it conveyed. Scripture was true because it disclosed God's word. Beginning with faith, the Christian seeks to know.

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44 As quoted by Rogers and McKim, 53.
45 Bernard of Clairvaux, as quoted by Rogers and McKim, 51.
With the ascendance of Aristotle’s works, the rise of scholasticism ushered in a more rational approach to Scripture. Though Aquinas practiced an historically aware exegesis of the biblical text, the legacy of scholastic philosophy resulted in speculation and logic. Knowledge leads to faith was the hallmark of this approach to Scripture.

Other trends in understanding Scripture emerged as well. Most notable was the mystic tradition that developed in the monastic communities. Rejecting the rationalistic excesses of Scholasticism, the mystic’s approach was “I believe in order to experience.”

Despite the shifts of thought in all of these approaches, fundamental to an understanding of Scripture’s authority was the sense that Scripture’s authority came from God. Whether it was through the veracity of the apostolic witness to Jesus, the ordered and rational quality of its record, or the experiential encounter of the divine—behind it all was the presence and power of God.

**Primary Reading**

The following is a few excerpts from Augustine’s *On Christian Doctrine*. This document was primarily intended to provide instruction to teachers and other church leaders on how to use and interpret Scripture properly. This selected reading will provide opportunity to hear Christian reflection from a leading church father.

**CHRIST THE FIRST WAY TO GOD  I.34.38**

And mark that even when He who is Himself the Truth and the Word, by whom all things were made, had been made flesh that He might dwell among us, the apostle yet says: “yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we Him no more.” For Christ, desiring not only to give the possession to those who had completed
the journey, but also to be Himself the way to those who were just setting out, determined to take a fleshly body. Whence also that expression, "The Lord created me in the beginning of His way," that is, that those who wished to come might begin their journey in Him. The apostle, therefore, although still on the way, and following after God who called him to the reward of His heavenly calling, yet forgetting those things which were behind, and pressing on towards those things which were before, had already passed over the beginning of the way, and had now no further need of it; yet by this way all must commence their journey who desire to attain to the truth, and to rest in eternal life. For He says: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life;" that is, by me men come, to me they come, in me they rest. For when we come to Him, we come to the Father also, because through an equal an equal is known; and the Holy Spirit binds, and as it were seals us, so that we are able to rest permanently in the supreme and unchangeable Good. And hence we may learn how essential it is that nothing should detain us on the way, when not even our Lord Himself, so far as He has condescended to be our way, is willing to detain us, but wishes us rather to press on; and, instead of weakly clinging to temporal things, even though these have been put on and worn by Him for our salvation, to pass over them quickly, and to struggle to attain unto Himself, who has freed our nature from the bondage of temporal things, and has set it down at the right hand of His Father.

THE FULFILLMENT AND END OF SCRIPTURE IS THE LOVE OF GOD AND OUR NEIGHBOR 1.35.39

Of all, then, that has been said since we entered upon the discussion about things, this is the sum: that we should clearly understand that the fulfillment and the end of the Law, and of all Holy Scripture, is the love of an object which is to be enjoyed, and the love of an object which can enjoy that other in fellowship with ourselves. For there is no need of a command that each man should love himself. The whole temporal dispensation for our salvation, therefore, was framed by the providence of God that we might know this truth and be able to act upon it; and we ought to use that dispensation, not with such love and delight as if it were a good to rest in, but with a transient feeling rather, such as we have
towards the road, or carriages, or other things that are merely means. Perhaps some other comparison can be found that will more suitably express the idea that we are to love the things by which we are borne only for the sake of that towards which we are borne.

THAT INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE WHICH BUILDS US UP IN LOVE IS NOT PERNICIOUSLY DECEPTIVE NOR MENDACIOUS, EVEN THOUGH IT BE FAULTY. THE INTERPRETER, HOWEVER, SHOULD BE CORRECTED. I.36.40 - 41

Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this two-fold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought. If, on the other hand, a man draws a meaning from them that may be used for the building up of love, even though he does not happen upon the precise meaning which the author whom he reads intended to express in that place, his error is not pernicious, and he is wholly clear from the charge of deception. For there is involved in deception the intention to say what is false; and we find plenty of people who intend to deceive, but nobody who wishes to be deceived. Since, then, the man who knows practises deceit, and the ignorant man is practised upon, it is quite clear that in any particular case the man who is deceived is a better man than he who deceives, seeing that it is better to suffer than to commit injustice. Now every man who lies commits an injustice; and if any man thinks that a lie is ever useful, he must think that injustice is sometimes useful. For no liar keeps faith in the matter about which he lies. He wishes, of course, that the man to whom he lies should place confidence in him; and yet he betrays his confidence by lying to him. Now every man who breaks faith is unjust. Either, then, injustice is sometimes useful (which is impossible), or a lie is never useful.

Whoever takes another meaning out of Scripture than the writer intended, goes astray, but not through any falsehood in Scripture. Nevertheless, as I was going to say, if his mistaken interpretation tends to build up love, which is the end of the commandment, he goes astray in much the same way as a man who by mistake quits the high road, but
yet reaches through the fields the same place to which the road leads. He is to be corrected, however, and to be shown how much better it is not to quit the straight road, lest, if he get into a habit of going astray, he may sometimes take cross roads, or even go in the wrong direction altogether.

THE CANONICAL BOOKS II.8.12 – 13

But let us go now back to consider the third step here mentioned, for it is about it that I have set myself to speak and reason as the Lord shall grant me wisdom. The most skillful interpreter of the sacred writings, then will be he who in the first place has read them all and retained them in his knowledge, if not yet with full understanding, still with such knowledge as reading gives, – those of them, at least, that are called canonical. For he will read the others with greater safety when built up in the belief of the truth, so that they will not take first possession of a weak mind, nor, cheating it with dangerous falsehoods and delusions, fill it with prejudices adverse to a sound understanding. Now, in regard to the canonical Scriptures, he must follow the judgment of the greater number of catholic churches; and among these, of course, a high place must be given to such as have been thought worthy to be the seat of an apostle and to receive epistles. Accordingly, among the canonical Scriptures he will judge according to the following standard: to prefer those that are received by all the catholic churches to those which some do not receive. Among those, again, which are not received by all, he will prefer such as have the sanction of the greater number and those of greater authority, to such as are held by the smaller number and those of less authority. If, however, he shall find that some books are held by the greater number of churches, and others by the churches of greater authority (though this is not a very likely thing to happen), I think that in such a case the authority on the two sides is to be looked upon as equal.

Now the whole canon of Scripture on which we say this judgment is to be exercised, is contained in the following books: – Five books of Moses, that is Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy; one book of Joshua the son of Nun; one of Judges; one short book called Ruth, which seems rather to belong to the beginning of Kings; next, four
books of Kings, and two of Chronicles, – these last not following one another, but running parallel, so to speak, and going over the same ground. The books now mentioned are history, which contains a connected narrative of the times, and follows the order of the events. There are other books which seem to follow no regular order, and are connected neither with the order of the preceding books nor with one another, such as Job, and Tobias, and Esther, and Judith, and the two books of Maccabees, and the two of Ezra, which last look more like a sequel to the continuous regular history which terminates with the books of Kings and Chronicles. Next are the Prophets, in which there is one book of the Psalms of David; and three books of Solomon, viz., Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes. For two books, one called Wisdom and the other Ecclesiasticus, are ascribed to Solomon from a certain resemblance of style, but the most likely opinion is that they were written by Jesus the son of Sirach. Still they are to be reckoned among the prophetical books, since they have attained recognition as being authoritative. The remainder are the books which are strictly called the Prophets: twelve separate books of the prophets which are connected with one another, and having never been disjoined, are reckoned as one book; the names of these prophets are as follows: – Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi; then there are the four greater prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel. The authority of the Old Testament is contained within the limits of these forty-four books. That of the New Testament, again, is contained within the following: – Four books of the Gospel, according to Matthew, according to Mark, according to Luke, according to John; fourteen epistles of the Apostle Paul – one to the Romans, two to the Corinthians, one to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, to the Philippians, two to the Thessalonians, one to the Colossians, two to Timothy, one to Titus, to Philemon, to the Hebrews; two of Peter; three of John; one of Jude; and one of James; one book of the Acts of the Apostles; and one of the Revelation of John.
HOW WE SHOULD PROCEED IN STUDYING SCRIPTURE  II.9.14

In all these books those who fear God and are of a meek and pious disposition seek the will of God. And in pursuing this search the first rule to be observed is, as I said, to know these books, if not yet with the understanding, still to read them so as to commit them to memory, or at least so as not to remain wholly ignorant of them. Next, those matters that are plainly laid down in them, whether rules of life or rules of faith, are to be searched into more carefully and more diligently; and the more of these a man discovers, the more capacious does his understanding become. For among the things that are plainly laid down in Scripture are to be found all matters that concern faith and the manner of life,—to wit, hope and love, of which I have spoken in the previous book. After this, when we have made ourselves to a certain extent familiar with the language of Scripture, we may proceed to open up and investigate the obscure passages, and in doing so draw examples from the plainer expressions to throw light upon the more obscure, and use the evidence of passages about which there is no doubt to remove all hesitation in regard to the doubtful passages. And in this matter memory counts for a great deal; but if the memory be defective, no rules can supply the want.

TO WHAT EXTENT HISTORY IS AN AID  II.28.42 – 44

Anything, then, that we learn from history about the chronology of past times assists us very much in understanding the Scriptures, even if it be learnt without the pale of the Church as a matter of childish instruction. For we frequently seek information about a variety of matters by use of the Olympiads, and the names of the consuls; and ignorance of the consulship in which our Lord was born, and that in which He suffered, has led some into the error of supposing that He was forty-six years of age when He suffered, that being the number of years He was told by the Jews the temple (which He took as a symbol of His body) was in building. Now we know on the authority of the evangelist that He was about thirty years of age when He was baptized; but the number of years He lived afterwards, although by putting His actions together we can make it out, yet that no shadow of doubt might arise from another source, can be ascertained more clearly
and more certainly from a comparison of profane history with the gospel. It will still be evident, however, that it was not without a purpose it was said that the temple was forty and six years in building; so that, as this cannot be referred to our Lord's age, it may be referred to the more secret formation of the body which, for our sakes, the only-begotten Son of God, by whom all things were made, condescended to put on.

As to the utility of history, moreover, passing over the Greeks, what a great question our own Ambrose has set at rest! For, when the readers and admirers of Plato dared calumniously to assert that our Lord Jesus Christ learnt all those sayings of His, which they are compelled to admire and praise, from the books of Plato because (they urged) it cannot be denied that Plato lived long before the coming of our Lord! – did not the illustrious bishop, when by his investigations into profane history he had discovered that Plato made a journey into Egypt at the time when Jeremiah the prophet was there, show that it is much more likely that Plato was through Jeremiah's means initiated into our literature, so as to be able to teach and write those views of his which are so justly praised? For not even Pythagoras himself, from whose successors these men assert Plato learnt theology, lived at a date prior to the books of that Hebrew race, among whom the worship of one God sprang up, and of whom as concerning the flesh our Lord came. And thus, when we reflect upon the dates, it becomes much more probable that those philosophers learnt whatever they said that was good and true from our literature, than that the Lord Jesus Christ learnt from the writings of Plato, – a thing which it is the height of folly to believe.

And even when in the course of an historical narrative former institutions of men are described, the history itself is not to be reckoned among human institutions; because things that are past and gone and cannot be undone are to be reckoned as belonging to the course of time, of which God is the author and governor. For it is one thing to tell what has been done, another to show what ought to be done. History narrates what has been done, faithfully and with advantage; but the books of the haruspices, and all writings of the same kind, aim at teaching what ought to be done or observed, using the boldness of an adviser, not the fidelity of a narrator.
SUMMARY OF THE FOREGOING BOOKS, AND SCOPE OF THAT WHICH FOLLOWS  III.1.1

The man who fears God seeks diligently in Holy Scripture for a knowledge of His will. And when he has become meek through piety, so as to have no love of strife; when furnished also with a knowledge of languages, so as not to be stopped by unknown words and forms of speech, and with the knowledge of certain necessary objects, so as not to be ignorant of the force and nature of those which are used figuratively; and assisted, besides, by accuracy in the texts, which has been secured by skill and care in the matter of correction; – when thus prepared, let him proceed to the examination and solution of the ambiguities of Scripture. And that he may not be led astray by ambiguous signs, so far as I can give him instruction (it may happen, however, that either from the greatness of his intellect, or the greater clearness of the light he enjoys, he shall laugh at the methods I am going to point out as childish), – but yet, as I was going to say, so far as I can give instruction, let him who is in such a state of mind that he can be instructed by me know, that the ambiguity of Scripture lies either in proper words or in metaphorical classes which I have already described in the second book.

RULE FOR REMOVING AMBIGUITY BY ATTENDING TO PUNCTUATION  III.2.2

But when proper words make Scripture ambiguous, we must see in the first place that there is nothing wrong in our punctuation or pronunciation. Accordingly, if, when attention is given to the passage, it shall appear to be uncertain in what way it ought to be punctuated or pronounced, let the reader consult the rule of faith which he has gathered from the plainer passages of Scripture, and from the authority of the Church, and of which I treated at sufficient length when I was speaking in the first book about things. But if both readings, or all of them (if there are more than two), give a meaning in harmony with the faith, it remains to consult the context, both what goes before and what comes after, to
see which interpretation, out of many that offer themselves, it pronounces for and permits
to be dovetailed into itself.

IT IS A WRETCHED SLAVERY WHICH TAKES THE FIGURATIVE
EXPRESSIONS OF SCRIPTURE IN A LITERAL SENSE III.5.9

But the ambiguities of metaphorical words, about which I am next to speak,
demand no ordinary care and diligence. In the first place, we must beware of taking a
figurative expression literally. For the saying of the apostle applies in this care too: “The
letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.” For when what is said figuratively is taken as if it
were said literally, it is understood in a carnal manner. And nothing is more fittingly
called the death of the soul than when that in it which raises it above the brutes, the
intelligence namely, is put in subjection to the flesh by a blind adherence to the letter. For
he who follows the letter takes figurative words as if they were proper, and does not carry
out what is indicated by a proper word into its secondary signification; but, if he hears of
the Sabbath, for example, thinks of nothing but the one day out of seven which recurs in
constant succession; and when he hears of a sacrifice, does not carry his thoughts beyond
the customary offerings of victims from the flock, and of the fruits of the earth. Now it is
surely a miserable slavery of the soul to take signs for things, and to be unable to lift the
eye of the mind above what is corporeal and created, that it may drink in eternal light.

Thought Questions:

1. What implications does the concept of accommodation have on
understanding the authority of Scripture today?

2. Does the use of the regula fide (the rule of faith) pose problems for
contemporary evangelical Christianity?
3. How would you critique Augustine’s fourfold approach to understanding Scripture? Why was allegory so widely used in the early centuries of the church? How do you deal with the difficulties of literalism?

4. Which of the following describes your approach to the Christian faith: “Faith seeking understanding,” “understanding seeking faith,” or “faith seeking experience?” How does your approach affect the way you study the Bible?
The Work of Witness: From the European Reformation to American Approaches of the Late-Nineteenth Century

Unit Five

Martin Luther

With Martin Luther and other Reformation voices, a certain continuity with earlier attitudes toward the authority of Scripture developed. For Luther, the function of the Bible was to present the saving work of Christ. The Bible led people to Christ. This christocentric reading of Scripture was thoroughly applied by Luther—as reflected in his well-known perception about the epistle of James. He was convinced that the “Bible’s authority was in its content—Christ—and its function—bringing salvation.”46 The importance of christocentric approach is depicted in Luther’s emphasis on theologia crucis—a theology of the cross. Christ is the telos of hermeneutical work.

Luther continued the theme of accommodation in articulating the content and function of Scripture, though he preferred to talk of incarnation:

the divinity and power of God are embedded in the vessel of Christ’s incarnate body, so the same divinity and power of God are embedded in Scripture, a vessel made of letters, composed of paper and printer’s ink. In order to grasp the biblical revelation in its fulness it is necessary to conceive of Scripture in terms of the divine-human nature of Christ.47

This divine-human nature of Scripture used the active role of the Spirit. For Luther, the Spirit was the “inspirer of Scripture in the past and the interpreter of Scripture in the present.”48

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46 Rogers and McKim, 78.
47 As cited by Rogers and McKim, 78.
48 Rogers and McKim, 79.
Luther, with his exposure to scholastic and humanistic trends of his day, found much value in a more literal understanding of Scripture. This move away from a reliance on allegory did not change the goal of interpretation. Scripture still needed to be exposited so that the saving message might be known. But literal understandings supplied what is needful for sound doctrine. As Johnson rightfully points out, literal for Luther meant historically grounded and grammatically informed. Scripture texts must be interpreted within context.

I have until now held that when one would prove something with the Scriptures, the Scriptures must really be relevant to the point. But now I learn that it is enough to throw the texts together in any crazy way, whether they agree or not-and, if this is to be the way, I can prove from the Scriptures that bad beer is better than good wine.

Luther firmly upheld the authority of Scripture. He believed its authority was located in its content, and he used his Christology as an interpretive key to ascertain it. Or, as Beker states, Luther's understanding of Scripture was bound "by two basic convictions: the historicity of the gospel and the harmonious unity of the gospel as witnessed in Scripture." Because Luther affirmed an incarnational stance regarding the Bible, his attempts to do critical reflection were not hindered by incongruities and difficulties in the text. "When discrepancies occur in the Holy Scriptures and I cannot harmonize them, let it pass, it does not endanger the articles of the Christian faith."

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49Ibid., 85.
50It is interesting that at one point he turns aside to observe that 'literal' is not a very satisfactory term, either in German or in Latin, for what he is insisting upon, and that it would be better if it were called the 'lingual or spoken sense,' or the 'grammatical, historical sense.' Johnson, 30; see Rogers and McKim, 85.
51As cited by Johnson, 28-29.
53As cited by Rogers and McKim, 87.
John Calvin

John Calvin's humanistic education fostered in him the logical and procedural talents that he brought to bear in the Reformation. For example, his law training opened up the reality of discerning authorial intent and the importance of context in understanding a text. The concept of accommodation was used in legal settings and by rhetoricians to describe the "process of fitting, adapting, and adjusting language to the capacity of the hearers." Calvin employed this idea in continuing this long-standing approach to Scripture.

His employment of accommodation brought some interesting developments. Calvin concluded that form was subordinate to function. The content of Scripture was the decisive thing. Related to that was the evidential nature of Scripture. Scripture's purpose was to persuade persons to be saved. Inconsistencies or human inaccuracies were unimportant. What was important was a fundamental conviction of faith that propels one to believe in the saving Word of Scripture.

The Word of God, therefore, is the object and target of faith at which one ought to aim; and the base to prop and support it, without which it could not even stand. And thus this true faith--which can at last be called "Christian"--is nothing else than a firm conviction of mind whereby we determine with ourselves that God's truth is so certain that it is incapable of not accomplishing what it has pledged to do by his holy Word (Rom. 10:11).55

Summary of Luther and Calvin

Luther and Calvin, the leading thinkers of the Reformation, both adopted Augustine's method--faith seeks understanding. Though they used

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54Rogers and McKim, 98.
55As cited by Rogers and McKim, 102-103.
the best of the scholastic tradition in their reading of Scripture, the source of truth was the Bible. Luther and Calvin affirmed with the church fathers that the authority of Scripture rested in its function of bringing persons to a saving relationship with God through Jesus. Both posited a Christological center for Scripture. Thus, Scripture was not meant to teach science or history. Scripture was meant to address human beings who are in desperate need for a word of transformation.

This word was presented through the accommodating word of Scripture. For Luther and Calvin, “the Incarnation exemplified God’s style of communication.” God used human language and thought processes to communicate the truth. Following the church fathers, it was the message or content of Scripture that was normative for the church, not the particular form in which the message was found. How does the church know that Scripture contains the Word of God? For Luther and Calvin it was the Holy Spirit:

The Reformers’ persuasion that Scripture was the Word of God came from the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit witnessed to the divine, Christological content of Scripture, not its human, linguistic form. Scripture was self-authenticating. It was foolish to try to prove to unbelievers what could only be known by faith. External arguments for the Bible’s validity were helpful only after persons had accepted Scripture in faith. The Holy Spirit also illumined the minds of interpreters of Scripture. Luther and Calvin refuted rational scholasticism, which demanded proofs before faith. They rejected with equal firmness the spiritualistic sectarians who claimed leadings of the Holy Spirit apart from the Word. The Word and the Spirit together served as a hallmark of the Reformation.57

56 Rogers and McKim, 126.
57 Rogers and McKim, 126-27.
A century after John Calvin many of the assumptions made about Scripture had changed. The scholastic method had resumed its dominant role in determining the manner of theology. Rogers and McKim describe the change in this way:

Theology was no longer viewed as a practical, moral discipline exclusively directed toward the salvation of people and their guidance in the life of faith. Theology now became an abstract, speculative, technical science that attempted to lay foundations for philosophical mastery of all areas of thought and life. Further, and equally far-reaching in its consequences, the concept of accommodation was discarded. . . . While scholastic theologians did not claim to know all that God knew extensively, they claimed a one-to-one correspondence between the theological knowledge they had and the way in which God himself knew it. Precision replaced piety as the goal of theology.  

This shift in thought is well represented by Francis Turretin, whose influence in seventeenth-century Geneva continues to be felt in various forms in America today. As a preacher and a professor of theology in Geneva, Turretin took up the ominous task of opposing many of the forces that threatened to destroy the gains of the Reformation. His allies in this endeavor were Aristotle and Aquinas; with their aid he produced “a scholastic theology that placed great emphasis on precise definition and systematic, scientific statement.” Thus Turretin would argue: “Before faith can believe, it must have the divinity of the witness, to whom faith is to be given, clearly established, from certain true marks which are apprehended to it, otherwise it cannot believe.”

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58 Rogers and McKim, 187.
59 Rogers and McKim, 173.
60 As cited by Paul Hanson, 67; see Francis Turretin, The Doctrine of Scripture: Locus 2 of Institutio theologiae elencticae, ed. and trans. John W. Beardslee III (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 39-56.
For Turretin the authority of Scripture relied on the external, rational proofs of an inerrant Scripture to make faith valid. This is a major shift from Calvin, who professed that it was the internal witness of the Spirit that persuaded people to believe that Scripture was the Word of God. Turretin's concern for an inerrant Scripture went so far as to state that the vowel points in the Hebrew text were authentic.

What makes Turretin's approach to Scripture particularly significant is that his major work, the *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, became the theological text for an infant seminary that through the nineteenth century grew to great influence in American theological circles. With the founding of Princeton Seminary in 1812, the Presbyterian Church in America set up a center to train their ministers. Archibald Alexander became the first professor and installed Turretin as the theological text. Alexander and his successors Charles Hodge, Archibald Alexander Hodge, and Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, developed the Turretin model of the doctrine of Scripture. This doctrine, though possessing great logical prowess, rational finesse, and at times a sensitivity to the humanity of Scripture, nevertheless articulated a rigid defense of a strict, verbal inerrancy.

With the onslaught on modern critical scholarship, the influence of Princeton theology was pervasive. The conflict between B. B. Warfield and Charles A. Briggs, which led to Briggs' heresy trial in 1893 and the much publicized John Scopes trial in 1925, were among the watershed points in this controversy. The reorganization of Princeton Seminary that occurred in 1929 led J. Gresham Machen, Robert Wilson, Oswald T. Allis and Cornelius Van Til to leave and form Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. This move was a direct response to the perceived abdication on the issue of inerrancy and authority of Scripture. It was at this newly formed seminary that many students from evangelical colleges came. The original class included Carl
McIntire and Harold J. Ockenga, both destined to be prominent conservative spokesmen.

**Primary Reading**

**Martin Luther**

*Faith over reason*

When it comes to the knowledge of how one may stand before God and attain to eternal life, that is truly not to be achieved by our work or power, nor to originate in our brain. In other things, those pertaining to this temporal life, you may glory in what you know, you may advance the teachings of reason, you may invent ideas of your own; for example: how to make shoes or clothes, how to govern a household, how to manage a herd. In such thing exercise your mind to the best of your ability. Cloth or leather of this sort will permit itself to be stretched and cut according to the good pleasure of the tailor or shoemaker. But in spiritual matters, human reasoning certainly is not in order; other intelligence, other skill and power, are requisite here--something to be granted by God himself and revealed through his Word.

What mortal has ever discovered or fathomed the truth that the three persons in the eternal divine essence are one God; that the second person, the Son of God, was obliged to become man, born of a virgin; and that no way of life could be opened for us, save through his crucifixion? Such truth never would have been heard or preached, would never in all eternity have been published, learned and believed, had not God himself revealed it.

--Epistle Sermon, Twelfth Sunday After Trinity.

*What is the Bible all about* . . . .

Just as the Old Testament is a book in which are written God's laws and commandments, together with the history of those who kept and of those who did not keep them; so the New Testament is a book in which are written the Gospel and the promises of God, together with the history of those who believe and of those who do not believe them. For Gospel is a Greek word, and means in Greek, a good message, good tidings, good news,
a good report, which one sings and tells with rejoicing. So, when David overcame the great Goliath, there came among the Jewish people the good report and encouraging news that their terrible enemy had been smitten and they had been rescued and given joy and peace; and they sang and danced and were glad for it.

So the Gospel, too, is a good story and report, sounded forth into all the world by the apostles, telling of a true David who strove with sin, death, and the devil, and overcame them, and thereby rescued all those who were captive in sin, afflicted with death, and overpowered by the devil; He made them righteous, gave them life, and saved them, so that they were given peace and brought back to God. For this they sing, and thank and praise God, and are glad forever, if only they believe firmly and are steadfast in faith.

This report and encouraging tidings, or evangelical and divine news, is also called a New Testament, because it is a testament, when a dying man bequeaths his property, after his death, to heirs whom he names, and Christ, before His death commanded and bequeathed this Gospel, to be preached into all the world, and thereby gave to all who believe, as their possession, everything that He had, that is, His life, in which He swallowed up death; His righteousness, by which He blotted out sin; His salvation, with which He overcame everlasting damnation. A poor man, dead in sin and tied for hell, can hear nothing more comforting than this precious and tender message about Christ, and from the bottom of his heart, he must laugh and be glad over it, if he believes it true.

The Gospel, then, is nothing but the preaching about Christ, Son of God and of David, true God and man, who by His death and resurrection has overcome all men's sin, and death and hell, for us who believe in Him. Thus the Gospel can be either a brief or a lengthy message; one can describe it briefly, another at length. He describes it at length, who describes many works and words of Christ,—as do the four Evangelists; he describes it briefly who does not tell of Christ's works, but indicates shortly how by His death and resurrection He has overcome sin, death, and hell of those who believe in Him, as do St. Peter and St. Paul. --Preface to the New Testament
On the use of allegory

It was very difficult for me to break away from my habitual zeal for allegory. And yet I was aware that allegories were empty speculations and the froth, as it were, of the Holy Scriptures. It is the historical sense alone which supplies the true and sound doctrine. --Lectures on the Psalms

To play with allegories in Christian doctrine, is dangerous. The words, now and then, sound well and smoothly, but they are to no purpose. They serve well for such preachers that have not studied much, who know not rightly how to expound the histories and texts, whose leather is too short, and will not stretch. These resort to allegories, wherein nothing is taught certainly on which a man may build; therefore, we should accustom ourselves to remain by the clear and pure text. --Table-Talk.

John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion

Faith over reason

1.6.3

Suppose we ponder how slippery is the fall of the human mind into forgetfulness of God, how great the tendency to every kind of error, how great the lust to fashion constantly new and artificial religions. Then we may perceive how necessary was such written proof of the heavenly doctrine, that it should neither perish through forgetfulness nor vanish through error nor be corrupted by the audacity of men. It is therefore clear that God has provided the assistance of the Word for the sake of all those to whom he has been pleased to give useful instruction because he foresaw that his likeness imprinted upon the most beautiful form of the universe would be insufficiently effective. Hence, we must strive onward by this straight path if we seriously aspire to the pure contemplation of God. We must come, I say, to the Word, where God is truly and vividly described to us from his works, while these very works are appraised not by our depraved judgment but by the rule of eternal truth.
Accommodation

1.13.1

For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to "lisp" in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness.

Faith and the role of the Spirit

1.7.4

Thus, the highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it. The prophets and apostles do not boast either of their keenness or of anything that obtains credit for them as they speak; nor do they dwell upon rational proofs. Rather, they bring forward God's holy name, that by it the whole world may be brought into obedience to him. Now we ought to see how apparent it is not only by plausible opinion but by clear truth that they do not call upon God's name heedlessly or falsely. If we desire to provide in the best way for our consciences--that they may not be perpetually beset by the instability of doubt or vacillation, and that they may not also boggle at the smallest quibbles--we ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit. True, if we wished to proceed by arguments, we might advance many things that would easily prove--if there is any god in heaven--that the law, the prophets, and the gospel come from him. Indeed, ever so learned men, endowed with the highest judgment, rise up in opposition and bring to bear and display all their mental powers in this debate. Yet, unless they become hardened to the point of hopeless impudence, this confession will be wrested from them: that they see manifest signs of God speaking in Scripture. From this it is clear that the teaching of Scripture is from heaven. And a little later we shall see that all the books of Sacred Scripture far surpass all other writings. Yes, if we turn pure eyes and upright senses toward it, the majesty of God will immediately come to view, subdue our bold rejection, and compel us to obey.
Yet they who strive to build up firm faith in Scripture through disputation are doing things backwards. For my part, although I do not excel either in great dexterity or eloquence, if I were struggling against the most crafty sort of despisers of God, who seek to appear shrewd and witty in disparaging Scripture, I am confident it would not be difficult to me to silence their clamorous voices. And if it were a useful labor to refute their cavilos, I would with no great trouble shatter the boasts they mutter in their lurking places. But even if anyone clears God's Sacred Word from man's evil speaking, he will not at once imprint upon their hearts that certainty which piety requires. Since for unbelieving men religion seems to stand by opinion alone, they, in order not to believe anything foolishly or lightly, both wish and demand rational proof that Moses and the prophets spoke divinely. But I reply: the testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.

Charles Hodge

Inspiration

It means, first, that all the books of Scripture are equally inspired. All alike are infallible in what they teach. And secondly, that inspiration extends to all the contents of these several books. It is not confined to moral and religious truths, but extends to the statements of facts, whether scientific, historical, or geographical. It is not confined to those facts the importance of which is obvious, or which are involved in matters of doctrine. It extends to everything which any sacred writer asserts to be true.

This is proved, (1) Because it is involved in, or follows as a necessary consequence from, the proposition that the sacred writers were the organs of God. If what they assert, God asserts, which, as has been shown, is the Scriptural ideal of inspiration, their assertions must be free from error. (2) Because our Lord expressly says, "The Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10.35), i. e., it cannot err. (3) Because Christ and his Apostles refer to all parts of the Scriptures, or to the whole volume, as the word of God. They make
no distinction as to the authority of the Law, God. They make no distinction as to the authority of the Law, the Prophets, or the Hagiographa. . . . (4) Because Christ and the writers of the New Testament refer to all classes of facts recorded in the Old Testament as infallibly true. Not only doctrinal facts, such as those of the creation and probation of man; his apostasy; the covenant with Abraham; the giving of the law upon Mount Sinai; not only great historical facts, as the deluge, the deliverance of the people out of Egypt, the passage of the Red Sea, and the like; but incidental circumstances, or facts of apparently minor importance . . . . --Systematic Theology, 1.162.

*The use of reason*

The Bible is no more a system of theology, than nature is a system of chemistry or of mechanics. We find in nature the facts which the chemist or the mechanical philosopher has to examine, and from them to ascertain the laws by which they are determined. So the Bible contains the truths which the theologian has to collect, authenticate, arrange, and exhibit in their internal relation to each other. This constitutes the difference between biblical and systematic theology. The office of the former is to ascertain and state the facts of Scripture. The office of the latter is to take those facts, determine their relation to each other and to other cognate truths, as well as to vindicate them and show their harmony and consistency. --Systematic Theology, 1.1-2.

*Archibald Alexander Hodge*

*Inspiration*

The books of Scripture were written by the instrumentality of men, and the national and personal peculiarities of their authors have been evidently as freely expressed in their writing, and their natural faculties, intellectual and moral, as freely exercised in their production, as those of the authors of any other writings. Nevertheless these books are, one and all, in thought and verbal expression, in substance and form, wholly the Word of God, conveying with absolute accuracy and divine authority all that God meant them to convey, without any human additions or admixtures. This was accomplished by a
supernatural influence of the Spirit of God acting upon the spirits of the sacred writers, called “inspiration;” which accompanied them uniformly in what they wrote; and which, without violating the free operation of their faculties, yet directed them in all they wrote, and secured the infallible expression of it in words. The nature of this divine influence we, of course, can no more understand than we can in the case of any other miracle. But the effects are plain and certain--viz., that all written under it is the very Word of God, of infallible truth, and of divine authority; and this infallibility and authority attach as well to the verbal expression in which the revelation is conveyed as to the matter of the revelation itself. --Confession of Faith, 33-34.

In what sense and to what extent has the Church universally held the Bible to be inspired? That the sacred writers were so influenced by the Holy Spirit that their writings are as a whole and in every part God’s word to us--an authoritative revelation to us from God, indorsed by him, and sent to us as a rule of faith and practice, the original autographs of which are absolutely infallible when interpreted in the sense intended, and hence are clothed with absolute divine authority. --Outlines in Theology, 66.

(1) Let it be proved that each alleged discrepant statement certainly occurred in the original autograph of the sacred book in which it is said to be found. (2) Let it be proved that the interpretation which occasions the apparent discrepancy is the one which the passage was evidently intended to bear. It is not sufficient to show a difficulty, which may spring out of our defective knowledge of the circumstances. The true meaning must be definitely ascertained, and then shown to be irreconcilable with other known truth. (3) Let it be proved that the true sense of some part of the original autograph is directly and necessarily inconsistent with some certainly known act of history, or truth of science, or some other statement of Scripture certainly ascertained and interpreted. We believe that it can be shown that this has never yet been successfully done in the case of one single alleged instance of error in the Word of God. --with Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield in Presbyterian Review, 2(1881):242.
Nevertheless the historical faith of the Church has always been, that all the affirmations of Scripture of all kinds, whether of spiritual doctrine or duty, or of physical or historical fact, or of psychological or philosophical principle, are without any error, when the *ipsissima verba* of the original autographs are ascertained and interpreted in their natural and intended sense. -- "Inspiration," 238.

**Charles Augustus Briggs**

*Critique of the Princeton theologians*

This drift has been gradual and imperceptible under the leadership of able divines who did not take trouble to study the Westminster divines, the authors of the standards, but who relied on their *a priori* logic for the correct interpretation of the standards as well as the Scriptures, and accordingly they interpreted both the Scriptures and the standards to correspond with that system of scholastic Calvinism which had become to them the rule of faith. It was an evil day for Presbyterianism when the Puritan and Presbyterian fathers were laid aside, and the scholastic divines of Switzerland and Holland were introduced into our universities and colleges as the text-books of theology, and the tests of Orthodoxy. The Westminster symbols were buried under a mass of foreign dogma. Francis Turretin became the rule of faith, and the Westminster Confession was interpreted to correspond with his scholastic elaborations and refinements. -- *Whither? A Theological Question for the Times*, 20-21.

The Westminster doctrine of the Scriptures is an admirable doctrine. It corresponds with the statements of the Scriptures themselves, as well as with the faith of the Reformation. The advance in the science of Biblical criticism in recent times has brought evangelical critics into entire sympathy with it. It corresponds with the facts of the case and the results of a scientific study of the Bible. They accept the Confession of Faith, and build upon it, and use it to destroy the false doctrines that dogmaticians have taught in its place. These false doctrines are partly extra-confessional, sharpening the
definitions of the Westminster symbols by undue refinements and assumed logical
deductions, such as, (a) the addition of the adjective verbal to inspiration, and (b) the use of
the term inerrancy with reference to the entire body of the Scriptures. They are chiefly
contra-confessional, substituting false doctrines for the real faith of the Church in these
two particulars, (c) basing the authority of the Scriptures upon the testimony of the ancient
Church, and (d) making the inspiration of the Scriptures depend upon their supposed
human authors. --Whither?, 63-64.

No confession of faith or catechism of recognized standing in the Reformed or
Lutheran Church, teaches that the Scriptures are inspired in their verbal expressions . . .
Verbal inspiration makes the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek documents as they
came from the hands of their writers, the only inspired Word of God. If the line cannot be
drawn between the thoughts and words of Scripture, we cannot separate the inspired
thoughts from the inspired words, – we cannot transfer the inspired thoughts into other
words. . . . The theory of verbal inspiration cannot admit inspired thoughts in other than
inspired words. It therefore results in the denial that there are inspired thoughts in the
English Bible. It cuts off the Christian people from the real word of God and gives them a

(1) The historic faith of the Church is to be found in the official symbolical books
and nowhere else. None of these symbols state that the 'ipsissima verba of the original
autographs are without error.' (2) It is well known that the great Reformers recognized
errors in the Scriptures and did not hold to the inerrancy of the original autographs. Are
these Princeton divines entitled to pronounce Luther and Calvin heterodox, and to define
the faith of the universal Church? (3). The Westminster divines did not teach the
inerrancy of the original autographs. --Whither?, 69.
The doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture not only comes into conflict with the historical faith of the Church, but it is also in conflict with Biblical criticism... It seems to me that it is vain to deny that there are errors and inconsistencies in the best texts of our Bible. There are chronological, geographical, and other circumstantial inconsistencies and errors which we should not hesitate to acknowledge. Whither?, 71, 72.

The question of credibility is to be distinguished from infallibility. The form is credible, but substance alone is infallible....

But whatever interpretation we may give to these errors, however much we may reduce them in number, the awkward fact stares us in the face, that these Princeton divines risk the inspiration and authority of the Bible upon a single proved error. Such a position is a serious and hazardous departure from Protestant orthodoxy. It imperils the faith of all Christians who have been taught this doctrine. They cannot escape the evidence of errors in the Scriptures....

What an awful doctrine to teach in our days when Biblical criticism has the field! What a peril to precious souls there is in the terse, pointed sentence, 'A proved error in Scripture contradicts not only our doctrine but the Scripture claims, and therefore its inspiration in making those claims!' No more dangerous doctrine has ever come from the pen of men. It has cost the Church the loss of thousands. It will cost us ten thousand and hundreds of thousands unless the true Westminster doctrine is speedily put in its place. -- Whither?, 72-73.

Thought Questions:
1. In what ways did Luther and Calvin continue with the thought of early church? In what ways did they differ?
2. Compare and contrast Luther and Calvin with Charles Hodge and A. A. Hodge.

3. "Faith seeking understanding" or "understanding seeking faith?" How would you place the persons you have read in this week's material?

4. How does the culture's agenda shape our assumptions?

5. Briggs took on the Princeton theology and lost. Which approach most nearly affirms earlier understandings of Scripture? Which approach most nearly connects with attitudes within Churches of Christ?
The Work of Witness: Current Options and the Restoration Tradition
Unit Six

The Contemporary Landscape

Much more could be said about the legacy of Turretin, and certainly something ought to be said about the contributions of classical liberal thought to the discussions of biblical authority. However, to provide a clearer focus for current thought, I propose to explore four broad categories that function today. The importance of seeing the continued development of the doctrine of Scripture is great, for this brief glance will demonstrate both the continuity and discontinuity of historical positions.

1. The Bible is authoritative because it is of supernatural origins. As a response to critical and often destructive attacks to the Bible's historicity that arose in the mid to late 1800s, a number of Protestant Christians began to insist that every book, chapter, verse, and word of the Bible was without any discrepancy or error. The Bible was judged to be completely in line with contemporary historical and scientific disciplines. Thus, the term inerrancy has become a defining concept in understanding Scripture's authority.

In recent times this approach to Scripture's authority has received a lot of attention among fundamentalist and conservative evangelicals. One notable event was the development of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. This statement was prepared at a three-day meeting in October 1978, by 284 scholars committed to biblical inerrancy. Sponsored by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, the group gathered largely in response to a controversy developing in American evangelicalism. The

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61I am using Daniel Migliore's framework for my observations. See his Faith Seeking Understanding (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 43-46.
controversy was whether institutions such as Christianity Today, Fuller Theological Seminary, and the Evangelical Theology Society were betraying their evangelical heritage by failing to affirm the inerrancy of the Bible.

However, this approach relies on the Bible’s authority being identified as divine words, not on whether God has something to say that transforms life. Scripture, via inerrancy, is often reduced to a data base of files to be arranged in whatever fashion is needed to authenticate a point of view.62

2. The Bible’s authority rests on its historical accuracy. With the rise of historical awareness and the need to understand the Bible in its historical contexts, this approach seeks to establish the authority of Scripture based on the veracity of Scripture’s claims. Paul J. Achtemeier, though rejecting a traditional liberal approach to authority, still posits the importance of historical truth to authority.63

The importance of historical and critical questions finds support from evangelicals as well. Steering clear of all the radical conclusions of classical liberal thought, but still engaging in critical thinking to understand Scripture’s authority includes I. Howard Marshall.64 Some realities are simply not verifiable to the standards of modern historical method. This results in leaving some key themes of Scripture, such as the resurrection, without any real authority. Additionally, Scripture becomes secondary to the historians’ interest in “what really happened.”

3. The Bible’s authority is rooted in its literary and philosophical value. To put it another way, the Bible is a “classic” and should be read and

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62Those who have offered critiques on the fundamentalist posture include Kathleen C. Boone, The Bible Tells Them So: The Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); James Barr, Beyond Fundamentalism (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984); see also the work of Paul Achtemeier and John Barton cited in this chapter.
appreciated for the moral truths it presents and the insight into humanity it offers. This approach places the Bible along with other significant literature; the Bible becomes a captivating and and compelling intersection of drama and prose.

4. The Bible's authority is found in the way it speaks to people in their private devotional life. The Bible addresses the individual, assuring one of God's love and providing direction for life. Or, as seen with a growing number of approaches, the Bible's authority is related to the degree in which it resonates with my particular world view. Those world views can include feminism, liberation theology, or Asian perspectives. Cultural relativity and existential concerns become paramount in determining Scripture's voice.65

However, this approach loses the objective nature of revelation. Individualistic interpretation improperly restricts the concept of community and the historical perspective of the church.

### Churches of Christ

Within Churches of Christ throughout this century, the strict inerrancy posture generally held sway. I suspect this position is the result of two related factors. First was the prominent and persuasive influence of B. B. Warfield and his predecessors. Much of the controversy about the authority of the Bible was front page news during the early years of this century. Second, the legacy that was handed on in the Restoration movement possessed a remarkably British accent. Francis Bacon, John Locke, and Thomas Reid with his Scottish Common Sense Philosophy furnished the Restoration movement with its philosophical and methodological foundations.66 Those

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65These are well illustrated by McKim's book mentioned above: *The Bible in Theology and Preaching.*

foundations, based on reason and inductive thinking, set up the framework to assume an external set of proofs for inerrancy. There has been a minority voice, though, and it has surfaced from time to time.67

Readings

Isaac Errett

1. By general consent, and on any hypothesis, even the most broadly rationalistic, the Bible, as a whole, must be regarded as a book of inspiration—of divine inspiration; and in this respect superior to any other book or collection of books known in the entire range of religions and religious literature.

2. Jesus Christ, as unapproachable in the fullness and richness of his inspirations—in his superhuman insight into moral and spiritual truth, is necessarily the highest authority as to inspired persons and inspired books.

3. On his authority, the Old Testament Scriptures, as they were found in his day, were inspired; also, the speeches and writings of his apostles.

4. The various theories of inspiration belong to modern times, while the fact of inspiration has been recognized in all ages. All these theories are unsatisfactory, inasmuch as each one fails to cover all the facts concerning inspiration which the Scriptures story of the rise of modern criticism.

supply. There may be some truth in every theory we have had under discussion; but the whole truth is found in none of them.

5. Any assertion of infallibility as belonging to the inspired Scriptures must be subject to the limitations growing out of the imperfections of human language and the uncertainties and perils ever attendant upon materials placed in human custody, and subject, more or less, to the control of ignorance, credulity, prejudice or superstition.

6. As a trustworthy communication of the will of God, in all that pertains to salvation, righteousness and holiness, or to human duty and destiny, and as a safe and sure guide in all the ways of truth and righteousness, the Bible is entitled to our untrembling confidence and acceptance; and, in this regard stands alone among all the books in the world. -- "Inspiration," from Missouri Christian Lectures, 1883.

INFALLIBILITY
Charles H. Roberson

It is a fact that very many good people find themselves at variance to others because they do not approach the subject from the same viewpoint, or fail to consider the limitation of the ideas under consideration. The main question in this essay is, "What is the infallibility which may be claimed for Scripture, and especially for the Gospels?"

Often there is the light claim that Scripture is infallible without even a slight suggestion concerning the question. "Infallible for what?" Let it be set forth now that the whole notion of infallibility depends upon the correct answer. What is the infallibility that the Bible student claims for the Bible? Is it infallibility in grammar, in style, in history, in science, or what? Its infallibility must be determined by its purpose. When a man avers that his watch is infallible, he means as a timekeeper – not that it has a flawless case or that it will tell him the kind of tomorrow's weather. The seaman finds his maps and charts infallible as a guide to lighthouses and shallows and reefs, but useless to give him the time of the day or to inform him of the value of the land to which he is sailing.
So it is an important factor to ask, "What, then, is the purpose of the Bible?" Its purpose is to exhibit the Lord Jesus Christ. He himself declared the Scriptures as: "They are they which testify of me." The Scriptures provide the vehicle by which the knowledge of God's love is conveyed to man. It was not the purpose to teach science, or ethnology, or to provide information about things of which man has always been so curious, or to make man a theological expert by the Scriptures; but God's purpose was, and is, and shall be, to set Christ before men in living grace and majesty and to perpetuate the knowledge of him upon the earth. Jesus Christ is the supreme revelation of God, and Scripture accomplishes its purpose when it conveys the life-giving knowledge of him. When Luther said, "That is not Scripture which does not exhibit Christ," he was right.

When this fundamental conception of Scripture is grasped, the variations of thought and content in the Gospels become of no consequence at all as affecting the account given us of Christ. The four records differ from each other in this or that, but it is the same Christ which each exhibits. Their trustworthiness is guaranteed both by their agreement in the main and by the fact that the average Christian has never found any difficulty in forming one consistent image of Christ out of the four accounts. Such variations and discrepancies as may appear to this critic or that are dangerous only when they are used to subvert the infallibility of the Scripture. And there are those who make such use, taking advantage of the claim of literal infallibility advanced by well-meaning but inconsiderate persons. There are instances where one is unable to claim this kind of infallibility, and consequently the critic infers that the Bible is infallible in no sense. But such an inference is wholly without justification.

It is not literal infallibility for which this compiler contends, and these variations might be multiplied a hundred times and still avail nothing affecting the true infallibility of Scripture. Two very valid reasons may be advanced. First, unimportant errors in details are never used to discredit a historian. The rule, "falsus in uno, falsus in omnibus," is valid in the courts at law only when the witness is found intentionally distorting the truth. A witness on oath who has the intention to deceive and withholds or perverts truth is certainly to be discredited in the whole of his testimony. But the maxim cannot be applied
to ordinary life or to the writing of history. Second, if it be asked, "Is not all error important where divine truth and eternal interests are concerned?" the answer is an emphatic no! else there would have been provision for the absence of error. There is no importance attached to errors in grammar so long as they do not affect the meaning or render it unintelligible. No errors of Scripture are important which do not prevent it from accomplishing God's purpose of preserving for man the knowledge of his revelation in Christ. The object of Scripture is to enable man to apprehend God in Christ and lead man to him. This it has infallibly accomplished.

Hence, it seems obvious that the true touchstone of Scripture is found. The ultimate ground for believing Scripture to be the word of God is that there is that in the truth delivered which convinces man that God is its author. Christians should come nearer the understanding that criticism cannot touch the authentication of Christ, that he is his own best witness, and that this witness is independent of any doctrine or theory of the inspiration or the infallibility of Scripture. Believers need to fear the nibblings of criticism as little as they fear the minute erosions of our shores by the ocean. The knowledge of God which the Gospels convey cannot be taken away, and that knowledge has the power to bring one into the life that is life indeed.

There are two extreme positions which are alike untenable. One is not able to maintain the infallibility of Scripture on the ground of its literal accuracy in every one of its statements, and he is equally unable to deny the infallibility of Scripture as a spiritual guide on the ground that there are found in it certain errors and variations. Man's acceptance of Scripture depends on his recognition of God's voice in it. Critics may work their will on the New Covenant, but they are not able to remove the Christ which it embodies. The facts that Christ has given man his highest idea of God, and that the conscience of each man who is brought into his presence acknowledges him as the best and divinest he knows or can conceive, are incontestable.
THE CHICAGO STATEMENT ON BIBLICAL INERRANCY

The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy was prepared at a three-day meeting in October 1978, of 284 scholars who are committed to biblical inerrancy. Sponsored by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, the group gathered largely in response to a controversy developing in American evangelicalism. The controversy was whether institutions such as Christianity Today, Fuller Theological Seminary, and the Evangelical Theology Society were betraying their evangelical heritage by failing to affirm the inerrancy of the Bible. --CER

The Authority of Scripture is a key issue for the Christian church in this and every age. Those who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are called to show the reality of their discipleship by humbly and faithfully obeying God's written Word. To stray from Scripture in faith or conduct is disloyal to our Master. Recognition of the total truth and trustworthiness of Holy Scripture is essential to a full grasp and adequate confession of its authority.

The following statement affirms this inerrancy of Scripture afresh, making clear our understanding of it and warning against its denial. We are persuaded that to deny it is to set aside the witness of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit and to refuse that submission to the claims of God's own Word which marks true Christian faith. We see it as our timely duty to make this affirmation in the face of current lapses from the truth of inerrancy among our fellow Christians and misunderstanding of this doctrine in the world at large.

A Short Statement
1. God, who is Himself Truth and speaks truth only, has inspired Holy Scripture in order thereby to reveal Himself to lost mankind through Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, Redeemer and Judge. Holy Scripture is God's witness to Himself.

2. Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches; it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises.

3. The Holy Spirit, its divine Author, both authenticates it to us by His inward witness and opens our minds to understand its meaning.

4. Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation and the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives.

5. The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible's own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church.

Articles of Affirmation and Denial

Article I. We affirm that the Holy Scriptures are to be received as the authoritative Word of God.

We deny that the Scriptures receive their authority from the Church, tradition, or any other human source.

Article II. We affirm that the Scriptures are the supreme written norm by which God binds the conscience, and that the authority of the Church is subordinate to that of Scripture.

We deny that Church creeds, councils, or declarations have authority greater than or equal to the authority of the Bible.
Article III. We affirm that the written Word in its entirety is revelation given by God.

We deny that the Bible is merely a witness to revelation, or only becomes revelation in encounter, or depends on the responses of men for its validity.

Article IV. We affirm that God who made mankind in His image has used language as a means of revelation.

We deny that human language is so limited by our creatureliness that it is rendered inadequate as a vehicle for divine revelation. We further deny that the corruption of human culture and language through sin has thwarted God’s work of inspiration.

Article V. We affirm that God’s revelation within the Holy Scripture was progressive.

We deny that later revelation, which may fulfill earlier revelation, ever corrects or contradicts it. We further deny that any normative revelation has been given since the completion of the New Testament writings.

Article VI. We affirm that the whole of Scripture and all its parts, down to the very words of the original, were given by divine inspiration.

We deny that the inspiration of Scripture can rightly be affirmed of the whole without the parts, or of some parts but not the whole.

Article VII. We affirm that inspiration was the work in which God by His Spirit, through human writers, gave us His Word. The origin of Scripture is divine. The mode of divine inspiration remains largely a mystery to us.

We deny that inspiration can be reduced to human insight, or to heightened states of consciousness of any kind.

Article VIII. We affirm that God in His work of inspiration utilized the distinctive personalities and literary styles of the writers whom He had chosen and prepared.
We deny that God, in causing these writers to use the very words that He chose, overrode their personalities.

Article IX. We affirm that inspiration, though not conferring omniscience, guaranteed true and trustworthy utterance on all matters of which the biblical authors were moved to speak and write.

We deny that the finitude or fallenness of these writers, by necessity or otherwise, introduced distortion or falsehood into God's Word.

Article X. We affirm that inspiration, strictly speaking, applies only to the autographic text of Scripture, which in the providence of God can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy. We further affirm that copies and translations of Scripture are the Word of God to the extent that they faithfully represent the original.

We deny that any essential element of the Christian faith is affected by the absence of the autographs. We further deny that this absence renders the assertion of biblical inerrancy invalid or irrelevant.

Article XI. We affirm that Scripture, having been given by divine inspiration, is infallible, so that, far from misleading us, it is true and reliable in all the matters it addresses.

We deny that it is possible for the Bible to be at the same time infallible and errant in its assertions. Infallibility and inerrancy may be distinguished, but not separated.

Article XII. We affirm that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit.

We deny that biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science. We further deny that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood.
Article XIII. We affirm the propriety of using inerrancy as a theological term with reference to the complete truthfulness of Scripture.

We deny that it is proper to evaluate Scripture according to standards of truth and error that are alien to its usage or purpose. We further deny that inerrancy is negated by biblical phenomena such as a lack of modern technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling, observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole and round numbers, the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations.

Article XIV. We affirm the unity and internal consistency of Scripture.

We deny that alleged errors and discrepancies that have not yet been resolved vitiate the truth claims of the Bible.

Article XV. We affirm that the doctrine of inerrancy is grounded in the teaching of the Bible about inspiration.

We deny that Jesus' teaching about Scripture may be dismissed by appeals to accommodation or to any natural limitation of His humanity.

Article XVI. We affirm that the doctrine of inerrancy has been integral to the Church's faith throughout its history.

We deny that inerrancy is a doctrine invented by scholastic Protestantism, or is a reactionary position postulated in response to negative higher criticism.

Article XVII. We affirm that the Holy Spirit bears witness to the Scriptures, assuring believers of the truthfulness of God's written Word.

We deny that this witness of the Holy Spirit operates in isolation from or against Scripture.
Article XVIII. We affirm that the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatico-historical exegesis, taking account of its literary forms and devices, and that Scripture is to interpret Scripture.

We deny the legitimacy of any treatment of the text or quest for sources lying behind it that leads to revitalizing, dehistoricizing, or discounting its teaching, or rejecting its claims to authorship.

Article XIX. We affirm that a confession of the full authority, infallibility, and inerrancy of Scripture is vital to a sound understanding of the whole of the Christian faith. We further affirm that such confession should lead to increasing conformity to the image of Christ.

We deny that such confession is necessary for salvation. However, we further deny that inerrancy can be rejected without grace consequences, both to the individual and to the Church.

ON THE LIBERAL VIEW OF SCRIPTURE'S AUTHORITY
Paul J. Achtemeier

Inspiration may therefore be defined in this way: The Bible as a whole was accomplished by an extraordinary stimulation and elevation of the powers of men who devoutly yielded themselves to God’s will, and sought, often with success unparalleled elsewhere, to convey truth useful to the salvation of men and of nations.” If the view that operates with such a definition was impressed with the phenomena of Scripture which linked it, in its primitive outlook and internal contradictions, with other similar literature, that same view is also impressed with the evidences that point to the high inspiration of this literature. The substance of thought which seems to defy human ability to express it adequately; the records of uniquely important events which led to spiritual victory despite, indeed through, tragedy; the passages that rise to lofty heights of spiritual beauty, rhetorical dignity, and power, which are able in the present, as they were able in the past,
to inspire men and women to seek and find God—all of these point to the high, even unique degree of inspiration evident in the pages of Holy Scripture.

There is no intention, therefore, in such a view to deny either the inspiration or the authority of Scripture. The aim is simply to conform the understanding of such inspiration and authority to the kind of literature the liberals are convinced the Bible represents.

This view of the nature of the Bible and the character of its inspiration also has implications for the way the Bible may be used within the Christian church. It is obvious that on this view of inspiration, the usefulness of every word in Scripture is by no means guaranteed. In a collection of literature of such uneven quality, not everything in the Bible is essential, or even useful, for salvation. The reader faces the task, therefore, of separating the kernel of divine wisdom from the husk of the human ideas in which it has been conveyed, once he or she has decided which portions of Scripture do in fact contain such divine wisdom. Since the words of Scripture are fully human and need critical evaluation, the reader must learn to discriminate between the word of God and the words of men, lest one think it as important to follow Paul’s advice about long hair (1 Cor. 11:14) as to follow Jesus’ command to love one’s enemies (Matt. 5:44).

Such a view also affects the way in which one understands the authority of the Bible. It is obvious that the highest authority in such a view is the sum total of human experience. One may therefore accept as authoritative only that material found in the Bible which is confirmed by humanity’s total experience, secular as well as sacred. That is, one must test historical, geological, botanical, and other such materials in the Bible in the light of our present knowledge of these sciences, and accept what conforms to such current knowledge. Similarly, one must test the moral and religious content of the Bible against the best of human experience in order to determine what may continue to have authority for us in our world. One would not, for example, want to attribute equal moral authority to the imprecatory Psalms, or the “legends of the bloodthirsty heroes in the Judges,” on the one hand, and to the sayings of Jesus on the other. The Bible therefore can no longer represent an unquestioned authority. What does retain final authority is God himself, who speaks to us through many channels. Since he speaks supremely in Christ,
and since the Bible is our primary source of knowledge about him, the Bible does retain high authority, but only within the larger context of God's communication with humanity through the totality of his creation and its history.
The Work of Witness: The Authority of Scripture for Today
Unit Seven

What sense can be made from the historical legacy bequeathed to yet another generation? How do contemporary Christians hear the voices of the past and speak with clarity to the future of Scripture’s authority within the life of the church? Using the trailmarkers noted in the historical survey of the previous chapter, the chapter is an attempt to chart a course for the tough and yet indispensable task of sailing in the contemporary world while hearing the Word of God for the church.

The Nature of Scripture

Scripture as Witness

What is Scripture? Scripture bears witness to the past revelation of God. That is its role. Barth was fond of referring to a painting by Grünewald of the Crucifixion. John the Baptist stands to the side with his long index finger pointing toward the Crucified One. That is the role of Scripture. The prophets and the apostles all attest to the work of God.

Standing in this service, the biblical witnesses point beyond themselves. If we understand them as witnesses, and only as such do we authentically understand them, i.e., as they understand themselves. They do not speak and write for their own sakes, nor for the sake of their deepest inner possession or need; they speak and write, as ordered, about that other. Why and in what respect does the biblical witness have authority? Because and in the fact that he claims no authority for himself, that his witness amounts to letting that other itself be its own

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authority. We thus do the Bible poor and unwelcome honour if we equate it directly with this other, with revelation itself.\footnote{CD, 1.1.111-112.}

This posture helpfully directs us away from the ever present temptation of bibliolatry.\footnote{Barton, People of the Book, 82.} By unequivocally affirming that authority is rooted in God's revelatory work and not in the Bible we remind ourselves of where our own loyalty lies. By confessing that Scripture is witness to God's work we confront the temptation to read the Bible as a compendium of propositional truth and open the possibility to hear the Word of God as did the primary, biblical witnesses.

Such a confession allows one to affirm that the Bible is indeed the Word of God--when we cease to procure for it some external authority and begin to listen. Perhaps much of the modern fundamentalist attempts to establish the authority of scripture fall short simply because they have failed to take the historic Scripture principle seriously enough. In order to validate Scripture, we manufacture external proofs and propositions. Remembering Calvin and affirming the work of the Holy Spirit, to claim that the Bible is the Word of God because it attests to God's saving work in Christ is quite biblical.

The work of preaching is an excellent way to explore Scripture's role as witness. The work of preaching is a continuation of that role in the contemporary Christian community. Such a conviction reflects on the truth that the Hebrew prophets and the apostles were humans called on to bear witness to the Word and Deed of God.

Thomas Long's recent book, entitled The Witness of Preaching, presents a cogent argument for the metaphor of witness to be applied to the preaching task.\footnote{(Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989.)} I am aware that the term witness does not curry much favor in many circles. To witness or to testify has certainly seen abuse and misuse.
In addition to that, the term witness conjures up a legal setting in some court of law. Fearing the thought of legalism and/or pontification, others have avoided the word.

But Long argues the courtroom scene makes the metaphor of witness viable. The preacher is not the judge, the jury, or the police officer. He is the witness—one of the people who are called on to speak. “Now this witness is in every way one of the people, but he or she is placed on the stand because of two credentials: The witness has seen something, and the witness is willing to tell the truth about it—the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”72 This witness, the preacher, is the truth-bearer. He speaks about what he has seen and heard. It is no mere mental or intellectual exercise; the witness, believing in the truth, stakes his life upon the validity of his claims.73

Long then notes how the image of witness shapes the preaching task.74 First, it locates the authority of the preacher in what he has heard, not in his own personality or power.75 Second, the image speaks about the event and the encounter between God and humanity. The preacher proclaims a Person, not facts. Third, the concept of witness relates to the rhetorical work of making known what has been seen and heard. What words, what forms, and what styles should be used? Long points out the importance of correlation between the style of sermon and the “character of the testimony.”76 Fourth, the witness is not a neutral observer. A personal faith and the contours of his own past shape his testimony. It engages his whole life.

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72Long, Witness, 43.
73As Long points out, it is no accident that the New Testament word for witness is “martyr” (44).
74Ibid., 44-46; see Leander E. Keck’s discussion of the preacher as witness in The Bible in the Pulpit: The Renewal of Biblical Preaching (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 53-68.
75“God’s authority has to be revealed before it can be apprehended, and the apprehension is of faith and must be freely made. Ministers of the Word cannot use open violence or subtle coercion to compel people to submit to the authority of God,” Browne, 37.
76Ibid., 46.
The witness metaphor is consistent with Scripture's own relationship to God. Preaching, like Scripture, can be the avenue by which the Word of God is heard today. But it is important to remember that the best that the preacher can do is be a faithful and reliable truth-teller of what he finds in Scripture. For even at his best the preacher is removed from the primary witness of Scripture. That gap will always remain.

Because of that distinction the preacher must begin with faith: faith that believes that God will speak again through Scripture as He has done before. As he seeks understanding, the preacher will undoubtedly use the customary literary and historical tools and methodologies. But he does so in a way to understand what he has heard. Thus, faith precedes reason as the preacher approaches Scripture.

**Scripture as Divine Words**

Intricately connected to the affirmation that Scripture is the witness to the revelation of God is the affirmation that only through Scripture do we come to know this Word of God. To declare freedom from rationalism for a theological method does not mean that one casts off from shore without a compass. Rather, what I affirm is a radical allegiance to hear Scripture speak. Though recognizing the historic conflux of authoritative sources--Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience--I am convinced of the necessity of the absolute priority of Scripture. It possesses that authority because it is the primary witness to God's work. Tradition, human experience, and reason, as valid as they are, must not overpower or ignore the primary role that Scripture has in shaping a contemporary message and directing the contemporary life.

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77"There is authority and freedom in the church only because Scripture has already told us what we are asking about when we ask about God's revelation" (CD, 1.2.462).
Scripture has been and will continue to be the source of our encounter with God. To understand that Scripture is inspired, that it is God-breathed, is appropriate. But to shape an understanding of inspiration in a mechanical way will reduce the Word of God to a mere codebook full of propositional statements.\(^7\)

How then are we to understand inspiration? Two realities come to mind. First, by the grace of God we come to know Him. Inspiration is an act of grace. Second, the past, present, and future work of the Holy Spirit insures the illumination of the Word of God for us.\(^8\) One might suggest that this leaves inspiration without any rational or logical leg foundation. I would maintain that understanding inspiration as an act of grace and mediated by the Spirit is quite rational--once one resolves to live by faith and not by the sight of scientific reasoning.\(^9\)

**Scripture as Human Words**

Scripture is not only Divine; it is also human. Luther made the comparison between the nature of Scripture and the incarnational nature of Christ. To ignore the historical realities of Scripture is to bury our heads in the sand. Christians are unwilling to accept a Docetic compromise in

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\(^7\)As in much of post-Reformation scholastic Protestantism. See Rogers and McKim, 147-99.

\(^8\)As Hanson states: “The question of biblical authority thus is resolved by being directed away from the realm of verification theory towards the realm of covenant fidelity: to acknowledge the authority of the Bible is to accept the claim God places on believers through God's self-revelation in Scripture, a claim that becomes particularly personal and poignant in the relationship of Christians to Christ. Acknowledgement of biblical authority is thus an aspect of faith’s response to God’s gracious initiative. As in the reception of divine grace in all of its forms, it is self-authenticating, or put another way, it arises from the testimony of the Holy Spirit within the believer and within the gathering of the faithful called the church.” Hanson, 70-71. This concept finds its classic expression in John Calvin. See *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.1.7.

\(^9\)To recognize the divine nature of Scripture opens the door to powerful concepts about proclamation, worship, and ethics. For example, if the Bible, as the Word of God, bears witness to the revealed Word of God, then preaching as the proclaimed Word of God sallies forth with great power and authority. Working with the assumptions that a doctrine of inerrancy contains, preaching becomes errant human words and approximations of the inerrant Word. What I am suggesting is that the power of the Divine Word is not limited to any human words but transcends the limitations of time and text to work in the present.
Christology; likewise, when it comes to understanding Scripture, there must be stout resistance to avoiding its humanness.81

When confronted by the critics with the human side of Scripture, many conservatives run quickly under the shelter of inerrancy. Then to protect their shelter, they shore it up with attempts to harmonize and minimize the ambiguities of Scripture. I propose another approach.82 Between the giants of historical-critical results and experiential authority on the one hand and the doctrine of inerrancy on the other stands a David. Both modern critical study of the Bible and inerrancy rely on the Goliath-like strength of reason and logical thought--albeit expressed in radically different ways. But the David in the middle acts in faith. He admits that Scripture is human words (much to the chagrin of the conservatives), but he refuses to capitulate to liberal scholarship to thrash about in the modern muck and mire of subjective expression.

I suggest that historical inquiry, exegesis, and biblical theology are proper endeavors. Historical-critical methodology, textual criticism, historical and systematic theology are valuable and useful tools. But these endeavors are limited by and are subservient to the Word of God. Ramm’s maxim for Barth is instructive: “Revelation generates history; history does not generate revelation.”83 Likewise, the priority of faith in the Word of God is necessary to keep the blindness out of biblical exegesis and to prevent the now popular individual reading (from a white or black or male or female) from dictating to Scripture.

81Johnson, 187.
82David H. Bobo is an example among thinkers in Churches of Christ who have proposed an alternative. As early as 1960, Bobo demonstrated the willingness to deal with the human realities of Scripture and concluded that “the issue is not a Biblical issue, as the Bible itself never claims to be non-discrepant. Biblical freedom from discrepancy, while it has a certain rational value, is an arbitrary and humanly imposed standard, and all efforts to prove it are gratuitous.” “Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible.”
Discerning Scripture's Authority

What does all this mean? How do we appropriate the past for the present? How does one decide which trajectory of tradition to draw resources from? These and other questions have constantly accompanied me as I have considered the contributions of the church fathers and others. But perhaps, most fundamentally, why should anyone turn to the Bible for an authoritative source? The breakthrough for me came with the asking of yet one more question. Where, or more properly, who, is the ultimate source of authority?

I am confident it is not a particular text. Nor is the ultimate source of authority an anthology of texts, compiled through the years by Christians. The source of authority lies behind and beyond any texts. The authority is God. Before there was an Old Testament or a New Testament, before canons of Scripture were debated or decided, God was. The authority that Scripture possesses is derivative--directly linked to the reality that it discloses God.

Historically, the church has always recognized that power lies in the saving work of God through Christ. The Bible's role is witness; it attests to what God has done.

Significantly, Scripture as witness is rooted in the primacy of faith. Scripture does not need the authentication of reason, logic or science to perform its divinely ordained task. Assured by the legacy left by earlier Christian spokespersons, the church begins with faith and seeks to understand God's work as disclosed through Scripture. Such an approach is particularly relevant in a day where the foundations of modernity are showing distinct signs of decay. Despite the protestations of much of the evangelical world, I am convinced that a return to the primacy of faith as a starting point

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85Barton, 81-82.
to do theology is not only an appropriate approach biblically and historically, but is the only valid sociological method in our present world.\textsuperscript{86}

With faith as the primary assumption regarding the authority of Scripture, the modern attempts to establish the authority of Scripture by establishing its inerrancy seem particularly useless. To do so is asking an ancient document to stand under the criteria of modern theory.\textsuperscript{87} It certainly seems to be foreign to the Bible itself. That is to say, Scripture never makes the claim that it is inerrant. Perhaps there is some other way to understand Scripture’s authority.

**Christ at the Center**

What claims does Scripture make that are relevant to the issue of authority? Certainly 2 Timothy 3:16 is a clear reminder that Scripture is inspired—God breathed—and is profitable for teaching, instruction, and doctrine. What is Scripture’s “profitable” nature? If Scripture ultimately derives its authority from God, then perhaps those events that reveal God most clearly are pivotal. Taking a cue from Paul, there are some expressions about God’s work that he can get quite upset about—namely a distorted expression of the gospel.\textsuperscript{88}

Paul is especially helpful on this point. He was among the first persons to articulate the Christian faith. He sought to make sense of the Old Testament and of the startling revelation in Jesus. What was pivotal and


\textsuperscript{87}“One difficulty with inerrancy of the Bible in scientific matters is that scientific ‘truth,’ i.e., statements about ‘the way things are objectively,’ tends to change from time to time. Can the Bible be ‘inerrant’ for its contemporary readers in the time of both pre-Galilean and post-Galilean astronomy? Or was the Bible written to be inerrant only for late twentieth-century Western civilization?” Paul J. Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 169, fn. 32.

\textsuperscript{88}Gal. 1:6-9.
essential to him is evidenced in his writing. Most notable is his statement in the Corinthian correspondence:

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain. For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.89

For Paul the gospel, the message of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection, was paramount to his ministry. For Paul this message functioned as a key to understanding the Old Testament.90 It was the key to his understanding of how faith was developed.91 This kerygmatic message was the key to his ethics.92 The message of the gospel was central to his preaching.93 Ultimately, this message was central for how Paul lived.94

Paul was not alone on this matter. Peter and Jesus demonstrated an awareness of the difference between Scripture and the core of Scripture.95 The early church fathers, as they attempted to articulate the Christian faith, merely continued this interpretive approach to Scripture. As noted earlier,

891 Cor. 15.1-8.
90Christ is the telos of the law, as in Romans 10:4.
91"Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the preaching of Christ" (Rom. 10.17). It is unfortunate that many earlier English translations neglect the preferred rendering. For Paul it was the preaching of Christ (not some modern understanding of the Bible as the Word of God) that when heard created faith.
92The structure of Paul’s letters, especially Romans and Ephesians, confirm this idea.
93“For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor. 4.5).
94“And it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).
95For Peter consider his sermons as recorded in Acts. Of special interest is the material in Acts 10 where he conveys to Cornelius’ household the essentials of the faith. Jesus takes to task the poor interpretative work of the scribes in John 5.39-40. “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”
Scripture was seen as authoritative because it affirmed the rule of faith or the saving message of God. Thus, Scripture became a divine and indispensable tool for teaching and instruction and doctrine.

Therefore, any attempt to formulate a systematic statement about the authority of Scripture must recognize that its authority rests on the proclaimed message of Jesus Christ. Scripture itself attests to this all-important, centering event. Any attempt to understand Scripture begins with some assumption. For the early church that assumption was the message of the gospel. I see no reason to ignore the witness of scripture and the church and attempt to anchor Scripture’s authority in the doctrine of inerrancy, human experience or any other source. Karl Barth makes this point quite poignantly:

If the crucified Jesus Christ lives, and if the church is the gathering of those who know this, have taken it seriously, and among whom it has rightly become the one axiom of all axioms, they cannot rely upon any other word that God may have spoken, before, after, in juxtaposition to, or outside of this Word—words that he willed to have proclaimed by this Word. The church hears and proclaims this one Jesus Christ as the one Word, the first and the last Word, of the true God. It hears in him the fullness of God’s Word of comfort, commandment, and power. It is therefore completely bound to him, and completely free in him. Thus it interprets creation, the course of the world, the nature of man, his grandeur and his misery, in the light which comes from him; and not somehow vice versa. It need hear no voice beside this voice as authoritative, because the evaluation of all other voices is contingent upon whether they are, or are not, an echo of this voice. It is quite true that, as the church seeks this voice, it also has both the permission and the command to hear other voices. And it can do so without hesitation or anxiety, because they may be permitted a share in his authority as an echo of his voice. However, it will always wish to return once again to hear this special, original voice, and place itself in its service. And, because he lives, the church will always
be permitted to hear this voice, and effectively commit itself to its service. In this sense we can say with Zwingli (and against all alleged “natural theology”): “The holy Christian church, whose sole head is Jesus Christ, is born of the Word of God; and in this same Word it remains, and hears not the voice of a stranger.”

Such a christocentric assertion steers a discussion away from utilizing categories of modern philosophy or historical method as fundamental assumptions. The question of Scripture’s authority is the church’s question, not the university’s. By making this assertion I am fully aware that one brings philosophical and methodological resources to Scripture. What I am proposing is an awareness of these assumptions and the need for them to be contained and harnessed by a proper Christology.

To illustrate, I turn again to the task of preaching. The starting point for preaching is the revelation of God through Jesus Christ. It is the message of the cross that functions as the interpretive key in the preacher’s approach to Scripture and to the pulpit. “The criterion of past, future and therefore present Christian utterance thus being of Church, namely, Jesus Christ, God in His gracious revealing and reconciling address to man.”

Stating that Christ is at the center of our proclamation, as he is the center of the biblical witness, is not new; the difficulty is that is very seldom practiced. Those who rely on historical methodology seek a historical Jesus (who turns out to be whoever they want him to be) and those who pursue a traditional Christianity count on an inerrant Bible. The tragedy of both is that human reason determines the center.

I am suggesting that foundational to the preaching enterprise is the reminder that, like Paul, “yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.” I have already mentioned the idea of an

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96 Karl Barth, as cited by Robert Clyde Johnson, 179.
97CD, 1.1.4; see 6, 12, 13, 15.
98Barton, 81-84.
99Phil. 3.7.
incarnational God and the idea of an incarnational Bible. Preaching, consistent with that model must be incarnational as well. For as James Daane states:

The best ministers, churches, and evangelists, recognizing that God himself speaks his Word through the proclamation of the church, therefore do not say “I say to you,” or “the Bible says,” but “Thus saith the Lord!” In biblical thought what the Bible actually says can only be heard at the point where God speaks his own Word in and through the proclamation of the church. The Bible is indeed the written form of the Word of God. But the Word finds a higher expression in that personal form of it which takes place in the pulpit of the church, for the pulpit expression which is true to the Written Word approximates more closely that Word which became flesh in Jesus Christ, because it is itself an expression of that fleshly, human form in which the Word of God is present in Jesus Christ.\(^{100}\)

Incarnational preaching, in continuity with the witness of Scripture, is God’s way of revealing to this and every age his gracious will.\(^{101}\) And an approach to preaching, as with theology, that is christocentric will lend itself well to the task of being faithful witnesses in the twenty-first century—as it has in the past.

**The Contextual Nature of Authority and the Church**

As stated earlier, Scripture’s authority is derivative; that is to say, Scripture’s authority rests in and on the One who is disclosed. Following the implications of this reality leads to yet another vital truth: Scripture functions as an authority only within a community of people—the church.\(^{102}\) Jodock reflects on the connectedness of the church and authority:

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\(^{101}\)“For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe” (1 Cor. 1.21).

\(^{102}\)“Beyond the dead letter of biblicism, the uncritical assumptions of historicism, the narrowness of bourgeois privatism and the detachment of aestheticism lies the real authority of Scripture in the life of the community of faith.” Migliore, 46.
A community also provides the context for the Bible’s authority: the community of faith. In the community of faith the Bible makes its claim on persons—to be taken seriously in their decision making and to inform their sense of direction and purpose. Those outside the community of faith can respect the Bible as a document of religious significance for others, they can study it, and they may even appeal to it if they want to persuade Christians to act in a certain way (this frequently happens in political discourse), but for them it does not, properly speaking, exercise authority. It makes no claims on their own decision making or sense of direction.103

For an individual to accept Scripture as authoritative for life, he must come into contact with someone who is a part of the community. The believer is a conduit; through the authenticity of a life given to God; God speaks and draws the other into the community. Only within the community then, does the individual come to accept the authority of Scripture. This commonly repeated reality affirms the incarnational nature of the Christian faith and highlights the centrality of the message of Jesus to understanding authority.

Jodock points out that, even in the reading of Scripture, faith is mediated through a member of the community of faith.104 Reading the biblical documents is an “overhearing” of a conversation between Paul or Luke or John and some church community. Thus, in observing the validity of truth claims in the life of the community and in the act of reading Scripture itself, authority comes as a result of these experiences, not as a presupposition to seeing and hearing.105

Herein lies the poverty of prominent theories of Scriptural authority that rely on external frameworks such as inerrancy. In an attempt to convince others of the Bible’s accuracy and usefulness, a void develops at the real heart of the issue of authority: Is it trustworthy? Will Scripture bring transformation, meaning, and hope? Instead, argument and debate often rule the agenda, making statements and offering conclusions about the Bible that

103Jodock, 106-07; see also Kelsey, 91, 208 ff.
104Jodock, 107.
105I am indebted to Jodock for this idea, 107. Beyond the scope of this document but of great importance is the necessary recognition of the need for ethic, holy living, and social responsibility to be squarely placed on the shoulders of the church. If the authority of the Word will be seen only in the life and ministry of the church, the time has come for a renewed and vigorous ecclesiology that supports this truth. See Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, Resident Aliens (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989).
many contemporary persons find intellectually dishonest and devoid of real meaning.  

Stanley Hauerwas takes the disparity between the reality of Scripture's authority within the church and presuppositions made about the Bible's authority quite seriously. In a recently released book, *Unleashing Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America*, Hauerwas boldly states that the real problem in American Christianity is the casual way in which all people are encouraged to read the Bible for themselves—indeed, independent of any church community. By making the Bible its own standard, "then the authority of the Bible is not privileged. Instead the authority of our private judgment will prevail." The Protestant tradition has consistently called for *sola Scriptura*—often in reaction to the teaching office of the Catholic tradition. But the loss of community that has accompanied this individualistic manifestation of the Reformation legacy points out the need to regain some sense of orthodox and historic tradition. I do not argue for a move to Catholicism, with its formal teaching office. Rather, I would suggest that *sola Scriptura*, as important and indispensable as it is, does not stand at the center of the church's understanding of authority. Only the presence of Jesus Christ, living among His people, the church, can properly be understood to be the authority for faith, life, and practice.

### The Relational Nature of Authority and the Church

Authority implies relationship. Authority defines the relationship between a person or persons and another person, persons, a book, or a set of ideas. It requires time and experience to develop. But the Bible is not the

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106Both Jodock, 108, and Barton, 89-90, speak of the danger of overstatement.
107"North American Christians are trained to believe that they are capable of reading the Bible without spiritual and moral transformation. They read the Bible not as Christians, not as a people set apart, but as democratic citizens who think their 'common sense' is sufficient for 'understanding' the Scripture. They feel no need to stand under the authority of a truthful community to be told how to read." Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 15.
108Hauerwas, 29.
109Hauerwas, 23-25.
110Barton, 83.
111"[T]he principle of sola scriptura . . . has become the basis for all sorts of maximalizing claims about the Bible." Barton, 84.
112Jodock, 108.
one who initiates and ushers in a relationship between God and humanity. Rather, it is the work of the Spirit of God, “who works through the message of grace proclaimed by human beings belonging to the community.” Thus, Scripture, in a very real sense, does not possess authority; Scripture is the conduit for the authoritative work of God within the church. Darrell Jodock relates this anecdote:

No contemporary theory of the authority of the Bible can assume that a person will be convinced of the Bible’s authority apart from participation in the community of faith. As Jaroslav Pelikan observed after hearing his eight-year-old daughter sing, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so,” the lyrics of the children’s song were incorrect for her. She had not read the Bible. She knew that Jesus loved her because her mother, her father, her Sunday-school teacher, her pastor, and others in the Christian community had told her so. Only later would she come into contact with the Bible.”

The Tradition of Authority and the Church

At first glance following observation is simple enough. The Bible functions authoritatively in the church because the church allows the Bible to function authoritatively. But underneath that simple observation lies an eye-opening reality. Before there was a Bible, the work, ministry, and life of the church was upheld by the gospel message and the rule of faith. As noted elsewhere in this work, the church developed a canon out of a response to a series of factors in the second and third centuries. Through consensus and usefulness, Scripture’s authoritative role evolved in the life of the church.

Jodock utilizes a term from Michael Polanyi to describe this reality. Jodock asserts that authority is “tacit.” By “tacit,” he means that authority is “established not consciously and deliberately but implicitly as
attention is focused on the tasks of the community.”116 In the work and life of
the early church, the documents that comprise the New Testament canon
came to be seen as God-breathed--useful and profitable. Why does the
contemporary church turn to the Bible? With the passing of each generation,
the church would be hard-pressed to reject the claim of tradition to the
authority of Scripture in offering guidance to present day issues.

**Primary Reading**

Please pick up a copy of “The Familiar World of the Bible,” from Leonard

Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World*

The breakdown of the modern mentality is evident in at least four areas. First, it
has been taken for granted in the intellectual world that the idea of God is superfluous.
We do not need God to account for anything. Subject after subject is studied in our
universities without reference to God, so that anyone educated outside church schools or
colleges is given the impression that religious questions are not among the fundamental
questions which any person who uses his or her head has to confront sooner or later. It is
not merely a matter of the separation of church and state, because the same thing exists
in many countries of Europe and in Canada where there is no such doctrine of separation.

But today there are fundamental developments in philosophy and cosmology that
actually point toward God. It can no longer be claimed that philosophy and science that
established that we live in a self-contained universe. Hume’s and Kant’s philosophical
arguments that it is pointless to ask whether the universe has an external cause have
recently been seriously revised in secular philosophical circles, as we shall see in detail in
Chapters Three and Four. This radical change has been independently reinforced by

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116 Jodock, 111.
recent developments in science, especially in cosmology, which we shall also examine in Chapters Three and Four. In both fields, the questions arise, Why does the universe have this particular order, rather than another possible one? and Why does the universe exist? These questions point toward God as an answer. As we shall see, it is beyond the capacity of those fields of inquiry to make a positive pronouncement on the matter. All they can say is that the order and existence of the universe pose real questions that they cannot answer and recognize that God is the sort of reality that would answer them.

This is a complete about-face. Both science and philosophy have been used for several centuries to exclude even the possibility of God. On strictly intellectual grounds, this can no longer rightly be done. This is a fundamentally different cultural situation.

Once the embargo on the possibility of God is lifted, it is easy to show that the issue of divine existence is intellectually inescapable and important. For example, human beings are goal-seeking. Our goals are numerous and in some instances conflicting. To be rational we must order them into some priority. This is true of us as individuals as well as members of various social and political groups.

To order our goals rationally, we must make a match between our needs, interests, and desires, on the one hand, and what the physical and social environments permit us reasonably to hope we can achieve, on the other hand. Our estimate is greatly affected by whether we think this universe is ultimate or not. An estimate based on the conviction that the universe is ultimate is significantly different from an estimate based on the view that it is not. So the need and order our lives as individuals and societies is a reason to pursue the question of the status of our universe. Our goal-seeking behavior renders the question of what is ultimate inescapable for rational agents.

Furthermore, our needs, aspirations, and desires are far greater than can be satisfied should this universe be all that there is. If the universe is ultimate, then we must greatly reduce our aspirations and suffer the frustration of many of our needs and desires. To assume that we must pay this price is rational and sensible only if we have examined the status of the universe, and indeed examined it seriously and carefully. If people are
sensible, they would want to know, earnestly want to know, whether this universe is ultimate or not.

Christians, therefore, need not continue to be defensive. We, just as Socrates in ancient Greece, have a mission: to challenge the supposition that the status of the universe and our place in it have already been thoroughly settled by scientific and philosophical grounds, we will show that science and philosophy do not explain everything. They do not establish what the status of our universe is nor our place in it. Both individuals and institutions, such as schools and universities, ought to consider and study anything that promises to shed light on our situation. We have the opportunity and task of turning people into seekers, as did Socrates.

The second breakdown of the modern mentality is the failure to find a basis for morality and society. A major project of the Enlightenment was to base traditional morality and society on reason and not on religion. It sought to show by reason alone that some things are wrong in nearly all circumstances, that to become a moral person is of supreme importance for an individual and society, and that moral behavior is objective and not a matter of individual choice nor relative to society. The deepest of all our traditional moral convictions is that every person has intrinsic value. But it has been argued recently that all attempts to give morality and society a secular basis are bankrupt.

When as individuals and as a society we chose a traditional morality, heavily influenced by the best in Greek culture and Christianity, the failure in secular philosophy did not matter for practical purposes. But today traditional morality is being discarded, and we find ourselves unable to reach a consensus for action or even a basis for rational discussion on such matters as war, armaments, the distribution of wealth, medical ethics, and criminal justice. We find ourselves increasingly in the time of the Judges, in which each does what is right in his or her own eyes.

The third pillar of the Enlightenment is belief in inevitable progress. Modern science and technology so improved life that they led to a belief in progress, and in time to a belief in inevitable progress. People came to believe that science coupled with the power
of education would free us from social bondage and vulnerability to nature. We are now faced with our failure to eradicate such serious social and economic problems as crime, pollution, poverty, racism, and war. We are becoming uneasy. We are beginning to feel that we may able to surmount our difficulties, but it is not inevitable that we shall. The optimism of inevitable progress has become tarnished. There is an increasing recognition that evil is real and that it cannot be removed merely by educational and social reform. These difficulties do not mean that we are not to work and strive, but they do mean that we shall have to do so without the assistance that we are bound to succeed.

The fourth Enlightenment belief that is being questioned is the assumption that knowledge is inherently good. For centuries science has been regarded as unquestionably a force for good. We are indeed immeasurably better off because of it. But our conviction that science is intrinsically good and scientists inherently benefactors of humanity arose largely because the morality that was part of the Greek and Christian heritage guided and restrained to some extent the uses to which scientific knowledge was put.

Today we are becoming increasingly aware that there is no inherent connection between knowledge and its beneficial use, with genetic engineering just beginning to open new possibilities of abuse, and with the power of bombs and other destructive forces at hand. Scientists do not control the uses to which their knowledge is put, and many even resist taking any responsibility for its uses. Within a moral order which is basically Christian, there is some prospect for controlling the use of scientific knowledge, or at least of restraining its destructive uses. There are perhaps some things which people impregnated with Christian attitudes will not do. However, the Christian order has been widely discredited by the Enlightenment. This has deprived us of one of the great resources for controlling the use of scientific knowledge.

We now realize that many of the reasons for thinking that Christianity is intellectually passé are unfounded. Recent work in the history of science has shown the indispensable contributions which Christianity made to the origins of modern science. We also realize that there is no inevitable conflict between science and religion. Finally, there is an increasing awareness that science does not explain everything.
In a postmodern world Christianity is intellectually relevant. It is relevant to the fundamental questions, Why does the world exist? and Why does it have its present order, rather than another? It is relevant to the discussion of the foundations of morality and society, especially on the significance of human beings. The recognition that Christianity is relevant to our entire society, and relevant not only to the heart but to the mind as well, is a major change in our cultural situation.

Thought Questions:

1. Describe your experience with the shift in our culture from a modern to a post-modern view of the world. Is it appropriate to talk of a post-modern era? Are we in a post-modern age?

2. Develop a succinct statement that reflects your understanding of the authority of the Bible. Think through the material you have read throughout the course. In your own words, how does Scripture function as an authority for the church?
Unit Eight

Introduction

Churches of Christ face a time of transition and change. Methodologies and ministries, worship and women, outreach to the world, and reaching out to believers in different traditions--these and much more confront churches and church leaders. Underneath these changes and challenges to the status quo is the fundamental question of how Scripture is to function authoritatively. The dilemma is heightened by the reality that the authority of Scripture within the Restoration tradition has received some criticism in recent years. This trend suggests the need to explore historical and biblical resources; such an exploration should give rise to a firmer foundation for theological reflection.

The need for a clear articulation of historical and biblical themes on the authority of Scripture is highlighted by a fundamental reality. Namely, the assumptions one holds about Scripture affect interpretation. A greater historical awareness of how the church has understood the authority of the Bible would greatly enhance contemporary attempts to bring Scripture to bear on issues facing the church.

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117Lynn Anderson's recent book, Navigating the Winds of Change (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 1994), and the magazine Wineskins serve as examples.

118"Despite a somewhat popular feeling that hermeneutics is a red herring, it is quite an important matter. How we read the Bible impacts to one degree or another what we believe, the topics we focus on, the emphases we make, how preachers choose and construct their sermons, and the way we all deal with people." Gary Collier, The Forgotten Treasure: Reading the Bible Like Jesus (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 1993), 27.
The Crisis of Biblical Authority

Pannenberg’s statement twenty-five years ago suggests the critical nature of this project: “The dissolution of the traditional doctrine of Scripture constitutes a crisis at the very foundation of modern Protestant theology.” From Gordon Kaufmann’s pronouncement in 1971 that in this modern age the Bible was no longer the Word of God to the growing intensity of inerrancy adherents, the issue of Biblical authority looms large over contemporary discussions of the Christian faith.

The issue of the authority of Scripture has occupied a prominent place on America’s theological table since the late nineteenth century. The growing controversy over the nature of Scripture’s authority found its seedbed in the growing use of modern critical thought. This debate emerged with the rise of modern historiography in nineteenth-century European and American universities and continued to be divisive in American churches as historical-critical scholarship made its way westward over the Atlantic.

Leopold von Ranke represents several nineteenth-century historians who refined historiography by inaugurating the seminar and emphasizing the use of primary sources to obtain objectivity. However, it was Ernst Troeltsch who clarified the essence of modern historiography to theological

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circles, focusing attention on the tension between critical reason and traditional faith. In his significant essay, "On Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology," he identified three principles that continue to serve as guideposts for modern historiography. These three principles are (1) the principle of criticism or methodological doubt, which makes it necessary to observe history in degrees of probability; (2) the principle of analogy, which allows insight into present experience to be the method of knowing about the past; and (3) the principle of correlation, which implies an interconnectedness of all events (i.e., the role of cause and effect).

Basing historical research on these principles produced significant problems for understanding the Bible's authority. Christians had traditionally affirmed their faith to be rooted in events that had occurred in human history. But with the acceptance of critical thought, supernatural events and the possibility of the unique in history became suspect, calling into question the veracity of Scripture. Thus, the polarization between verification and faith emerged, creating for many the need to establish, by the use of reason, a way of upholding the authority of Scripture.

By the late nineteenth century, two distinct postures emerged. For some persons the use of reason led them to embrace historical-critical methodology. This point of view anchored the authority of Scripture to whatever could be historically verified. Other persons took reason and developed a framework to protect Scripture from the devastating effects of historical-critical thought. This framework, inerrancy, quickly became the hallmark of fundamentalists.

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The reality, however, is not simply divided into two clear categories. Within the evangelical world, a great diversity exists concerning the authority of Scripture. The locus of authority is clear: "Whatever subsidiary sources may be recognized—the role of the church and its traditions or the place of the world of human experience—Scripture is primary." What creates the great diversity among evangelicals is how Scripture is authoritative.

The gray landscape turns to fog in the contemporary, post-modern setting. A person can no longer say "The Bible says so," much less, "This is the clear historical-critical understanding of the text." With the rise of canon criticism and, more recently, the introduction of structuralism, the idea of a single meaning for a text has come under serious attack. Thus, reason has fallen from grace; and objectivism, which was integral to both classical liberalism and inerrancy, is suspect.

In an attempt to mark signposts in the fog, Darrell Jodock, in his book, The Church's Bible, delineates the plethora of positions being taken in understanding the authority of the Bible. Of particular note are two primary assumptions that he makes. First is that "each position was influenced by the context in which it was developed." Second, "each

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129 John Barton, in Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), presents a review of the various methods of study—ranging from form criticism to more recent approaches. He effectively demonstrates the limitations that occur when the exegete attempts to present a single method as the method.
132 Jodock, 32.
position employs assumptions or makes theological assertions that influence the way the Bible is understood but that are not mandated by the Bible itself.”133 In other words, everyone comes to the table from some specific context, and everyone brings some philosophical or theological framework to begin the task of hearing Scripture.

The question is how does the church hear Scripture in a way that it functions authoritatively for the church’s proclamation and life. This issue is heightened by the, at times, crumbling and, undoubtedly, fracturing attempts to maintain the authority of Scripture through the use of modern rational thinking.134

Francis Schüssler Fiorenza observes these effects of modernity in an insightful article on the authority of Scripture.135 Though noting secularization and alienation as the two usual culprits for the poverty that modernity has placed upon the world, Fiorenza proffers an additional feature. Increasing professionalization and specialization in culture have fragmented the unity and the interconnectedness of the world. As Fiorenza states: “The fourfold division of theological disciplines in the nineteenth century into biblical, historical, systematic, and practical shattered the unity of the theological task.”136 Though this increased specialization brought knowledge, this newfound knowledge carries a price tag. Scientific objectivity and neutral values reduce the range of Scripture’s spirituality and vitality. “For the sake of exactitude, the historical method excludes seeking the meaning of the text for our contemporary situation or for our faith.”137 The result of all this is an

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133 Jodock, 32.
135 Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Crisis of Scriptural Authority: Interpretation and Reception” Interpretation 44 (October 1990): 353-68.
136 Fiorenza, 356.
137 Fiorenza, 356.
interpretation of Scripture that has nothing to do with ethics or theology. There is a growing distance between the halls of exegesis and the church's life. With that, Fiorenza argues, comes a singular emphasis on the literal meaning of the text.

The striking result of this emphasis on the literal interpretation of Scripture is that inerrantists and liberals seek the literal meaning of the text. Fiorenza notes that the current concern over inerrancy among fundamentalists is a mirror of the concern for literal meaning for historical-critical scholarship. “The priority of the literal sense led to a split in which literal came to mean either literal as inerrant truth or literal as historical contextual truth.”

The tension and debate on the nature of Scripture create a dilemma for contemporary churches and Christians. With a vast spectrum of approaches to Scripture, the temptation is simply to pick and choose from the menu offerings, or, worse yet, to let go of a clear authoritative role for Scripture altogether. Jodock states the confusion well:

Persons wrestling with contemporary issues often work with unexamined, unappropriate, and sometimes even contradictory assumptions about the authority of the Bible. They are convinced that the Bible is important but, lacking a coherent explanation of its relevance, have patched together mismatched procedures and biblical interpretations.

This crisis in the authority of Scripture has surfaced among Churches of Christ and has contributed significantly to an ongoing struggle to establish a clear identity in the closing years of the twentieth century. In recent years, reviews of hermeneutical assumptions within Churches of Christ have revealed the need for scrutiny, constructive critique, and ultimately, new

\[138\]Fiorenza, 357.

formations. Though biblical scholarship within Churches of Christ has matured, offering to the fellowship and to scholarship credible work, the nagging question remains: “how does the Word of God function as the Word of God to the church?” Given the legacy of Churches of Christ--“we are people of the Book”--how will Scripture function as an authority in the church’s life?

**Interpretation: Hearing the Voice of Scripture**

So what does it mean to say that Scripture is the primary witness to God’s revelation? What ramifications develop in affirming both the divinity and the humanity of Scripture? How does the church speak an authoritative Word? Or, on the other hand, can a person who affirms the veracity of Scripture’s ancient witness have anything relevant to say to contemporary life? How can one approach Scripture in a way that is consistent with its nature and attentive to its authority? To answer these kinds of pertinent questions, I plan to propose a general interpretive approach to Scripture that correlates with some of the discoveries and affirmations made above. This correlation is really quite imperative as Robert Browne indicates about preaching: “What a preacher believes about the mode of divine revelation determines the mode of his preaching.”

The place to begin is with Scripture itself. The church must allow the “Word of God” to critique our presuppositions, using Scripture and prayer to review what questions are brought to the text. An additional control includes

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the history of Christian thought. The Word of God finds greater freedom where it is heard in the large circle of historic Christian witness. Though many different interpretations exist, the differences can be helpful as long as people respectfully hear the other and are open to change. Variations become destructive only when fixed points are rejected or when the “living hope” is threatened.

Scripture Sets the Agenda

So what does that mean? It means that the nature of Scripture dictates how we interpret Scripture. And the nature of Scripture can be encountered through three distinct convictions. First Scripture is God’s book. It is the revelation of God. That means that the Bible has everything to do with disclosing who God is to humanity. And God is the One who willed it into being. Second, this book about God from God is not some metaphysical theory or exercise in philosophy. God’s revelation is action--concrete actions within human history. God reveals himself in Word and Deed; God works in history. Third these acts in history have, by his will and purpose been recorded by humans in human forms with human words. The ancient Christian thinkers spoke of accommodation; God reveals himself in modes and methods that humans can perceive and hear. Thus, the Bible is filled with literary documents, material written using literary structures that were in common vogue. It means going to Scripture with three interrelated, but distinct interests. These interests or approaches are used not because they are enlightening or instructive--though they are both. I propose these three avenues of inquiry because they approximate three realities about Scripture.

If these are the three fundamental assumptions about the nature of Scripture, then they must be reflected in our attempts to understand Scripture:

1. **Literary** We must recognize that the fundamental elements that we have to work with are words and documents. Literary analysis attempts to understand texts within the context of each document. It also seeks to understand each book of the Bible as complete within itself.

2. **Historical** Before we can conclude what a text means today, we must discover what the text meant for the original readers. Historical questions help to negotiate the distance between now and then.

3. **Theological** The church is not the university. Our study of Scripture is ultimately to hear the voice of God. Therefore, we look for the theological themes in the text, always considering what word is being offered from God.
Or, in keeping with the concept of witness, the church’s task is to look and listen for the truth Scripture has to tell about God.

A Threefold Approach

The first avenue is foundational. We must begin with the recognition of the literary form that a particular text or book possesses. Every book of the Bible was fashioned in a distinct literary form. The Psalms were poetry, Genesis was narrative, and Romans was a letter. For us to understand the meaning of these important texts, we must first realize the form that God has used to preserve and present his message. If we fail to understand the form that the message assumes we may fail to hear the message properly. In our minds today there are, for example, a certain set of expectations, about the way a story works. Consider the illustration that Thomas Long uses:\textsuperscript{143}

Once upon a time there was a man who lived in a small village. Though his home was humble, and his life simple, he was a collector of fine clocks, and people would travel for many miles to see his rare and wonderful collection. His clocks were indeed splendid, but none was more magnificent than the one which was called the “Angel Clock.” It was a very old clock, but no one, not even the man himself, knew just when it was made, or the circumstances of its creation. Its base was of the finest silver; the figures on its face were precious stones. Rising from its was an angel made from the purest gold. Each quarter hour was marked by the tone of a flawless chime, and, at each hour, the clock sounded music so lovely the man believed it was the very music of heaven.

One night, while the man was sleeping, a thief entered his home and, when the thief departed, he carried with him only one of the man’s possessions. It was the “Angel Clock.” THE END.

Surely there must be more than that. The rhythm and cadence of this piece led us to believe that what we were reading was a story. But something is missing and we are disoriented. Long presents another telling:

Littleton (AP) Littleton police reported yesterday that William Archer, a local resident and a collector of antique clocks, was the victim of a burglary Tuesday night.

The thief apparently entered the home while Archer was sleeping. Only one item, a valuable clock, was reported missing. Several dozen other clocks, including some of great value, were not disturbed.

"I am particularly sad to lose that one," Archer said by telephone. "It was my 'Angel Clock,"' he said, referring to the gold figure of an angel which was a feature of the stolen clock.

Investigator John Bowman of the Littleton Police, who is in charge of the case, expressed optimism that the clock would be recovered. "It will be easy to trace," he said. "It is a chiming clock with a silver base, jewels on the face, and, of course, that angel on the top."

Police sources indicated that there are no suspects at the present time.

This text, relaying the same information, does so in a very different way. And, by the way it relays the information, the reader is clued in on how the information is to be understood.

To understand the truth that the gospel of Luke or the Roman letter presents, we must hear it on its own terms. To read Luke like a cookbook or Romans like the newspaper will only create a distance between ourselves and the message. Literary analysis, or asking questions that aid in discerning the form that a biblical writer is using, paves the way to understanding the message.

The second avenue builds on the first. Not only must we recognize and understand the literary forms of Scripture, but we must understand the historical setting of the text. These biblical documents are products of
distinct historical happenings. They are nestled in the warp of human experience. These events and experiences are the warp and woof of God’s revelation. And these distinct historical happenings took place a long time ago. Thus, the distance between the “then” and the “now” must be negotiated, and the historical questions, internal and external to the text, are necessary.

The third avenue is the theological one. The broad and clear themes of Scripture enable us to hear correctly the specific claims that a particular text may make on our life. Convinced that the Bible is somehow God’s revelation to humanity, we must be quick to pause and to hear the claims that are laid on us. Specifically we begin to discover that the life and message of Jesus were and are normative for the the life of the church. Our interpretive work must not neglect to remember that we ultimately are not the interpreters—God is. Or to put it in another way, God is not the object of our study. We are. Humility, devotion, and an open heart to the message of God are imperative tools.

**The Threefold Approach at Work**

If the church is to respond to the authority of Scripture then she must regain a clear sense of being biblical in her theology. Preaching and teaching must be biblical or else lose its connection with any divine authority.\(^{144}\) A grave danger exists in contemporary culture for a gap to develop between life and the Bible, thus dissolving the opportunity for the Word to be heard in the church.\(^{145}\) Thus I am suggesting the vital need for biblical, expositional work in our churches. Let me be clear about what I mean about exposition. For example, expository preaching is often misconstrued; it often is used to

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\(^{144}\)Greidanus, 13.

\(^{145}\)More than one book has appeared in the past forty years noting the demise of preaching that is anchored to the Bible. Leander Keck’s chapter “On the Malaise of Biblical Preaching,” in *The Bible in the Pulpit*, is illustrative.
describe a form of preaching that in reality is exegesis. When I use the word expositional, I mean a way of handling the text so that the truth it bears witness to in its ancient setting will be heard anew in a contemporary setting. As Long suggests about preaching:

Preaching is biblical whenever the preacher allows a text from the Bible to serve as the leading force in shaping the content and purpose of the sermon. More dynamically, biblical preaching involves telling the truth about—bearing witness to—what happens when a biblical text intersects some aspect of our life and exerts a claim upon us. Biblical preaching does not mean merely talking about the Bible, using the Bible to bolster doctrinal arguments, or applying biblical "principles" to everyday life. . . . Biblical preaching has almost nothing to do with how many times the Bible is quoted in a sermon and everything to do with how faithfully the Bible is interpreted in relation to contemporary experience.

This conviction about expository works leads to a growing realization of the importance of grammatical, historical and literary endeavors. If the authority of Scripture is to be appropriated properly, then it must be heard in its original setting—with the church's ears attuned for its original message. That does not reduce Scripture to a mere historical document subject to the ambiguities of historical-critical method. Rather it gives serious weight to the incarnational work of God in Jesus and in Scripture. That is to say, God accommodated himself to work in and through human history; the church

\[146\text{See Greidanus' discussion, 10-11; also Donald G. Miller, The Way to Biblical Preaching (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), 15-36.}

\[147\text{Long, 48. John R. W. Stott suggests, in Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 126, that expositors are to open a text "up in such a way that it speaks its message clearly, plainly, accurately, relevantly, without addition, subtraction or falsification. In expository preaching the biblical text is neither a conventional introduction to a sermon on a largely different theme, nor a convenient peg on which to hang a ragbag of miscellaneous thoughts, but a master which dictates and controls what is said." See Gustaf Wingren, The Living Word: A Theological Study of Preaching and the Church (London: SCM, 1960), 201. See Karl Barth, Homiletics, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 44.}

\[148\text{See Migliore's comments on the need for Scripture to be "interpreted with the help of literary and historical criticism," 49.}
longs to bear witness to that Work and Word of God, and she must engage in some literary and historical thinking to hear and see.

Foundational then to this vital work is exegesis. Bringing linguistic, grammatical, textual, historical, and theological resources to bear is essential for the one who is called on to bear witness to the Word. Much could be said about exegetical work but I want to point out only one theme that is often overlooked.

Typically the stress in doing exegesis has been on discovering the message of Scripture. The specific form of the text mattered little. However, in recent years there has been a growing emphasis on literary criticism and, therefore, a growing appreciation of the various forms that Scripture takes. The literary forms of Scripture are not merely vehicles for some message, but they are an intricate part of the message. The form itself and the impact that form has on the reader must be considered as a part of the message.

Concerning the authority of Scripture, David Bartlett has helpfully pointed out that the different forms of Scripture, by virtue of their form, make different claims of authority for the Christian community. Likewise, the student should consider the form of his text—allowing the content and the form to guide his work. There are many fruitful possibilities; for example,

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151 This has found popular expression in Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).


153 This I believe is the genius of Sidney Greidanus' work The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text; see Keck's comments, 106.
Thomas Long encourages preachers to let the form of the text shape the form of the sermon.154

If Scripture is the primary witness to God’s saving work then the serious work of historical and literary disciplines is necessary to put the preacher in the position to hear the Word of God. Without asking what is the truth to which the text bears witness, one will be hard pressed to have an authoritative word for the church to hear today.

A Conclusion

In the midst of an ongoing controversy over the nature of Scripture’s authority in contemporary life, I suggested some concepts that I believe lead to a biblical understanding. First, using the history of Christian thought as a backdrop, I pointed out that attempts to establish the authority of Scripture by the doctrine of inerrancy are historically late and were efforts to shore up a sagging image of the Bible with the coming of the modern age. Second, the church fathers and reformers affirmed the authority of Scripture. They affirmed the authority of Scripture as the primary witness to God’s saving Word and Deed by working from the primacy of faith and with such concepts as the evidential nature of Scripture, accommodation, and the use of the rule of faith.

I proposed that a contemporary affirmation of the authority of Scripture begins with an understanding that God is the ultimate authority. Additionally, Scripture is both divine and human--the Word of God in the words of humanity. Scripture’s authority is related to its task of bearing witness to what God has done. Fundamental to hearing the Word of God in

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Scripture is the belief that most significantly the Word of God was incarnate. A christocentric understanding of Scripture continues to be the interpretive key for the church.

Not only does the authority of Scripture rest in its telling the story of Jesus, but I have also argued that this authority functions within the community of faith. It is to those who believe that the Bible has authority to speak and to guide. Scripture is indeed the church’s book. John Barton’s remarks are appropriate:

Central to my own thinking about the authority of the Bible is the conviction that we can say nothing worthwhile about the Bible except by beginning with the Christian gospel that existed before there ever was a Bible and could survive if every Bible was destroyed.\(^{155}\)

As a minister of the gospel and as a disciple of Jesus, I can do no less than allow Scripture to set its own agenda for how it should be heard. Thus, whatever remarks I have offered have been an attempt to allow the nature of Scripture to establish authority and inform interpretation.

With a clear voice from history affirming the priority of the gospel, the concept of accommodation, and the idea of witness, the challenge for the church today rests in reaching beyond the last fifty years to determine how Scripture should be heard. The bankruptcy of both inerrancy and modern critical approaches will indeed leave Christians impoverished in a postmodern world. With the rich legacy of the fathers and reformers, the church would be wise to invest in the durable understandings of Scripture that are rooted in Scripture itself. This investment is made imperative by the reality that Scripture is not an end to itself; it exists to bear witness to the truth about God. Likewise, the church stands as truth-bearer in a world that shows no fondness for truth and yet longs for the healing and hope that the truth of God provides.

\(^{155}\)Barton, 89.
If the church is to bear witness to the truth, then my hope is that by properly discerning the locus of authority, the world will come to hear and see Jesus. Such a goal is easily distinguished from an approach to Scripture based on reason and external proofs such as inerrancy. Well known in many evangelical circles and in Churches of Christ, that approach to Scripture can often lead to legalism and sectarianism. I call the church to allegiance to God, not the Bible. I call the church to Jesus not to a plan. I call the church to a life in the Spirit not to a system of doctrine. As Barth notes, such a task begins with a proper understanding of biblical authority, and understanding begins and ends with the Incarnate Word:

The last word which I have to say as a theologian and as a politician is not a term like “grace,” but a name, “Jesus Christ.” He is grace, and he is the last, beyond the world and the church and even theology. What I have been concerned to do in my long life has been increasingly to emphasize this name and to say: There is no salvation in any other name than this. For grace, too, is there. There, too, is the impulse to work, to struggle, and also the impulse towards fellowship, towards human solidarity. Everything that I have tested in my life, in weakness and in foolishness, is there. But it is there.156

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**Primary Reading**

Gail A. Ricciuti, Salted and Holy (in Memory of Lot’s Wife)157

*Genesis 19:15-29; Luke 19:41-44*

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. (1 John 4:18)

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156Karl Barth, just a few days before his death in a tape recording intended for broadcast on Swiss radio, as cited by Busch, 496.

157Taken from Donald McKim, *The Bible in Theology and Preaching*, 186-89.
The moving van has pulled out of the driveway and lumbered off down the street toward the highways, the thruway entrances, the state lines that mark the way to your new home. The kids are corralled in the back seat of the car, the dog between them, along with pillows and snacks and favorite toys and the suitcases you’ll live out of for a while. The windows of the house have been locked up one last time, and dust bunnies swept out of corners now nakedly exposed in the absence of the furniture. You look around, check around, just once more.

There's a bit of plaster chipped off the corner by the kitchen door, where someone bumped it with the Christmas tree stand years back . . . and the smallest room, where you laid the new baby, with crayon marks on the lower wall where she conducted her first art project . . . and the dogwood tree just out the back window over the kitchen sink, the tree you contemplated so many thousands of times, dreamily or fretfully, with hands in dishwater.

And then, after this, final circuit, you walk out the front door, almost ceremonially, and lock it (knowing just how hard to pull the loose doorknob in order to fit the dead bolt into its casing) and drop the key back through the mail slot, where you told the new people it would be when they arrive next week. Down the flagstones of the walk your feet know by heart. . . . you slip behind the wheel, click in the seatbelt, turn the ignition, back into the quiet street. And just at the corner, where one more turn of the wheel will put this street and this home behind you forever, what is the last thing you do?

"Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt." Sunday school always taught us not to be like Lot's wife – silly woman, disobedient woman, paying no attention to God's warning like that. She disobeyed, and so this unpredictable God, jealous even of her glance, turned her into a pillar of salt. Even modern commentaries like The Anchor Bible series observe: "Though the deserving minority proves to be in this instance too small to affect the fate of the sinful majority, the innocent, here Lot and his daughters, are ultimately spared."

But wait: What the cultures of patriarchy have said was never how the biblical story read. "She became a pillar of salt." Looking back upon the smashed possibilities of
her ruined home, weeping in the desert sun, unable to staunch the bleeding of her heart, unable to ignore the human suffering, she became her tears. It was one of those moments when you think you will never stop crying.

I know her feeling. Almost a year after my cousin was murdered, just when I thought the heaviest grief was over, at breakfast one day I remembered him, such a wonderful bright, and witty man. . . and looking back, I began to cry. I did not go to work that morning but wandered around the house, crying my heart out. It is a sign of our institutional preoccupation that while part of me said, “This is okay, let it happen,” the other part was fretting, “Presbytery meets this afternoon! How can I go and moderate with my eyes all swollen?”

Looking back, being consumed have somehow gained moral overtones, as if it is weakness of character to feel too much. As children, my generation heard her story and sensed the danger. Practicing air raid drills in school hallways, we were reminded of residents of Hiroshima and Nagasaki who turned to look in the direction of the unearthly roar of their homes and were blinded, their eyes literally melted from their sockets by the heat and light.

So she makes us uncomfortable, like an ancient bag lady out there, wandering crazy-eyed and recalcitrant. The world is afraid of such “fierce tenderness,” to use Mary Hunt’s phrase. And yet we too are full of passion for our friends, we live in relationship, and we long not to commit the very offense for which the prophet Isaiah claimed Sodom was destroyed: turning away from suffering and need.

Was she punished for disobedience, as we have been taught? If so, well, look at Lot: bargaining with the angels not to have to walk so far, dragging his heels, so to speak, in leaving home. Lot hesitated when told to flee to the hills, dickered for an easier destination, argued to be allowed to stop on the plain (“This little town nearby, it’s hardly anything: no big loss if You let it be.”) The weary angels all but booted him out on the road, at last. But he was not punished.
And she, suntanned and strong-muscled from maintaining a household, reached Zoar, that “little thing,” with him. It was not midway in the desert when she turned and wept!

If her offense was in looking back over the devastated city, consider that Abraham too surveyed the smoking ruins the next day, from a far hill. Abraham the patriarch, with promised descendants too many to be numbered, his gaze is intentionally noted as the climax of this episode of faith history. But he was not punished.

And if the ghastly symbol of her supposed transgression is so much salt, then follow the trail of “salt” throughout the sacred texts and discover that salt in all its uses is holy and valued: for healing, for covenanted blessing, for preserving, for zest. “Have salt in yourselves,” Jesus said. “You are the salt of the earth...” Only here in this single sentence of Genesis, this terse biography of one nameless woman, is saltiness considered horrifying.

Our very core is salt. The delicate saline balance in our veins sustains our heartbeat. Perhaps we must also claim our spiritual core as salt, that ability to weep with compassion but to be empowered rather than consumed by it. These tears must be understood as creative, not sacrificial. Letting yourself be touched to the core is a fearless act. But there is no fear in love, for fear has to do with punishment.

You see, our labor is only in order to bring birth: it is hard work, but it is not punishment or atonement. A contemporary rabbi said, “No woman is required to save the world by sacrificing herself.” And in the poetry of Marge Piercy, a strong woman doesn’t mind crying while she shovels out the cesspool of the ages!

There was Another who gazed across sand and Kidron cemetery and wept with womb-love at the city he saw there. And then what did he do? He went into its midst. Lot’s wife is the archetype for Jesus’ tears, and he the divine response to hers. As Rita Nakashima Brock has written: “No one else can stop the suffering of brokenheartedness in our world but our own courage and willingness to act in the midst of the awareness of our own fragility” (Journeys by Heart, 106).
But first, we look back, lest in forgetting our past we inherit no future. Some of us,
looking behind us, see in that conflagration across the valley the church in which we came
to faith, but now in the grip of retrenchment to an exclusionary “orthodoxy” and we hope
that we can continue to move into the heart of it, reopening each door slammed summarily
shut.

Some of us look back toward beloved homelands left years ago and wonder how our
children will ever learn to sing their native song in this foreign culture.

Some of us look upon the spectacle of a Senate enraged by a woman’s story of
sexual harassment... responding with political posturing and turning judgment back
upon the vulnerable. Some of us suddenly look back upon forgotten incest suffered as
children, or the rape of our bodily integrity... and cry out.

And some of us, perhaps this very day, turn around and behold, with tears of
anger, the loss of our theological and ethical “innocence.”

Some days it feels as if our tears are running into our boots. They threaten to
choke our hearts, to paralyze our finest impulses for change, to undo us. It is the price of
attentive compassion that we will weep. But the tears cannot be allowed to be the last
word about us.

I wonder whether Lot’s wife would have been paralyzed if sisters had stood beside
her. Marge Piercy writes: “Strong is what we make/each other. Until we are all strong
together/a strong woman is a woman strongly afraid” (“For Strong Women,” in The Moon Is
Always Female, 56-57). Love casts out fear.

What of Lot’s wife? I picture her moving into her old age, a tower of wisdom,
making a crone of herself, her wounds becoming her strength. She goes into the centuries
without a name, salt tears her only memorial. Today, let our claiming of our own saltiness
be the living monument, not only to her, but to all those women in history who have
purchased justice, struggled for liberation, and given birth to a new day with their blood
and their tears.

Thank God the Scriptures have instructed us well. Now we know it is not
Scripture, but tradition that has promoted such lies. I will no longer believe that the wife
of Lot transgressed. To her, I say: You are free, my sister, from these centuries of entombment. You were not afraid to love. May we grow to be like you. Amen.

**Thought Questions**

1. What fundamental realities of Scripture do you see? How does your own worldview shape your perception?

2. How helpful are the hermeneutical principles given in this reading? Which ones make the most sense? Which ones are difficult to understand or use?

3. Of the three movements toward Scripture described in the reading—literary, historical, and theological—which of these are you most comfortable with? Does the order in which you approach them make a difference?

4. Write another draft of your statement on the authority of Scripture.
Appendix 2: Focus Group Questionnaire

The Work of Witness: An Introduction to the Nature and Authority of Scripture

Questionnaire

Scale: 1 --Disagree Strongly 10 --Agree Strongly

The Written Materials:
1. *The Work of Witness* presented a clear overview of the historical issues regarding biblical authority.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Comments:


1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Comments:

3. *The Work of Witness* provided an excellent opportunity to reflect on what Scripture itself says about biblical authority.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Comments:

4. *The Work of Witness* would provide the basis for exploring the nature and authority of Scripture for persons at Westlake.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Comments:
5. After this study, I possess a clearer understanding of how Scripture functions authoritatively for the church.

Response questions:
1. What historical figures or readings did you find the most appealing? Why?

2. Name one idea that has challenged you the most.

3. What do you like the most about The Work of Witness?

4. What do you like the least about The Work of Witness?

5. In what ways did The Work of Witness enhance your understanding and awareness of Scripture’s authority?

6. Is this the first time you have been exposed to historical and theological concerns such as canon, accommodation, rule of faith, and inerrancy?
The Facilitator:
1. The facilitator was well acquainted with the materials presented and knowledgeable about the subject.

   
   
   1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10
   Comments:

2. The facilitator effectively conducted class times, promoting discussion and interchange of ideas.

   
   
   1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10
   Comments:

3. What are the strengths of the facilitator?

4. What are the weaknesses of the facilitator?

Any concluding observations . . . .
BIBLIOGRAPHY


