

The Authority of Scripture

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There are several main streams of theology in the Christian world: Roman Catholics in the west, the Orthodox in the East, the Anabaptists of Europe, a world-wide Pentecostal movement that grew from American roots, and the Reformed Theologians of Europe, especially Martin Luther and John Calvin. We Presbyterians stand in the tradition and heritage of Reformed Theology, with our roots in John Calvin in the early 1500's, through Scotland, England and the Puritans. At the heart of the Reformation was the conviction that everything the church teaches and does ought to be grounded in scripture. The key marks of Reformed Theology include: the **authority of scripture**, the **sovereignty of God**, the **need of all humans for God's salvation in Jesus**, and the **priesthood of all believers**.

I've been asked to talk this evening about the authority of scripture. In fine Reformation fashion, let's start with the Bible: whatever we claim about the authority of scripture should be substantiated *from* scripture—we ought not to claim less for the Bible than it claims for itself, and we also ought not to claim more for it than it claims for itself. The central passage on the authority of scripture is II Timothy 3: 14-16. The Bible doesn't claim that it is perfect in some Greek sense of perfection, and it doesn't claim that it has no tensions in it, and it doesn't claim to answer every question that people can whomp up. What it says is that all scripture is inspired by (or "breathed of") God and *useful* for the following: making us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus; teaching; rebuking; correcting and training in righteousness. Why? SO THAT the people of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

So, here's what that means in the Reformed Tradition. If you want to tell the church, and the world, who God is, what God is like, what God has said and done, how to live God's way, and what our mission as a church is, we expect that you will **authorize** what you say from scripture.

Our ordination vows for pastors, elders and deacons get specific about the authority of scripture in what we teach and do: "Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you?" Only one answer is permitted: "I do."

Now, some people like to say that you can't use scripture as your authority for anything because it can be interpreted any way people want. But we stand in a tradition that does not agree with that. **All interpretations of scripture are not equally good**—some are more faithful than others, and some are not acceptable to us at all. Part I of the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) is the Book of Confessions. There are 11 confessions that have been adopted by the Presbyterian Church—beginning with the ancient Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed, and culminating in the 1990's with the "Brief Statement of Faith." The point is this: these creeds tell us what interpretations of scripture are acceptable in the Reformed Tradition, and which interpretations are not acceptable. One of our ordination questions asks pastors, elders and deacons, "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed Faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture lead us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?"

The Confessions have authority in the Presbyterian Church—we are not free to teach anything we want about the Bible, or about God or about how to live. The Confessions don't take the place of scripture—they are **subordinate** standards—they are subordinate to scripture. If you can show from the Bible that there is an error in a confession, we change the confession, not the Bible. But the confessions are **superior** to personal opinions and convictions and viewpoints about how to interpret the Bible and what to teach. We have agreed in advance to be bound to these interpretations of the Bible. And that's good news, because these are wonderful expositions of what scripture teaches us to believe and do.

Now, the REAL question about scripture is how it will **function** with authority in the church. We can say whatever we want about the Bible, we can have a fancy theology of the inspiration and authority of scripture, but what matters is how we *use* them.

And, here is how scripture itself says it ought to be used, and how our Reformed Tradition says it ought to be used: If you want to tell the church—or anyone, anywhere in the church's name—who God is, what God has said and done, how God wants us to live and what our mission in Christ is, then we expect you to authorize what you say from scripture. That may seem obvious, but there are a variety of other authorities that people turn to when deciding what to believe about God and how to live.

Other sources of authority include these: **personal experience, church tradition, human reason**, theological systems, the soft sciences, the hard sciences, personal convictions, peer groups, families, and so on. The first several are the key competitors for authority.

Here is how we hope you do theology. We expect that what you say will be based on sound human reason, but we insist that you will submit your reasoning about who God is and how to live God's way, of what's good and live-giving through scripture—and not the other way around! We hope that you have had personal experiences of God and that what you say about God and how to live will reflect your experiences, but we absolutely demand that you will interpret your experiences through scripture. We hope you have good theology, and we hope you'll be respectful of church traditions, some of which are almost 2,000 years old, but we demand that you submit your theology and the church's tradition to the authority of scripture—and change your theology or practice when scripture demands it. *That* is what led to the Reformation—the submission of human reason and church tradition to the authority of scripture. And, allow me to say this: everyone (conservatives, liberals, and proud centrists) has a dreadful tendency to do just the opposite: when there's a disagreement between their reason or their theology and scripture, they fix the Bible. In the Reformed Tradition, it's supposed to work exactly the other way around! And, just so, we hope you'll consult the soft sciences like sociology, and take the hard sciences like physics seriously—but we expect that when you talk about God and God's will, you'll submit to the authority of scripture.

It is true that there are times when we must grapple earnestly with God's word in order to get it right. But we have agreed in advance that the scriptures are the arena of our debate. Sometimes we get it wrong for a few thousand years, as we did with slavery. But the arena of our debate is the Bible when the topics are who God is and how to live God's way. At Chapel Hill, and in our Reformed Tradition, scripture is unique and authoritative about God and how to live.