

Authority of Scripture

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Three Parts on The Authority of Scripture

My interest in the authority of Scripture grew rapidly out of my recent awareness that one's view on the matter plays a fundamental role in all proceeding religious positions. The way in which we view how much authority scripture has, greatly determines much of our consequential views. This essay is primarily intended to be informative of the positions and questions in contemporary theology regarding the authority of Scripture for the Christian believer who holds a fully inspired, inerrant view of Scripture, yet has many questions about the legitimacy of the position. My hope is that we can struggle through some of the difficult questions that have been raised as of late, and come to a stronger, more confident, place in our view of Scripture.

After some preliminary study on the issue, I found that there was not one issue to be addressed, but several intertwined. For the purpose of clarity, I have divided the issue into three parts each of which will be addressed individually. The first is the question of whether scripture's canonization process was a valid procedure. Both secular thinkers and liberal theologians have been raising many questions as to the validity of the canon as it now stands. My intent is to defend the Scriptural canon as being truly authentic and uniquely divine. The second part will address the question of whether we have a justified account for believing in Scripture as being God's untainted word. My desire is to offer a cogent explanation for why I believe Scripture is a distinctively authoritative piece of literature. Finally, I want to examine the liberal Christian's view of Scripture, and how it is essentially humanistic in origin and give my reasons for why I think it is detrimental in the long run to our theology as well as our faith.

Part I: The Canonization of Scripture

The question as to the canonization of Scripture is fundamental in establishing a strong authoritative view of scripture. If after investigation the validity of the canonization process remains dubious, then we will be left with some serious problems as to Scripture's authority. An arbitrary compilation of ancient books thrown capriciously together for no significant reason, is hardly a document that should be considered divine, authoritative or followed whole heartedly. However, if after some study it becomes apparent that there are countless, uniquely extraordinary characteristics only to be found in Scripture, I would be ready to hold the Bible as unique, infallible, inerrant, and divinely inspired, and thus uniquely and ultimately authoritative.

Due to the volumes and volumes of literature and the size of the subject, I will for purposes of time narrow my focus to the more controversial: the New Testament canonization process. There are two views on the process of canonization the New

Testament. The first posits that the canonization was an evolutionary process that took place over hundreds of years after Christ. This view is held by many scholars who presuppose that scripture is a human generated document and has no divine authorship. 'The compilation of the Bible was not an act of any definite occurrence. It was a matter complicated and abstruse. It was an evolution at the hands of Churchmen of various beliefs and purposes.' The second view claims that the books that we now consider canonical, were immediately considered divinely inspired by the early church. The first view presupposes that the church had decided what would be in the canon and what would not, and that the final choice was the Church's. However, the second view has more conclusive evidence for being historically accurate. 'The New Testament books did not become authoritative for the Church because they were formally included in a canonical list; on the contrary, the Church included them in her canon because she already regarded them as divinely inspired, recognizing their innate worth and generally apostolic authority, direct or indirect. The first ecclesiastical councils to classify the canonical books were both held in North Africa—at Hippo Regius in 393 and at Carthage in 397—but what these councils did was not impose something new upon the Christian communities but to codify what was already the general practice of those communities.' 'It was not an intuition: it was simple obedience to the known commands of Christ and His apostles. This view would fully explain the sudden rise of the New Testament as an authoritative corpus of undoubted authority...it was not a selection, but a production.'

The early Church simply believed what Scripture taught about itself. They believed that 'Prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.' And that 'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.'

Furthermore, the ancient Church believed that the authors of the Bible were uniquely authoritative, not just any religious leader was included in Scripture: in the Old Testament they were prophets, and in the New Testament there were Apostles (or were under apostolic authority). The entire Bible is written by one of these two kinds of people.

The New Testament books appear to have been written within 70 years after Christ's death in A.D. 33. Modern scholars have suggested that Mark was written in A.D. 65, Luke in A.D. 80-85, John in A.D. 90-100, Galatians in A.D. 48, 1 and 2 Thessalonians in A.D. 50, Philippians in A.D. 54, 1 and 2 Corinthians in A.D. 54-56, Romans in A.D. 57, and Colossians, Philemon and Ephesians in A.D. 60, to name a few. Recent discoveries by a non-Christian scholar, Carsten Peter Thiede, suggests that the book of Mathew was written much earlier than was estimated previously. In 1994, Thiede found a papyrus believed to be the oldest extant fragment of the New Testament in the Oxford library. 'The Matthean source known as "Q" —some sayings of Jesus and a few other minor sources—first circulated between A.D. 30 and 60.' When the early church received these letters, and subsequently distributed throughout the Mediterranean and Asia Minor, they were received as being divinely inspired and uniquely authoritative. We can read the writings of the early church fathers, writing between A.D. 90 and 160, such as Polycarp, Clement and Ignatius, and note that, between all of them, they cite all of the New

Testament books as being uniquely and divinely inspired, and were used for worship and Church gatherings.

So what was the criteria for a letter or book to become canonical and another not? There were three main things that the early church looked for when considering whether a book was divinely inspired, or simply a letter or a fallible account of what took place: '1. apostolicity (was it written by an apostle or authenticated by an apostle?), 2. universality (was it widely read and accepted?), and 3. character (was it sufficiently spiritual, directed at godliness, and doctrinal content in agreement with other apostles?).' When a document met all of these prerequisites, Church councils recognized those letters as being divinely inspired and formally added it to the Scriptural canon.

And what then of the reliability of the Bible? Are the books we now read in the Bible reliably accurate to the original writings? The Bible has more manuscript copies than any other ancient document. Counting just Greek manuscripts, there is a total of over 5,000 copies of Scripture either in fragments or in their entirety, and counting manuscripts in other languages the number of copies reach over 24,000; 'No other document of antiquity even begins to approach such numbers and attestation. In comparison, Homers's Iliad is second, with only 643 manuscripts that still survive.' We can prove the reliability of these documents with newly found manuscripts from sources such as the Dead Sea Scrolls. By comparing the thousands of copies, we can see that remarkably, there is little or no difference between copies. Though some verb tense or article removal has changed, no substantial change or major proof text of doctrine is different.

'The Authorized Version or any other form of the English Bible is not inspired...the translation is not perfect. There are errors in it. The translators were not supernaturally preserved from making mistakes.' Yet the copies that we do have are incredibly accurate. The earliest copy of the entire New Testament that we know of dates back to 350 A.D., a little more than 300 years after Christ's death. It is known as Codex Sinaiticus, which was found by Tischendorf in 1859, and then sold to the British Government by the Soviets for 100,000 British pounds in 1933. In addition, there are significant copies of parts and collections of the New Testament, which date even earlier. 'The Papyrus Bodmer II...was written about A.D. 200, contains the first fourteen chapters of the Gospel of John with but one lacuna (of the 22nd verse), and considerable portions of the last seven chapters.' The late Princeton Professor J. Gresham Machen concludes that, 'the evidence for the original text of the Bible is so vastly more abundant than the text of other ancient books in the case of which, nevertheless, nobody doubts but that we have a very close approximation indeed to what the authors wrote.'

To continue our inquiry, why has the Apocrypha been left out of the Protestant Bible? In short it has never been considered canonical until the Council at Trent in 1545, where the Catholic Church, being pressured to produce Biblical authority for their doctrine of indulgences, voted to accept the Apocrypha. It lacks prophetic authority, purports historical and geographic inaccuracies, and contains contradictory doctrine. Moreover, Christ and his Apostles never used or quoted the Apocrypha. Some of these books, like Maccabees, are useful for understanding the Jewish history during the four hundred years

of silence between the Old and New Testament. They are still helpful and interesting, but they are not sacred.

And why aren't there more books of the New Testament? There are a number of documents that state that they are eyewitness accounts of the events of the time of and around the life of Christ. Some such books include: The Gospel of Mary, The Protevangelion, The Lost Gospel according to Peter, and The Gospel of Thomas. What then are we to do with such books? The book of Infancy I, for example, is ascribed to Thomas. It narrates the events of Christ's infancy and events of his childhood. There are such stories in it that narrate how Christ's schoolteacher attempts to teach him his alphabet, and the young hoity Jesus gives a pompous reply. 'But his master, when he lifted up his hand to whip him, had his hand presently withered, and he died. Then said Joseph to St. Mary, henceforth we will not allow him to go out of the house; for every one who displeases him is killed.' The book is full of accounts of the young testy Jesus reeking havoc on all of his playmates and the town. The book clearly is fabricated, fictitious and is not in line with what we know of the real Christ narrated in the four verified gospels. As for the rest of these "Lost Books", supposedly written between A.D. 50-150, they all fail to either have verifiable apostolic authorship or enjoyment of the majority of the early Church's acceptance, and/or contains clear contradictions with the 27 established canonical books.

Finally, there is no other book in the history of humanity that speaks with such stunning continuity. There are 66 books in the Bible, and of these are 39 Old Testament documents and 27 New Testament books. These 66 books were written over a period of more than a thousand years, in three languages, by 40 different authors, and on 3 continents. How could there be such seamless continuity and focus on Christ throughout the entire book, if it were not brought together by God Himself? This brings us to the second part: though the Bible could be reasonably defended as being historically reliable, is Scripture really without error?

Part II: Why We Believe Scripture is Infallible

The notion of the infallibility of Scripture, simply put, entails that all 66 original books of the Bible are true in every sense historically, scientifically, spiritually, and subjectively; or put differently, there is no fallacy, mistake or lie in the entire Bible. It is not my goal to ascertain absolutely certain or have absolute proof that the Bible is without error, for there is nothing we can know that is absolutely certain. But I believe that we can know some thing truly, if only partially. One of these things is Scripture. The objective therefore is to identify a reasonable, sensible and consistent validation for believing in Scripture as infallible.

Historically, Christians have tried to validate Scripture as true in two ways: presuppositionalism and evidentialism. Presuppositionalism is the idea that we know Scripture is true because of what it says for itself, and that the truth content and the Holy

Spirit speaks to our souls attesting to its validity. The two most influential leaders of this view are Dutch theologian Cornelius Van Til and the German reformer, John Calvin. Van Til's argument is: we all begin with presuppositions in our understanding of the world. We presuppose that our chair holds us up and that we will get hungry tonight at dinnertime. There are certain things that we are entitled to believe because they fit with our understanding of reality, and we have no deeper justification for those beliefs. Moreover, the Christian worldview, and specifically the inerrancy of Scripture, is one of those presuppositions. If it is consistent with our subjective understanding of reality and when there is a whisper from the Spirit of the Lord, we need no further justification in believing it when it says it is without mistake.

However, critics of the view will point out that any authority claiming ultimate authority, such as the Bible is not immediately self-validating. If I were to state that my friend's new book is the ultimate authority on the meaning of life, this clearly exemplifies that self-referential truth claims, especially ultimate and absolute claims, are not always true. In addition, 'a subjective religious experience is a flimsy foundation for anything.' If you feel a certain subjective intellectual and emotional conviction that Islam or Wicca is absolutely true, it does not indicate that it is true. More often than not, religious experience only validates one's presuppositions about theology. Presuppositions are tricky, in that they will dictate much of one interpretation of subsequent subjective experience. Thus when I presuppose that the world operates in terms of karma, I will view and interpret the world differently than you, who presupposes that the world operates in terms of grace. And finally, having a religious experience doesn't necessarily self-authenticate a divine encounter. To base one's entire religion upon a subjective experience affords the possibility of that religious experience being merely wishfully sentimental, or worse, demonic.

The evidentialist's position consists of the insistence that there must be outside, objective and historical data behind one's religious experience. 'Faith cannot make its way past criticism without an empirical anchor. To segregate Christian conviction from all empirical verification is to make nonsense of it and to go against the precise claims of the gospel to be historical.' Proponents of this view include the late Princeton theologian and apologist Benjamin Warfield, and the popular Christian author Josh McDowell. They are persistent that scripture must be based upon real objective historical events that are verifiable via investigation. Critics of this view suggest that no matter how clear and convincing the evidence and arguments, unless the heart of the individual is moved by the Spirit of God, no conviction in Scripture's infallibility will be had.

For myself, I position myself in both camps. Everyone must begin with a presupposition. And for many Christians, who have responded to those whispers of our Lord, they have adopted the Christian worldview hook, line and sinker. This is an authentic, and justifiable position. Yet, at some season in the life of a Christian, he will encounter cynicism, criticism, and challenges as to the validity of his faith. At this point, some honest investigation and sincere evaluation of the presupposition will be defensive in essence, and reinforcing spiritually by putting certain doubts aside. The point is not to

entrench oneself into an ideological camp, but to desire God's wisdom and truth which will bring us into a deeper understanding and love of Christ Himself.

This brings me to the third and final part. I must clarify to the reader that my intention is not to dig myself into the "holy and righteous" conservative camp and throw theological grenades over to the "dark and evil" liberal camp. My motives are completely non-combative, and are written with the hope that the reader will recognize why I feel that there is a genuine danger to one's faith and spiritual health in holding the liberal's position on Scripture.

Part III: A Response to the Liberal Christian View of Scripture

The liberal Christian view of Scripture differs from the historical, orthodox Christian view at this question: where does religious authority ultimately lay? For the liberal, subjective faith is the source and norm of theology. 'Rather than starting with God, postulating divine initiative, many liberal Christians begin with the human predicament and emphasize man's search for God...God is synonymous with the search for human wholeness, for confidence in the ultimate meaningfulness of human existence.' When a religious question arises, the liberal will probably consult Scripture as a loose guidebook, but the final decision comes down to his own religious experience (intellectual or emotional). Therefore the liberal has a significantly diminished view of Scripture, compared to the orthodox Christian.

The move from the objective to the subjective, culturally, can be traced back to Immanuel Kant's idea 'that human beings do not see the world directly, but through a number of categories. We do not directly see "things-in-themselves"; we only understand the world through our human point of view. This leads to Idealism; the belief that what we call the "external world" is somehow created by our minds.' These types of ideas grew slowly through the end of the 19th century and exploded throughout the philosophical community in the early 1900s. Religious subjectivism first affected the philosophers and theologians, and then trickled down through the artists and finally to the lay population. In the 1920s a significant split at Princeton University among the professors there was later marked as the watershed event for American theologians from mainstream denominations. This new "modernist" or "liberal" interpretation of Scripture was infiltrating Princeton, one of the most influential religious establishments, and eventually mainstream denominations. The outcome was that the liberals won the battle and many of the defeated professors responded by starting Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. Now, we live in a culture where 97% of Americans believe in a God, but only 45% believe that Scripture is God's inerrant word. Liberal notions of Scripture have finally filtered down to the mass population.

With the liberal's subjective religious experience being one's theological reference point, 'theology and the Bible are but fallible human attempts to understand the data of faith.' The liberal's view of Scripture is much like a man at a feast, a smorgasbord of ideas of

which he can decide what he likes and what he doesn't. This belittles Scripture to the same level as other religious texts such as the Koran and the Bagavad Gita. "Whatever compliments your personal religious experience must be true for you." However, this deflates Scripture to a limp collection of religious writings of other religious people who have similar experiences with me, yet lack any real definitive authority. Liberal theologian Donald Miller in his book *The Case for Liberal Christianity* claims, 'The Scripture contains the record of men's and women's reflections regarding the meaning which Christ had for them. It is not primarily an historical account. The resurrection, the miracles, the virgin birth are valued as symbols that point beyond the historical event to a larger and more ultimate truth... To take symbols literally is to engage in idolatry.' Thus 'when the standard of the written Word is discarded, sentimentality becomes the canon.'

In addition, liberals 'limit inerrancy to those statements that are able to make men wise unto salvation.' This view of Scripture assumes that the nature of truth is fragmented. As opposed to the orthodox view, which insists that truth is unified over all areas: historically, socially, spiritually, psychologically, philosophically and so on, and by nature cannot be contradictory, the liberals have adopted an ontologically Eastern notion of truth: Truth contradicts itself all the time. There is an even deeper underlining assumption within Eastern thought that rejects absolutes, and thus when only dealing with sets of relative views of the world, truth itself is then seen as fragmented. 'The result is that religious things become 'truth' inside of one's head just as... the Eastern religious experience is 'truth' inside of one's head.' Ultimately, the liberal's position, when taken to its logical conclusion, suffers from the same ailment that extreme presuppositionalism experiences. With no prospect for investigation on the physical/historical level, religion becomes what Francis Schaeffer would call an "upper-story" mystical experience, closed to verification in the physical reality.

The liberal will go further and claim that the historical accuracy of Scripture has no bearing upon the significance of Scripture as a religious document. Being objectively and historically grounded in space and time is largely irrelevant. Again, it is primarily grounded in the subjective religious experience of the devotee.

The fact that Scripture is so historically accurate baffles the liberal. He is adamant that the writers of Scripture were never trying to be factual or historical, yet he can't explain why it is so overwhelmingly factual and historical.

'It must be remembered also that such a thing as historical accuracy is a comparatively novel product. The older writers never dreamed of it. They wrote in order to be interesting, not to tell the truth. And it is remarkable fact that the events recorded in the Holy Scriptures, as far as we can find out, were most of them veritable, and the chroniclers were truthful.'

Liberals operate under the conviction that myth is superior in everyway to real historical events. 'Myths enable us to structure insights that will allow us to follow our quest for holistic explanations of the cosmos and to understand the meaning of our personal existence in all of its ramifications. It is from this perspective that I say that Christianity

rests on fiction and myth.’ It is interesting that in the past, Christianity considered itself to be unique in that it claimed its primary religious text to be a legitimate historical record. However, this no longer accurately describes the liberal Christians.

What then is to be said of myths, parables, and fables? Certainly there is something to be said for the power of fictitious anecdotes that communicate transcending truth into contemporary language. ‘Very often the fiction writer depicts life and the great truth of life better than the historian. He does not pretend to write down what is exactly true, but he tinges all things with his imagination. His feelings, however, may be just and reliable.’ This is true for the wealth to be found in world literature, and ancient myths. Only to an extent does this apply to the Bible. As stated above, Christianity proudly claims Scripture not only to be metaphorically and spiritually true, but also claims to be verifiable, within real space and time.

What are we to say then of those who view that the gospel message is more important than the credibility of Scripture as historically accurate? Does it even matter? I would argue that the belief in Scripture’s historical credibility is paramount to the Christian position. Our salvation is based upon the belief that Christ died, in space and time, for our sins. The Bible claims that this was a historical event. The entirety of the Christian faith is built upon the belief that what Christ did was a literal, actual and historical event. Those that place their religious authority in their own subjective experience, are doing little more than equating their faith with all other mystical and ultimately subjective religions. Religious experience is not Christian experience. If Christ really hasn’t died, in space and time, we have no hope for salvation or redemption. “My Christian life, then, depends altogether upon the truth of the New Testament record.” In addition Jesus Himself quotes the Old Testament as if it is historically accurate many times (Matt 5:17-20, Luke 13:28, Mark 10: 6, Jn. 11:51). How is the liberal to respond to the fact that Christ considers Scripture to be historically accurate? Is Christ therefore a bad Bible teacher?

Modern religious liberalism has popularized the notion that final authority does not rest in Scripture, but rather authority rests in Jesus alone. At first this sounds like a reasonable and attractive view: the literalism of the rest of the Bible is irrelevant, only the teachings of Christ about loving one another and being kind to one another are authoritative, the Pauline books of the Bible (that speak of the wickedness of homosexuality) can be quietly dismissed as being non-authoritative. Ultimately, I think God is the final authority, however this interpretation is very misleading for a number of reasons. At its root, the believer is really only granting Jesus authority because he says some things that correspond to modern notions of ethics. He is ‘retaining as genuine words of the historical Jesus only those words which conform to his own preconceived ideas...(Their view) represents those elements in the teaching of Jesus—isolated and misinterpreted—which happen to agree with the modern program.’ In addition if the liberal would honestly look at all that Christ said, he would find things that do not agree with the modern liberal doctrine. Christ mentions Hell more than anyone else in the Bible. Hence, the liberal must pick and choose what it is that he wants to believe Christ really said. But this quickly will lead to one just choosing the things that Christ says that parallel to his

presuppositions that he came to the Scriptures with. Furthermore, by dismissing the rest of the Bible as untrue fictitious myth, the meaning and significance of the true Christ is entirely missed. The truth of man's depravity and our need for a savior is greatly depreciated, the beauty of the historical entrance of Christ's appearance after hundreds of years of Israel's waiting, and the great revelation given to Paul and the other apostles are all lost in an attempt to twist the Bible to one's own preconceived notions of what Christianity should be. Clearly, authority does not rest in Christ for the liberal, but in his own individual religious experience. 'Such an authority is obviously no authority at all; for individual experience is endlessly diverse, and when once truth is regarded only as that which works at any particular time, it ceases to be truth. The result is an abysmal skepticism.'

Conclusion

Part of the Good News of Christ, is that we do not need to be limited in beginning with ourselves as a reference point. Instead we are free in every way to align our thinking as close to God as possible. However this could mean submission, and submission is one of the hardest things for a human being to do. Our lives are to be a response to His love and grace, lives that are pleasing and glorifying to Him. Our place is not to pick and choose, but to obey what he delights in. Let us make it our goal to please him by giving Scripture its proper authoritative position in every part of our lives.

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