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## THE AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES

A PRIMARY CAUSE OF THE CONFUSION WITHIN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH TODAY is its lack of a valid authority. There have been attempts to supply this authority through the pronouncements of church councils, existential encounter with an intangible “word” of God and other means. But none of these recent approaches can claim to be very successful. What is wrong? What is the source of the Christian’s authority?

The classical Protestant answer is the revealed Word of God, the Bible. The Bible is authoritative because it is not the words of mere humans, though humans were the channels by which it came to us, but it is the direct result of the “breathing-out” of God. It is his product. But there is another level on which the question of authority may be raised. This relates to the way in which we become convinced of the Bible’s authority. What is there about the Bible or the study of the Bible that should convince us that it is indeed God’s Word?

The human aspect of the authority question takes us a bit further into what we mean when we say that the Bible is the Word of God, for the full meaning of that statement is not only that God has spoken to give us the Bible but also that he continues to speak through it to individuals. In other words, as individuals study the Bible, God speaks to them in their study and transforms them by the truths they find there. There is a direct encounter of the individual believer with God. It is what Luther meant when he declared at the Diet of Worms, “My conscience has been taken captive by the Word of God.” It is what Calvin meant when he declared that “Scripture indeed is self-authenticated.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 80.

Nothing but direct experience will ever ultimately convince anybody that the Bible's words are the authentic and authoritative words of God. As Calvin said, "The same spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what has been divinely commanded."<sup>2</sup>

The Bible is something more than a body of revealed truths, a collection of books verbally inspired of God. It is also the living voice of God. The living God speaks through its pages. Therefore, it is not to be valued as a sacred object to be placed on a shelf and neglected, but as holy ground, where people's hearts and minds may come into vital contact with the living, gracious and disturbing God. For a proper perspective on Scripture and for a valid understanding of revelation there must be a constant interworking of these factors: an infallible and authoritative Word, the activity of the Holy Spirit in interpreting and applying that Word and a receptive human heart. No true knowledge of God takes place without these elements.

### Sola Scriptura

The assurance that God has spoken to them directly through his holy Scriptures gave the Reformers their unique boldness. The formation of that truth theologically was the fundamentally new element in the Reformation.

The Reformation battle cry was *sola Scriptura*, "Scripture alone." But *sola Scriptura* meant more to the Reformers than that God has revealed himself in the propositions of the Bible. The new element was not that the Bible, being given by God, speaks with God's authority. The Roman Church held to that as well as the Reformers. The new element, as Packer points out, was the belief, borne in upon the Reformers by their own experience of Bible study, that Scripture can and does interpret itself to the faithful from within—Scripture is its own interpreter, *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*, as Luther puts it—so that not only does it not need Popes or Councils to tell us, as from God, what it means; it can actually challenge Papal and conciliar pronouncements, convince them of being ungodly and untrue, and require the faithful to part company with them. . . . As Scripture was the only *source* from which sinners might gain true knowledge of God and godliness, so Scripture was the only *judge* of what the church had in each age ventured to say in her Lord's name.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>3</sup>J. I. Packer, " 'Sola Scriptura' in History and Today," in *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. John Warwick Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), pp. 44-45.

In Luther's time the Roman Church had weakened the authority of the Bible by exalting human traditions to the stature of Scripture and by insisting that the teaching of the Bible could be communicated to Christian people only through the mediation of popes, councils and priests. The Reformers restored biblical authority by holding that the living God speaks to his people directly and authoritatively through its pages.

The Reformers called the activity of God by which the truth of his Word is borne in upon the mind and consciences of his people, "the internal witness of the Holy Spirit." They stressed that such activity was the subjective or internal counterpart of the objective or external revelation, and often referred to texts from John's writings. "The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit" (Jn. 3:8). "But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all know. . . . But the anointing which you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that any one should teach you; as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie, just as it has taught you, abide in him" (1 Jn. 2:20, 27). "And the Spirit is the witness, because the Spirit is the truth" (1 Jn. 5:7).

The same idea is present in Paul's writings.

We have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit. The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. (1 Cor. 2:12-15)

I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places. (Eph. 1:16-20)

Taken together these texts teach that not only our rebirth but our entire growth in spiritual wisdom and the knowledge of God is the result of the working of the divine Spirit upon our life and mind through the Scriptures,

and that no spiritual understanding is possible apart from this activity. The witness of the Holy Spirit is, therefore, the effectual reason why the Bible is received as the final authority in all matters of faith and practice by those who are God's children.

### **The Book That Understands Me**

When we begin to read the Bible and are spoken to by the Holy Spirit as we read it, several things happen. First, the reading affects us as no other reading does.

Dr. Emile Cailliet was a French philosopher who eventually settled in America and became a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey. He had been brought up with a naturalistic education. He had never shown the slightest interest in spiritual things. He had never seen a Bible. But World War 1 came, and as he sat in the trenches he found himself reflecting on the inadequacy of his world-and-life view. He asked himself the same questions Levin had asked in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, while sitting beside the bed of his dying brother: Where did life come from? What did it all mean, if anything? What value are scientific laws or theories in the face of reality? Cailliet later wrote, "Like Levin, I too felt, not with my reason but with my whole being, that I was destined to perish miserably when the hour came."

During the long night watches Cailliet began to long for what he came to call "a book that would understand me." He was highly educated, but he knew of no such book. Thus, when he was later wounded and released from the army and returned to his studies, he determined that he would prepare such a book secretly for his own use. As he read for his courses, he would file away passages that seemed to speak to his condition. Afterward he would copy them over in a leather-bound book. He hoped that the quotations, which he carefully indexed and numbered, would lead him from fear and anguish to release and jubilation.

At last the day came when he had put the finishing touches to his book, "the book that would understand me." He went out and sat down under a tree and opened the anthology. He began to read, but instead of release and jubilation, a growing disappointment began to come over him as he recognized that instead of speaking to his condition, the various passages only reminded him of their context and of his own work in searching them out and recording them. Then he knew that the whole undertaking simply would not work, for the book was a book of his own making. It carried no strength of persuasion. Dejected, he returned it to his pocket.

At that very moment his wife (who knew nothing of the project) came by with an interesting story. She had been walking in their tiny French village that afternoon and had stumbled upon a small Huguenot chapel. She had never seen it before, but she had gone in and had asked for a Bible, much to her own surprise. The elderly pastor had given her one. She began apologizing to her husband, for she knew his feelings about the Christian faith. But he was not listening to her apology. "A Bible, you say? Where is it? Show me," he said. "I have never seen one before." When she produced it he rushed to his study and began to read. In his own words,

I opened it and "chanced" upon the Beatitudes! I read, and read, and read—now aloud with an indescribable warmth surging within. . . . I could not find words to express my awe and wonder. And suddenly the realization dawned upon me: This *was* the Book that would understand me! I needed it so much, yet, unaware, I had attempted to write my own—in vain. I continued to read deeply into the night, mostly from the gospels. And lo and behold, as I looked through them, the One of whom they spoke, the One who spoke and acted in them, became alive to me. This vivid experience marked the beginning of my understanding of prayer. It also proved to be my initiation to the notion of Presence which later would prove so crucial in my theological thinking.

The providential circumstances amid which the Book had found me now made it clear that while it seemed absurd to speak of a book understanding a man, this could be said of the Bible because its pages were animated by the Presence of the Living God and the Power of His mighty acts. To this God I prayed that night, and the God who answered *was the same God* of whom it was spoken in the Book.<sup>4</sup>

In all ages God's people have discovered the Reformation insight. Here is Calvin's expression of the same truth:

Now this power which is peculiar to Scripture is clear from the fact that of human writings, however artfully polished, there is none capable of affecting us at all comparably. Read Demosthenes or Cicero; read Plato, Aristotle, and others of that tribe. They will, I admit, allure you, delight you, move you, enrapture you in wonderful measure. But betake yourself from them to this sacred reading. Then, in spite of yourself, so deeply will it affect you, so penetrate your heart, so fix itself in your very marrow, that compared with its deep impression, such vigor as the orators and philosophers have will nearly vanish. Consequently, it is easy to see that

<sup>4</sup>Emile Cailliet, *Journey into Light* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1968), pp. 11-18.

the Sacred Scriptures, which so far surpass all gifts and graces of human endeavor, breathe something divine.<sup>5</sup>

Another example is recorded toward the end of Luke's Gospel. Jesus had just risen from the dead and had begun to appear to the disciples. Two of these, Cleopas and possibly his wife, were returning to their hometown of Emmaus when Jesus drew close to them on the road. They did not recognize him. When he asked why they were downcast they replied by telling him what had happened in Jerusalem at the time of the Passover. They told him about Jesus, "who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people." They told him how the chief priests and rulers "delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him." They had been in Jerusalem that very morning and had heard tales from the women who had been to the tomb, reporting that the body was gone and that angels had appeared proclaiming that Jesus had been made alive. But they didn't believe in resurrections. They hadn't even bothered to go to the tomb to see for themselves, although they were within a short walk of it. The dream was over. Jesus was dead. They were going home.

But Jesus began to talk to them and explain the mission of the Christ, teaching them from the Scriptures. He said, "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and going through all the prophets, he explained to them out of the Scriptures the things they said about himself.

At last they came to where the two disciples lived. They invited Jesus in, and he revealed himself to them as they ate together. He vanished, and they at once returned to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples what had happened. Their own testimony was this: "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?" (Lk. 24:13-32). They were convicted by the Word of God. In this instance Jesus himself fulfilled the role of the Holy Spirit by interpreting the Bible to his disciples and by applying its truths to them.

The Bible also changes us. We become different men and women as a result of encountering it. A section of the thirteenth chapter of Romans changed the life of St. Augustine as he turned to the Bible in the garden of a friend's estate near Milan, Italy. Luther tells how in meditating upon the Scriptures while secluded in the Wartburg Castle, he felt himself to be "reborn," and tells how Romans 1:17 became for him "a gate to heaven." John

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<sup>5</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 82.

Wesley's meditation upon Scripture led to his conversion in the little meeting in Aldersgate. J. B. Phillips writes,

Some years before the publication of the New English Bible, I was invited by the BBC to discuss the problems of translation with Dr. E. V. Rieu, who had himself recently produced a translation of the four Gospels for Penguin Classics. Towards the end of the discussion Dr. Rieu was asked about his general approach to the task, and his reply was this:

"My personal reason for doing this was my own intense desire to satisfy myself as to the authenticity and the spiritual content of the Gospels. And, if I received any new light by an intensive study of the Greek originals, to pass it on to others. I approached them in the same spirit as I would have approached them had they been presented to me as recently discovered Greek manuscripts."

A few minutes later I asked him, "Did you get the feeling that the whole material is extraordinarily alive? . . . I got the feeling that the whole thing was alive even while one was translating. Even though one did a dozen versions of a particular passage, it was still living. Did you get that feeling?"

Dr. Rieu replied, "I got the deepest feeling that I possibly could have experienced. It—changed me; my work changed me. And I came to the conclusion that these words bear the seal of—the Son of man and God. And they're the Magna Carta of the human spirit."

Phillips concludes, "I found it particularly thrilling to hear a man who is a scholar of the first rank as well as a man of wisdom and experience openly admitting that these words written long ago were alive with power. They bore to him, as to me, the ring of truth."<sup>6</sup>

### One Subject

Another result of reading the Bible is that the Holy Spirit who speaks in its pages will direct the student to Jesus. The Bible contains many varieties of material. It covers hundreds of years of history. Still, the object of the Bible in each of its parts is to point to Jesus, and this goal is carried out on the subjective level by Christ's Spirit. Jesus said, "But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me" (Jn. 15:26). Since the role of the Holy Spirit is to point to Jesus in the Scriptures, we can be

<sup>6</sup>J. B. Phillips, *Ring of Truth: A Translator's Testimony* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 74-75.

sure that we are listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit when that happens.

"Isn't the Bible mostly history?" a person might ask. "How can Jesus be its subject in the Old Testament? And how can the Holy Spirit point us to him?" Jesus becomes the subject of the Old Testament in two ways: (1) by fitting in with its general themes and (2) by fulfilling specific prophecies found there.

One main theme of the Old Testament is *human sin* and our resultant need. The Bible begins with the story of the creation. But no sooner is this story told (in the first chapter of Genesis) than we are also told of the Fall of the human race. Instead of being humbly and gratefully dependent upon our Creator, as we should have been, we were soon in a state of rebellion against God. We went our own way instead of God's. So the consequences of sin (ultimately, death) came upon us.

In the rest of the Old Testament we see these consequences unfolding: the murder of Abel, the corruption leading up to the flood, demonism, sexual perversions, eventually even tragedy for the chosen nation of Israel in spite of great blessings. The Old Testament is best summarized in David's psalm of repentance, which ought properly to be the psalm of the whole human race. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. . . . Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps. 51:1-3, 5).

Here is one important biblical doctrine. But if we understand it rightly, even this doctrine is not an end in itself. The truth of our sin and need is expounded in the Bible because the Bible is also able to point to Christ as the solution to the dilemma.

A second Old Testament theme is the existence of a *God who acts in love* to redeem sinners. God the Father did this throughout the Old Testament period. At the same time, as he did it, he pointed to the coming of his Son who would redeem men and women perfectly and forever.

When Adam and Eve sinned, sin separated them from the Creator. They tried to hide. God, however, came to them in the cool of the evening, calling them. It is true that God spoke in judgment, as he had to do. He revealed the consequences of their sin. Still, he also killed animals, clothed the man and woman with skins, covering their shame, and began his teaching of the way of salvation through sacrifice. In the same story he spoke to Satan revealing the coming of One who would one day defeat him forever: "He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15).



Nine chapters later we find another, somewhat veiled reference to the "seed" who shall crush Satan. It is God's first great promise to Abraham, stressing that in him all nations would be blessed (Gen. 12:3; 22:18). The blessing referred to is certainly not a blessing to come to all people through Abraham personally. It is not a blessing to come through all Jews indiscriminately, for all Jews are not even theists. The foretold blessing was to come through the seed of Abraham, the promised seed, the Messiah. Thus, years later the apostle Paul, who knew this text, used it to show: (1) that the seed was the Lord Jesus, (2) that the promise to Abraham was one of blessing through him and (3) that the blessing was to come through Christ's work of redemption (Gal. 3:13-16).

An interesting prophecy was spoken by the Lord through Balaam, a shifty, half-hearted prophet of Moses' day. Balak, a king who was hostile to Israel, had hired Balaam to curse the Jewish people. But every time Balaam opened his mouth, blessings on the people came out instead. On one occasion he said, "A star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel. . . . By Jacob shall dominion be exercised" (Num. 24:17, 19).

As he was dying, the patriarch Jacob said, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples" (Gen. 49:10).

Moses also spoke of the One who would come: "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren—him you shall heed" (Deut. 18:15). And again, with God speaking, "I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him" (v. 18).

The book of Psalms contains great prophecies. The second psalm tells of Christ's victory and rule over the nations of this earth. This psalm was a popular one with the early Christians (see Acts 4). Psalm 16 foretells the resurrection (v. 10; see Acts 2:31). In Psalms 22, 23 and 24 we have three portraits of the Lord Jesus: the suffering Savior, the compassionate Shepherd and the King. Other psalms speak of other aspects of his life and ministry. Psalm 110 returns to the theme of his rule, looking for the day when Jesus shall take his seat at the right hand of the Father when all his enemies shall be made his "footstool."

Details of Christ's life, death and resurrection occur in the books of the prophets—in Isaiah, Daniel, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Zechariah and others.

The Lord Jesus Christ and his work are the chief subjects of the Bible. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to reveal him. As the revelation takes place

the Bible becomes understandable, Scripture bears witness to Scripture, and the power of the living God is sensed to be surging through its pages.

### Word and Spirit

The combination of an objective, written revelation and its subjective interpretation to the individual by God's Spirit is the key to the Christian doctrine of the knowledge of God. This combination keeps us from two errors.

The first is the error of overspiritualizing revelation. This is the error that entangled the Anabaptist "enthusiasts" in Calvin's day and which has since entrapped many of their followers. The enthusiasts laid claim to private, Spirit-given revelations as justification for their decisions and conduct. But these were often contrary to the express teaching of the Word of God, as, for example, their occasional decision to stop working and gather for the anticipated return of the Lord. Without the objective Word there was no way to judge such "revelations" or to keep the individuals from error who were caught up in them. Calvin wrote in reference to this dilemma:

The Holy Spirit so inheres in his truth, which he expresses in Scripture, that only when its proper reverence and dignity are given to the Word does the Holy Spirit show forth his power. . . . The children of God . . . see themselves, without the Spirit of God, bereft of the whole light of truth, so are not unaware that the Word is the instrument by which the Lord dispenses the illumination of his Spirit to believers. For they know no other Spirit than him who dwelt and spoke in the apostles, and by whose oracles they are continually recalled to the hearing of the Word.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, the combination of an objective Word and a subjective application of that Word by God's Spirit also keeps us from the error of overintellectualizing God's truth. That error was evident in the diligent Bible study habits of the scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' time. The scribes and Pharisees were not slothful students. They were meticulous in their pursuit of Bible knowledge, even to the point of counting the individual letters of the Bible books. Yet Jesus rebuked them saying, "You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me" (Jn. 5:39).

To know God we must be taught from the Bible by the Holy Spirit. It is only then that a full awareness of the nature of the Bible and its authority is borne home upon our minds and hearts, and we find ourselves taking a firm stand upon that cherished revelation.

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<sup>7</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, pp. 95-96.