

On the Authority of the Bible

by Alan W. Rice

When the Christian gospel is proclaimed, it is properly concluded by an appeal to be reconciled to God - to repent - to turn away from our sins, and turn toward God, and to pray that God will forgive us and deliver us from our sins, for Jesus' sake, and to trust in Jesus and His teaching of the Way of Salvation.

When God hears our prayer, He forgives our sins, sends His spirit of adoption into our hearts, and begins to open our minds so that we can understand the Scriptures. We become students of the Lord Jesus. We love Him, because He first loved us. And we want to be loyal to Him. He invites us to come to Him, and learn from Him.

We also become part of a global Christian community that believes and teaches that God has raised Jesus from the dead, and exalted Him as Lord over all in heaven and on earth, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins is to be preached in His name to all nations (Luke 24:47). In fact, Jesus told His apostles

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ..., and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matt 28:18)

We learn that, within the world-wide Christian church, there are different groups (Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian/Reformed, Baptist, Pentecostal, Liberal Protestants, etc.) -- all claiming to speak for God, and agreeing mainly on the content of the four ecumenical creeds (Apostles', Nicene, Nicene-Constantinopolitan, and that called the "Athanasian.") On other matters they differ.

Clearly, a standard is needed to define Christian truth; to properly carry out the tasks of preaching the gospel, teaching those who receive it, defending it against its critics and refuting those who preach another, counterfeit gospel.

All of these groups recognize that the Bible - the 39 books of the Hebrew Old Testament plus the 27 books of the Greek New Testament - is the authoritative source-book for Christians, and probably agree with J.I. Packer's statement:

It is God speaking in Christ, and God's word spoken through Christ, that is ultimately authoritative; it is the Bible that bears authoritative witness to the speaking of that word; and it is the Holy Spirit who, in every age, mediates that authoritative word to the individual Christian and the Church.

Packer comments that problems arise

... when we try to be more specific and practical in our forms of statement. How should we set about discovering just what this word of God is? By what channel exactly is it mediated from the past to the present? From what source may we gain authoritative guidance as to what God has and has not authoritatively said? When Christian opinions differ, where should be the final court of appeal? This is the problem of authority.

There are three distinct authorities to which final appeal might be made - Holy Scripture, Church

tradition, or Christian reason; that is to say, Scripture as interpreted by itself; Scripture as interpreted (and in some measure amplified) by official ecclesiastical sources; and Scripture as evaluated in terms of extra-biblical principles by individual Christians

The problem of authority can be answered in three ways, and three only, according to which of the authorities mentioned is given precedence over the other two: we call these three types of answer the evangelical, the traditionalist, and the subjectivist respectively. Confessional Protestants give the first; Romanists, some Anglo-Catholics and Orthodox give the second; modern Liberal Protestants give the third. The subsequent threefold division of Christendom on the subject of authority cuts across many denominational barriers, and is in fact the deepest cleavage of all.

a. The Evangelical View: *[Scripture as interpreted by itself]*

This was first formally stated in opposition to the other two at the time of the Reformation, but ... it is in fact the original Christian position. Its basic principle is that the teaching of the written Scriptures is the Word which God spoke and speaks to His Church, and is finally authoritative for faith and life. To learn the mind of God, one must consult His written Word. What Scripture says, God says.

*The Bible is inspired in the sense of being word-for-word God-given. It is a record and explanation of divine revelation which is both complete (**sufficient**) and comprehensible (**perspicuous**); that is to say, it contains all that the Church needs to know in this world for its guidance in the way of salvation and service, and it contains the principles for its own interpretation within itself. (1)*

Furthermore, the Holy Spirit, who caused it to be written, has been given to the Church to cause believers to recognize it for the divine Word that it is, and to enable them to interpret it rightly and understand its meaning. He who was its Author is also its Witness and Expositor. Christians must therefore seek to be helped and taught by the Spirit when they study Scripture, and must regard all their understanding of it, no less than the book itself, as the gift of God. The Spirit must be acknowledged as the infallible Interpreter of God's infallible Word. "The supreme Judge ... in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture." (2)

b. The Traditionalist View *[Scripture interpreted by an official Church Authority]*

This view "maintains that the final authority for faith and life is the official teaching of the institutional Church. To learn the mind of God, one should consult the Church's historic tradition; what the Church says, God says" (3)

c. The Subjectivist Position *[Bible interpreted by Christians, but not according to Biblical principles]*

This is a veritable chameleon, and takes many forms But all its many varieties spring from a single principle, namely, that the final authority for my faith and life is the verdict of my reason, conscience, or religious sentiment ... as I examine Scripture "with an open mind" (i.e., without presupposing that its own account of itself is true), and measure it by what I have learned from other sources, historical, philosophical, religious and scientific. What,

under these circumstances, reason and conscience say, what I find that 'I feel', that [is what] God says. (4)

According to subjectivism, therefore, the proper ground for believing a thing is not that the Bible or tradition contains it, but that reason and conscience commend it; from which it seems to follow that faith is essentially a matter of being loyal to such religious convictions as one has. (5)

When we read the Gospels, Acts, and the Epistles, we see that Jesus and the apostles, by teaching and example, support the Scriptures as the final authority; on several occasions Jesus rests His teaching on the meaning of a single word. The Old Testament certainly warns us against trusting our own judgment, or the judgment of other humans, rather than the statements of Scripture. And Jesus warned against relying on religious tradition, because it sometimes ignores or distorts the teaching of Scripture.

But notice that following Jesus and the apostles in this matter is not easy. Packer comments:

Whether or not we belong to a [church] that treats tradition as an authoritative source of teaching, we are all in fact children of tradition in our religion ... our faith ... is mediated to us by Christian tradition in the form of sermons, books, and established patterns of church life and fellowship. We read our Bibles in the light of what we have learned from these sources; we approach Scripture with minds already formed by the mass of accepted opinions and viewpoints with which we have come into contact, in both the Church and the world

... we grow up children of our own age, reflecting in our outlook the mental environment in which we were reared. The process is as natural as breathing in the air around us, and as unconscious. It is easy to be unaware that it has happened; it is hard even to begin to realize how profoundly tradition in this sense has moulded us

Again, whether or not we call ourselves Liberals, we are all in fact inclined to subjectivism in our theology. God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and the God-centered approach which the Bible makes to problems of life and thought is in the highest degree unnatural to the minds of sinful and self-centered people. It calls for a veritable Copernican revolution in our habits of thought, and is slowly and painfully learned(6)

So, what to do? It would seem that, if we are to follow the method of understanding Scripture by Scriptures' commentary on itself, we will have to be reading and studying the Scriptures as a global community of believers intent on hearing the voice of the Spirit speaking in the Scriptures, and help one another to avoid putting our trust in anything or anyone else.

The Creeds and Confessions will continue to be useful guides as we read and study, since they show what faithful "western" Christian scholars of other times and places understood the Scriptures to teach.

We will also need to read some works of Christians from Asia and Africa and the Middle East, who, from their reading of the Scriptures, can recommend improvements in our Christian teaching and behavior.

Evangelicals seek to approach and use [Scripture] as it demands that people should; that is, they seek to think and live in accordance with its authoritative teaching. Accordingly, they hold that view of the nature and interpretation of Scripture which they believe to be the Bible's own; and

they reject views which they believe to be contrary to it. They reject, for instance, the supposition that Scripture errs; for Scripture claims not to err (7)

In fact, Jesus taught and acted on this principle: “The Scriptures cannot be set aside”, “It is written”, “The Scriptures must be fulfilled.”

Opponents of inerrant Scriptures agree that Jesus taught these things about the Scriptures. But some maintain that this does not make it true, because:

- (1) Jesus may have known better, but chose to accommodate His teaching to His audience, or
- (2) Jesus did not know better; His beliefs on Scripture were those of the culture in which He grew up.

Item (1) above has no support at all in the New Testament, and is out of character with the One who proclaimed Himself to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and who promised that the Spirit of Truth would guide His disciples into all the truth. (John 16:13)

Item (2) above contradicts what Jesus said about all of His teaching:

My teaching is not my own. It comes from the One who sent me. Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own. Whoever speaks on their own does so to gain personal glory, but he who seeks the glory of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him. (John 7:16-18)

Attacks on the inerrancy of Scripture have been made based on the works of scientists and of historians. So it has become important to clearly state what is meant by the inerrancy of Scripture. Such a statement was made in The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978).

Two articles from the Statement provide helpful detail:

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. (8)

It is love for, and trust in, our Lord, whose Name is Faithful and True, that moves us to adopt and live by the view of the Scriptures that He endorsed (the Old Testament), and to adopt the same approach to the written testimonies of His apostles (and those with apostolic approval - the New Testament), which testimonies Jesus promised would be guided by the Spirit of Truth.

Footnotes (greater detail and extended discussion may be found in these publications)

(1) J.I. Packer: Fundamentalism and the Word of God. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, ppb. (1958)

(2) Packer, p. 48, quoting from the Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.X.

http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/index.html

(3) Packer, p. 49

(4) Packer, p. 50

(5) Packer, p. 51

(6) Packer, p. 70

(7) Packer, p. 74

(8) The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978)

<http://www.reformed.org/documents/icbi.html>

For further study:

John R. W. Stott: The Authority of the Bible. Downers Grove, IVP (1974)

John M. Frame: Is the Bible Inerrant? IIM Magazine Online, Vol. 4, No. 19, May 2002

http://reformedperspectives.org/articles/joh_frame/TH.Frame.inerrancy.html