

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

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Around the world and across time, millions of Christians have gathered and continue to gather regularly to hear the scriptures read in worship. When the reading is finished, the worship leader recites the familiar words and God's people respond.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

These words, simple as they are, bear profound witness to the church's belief that, in the reading and proclaiming of scripture, we encounter God's own voice. The word spoken at creation (Gen 1), the word that is "sweeter than honey in my mouth" (Ps 119:103), the word that doesn't return empty but accomplishes what the Lord intends (Isa 55:10-11), the word that John identifies with Jesus (John 1:1-14), the word that sometimes leads to the harassment of God's people (Rev 1:9) and yet continues to grow (Acts 12:24)—this is the word we embrace as we attend to the scriptural voice of God. And the liturgy reminds us that we attend to scripture most faithfully when we do so together in worship.

Of course, the Bible can be read in many ways. The Bible is a collection of books, an anthology. We find in its pages poetry and letters, historical narratives and visions, proverbs and oracles. For good reason, then, we might turn to the Bible as *literature*. Or we might turn to it as *history*. We find among the biblical writings a keen interest in the beginnings of Abraham and Sarah's people, the gathering of a tribal people as a nation, the rise and fall of leaders and kings, the movements and counter-movements of nations, the story of Jesus' life and ministry, as well as the origins of the church and its spread across the Roman Empire. When we attend to these books as the church's Book, however, we do so because of our shared belief that this collection of documents is nothing less than the Christian scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Together, the Old and New Testaments make up the authoritative witness to God's work in the world.

We ought to consider the literary qualities of these documents. We need to reflect on the many ways that these books refer to the realities of ancient communities and cultures. Respecting the books of the Bible requires that we take seriously their literary artistry, their literary forms, and their literary purpose. Respecting the books of the Bible requires us to study them against the background of ancient customs, institutions, and geography. Reading the Old and New Testaments as scripture includes but also surpasses these kinds of methodological concerns, however. We come to scripture with ears attuned and hearts open to what the Holy Spirit is saying to God's people. Reading and hearing these words as the church's scriptures, we seek not only to understand the Bible's message but also to "stand under" its authority. We seek not only to know but to be known. We put into practice the famed words of Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687–1752): "Apply yourself wholly to the text; apply the text wholly to yourself." We open our lives, corporately and individually, to the ways, through scripture, we might grow in Christ-likeness and come to reflect more faithfully God's own image.

Embracing Scripture's Authority

Although the biblical books might be read for many reasons, the simple fact that these particular books have been gathered into this particular collection has nothing to do with the Bible's status as a compilation of literary works or a history book. We open the Bible as God's people and return again and again to its pages because of its special status as the church's scriptures. We give the Bible to those who are baptized and confirmed, and we gather in circles around the Bible for study, because we believe that in and through the Bible we encounter God. Let's think together about what it means when we agree that the Bible is the authoritative witness to God's work in the world.

Reading the Bible with the Church

First, it means that we locate ourselves within the church, which finds its true identity in scripture. It is the church that affirms that the Bible is God's Word, and in doing so the church recognizes the origin, role, and aim of these texts in God's self-communication. We also recognize that the biblical documents were written by God's people for God's people, so that it is with and among God's people that we are best positioned to read the scriptures faithfully.

When we speak of the church, we naturally refer to God's people today as they gather for worship and fellowship and then are sent forth for mission and service. But we also refer to the church as it has heard

and read the Bible over time, from the church's beginnings some two thousand years ago until today. Jesus' disciples learned to read the scriptures in the synagogues of their youth. They then became apprentices to Jesus himself, who led them further into the truth of scripture. These Christ-followers were filled with the Spirit at Pentecost, and believed that the Spirit guided them further in their understanding and proclamation of the scriptures. This is how the long history of the church begins—a history that can rightly be understood as the story of how Christians have read the Bible and learned to practice its teaching. Among the ways we take seriously the character of scripture as the church's Book, then, is to take seriously the ways Christians throughout the ages have found their lives shaped through their reading and engagement with the Bible.

We recognize that the church has not always provided good examples of how to read its scriptures. The Bible has been used to support injustices of many kinds, whether the persecution of the Jewish people, the institution of slavery, practices of racism, or the abuse of women. Our increased awareness of how the church has misused the Bible can be instructive, too, however. By keeping in mind some of the ways the Bible has been badly interpreted and misappropriated, we stay alert to the ways in which we allow our own assumptions and allegiances to hijack the Bible's message of liberation and love, holiness and hope.

Struggling with Scripture

Embracing scripture's authority doesn't mean that we turn a blind eye to those parts of the Bible that seem strange to us, or that seem to run counter to its overall message. The biblical documents were written in cultures that were male-dominated, so it shouldn't surprise us to discover that they often portray authority in families and social groups as generally reserved for men. But this doesn't mean that the church that acknowledges scripture's authority should likewise reserve positions of authority for men. And the same could be said for those parts of the Bible that presume various forms of institutional slavery, for example, or those biblical stories in which God's people take up and wield instruments of war. To embrace scripture's authority sometimes means struggling with scripture. In fact, it is precisely because we affirm scripture's authority that we sometimes must struggle with it, rather than ignore or dismiss texts that trouble us.

How might we struggle with scripture? To return to the question of the place of women, for example, we might do so by taking special notice of those texts that promote the status of women in positions of leadership in families, tribal groups, and churches. We might account for the historical contexts within which these documents were written. We might listen to how the global church, and the church across time, has listened to these texts. And we might work to understand individual texts within the whole of scripture's testimony.

Here's another example: We can recognize that scripture calls us to participate in actions that show that God has made us one people in spite of our racial, national, social, and other differences without thinking that the only way to do so is to "say hello to each other with a holy kiss." This is true even though several biblical texts direct us to do just that! (See Rom 16:16; 2 Cor 13:12; see also 1 Cor 16:20; 1 Thess 5:26; 1 Pet 5:14.)

Scripture Is Never Alone

Since the 16th century, Christians in the Protestant tradition of the church have used the slogan, *sola scriptura*, "by scripture alone." This is a useful reminder of the central, authoritative role of the Bible in the life and faith of the church. But it can be problematic when we take it to mean either that scripture is the only way God has revealed God's character and ways to us or that all we need to be faithful to God is the Bible. Scripture itself teaches that something of God's character is known through what God has made (e.g., Ps 19:1-6; Rom 1:20). And practically from the beginning of the church we have example after example of how easy it is to read the Bible in ways that aren't at all faithful to the God of the Bible. As the saying goes, even the devil can read the Bible (see Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13)!

Irenaeus, the 2nd-century Christian theologian, offers this analogy: Someone might collect from Homer's poetry phrases and names, then use them to write a poem that might actually fool some people into thinking that it had been written by Homer. After all, it sounds like Homer. (Today, we might say the same thing about Shakespeare.) In the same way, Irenaeus wrote, people who hold to beliefs that differ markedly from those held by the Christian church try to collect terms, phrases, and names scattered throughout scripture, then use them to tell their own story. The result might sound like scripture, but it wouldn't have any genuine relation to the story scripture itself tells. This is because those people disregard what Irenaeus calls the "order and connection" of the scriptures. For Irenaeus—and for the church across time—the medicine needed to fend off these bad readings of scripture is not only careful reading of biblical texts (though this is certainly needed). We also need what the early church often called the Rule of

Faith, which would soon take form in the great creeds that all branches of the church—Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant—affirm. We share three creeds: the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. And the purpose of these creeds is to teach us how to read scripture faithfully by reminding us of the Bible’s order and connection. Part of what it means to read scripture within the church is that our readings of scripture take seriously what we might call the plotline of scripture as this is represented in the church’s great creeds.

Authority as Invitation

Notice that the Bible doesn’t spend a lot of time simply telling us what to do. This is mostly because the Bible isn’t like an antiquated book of manners; it isn’t really a handbook for living or a moral codebook. This is obvious enough when we recognize how often it addresses issues that don’t concern us much (like whether to eat meat sacrificed to idols) and how often it doesn’t address issues that do concern us (like where we should relocate Aunt Sue who is suffering from severe dementia—at home with us or in a healthcare facility). Scripture does call on God’s people, but it does so in less direct ways. For example, scripture invites us to find the history of our people, God’s people, and, therefore, our true identity in its story of God’s relationship with Israel and the early church. The story we are telling or writing with our lives, then, wouldn’t be tied to “the American dream.” Instead, our life stories would continue the story of exodus and reconciliation in Christ, of the coming of the Spirit and the gathering of Christ’s followers in communities of faith concerned with God’s mission in the world. Scripture shapes our imaginations (what we take to be real and possible and true), reminds us of our commitments, asks us to consider reasoned arguments, and urges us to reflect on the goodness of God and the nature of our responses to God’s goodness. It molds and persuades, but rarely demands.

As we give ourselves to life in the Holy Spirit and to engagement with scripture, God works in our lives. God leads us further into scripture, and we find the Bible more and more to be true. This means that what is needed most are people deeply rooted in faithful communities of discipleship, people in whom the Spirit is making real God’s Word, people who are learning firsthand that scripture gives us true access to God’s voice.

God speaks, and this is the basis for scripture’s authority. Through scripture, God convinces us that things between God and humanity—indeed, between God and all creation—are just as we find them described in scripture. By embracing scripture’s authority, we are drawn into the story of scripture, and especially more deeply into relationship with scripture’s primary character, that is, with God.

What does it mean to affirm the authority of the Bible, then? When we acknowledge scripture’s authority, we reject attempts at revising its words so as to make them match our reality. Instead, we make sense of our reality, our lives, within its pages and according to its story. To embrace scripture’s authority is to allow ourselves to be shaped by it thoroughly and fully. This shaping means that scripture’s authority is less demand and more invitation. “Taste and see how good the LORD is!” (Ps 34:8). In scripture, we are invited to come and make our home in this story of God’s ongoing and gracious purpose for God’s people.

Attitudes and Postures

As with other books, Christians read the biblical documents by taking account of their literary forms, getting a sense of their historical background, and taking seriously the words on these pages. But Christians also read the Bible quite differently than they read other books. We don’t come to scripture first and foremost in order to assess its historical basis or origins. We don’t come to scripture primarily in order to summarize and organize its statements about God. Christians may do all of these things and more, but none of these represents a particularly Christian approach to scripture. Rather, Christians come to scripture to hear God’s voice. They want to hear and do God’s Word. Therefore, affirming scripture’s authority can never be reduced to an academic exercise or logical argument by which we count the Bible as trustworthy. Our job isn’t to prove or otherwise to protect the Bible. Indeed, attempts to protect the Bible assume that scripture’s aims depend on human activity rather than on God’s. What we need instead are attitudes of openness, humility, submission, and obedience. Christian readers of the Bible want to become familiar with ancient peoples and their cultures. We honor being schooled in the biblical languages. We want to cultivate good skills for reading the Bible. But, even more, we bring to the Bible our attitudes of acceptance, devotion, attention, and trust.

To affirm scripture’s authority is to embrace habits of prayerful reading that lead to the conformity of our thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors to God’s character and purpose as these are revealed in scripture. We find here in the pages of scripture who we are and what we are to become. We acknowledge and invite the ongoing work of scripture’s divine author, the One who desires to shape us as a community, the church, God’s people.

The Nature of Scripture

When we acknowledge scripture's authority, we recognize that the books gathered together in the Bible are special. The ancient world knew many books. Today, literally tens of millions of titles are cataloged, with some half-million new books added each year—in English alone! What makes this collection of books unique is its status as scripture. We can understand better what this means by thinking about the church's Book in the categories the Nicene Creed uses to describe the church: "We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church."

Scripture Is One

Although the books of the Bible are many, the church affirms scripture's unity. This unity is not a simple one, as though every book spoke with the same voice in the same way about the same things. Clearly, this isn't the case. For example, we have four Gospels in the New Testament. They all speak truthfully about the significance of Jesus of Nazareth, God's Son, but they do so in different ways. Mark and John have no stories of Jesus' birth, but Matthew and Luke do. Matthew, Mark, and Luke relate Jesus' teaching in parables, but we find no parables in John. All paint a portrait of Jesus, but these portraits aren't identical.

Instead, scripture's unity is a theological claim about the origins and aims of scripture, and especially about the God concerning whom scripture testifies. Unity rests in the church's recognition that the Bible finds its origins in the purpose and voice of the one God. The Bible tells the story of the Triune God as a single story, the plotline of which is set out in the church's creeds. The Bible reveals the one God: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, whom Jesus called Father, who raised Jesus from the dead. And the Bible's message is interpreted to us with the help of the one Holy Spirit. The Bible's oneness can't and shouldn't be reduced to a statement about its historical contexts, its teaching on a given subject, or its literary character. Its unity is found in its witness to God.

Scripture Is Holy

We use the term "holy" to refer to a person or thing set aside for a particular purpose in service to God, for something or someone dedicated to God. This is a good way to think about authoritative scripture. On the one hand, these documents are like other ancient documents. Their authors are sometimes unknown. Some of these books reached their present form through down-to-earth processes of passing on and editing traditional stories and sayings. These documents were prepared with the usual writing materials, and the books of the Bible can be studied like any other document. On the other hand, these documents together form Holy Scripture. Through the work of God's Spirit they have come to us as something more. God's Spirit was involved in the production of these texts. The church was led by God's Spirit to recognize these (and not other) documents as scripture. The church is enabled by God's Spirit to grasp the meaning of scripture, and to be grasped by it. We affirm that God has set these books aside to form the church's Book for the purpose of directing us into greater Christ-likeness.

Scripture Is Catholic

"Catholic" is another word for "universal." To affirm the catholicity of scripture is to affirm that all scripture is written for all of God's people in all times and in all places. The Christian scriptures aren't the possession of Americans only but are to be heard, read, and interpreted among Asians and Africans, and indeed throughout the world. The Christian scriptures aren't the possession of scholars only but belong to the whole church that gathers and scatters in the name of Jesus Christ. Nor are the Christian scriptures for Methodists or Baptists only but are the scriptures of all who call on the name of the Lord. Even if we always read the Bible in a local context, we remember that others throughout the church's history and around the world have turned and continue to turn to these same texts. God's Spirit empowers their reading, too, so what can we learn by hearing from these other students of scripture?

Scripture Is Apostolic

With the term "apostolic," we remind ourselves that Jesus and the band of apostles he gathered around himself were Jews who searched Israel's scriptures to learn of the nature and ways of God. We could hardly have a more firm affirmation of the significance of those scriptures, which we know as the Old Testament. Early Christians had no scriptures other than Israel's scriptures, which they read in relation to traditions about Jesus and letters from missionary leaders that would eventually be gathered into the New Testament. The books of the New Testament were included in the New Testament largely because of their conformity with the gospel handed down by the apostles. Together, the Old and New Testaments

bear witness to the eternal aims and particular workings of God. And they bear witness to the God who draws near to save and lead, both in exodus and in Jesus Christ. In the scriptures, then, we encounter the heart of our faith.

What Is Scripture For?

Christians have traditionally turned to 2 Timothy 3:16-17 as a way of talking about the nature of scripture's authority. "Every scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, so that the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good." This text is helpful for anyone thinking about scripture's authority, for two reasons. First, it reminds us of the claim of our faith, that scripture has its origins in the aims and voice of God. Like the Old Testament prophets, scripture speaks because God has first spoken. Scripture bears witness to God because God enables speech about God and God's activity in the world. Second, it reminds us of the purpose or direction of scripture's authority. The role of scripture isn't really to teach us lessons about history, medicine, archeology, architecture, science, geography, and so on. The Bible has things to say about all of these subjects, and others besides, but this isn't the focus of the Bible's authority in the church. Instead, engagement with scripture should produce this: "that the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good." We exhibit best our beliefs about the Bible not so much by what we say about the Bible but through scripture-shaped hearts and lives.