



A MINISTRY SCHOOL OF THE ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF THE UPPER MIDWEST

Theology of Scripture

Or

Holy Scripture, Holy Son, Holy Spirit, Holy Church

Part II of II

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"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me"
(John 10:27).

*"If we are to have serious dealings with God it is essential that we be quiet and first of all do nothing but simply listen and let ourselves be questioned. When we do, we shall make the astonishing discovery that Christianity is not, as we supposed, an answer to our questions. . . . On the contrary, it is Christianity that asks the serious questions and therefore teaches us what true questioning is." —Helmut Thielicke, *Out of the Depths*.*

I. The Church: Creator or Creature of Scripture?

Roman Catholics and their Reformation counterparts disagreed about whether the church designates Scripture (the RCC position) or recognizes Scripture (the PE). For the latter, designating Scripture suggests that the church is, in effect, lord over Scripture, rather than a creature called into existence by Scripture to be cheerfully, confidently, beholden to Scripture.

- Why did the sixteenth-century Reformers have such strong convictions on this issue?
 - John 15:26-27; 1 John 1:1-4 (cf. John 15:11).
 - Scripture, Church Councils, and the Canonical Collection (Council of Trent, 1545-63).
- Might some modern Protestant Evangelicals sometimes operate in this regard—if not in self-consciously or formally, then unwittingly in practice—quite similarly to Roman Catholics?



II. The Authority of Scripture

The Reformers insisted that the church cannot confer authority on Scripture, but recognizes the authority of Scripture. In other words, the church must not stand in judgement of Scripture as an authority above Scripture. Rather, the church joyfully acknowledges that Scripture whose authority is as self-authenticating as are the colors and shapes and tastes of objects.

“As to their question—How can we be assured that [Scripture] has sprung from God unless we have recourse to the decree of the church?—it is as if someone asked: Whence will we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter? Scripture exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do of their color, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste” (Inst. 1.7.2).

Calvin maintains that there is a conviction whose self-authenticating nature we can only truly know by entrance into it, by tasting and seeing! When the Spirit vivifies Scripture and illumines our hearts to the end that we and Jesus Christ are fused together, in that moment and thereafter, how do we know that it is Jesus Christ who we have embraced, and who has embraced us? The same way we know that salt is bitter and sugar is sweet.

According to Calvin, Scripture authenticates itself in that through Scripture we are brought to faith in the Lord of whom Scripture speaks, and he authenticates himself.

That is, as Jesus Christ authenticates himself in the power of the Spirit, the book (apostolic witness) whereby we encounter Jesus Christ is too authenticated.

Experience may suggest that we recognize the authority of Scripture, and only then infer the authority of Christ from it. But in point of fact it is quite the opposite; we come to recognize the authority of Scripture as we are encountered by him who is Lord of Scripture. That is to say, the theological order is always Christ to Scripture, even as the temporal order of our coming to faith is often from Scripture to Christ (Illustration: Paul in 1 Cor. 2).

Precisely because God himself speaks in Scripture, we do not deduce, infer, or conclude God from the printed page. For the Reformers, like the prophets before them, an inferred or deduced God is an idol by definition. For the true God—that is, the living, acting, speaking God—acts in the immediacy of his trine self, rendering inference or deduction utterly, altogether beside the point!

To infer or deduce God from Scripture is to deny that God speaks in Scripture, and thus to affirm (albeit tacitly) that Scripture is only a message about God abstracted from God himself. And an abstract inference is categorically different from an encounter with the living, present God in Christ.

Calvin’s point: Anytime the church elevates herself above the primacy and normativity of Scripture, she contradicts the authority of Christ, and thereby dishonors him.



III. The Self-Authenticating Nature of Scripture

That Scripture is self-authenticating has historically been an important aspect of Christian experience. For instance, John Calvin provides a well-developed apologetic for Scripture in book one, chapter eight, of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

In defending the truth of Scripture, Calvin speaks of its antiquity and preservation. He speaks of the fulfilled prophecies and miracles found in Scripture, the sublime wisdom of Scripture, the testimonies of the martyrs, and other evidences as well. Yet Calvin ends his apologetic with these words:

“There are other reasons, neither few nor weak, for which the dignity and majesty of Scripture are not only affirmed in godly hearts, but brilliantly vindicated against the wiles of its disparagers; yet of themselves these are not strong enough to provide a firm faith, until our Heavenly Father, revealing his majesty there, lifts reverence for Scripture beyond the realm of controversy. Therefore Scripture will ultimately suffice for a saving knowledge of God only when its certainty is founded upon the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, these human testimonies which exist to confirm it will not be vain if, as secondary aids to our feebleness, they follow that chief and highest testimony. But those who wish to prove to unbelievers that Scripture is the word of God are acting foolishly, for only by faith can this be known” ~John Calvin (Inst. 1.8.13).

Illustration: Charles Spurgeon’s “Tiger.”

Point to Ponder: Why do many modern evangelicals operate in a manner that is seemingly opposed to what we have just discussed in Calvin and Spurgeon? That is, why do many habitually try to convince people that Scripture is God’s word by appealing to secondary evidences? Do we believe that the veracity and credibility/legitimacy of Scripture needs to be derived from and conferred by other disciplines, such as history, science, and philosophy? Do we believe that our knowledge of God is utterly dependent upon the self-revelation of God, or do we believe we are beholden to other measures of authority that stand over that revelation, telling us whether or not we are warranted to recognize the self-revelation of God as such? Could it be that, on this point, many modern evangelicals unwittingly obscure the integrity, logic, and power of Scripture with the imposition of alien rationalities and methodologies? Let us be sure we possess and proclaim a biblical understanding of the Bible!

IV. The Clarity—or Perspicuity—of Scripture

On the eve of the Reformation in late medieval Europe, it was widely held that lay Christians—ordinary believers, the common “rabble,” as it were—should not read Scripture. To be sure, many lay Christians could not read Scripture, because:

- Until the advent of printing in the mid-fifteenth century, Bibles were expensive and not easily obtainable.



- The Vulgate—the medieval church’s official, standard version of the Bible—was in Latin, a language which very few ordinary Christians could read.
- The literacy rate among the general populace was extremely low until the Reformation.
- In 1522, Martin Luther began his translation of the Bible into his native German tongue. In 1525, William Tyndale did likewise in English.
- These vernacular versions of the Bible were not well-received by all, however. In fact, Tyndale’s translation was promptly banned in Britain, and Tyndale was martyred in 1536.
- Placing a Bible in the hands of commoners will result in chaos, it was said. They won’t be able to understand the Bible. The Bible is not to be read by all Christians. Because, after all, the Bible is not clear!
- The issue of Scripture’s clarity was an issue of terrific import at the time of the Reformation, and Scripture’s clarity remains a terrifically important for evangelical Christians today!

a. Scripture on Scripture’s Clarity

- Deuteronomy 6:6-7; Psalm 19:7; Psalm 119:130.
- Jesus constantly discusses Scripture with common Jews. What is more, he never appears to suggest that Scripture is unclear or too difficult for them to understand.
- Yet Jesus does point out that people do not understand Scripture, and he does this often. However, not once does Jesus attribute this lack of understanding to Scripture’s lack of clarity, or to his audience’s intellectual deficiency, as such. What is more, it is, ironically, not common Jews that Jesus finds habitually deficient in understanding (Matt. 22:29; John 3:1-15; 5:39-40). Who, then, are the habitually deficient? To what, or better, to Whom are they habitually blind? What does this tell us about the relationship between the written and incarnate word of God? What does it tell us about knowledge, as described by Scripture?

b. Working Definition of the Clarity of Scripture

- Scripture is written in such a way that it is able to be understood by all who will read it seeking God’s help, being willing to hear and heed the voice of God in Scripture.
- One’s understanding of Scripture depends upon God’s help (i.e. the Spirit’s illumination) and our willingness cherish and obey the word of God. Is this something you readily associate with the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture?
- To affirm the clarity of Scripture is not to affirm that Scripture is always easy to understand; only that we are able to understand it.
- There is a certain disposition needed to properly understand Scripture. What does it entail? See 1 Cor. 2:14; 2 Cor. 3:14-16; 4:3-4, 6; John 7:17; Heb. 5:14; John 16:12-15; James 1:5-6.
- What, then, does Scripture mean by “understanding”? Surely, “understanding” has a cognitive/intellectual component. But is it merely cognitive? Does it involve other dimensions of our person? Does it involve our entire person?