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Maintaining the Scripture Principle Today

by Clark Pinnock

The adoption of the bipartite Christian Bible as the authoritative Scripture of the church was probably the most momentous choice ever made in the history of doctrine. By doing so, the church provided herself with a standard of identity to evaluate and shape her theology, life, and mission. Therefore, the place to begin a discussion of biblical authority is with the simple fact, not really disputed, that entrenched in Christian thinking of every kind is a belief in the Bible as the written Word of God. Even if we are not impressed with this belief or persuaded by it, we have to acknowledge it and appreciate why it is held so stoutly. For better or for worse, belief in the Scriptures as the canon and yardstick of Christian truth, the unique locus of the Word of God, is part of an almost universal Christian consensus going back to at least the second century. Until the recent rise of revisionist theology, Christian thinking was done in the house of authority, a fact that is not doubted even by the writer most eager to overturn such belief, Edward Farley.¹ Theology in the premodern period was always done on the assumption that the Bible was the written Word of God.

More than an isolated belief, this conviction about the Bible was an integral part of a larger package of classical convictions and cannot be discarded without tearing the fabric of the whole garment of traditional Christian beliefs. Without much exaggeration one could say that the history of theology is a history of the interpretation of the Bible, so basic to this message was this medium. The way Christians have thought about God, Christ, humanity, salvation, and church is indebted to the teachings of the Bible. This is not to deny that cultural factors have entered into the various formulations at different periods, but simply to point out that the creed as we all know and accept it is utterly tied up with its scriptural foundations, making the authority of the Bible, if not a soteriologically indispensable belief (one can be saved by believing in Christ whatever one thinks of the Bible), then certainly an epistemologically crucial belief. Without belief in the authority of the Bible, there would not have been any creedal backbone to the Christian movement, and certainly not the bony structures of Nicaea and Chalcedon. Beliefs like the atonement and the resurrection unquestionably stand or fall with belief in biblical authority, and that is the measure of the seriousness of the modern debate about it. We are not arguing over some minor detail in Christian belief, like the rapture or the classes of angels, but over the basis of religious knowledge as such and how we know what God has promised and commanded. How can we worship God if we do not know who God is? How can we trust his promises if we do not know what they are? How can we obey God if we have no sure knowledge of his will? The reason Christians have felt historically that the authority of the Bible is a crucial conviction is that they have realized the Bible is needed to give us a reliable knowledge of the truth, without which we cannot exist long as Christians. Calvin spoke of this so practically when he referred to the Bible as the spectacles our dim eyes require to make out what the will of our creator is (*Institutes* I, chap. 6).

To be candid, however, the classical conviction about Holy Scripture was not always developed in sound and healthy ways, and some of our difficulties today are due in part to inadequacies in it. Given the polemical atmosphere between evangelicals and more liberal Christians, it is uncommon for conservatives to admit any un-ideal elements in the orthodox view of the Bible, but admit them we must if we hope to gain a fair hearing and to advance in our own understanding. There has been, for example, a tendency to exaggerate the absolute perfection of the text and minimize the true humanity of it. One of the weaknesses of the fathers, as Bromley notes, was their failure to give full weight to the human and historical aspects of the text. "The truth is that the fathers seem not to have appreciated the real significance of the human dimension

nor to have grasped the possibilities of a better exegesis that lexical, literary, and historical inquiry would present."² In addition, there was a strong, "catholic" tendency to link the authoritative Scriptures to an infallible ecclesiastical institution, thus providing even more security for the believer—more, in fact, than the Lord had planned for us. It must be obvious to any reader of classical theology that the people who spoke so highly of the infallibility of the Bible very often spoke just as highly of the church's creeds and hierarchy, and that they do not witness to what we today would regard as an evangelical position, though they are repeatedly cited by evangelicals today for that purpose.³ Evangelicals who hold to the sole authority of the Bible do not do justice to themselves when they appear to be uncritical of tradition, even when it happens to be tradition about the Bible. Rather than trying to argue unconvincingly, as Rogers and McKim did, that the traditional view of authority was less rigorous than we have thought (Woodbridge has shown it was very rigorous indeed), what we have to do is admit honestly that the old view of the Bible that we treasure is not biblical and serviceable in every detail today and, like every other theological topic, can use some improvement and development by the thinkers and scholars of our generation.⁴ We simply must transcend the neglect of the humanity of the Bible, so familiar in orthodoxy, and liberate the Bible from too close an association with mother church, an association that can easily smother its independent voice. The legacy we honor is noble and true, but it is not infallible or perfect, and we must be free to improve it if we can.

The Crisis of the Scripture Principle

Despite the ecumenical range and great antiquity of the classical conviction about the Bible as the written Word of God, we face a "crisis of the Scripture principle" today and with it the unmaking and unraveling of traditional Christian doctrine.⁵ Farley and Hodgson put it succinctly and accurately when they write:

Until recently, almost the entire spectrum of theological opinion would have agreed that the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, together with their doctrinal interpretations, occupy a unique and indispensable place of authority for Christian faith, practice, and reflection. But this consensus now seems to be falling apart.⁶

Out of the liberal theological revision has come a flat denial of the Scripture principle in the classical sense, the collapse of the house of authority based upon it, and the subsequent disintegration of the orthodox creed. Whether the denial comes in a direct⁷ or in an indirect form⁸ does not matter much: the point is that the normative authority of the Bible has been called into question deliberately and repeatedly since Schleiermacher by adherents of the new theology.

But what can possibly explain such behavior? There are three basic reasons for this far-reaching change of theological opinion. The first and most important is the cultural shift to secular modernity beginning in the Renaissance, and to rationalist modernity, brought on by the Enlightenment, and the liberal response to it. The modern mind dislikes traditional authorities such as the Bible and insists on subjecting them to rational scrutiny. The final authority of the Bible can hardly stand if the message it conveys provokes, not belief, but unbelief. Ed Farley makes it plain that this is a fundamental reason for his own rejection of biblical authority.⁹ We face a rebelliousness in the modern period that seeks to edge God out of the world and leave humanity autonomous in it. To achieve this, the Bible that challenges this insurrection must be silenced as divinely authoritative.

The second reason, second also in importance, is the rise of biblical criticism of the kind that treats Scripture as a merely human document and frequently debunks its claims on various levels. Pretending to be a key to the elucidation of the text, criticism had the effect of situating the Bible so thoroughly in the human context as

From *The Scripture Principle*, by Clark Pinnock, © 1984 by Clark H. Pinnock. Used with permission from Harper & Row Publishers, Inc.

to make it well nigh impossible to consider its authority as anything more than human. It became less and less natural to regard the text as divine communication and more and more plausible to regard it as fallible human utterance.¹⁰ What made it even more difficult for the conservative believers who wanted to be honest in their study of the Bible was the burden of their own heritage, which had erred in both exaggerating the absolute perfection of the text and obscuring its genuine, humble humanity. They were thus not in a

students of the matter. How shall we use as authority a text that was written when people thought in very different ways than we do? How shall we respond to critical "discoveries" on a host of issues pertaining to biblical literature and history? What about the diversity of biblical teaching? How should we think about the present defective copies and translations? What books properly belong to the canon? How is the Old Testament authoritative when the New Testament appears to correct it? What is the nature of the

Why do Christian people believe the Bible to be God's Word? Because it has been able to . . . introduce them to a saving and transforming knowledge of Christ.

strong position to distinguish between the positive and the negative proposals that the new criticism advanced. To this day, this is the conservative burden. It makes it difficult for those who keenly desire to respect the Bible highly but are put off by the form the conservative tradition often still takes.

The third reason, though it is more in the nature of an afterthought, I suspect, is theological in character. Orthodoxy, it is felt, silences God from speaking today—locking him up in a book—and creates a petrified and rigid style of faith that is false to the dynamic transcendence of the Bible. It closes us off from appropriating fresh truth and creates a whole set of oppressive attitudes and dogmas. Surely, as Auguste Sabatier argued, religious experience is the heart of Christianity, and though this gives rise to dogmas in time, such are the work of human beings, not the declarations of God.¹¹

Leaving aside for the time being the conservative theologian might counter these three contentions, it is obvious that we have here a confrontation between classical Christianity based upon the Scripture principle and a neo-Christianity without a Scripture principle, a collision that, in the realm of theological ideas, makes the differences between Roman Catholic and Protestant seem trivial by comparison. Theology without the controlling influence of the Scripture principle could only degenerate into open-ended pluralism of belief that none could adjudicate, and its classical concepts could only suffer unlimited revision. The crisis of the Scriptures is in fact the crisis of Christian theology itself and the cause of the deepest polarization of all in the churches. The gap is unbridgeable between those who stand by the historic confidence in the infallible truth of the Bible and those who adopt the pancritical view, which relativizes the entire theological enterprise. Seeking reconciliation is always a good thing, as it is between theological liberals and conservatives, but when the full measure of the difference here is taken, I doubt that reconciliation is possible.¹²

The Struggle to Maintain the Scripture Principle

Seeing a real threat to the authority of the Bible and to the *benefit* of the churches, classical Christians today respond by wanting to defend and explicate the Scripture principle in this newly critical context. In one sense, they are in a strong position to do so. The conservative position is deeply rooted not only in the most ancient traditions but also in the Bible itself, as we shall see, and the task is made easier by the fact that the liberals are scrambling to find a viable alternative to it—not an easy thing to do. The church as a whole is not likely to respond well to a denial of the real basis of her apostolicity when nothing solid is proposed to be put in its place. In another sense, however, it is not so easy, because in the course of the criticism of the Scripture principle some very tough questions have been raised and placed on the agendas of all serious

claim the Bible makes for itself? Those who are honest in pursuing these issues (not all Christians are) know there are some hard questions for the conservative scholar to answer and know also that there is little agreement among such scholars how to answer some of them. Even though there is agreement on the basic approach to the Bible as God's written Word, and a widely felt desire to preserve unity among Bible-believing Christians in face of the present crisis, there is lack of consensus on some rather important questions and on what to do about them. From a distance it seems that everyone dwells in the same house of biblical authority, but closer in, it becomes quite apparent that the house contains various rooms and closets in which one or another of this mixed multitude resides. Thus there are debates among conservatives, despite the need for a united front¹³.

What obviously is needed is a systematic treatment of the Scripture principle that faces all the questions squarely and supplies a model for understanding that will help us transcend the current impasse. Though one has the impression that evangelicals are always writing such tomes, there are in reality almost no full-scale expositions that cover the ground adequately and set forth the evangelical conviction in a balanced and sensible way. Much of our work operates within a circle of limited visibility, presupposing evangelical readers, and never raises its eyes to the larger perimeter of the theological mainstream where such issues are discussed professionally and in depth¹⁴.

In a broad outline, I want to suggest a paradigm utilizing three dimensions: first, the divine inspiration of Holy Scripture that arises organically out of the Christian pattern of revelation; second, the human character of the biblical text as the form in which the Word of God was communicated to us; and third, the ministry of the Spirit in relation to the Bible and the dynamic interaction between the two. Such a paradigm is sufficiently broad to capture the major themes and specific enough, when opened up, to introduce the reader to a large number of issues without losing his or her attention.

More specifically, my treatment of the Scripture principle will focus on and orient itself to the kind of practical, evangelical emphasis found in 2 Timothy 3:15-17:

From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

In this wonderful text Paul places his emphasis on the plenary

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profitability of the Scriptures in the matter of conveying a saving and an equipping knowledge of God. He does not present a theory about a perfect Bible given long ago but now lost, but declares the Bible in Timothy's possession to be alive with the breath of God and full of the transforming information the young disciple would need in the life of faith and obedience. I think we can all learn from this kind of concentration and orientation¹⁵. It is important for us to stress the practical effectiveness of the accessible Bible in facilitating a saving and transforming knowledge of God in Jesus Christ. We must not shift the emphasis to the unavailable Bible of the past, about which one can speculate, or to the inaccessible Bible of the future, after the experts will (supposedly) have cleared away every perplexing feature of the text, removing all possibility of doubt. It is this present Bible we need to be able to trust, this New International Version or King James Version, and this practical purpose of communicating the saving knowledge of God we need to be focusing on. Furthermore, it is this Bible that all Christians have come to trust through the grace of God, and this purpose that has proven valid in their experience. Given by God's breath, the Bible proves to be quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword and gives life and truth to the one who trusts in Jesus. This is the doctrine of Scripture I am concerned to discuss and defend: Not the Bible of academic debate, but the Bible given and handed down to be the medium of the gospel message and the primary sacrament of the knowledge of God, his own communication, which

is able to reconcile us to God so that we might come to love and obey him. Not a book wholly free of perplexing features, but one that bears effective witness to the Savior of all.

Why, in the last analysis, do Christian people believe the Bible is God's Word? Not because they have all studied up on Christian evidences and apologetics, however useful these may prove to some. Christians believe the Bible because it has been able to do for them exactly what Paul promised it would: introduce them to a saving and transforming knowledge of Christ. Reasons for faith and answers to perplexing difficulties in the text, therefore, are supportive but not constitutive of faith in God and his Word. Faith rests ultimately, not in human wisdom, but in a demonstration of the Spirit and power. Therefore, let us not quench the Spirit in our theology of inspiration, whether by rationalist liberal doubts or by rationalist conservative proofs, because both shift the focus away from the power of God in the Scriptures and onto our ability to rationally comprehend these matters. There is, of course, a place for ordinary understanding with the mind and a place for scholarly discussion and vindication. But it is greatly overdone if we leave the slightest impression that we are able to ground faith in God's Word by rational arguments alone and that God's working in the human heart in response to faith is not the main cause of faith. The Bible is not so interested in our academically proving, as in our holistically seeing the truth, in our believing the gospel and obeying God. This is something I have had to learn myself, and it is a liberating truth¹⁶.

¹ Edward Farley, *Ecclesial Reflection: An Anatomy of Theological Method*.

² Bromiley, "The Church Fathers and Holy Scripture," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge, p. 217.

³ Virtually all evangelicals, including myself, have done this in times past, so eager are we to enlist such great worthies as Augustine on our side in the great battle with liberalism. Edward Farley calls our bluff on this practice very effectively; *Ecclesial Reflection*, pp. 83-105.

⁴ The subtitle of Woodbridge's book, *Biblia Authority is A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal*, and effectively refutes the view that classical theologians limited the inerrancy of the Bible to matters of faith and practice. The book referred to is by Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*.

⁵ Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Crisis of the Scripture Principle" in *Basic Questions in Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 1-14. I appreciated the candid humor of Maurice Wiles near the end of his book *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, when he asked himself, in view of the radical nature of the changes he was proposing, whether the title of the book ought not to be "the unmaking of Christian Doctrine." His instincts are on target, of course.

⁶ Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, ed. *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, p. 35.

⁷ For direct denials, in addition to the work of Farley and Pannenberg already referred to (notes 1 and 12), consult C. F. Evans, *Is "Holy Scripture" Christian?*; James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World*; and Holy Scripture: *Canon, Authority, Criticism*; Gordon D. Kaufman, *Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God*.

⁸ For indirect denials, note the shift of the "functional" authority of the Bible in a whole range of modern writers who take the Bible to be authoritative, not in its teachings as history but in its power to occasion new experiences of revelation in us. See David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*. For Langdon Gilkey, the Bible is a fallible human witness reflecting all the biases and fears of its age and is subject to our correcting its errors. What he holds to be true is the symbolic structure and its power to illuminate our existence. See

Gilkey, *Message and Existence: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, p. 52 f. Many prominent theologians make the shift to the functional while continuing to pretend they are operating within the classical picture. Hodgson and King name Bultmann, Tillich, and Barth in this category: *Christian Theology*, p. 53.

⁹ Farley, *Ecclesial Reflection*, pp. 153-65.

¹⁰ Farley, *Ecclesial Reflection*, pp. 135-40.

¹¹ Auguste Sabatier, *Religions of Authority and Religions of the Spirit*.

¹² Compare Richard J. Coleman, *Issues of Theological Conflict: Evangelicals and Liberals*.

¹³ No conservative book I know of responds to anything like the full range of hard critical questions, though most of them are treated helpfully by someone somewhere. I hope this book will fill this important gap satisfactorily.

¹⁴ Barth and Berkouwer see themselves in line with the historic doctrine of biblical authority and address themselves to the contemporary discussion, but neither one, partly because of the European context, and partly because of their emphasis upon event rather than content, really speaks for or to the evangelicals in the English-speaking world. Carl Henry is the only one thus far to fulfill my prescription (*God, Revelation and Authority*) unless my own *Biblical Revelation* be mentioned as a poor second. There are signs that better work will come forth from the diverse circle that groups itself around the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. The appearance of Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, vol. 1, which will grow to three large volumes, is the best treatment of the subject so far in a full-scale systematic theology.

¹⁵ Paul's text is discussed helpfully in Edward W. Goodrick, "Let's Put 2 Timothy 3:16 Back in the Bible," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25 (1982), pp. 479-87; and Howard J. Loewen, *Karl Barth and the Church Doctrine of Inspiration*, (Seminary, May 1976), chap. 2.

¹⁶ While still wary of fideism, I understand better what scholars like Daane; Berkouwer, Rogers, Bloesch, Barth, Wink, and Grounds have been trying to tell conservatives like me who have an overly rationalist bent.

Reading the Bible as an Icon

by Duane Christensen

In the Baptist tradition, icons do not play a significant role; unless of course, as some more liberally oriented critics would have it, the Bible itself becomes an icon. There is irony here: whereas some would accuse a good many Baptists of "bibliolatry", or worshipping the Bible, these same Baptists would be quick to point the finger back at those who produce and make use of icons, accusing them of idolatry, or worshipping images. And though the language used in both cases is pejorative, there may be value in an attempt to combine these two negatives to see whether the result may somehow yet be positive.

My introduction to the field of iconography was a meditation by Henry Nouwen on "Rublev's Icon of the Trinity" published recently in the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*.¹ I was struck with how deeply Rublev's icon spoke to Nouwen, and others as well, who have taken the time to enter deeply into its structure and symbolism. Let's take a brief look at this remarkable work, considered by some "to be one of the most perfect achievements in the history of art".²

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Nouwen was experiencing what he calls "a hard period of (his) life, in which verbal prayer had become nearly impossible".³ It was "a long and quiet presence to this Icon (which) became the beginning of (his) healing".⁴

Rublev painted his icon in memory of St. Sergius, in a desire to bring fifteenth century Russia together around the name of God so its people would conquer "the devouring hatred of the world by the contemplation of the Holy Trinity".⁵ He chose a moment in the Old Testament narrative of Abraham's three heavenly visitors in Gen. 18 to portray the Trinity. Notice that "the three men" of the story become three women in the icon. And the table which Abraham set for them beneath the oak of Mamre becomes an altar on which the flesh of the freshly slaughtered calf is placed in a chalice. The picture is shaped by two geometric forms. On the one hand, the figures compose a circle with the chalice at the center and each of the three figures speaks by means of her right hand. For Nouwen the central figure is God the Father and His two fingers point to the chalice and to God the Son.

The message is clear. It is the message of the incarnation itself; and the Son, understanding its full significance, accepts that painful