

THE WORD OF GOD AND THE CHURCH OF GOD

Reaffirming Scriptural Authority Today

by Rob Smith

Presented at the Anglican Church League's conference on the Bible, 11th May 2002.

1. The Threat to Scriptural Authority in the Church

Both the history of the Christian church and the testimony of the Bible itself alert us to the fact that the Church of God lives in constant danger of undervaluing the power, authority and sufficiency of Word of God (that Word which we have in an objective and reliable form in Scripture). The primary reason we are in this danger is simply because the people of God are all the time being tempted to think that Scripture is in some way inadequate to the needs of the hour; that it's not *really* able to make people wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ (not in the 21st century, not by itself); that its not *really* up to the task of *thoroughly* equipping God's people for *every* good work (not in a globalised, psychologised, technological society like ours).

Sadly, there is good reason for believing that many churches have succumbed to this temptation today. For in many places the church of God is being ruled by a number of agendas other than that of humble submission to the Word of God in Scripture. For some it is *the popularity agenda* (which has led to the tyranny of a sub-Christian marketing ethos driving churches to promote themselves rather than the Saviour). For others its *the tolerance agenda* (which has led to the dulling down of the exclusive particularity of the Bible's message that Jesus is the only name under heaven by which we must be saved). For others still it is *the relevance agenda* (which has led to the reinterpreting of the Bible's teaching on sin and salvation in terms of people's perceived needs). Of course, there are other agendas too; such as the growth agenda, the respectability agenda, the political-action agenda, and so the list could go on.

The solution, however, is not to be totally insensitive to these agendas, nor to deny them their proper place. The point is simply that if we allow ourselves to be ruled by any agenda other than the will of God as it is expressed in Scripture, then the game is all but lost. And in due course, our light will be extinguished, our salt lose its saltiness, our mission forfeited and our lampstand removed from its place.

2. Reaffirming Scriptural Authority in the Church

So how then do we guard against this danger? The answer (I believe) is to recapture and recommit ourselves to the Protestant Reformers' understanding of Scriptural authority—which is another way of saying that we need to believe Scripture's own teaching about itself! For in line

with Scripture's self-testimony, the Reformers unambiguously affirmed the unique and supreme authority of the Scriptures, both for the conscience of the individual and for the corporate life of the church. Moreover, this assertion contained within it an affirmation of Scripture's infallibility and inerrancy; for the Reformers' fundamental argument was that the teachers and traditions of the church could and did err, whereas Scripture never errs! In other words, Scripture alone infallibly reveals the true knowledge of God and of his salvation.

a) The grounds of Scriptural authority

On what grounds did the Reformers hold this position? Firstly, the Reformers argued that the Scriptures are authoritative on the grounds on their *unique inspiration*. To quote Luther: 'Holy Scripture has been spoken by the Holy Spirit.' This, of course, is simply another way of saying that 'all Scripture is God-breathed' (2 Tim. 3:16). What this means then is that the Scriptures speak with God's authority. What Scripture says, God says (to quote Augustine's famous dictum). The implication of this, however, as Calvin pointed out, is that 'we owe to Scripture the same reverence as we owe to God' (*Comm.*, 2 Tim. 3:16).

Now it's important to understand that the Catholic church did not (and does not) dispute this point, but claims that the magisterium of the church also speaks infallibly by the Holy Spirit. However, as Luther strenuously argued, not only does the New Testament disprove such a claim (stressing both the frailty of the church and the once for all nature of apostolic revelation), but history itself makes nonsense of it. The Reformers' point, then, was that Scripture *alone* speaks with God's authority, for not only is *all* Scripture inspired by God, but *only* Scripture is inspired by him.

The second front on which the Reformers argued that Scriptures' final authority had to do with their *gospel content*. 'They are the manger in which Christ lies', said Luther. This argument was based (on the one hand) on Jesus' own view that the entire Old Testament witnessed to him, and (on the other) on the fact that the authority of the New Testament is bound up with the authority of the gospel which it reveals and applies. As this gospel was final and unalterable, the apostolic testimony given to it cannot be changed. As Paul says in Galatians 1:8-9: 'Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!' In short, the only Christ we know is 'Christ as he has been presented to us by the Father, clothed with the gospel' (to quote Calvin). But the only gospel we know is that which has been recorded in Scripture *alone*.

But what about the canon? Who decides what is and what isn't authentic apostolic testimony? Wasn't it the church that authorised the collection of books that make up our New Testament? Does that not place the church over Scripture? No, said the Reformers. Scripture is the Word of

God, not the word of the church. The canon, therefore, established itself. Or, to put it more precisely, the Spirit of God authorised the canon (by inspiring it) and then led the church to recognise and confirm his work. Moreover, it is the Word which gives birth to the church—not the other way round (1 Pet. 1:23; Eph. 2:20). Therefore, the church's recognition of the canonical books is simply analogous to a child recognising its true parents—and, said Luther, 'who begets his own parent?', or 'Who first brings forth his own maker?'

Calvin argued similarly that the supreme authority of Scripture is ultimately 'self-authenticating.' Scripture thus carries inherent final authority; revealing its true majesty as 'it is sealed upon our hearts through the Spirit.' Ultimately, we need no other proof of his testimony. To quote Calvin:

Therefore, illumined by his power, we believe neither by our own nor by anyone else's judgment that Scripture is from God; but above human judgment we affirm with utter certainty (just as if we were gazing upon the majesty of God himself) that it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men (J. Calvin, *Institutes*, I, VII, 5).

b) The meaning of Scriptural authority

Scripture, then, is nothing less than 'the sceptre of God' (to use a favourite phrase of Calvin's). As such, it must be allowed to reign supreme in the church of God. However, it is important for us to understand what this does and does not mean in practice. Let me make three points:

[i] First of all, it does not mean that Jesus has given no authority to the church. What it does mean is that the Word of God has authority over the church, and that the church, therefore, must, in all things, submit to the Word. Article XX of the 39 Articles captures the point beautifully:

The Church has power to decree rites or ceremonies and authority in controversies of faith; and yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything contrary to God's word written (Art. XX).

[ii] Second, the supreme authority of Scripture does not mean that the Bible is the only authority in the church. What it does mean is that Scripture is the only *infallible* authority in the church, and therefore the *final* authority. All other authorities—such as church traditions, creeds and confessions, decisions by synods, Christian literature and liturgies, Christian songs and hymns, church ministers, parish councils and even Christian preaching—all must be tested against the bar of Scripture. If they pass the test they may be judged to be helpful. But if they fail the test they must be abolished or reformed. The Articles are again clear on this point. Article XXI, for example, says that:

[T]hings ordained by them (i.e. church councils) as necessary to salvation have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be declared that they be taken out of Holy Scripture (Art. XXI).

Article VIII, likewise tells us that the only reason why the Church of England accepted the ancient creeds was because 'they may be proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture.'

[iii] Third, the authority of Scripture does not mean that we must be either anti reason or anti experience. It does mean that both our reason and our experience must be submitted to Scripture if they are to be truly useful to us.

Regarding reason, Luther once declared:

Before faith and the knowledge of God, reason is mere darkness; but in the hands of those who believe, 'tis an excellent instrument. (Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, p. 49).

Regarding experience, evangelical theologian Donald Bloesch, helpfully comments:

The Word must indeed be experienced, but this is the experience of faith itself, which transcends the reach of man's perception as well as the power of man's conception. Moreover, the experience of faith is forever critical of itself as an experience and always points beyond itself to the Word. (D.G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, Vol. 1, p. 61).

This is very important. We are not saved by our experience. We are saved by the living enduring Word of God, which descends into our experience (certainly), but does not arise from it. Scripture therefore must shape and inform our experience, just as it must convert and control our reason, and judge and reform our traditions. The Westminster Confession sums up the point well:

The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture (*The Westminster Confession of Faith*, I, X).

3. Implementing Scriptural Authority in the Church

But if the Bible is indeed our final authority, then it's not enough simply to affirm Scriptural supremacy in theory, we must implement it into the lives of our churches. How do we do this? What will it mean? Once again, I shall make three points:

[i] First, *we will allow the Word of God to hold pride of place in the life of the church*. This means that we will give attention to the public reading of Scripture and to preaching and teaching (cf. 1 Tim. 4:13). It will also mean that we will seek to ensure that these activities are done well. Whilst being sensitive to the needs and the capacities of our congregations, we will resist the demand for short sermons. For as P.T. Forsyth rightly observed: 'a Christianity of short sermons is a Christianity of short stature.'

It will mean that we commit ourselves to personal and corporate Bible study, adopting methods and utilising resources that let the text speak for itself, rather than certain kinds of devotional notes which tend to speak for it and often undermine its meaning. It will further mean that we seek to allow Scripture to establish our priorities, again both personally and corporately, resisting the inherent consumerism (fuelled by the proliferation of endless life-application Bibles) which dominates contemporary Christianity, encouraging our native self-centredness and leading us to impose our agendas on Scripture, rather than the other way round.

In short, we will take seriously Scriptures' own claim to be sufficiently powerful to lead people to salvation and to thoroughly equip believers for every good work. This belief is winsomely expressed in Article VI of the 39 Articles:

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. (Art. VI).

[ii] *Second, we will test all things by the Word of God, holding on to what is good and avoiding every kind of evil.* This means that we will review everything in the church, and never assume that any particular tradition or form of practice is here to stay. If, for example, certain songs have outlived their usefulness, either because they don't communicate any more or because they'd been done to death, then they must be put to rest. Likewise, if the wearing of robes communicates that the ministers of the church belong to a higher spiritual order, then they must be destroyed. We must be ready to become all things to all people so that by all means we can save some (1 Cor. 9:22).

It also means that we will be ready to test the use (and usefulness) of certain gifts, as well as all claims to spiritual or prophetic insight (1 Thess. 5:13). The key question to ask is this: Do these things lead us more deeply into the knowledge and love of Christ, or do they take us away from him? Given that the Spirit who leads the children of God is the same Spirit who authored the Scriptures, there can be no conflict here. As Calvin long ago pointed out:

[T]he Spirit promised to us has not the task of inventing new and unheard of revelations, or of forging a new kind of doctrine, to lead us away from the received doctrine of the gospel, but of sealing our minds with that very doctrine which is commended by the gospel. (*Institutes*, I, IX, 1).

[iii] *Third, we will approach the important tasks of Biblical interpretation, in a biblically consistent manner.* The whole issue of interpretation is crucial. For the Bible can only rule over effectively us when it is properly understood. And it can only be properly understood when it is rightly interpreted. Therefore, we need to interpret the Bible in a way that

is faithful to itself, and consistent with its claim to supremacy.

The claim of the Roman Catholic church is that the Bible badly needs an outside interpreter for it 'does not bear its plain meaning on its face.' This claim, however, is Biblically inconsistent; for it suggests that the authoritative keys which unlock the meaning of Scripture belong to the church. This, once again, places the church over Scripture, and therefore undermines Biblical authority. In a similar vein, Post-modern approaches to interpretation suggest that it is the reader who supplies the interpretive keys. This then places the individual over Scripture.

By way of contrast, the Reformers insisted that the Bible must be interpreted 'from within', letting it speak for itself in its own terms. They thus suggested three interpretative principles, which have come to be known as 'The Analogy of Faith'. The principles are these: (1) That the final interpreter of Scripture is Scripture itself; (2) that Scripture must never be interpreted against Scripture; (3) that the obscure parts of Scripture must be interpreted by the clear ones. Again the Westminster Confession makes a helpful statement on this point:

The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly. (*The Westminster Confession of Faith*, I, IX).

Article xx of the 39 Articles also reflects this understanding when it declares that 'it is not lawful for the Church to ... so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another.' What this means in practice, then, is that we need to work hard, work humbly and to work prayerfully at the task of interpretation. We need to constantly allow Scripture to correct our false interpretations of it, so that we might faithfully hear and head the Spirit's voice. Moreover, as part of encouraging people to read the Bible, pastors need to instruct and guide their congregations as to how to responsibly interpret and apply the written Word.

4. Conclusion

The church of God has often been ashamed of the Word of God. At times it has even fought against it—as much of it is doing today. Jim Packer, in his book *Truth and Power: The place of Scripture in the Christian Life*, devotes a whole chapter to the history of the relationship between the church and the Bible; which he describes it as 'tense and complex' (p. 58). But it doesn't have to be that way. It is only ever made that way when the church foolishly thinks that it needs to supplement Scripture in order to make up for its deficiencies, or arrogantly sees itself as the authoritative interpreter of Scripture, rather than as a humble 'keeper of Holy writ' (Art. XX)!

Christ *alone* is the head of the Church. He exercises his loving

Lordship through the Word written, which is the sword of the Spirit. As God's sceptre, then, Scripture must be allowed to reign over God's people for it is the means by which the Spirit speaks to the churches. When church tradition is allowed to subvert Scriptural authority the result is the cultic institutionalism of Catholicism. When reason is allowed to subvert Scriptural authority the result is the humanistic rationalism of liberalism. When experience is allowed to subvert Scriptural authority the result is the subjective emotionalism of the charismaticism.

Evangelicals insist that because the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets (Eph. 2:20), it must continue to be built on and by this foundation. Otherwise, Christ the chief cornerstone will be cast off and the church (which bears his name) degenerate into a synagogue of Satan. The Reformers saw these issues clearly, understood why they mattered, and reformed the church accordingly. The task of reformation, however, is an ongoing one. *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*—the reformed church always needs to be reformed. This, then, is our task today: we must love the Word, do the Word, proclaim the Word and bring all things under the Word.

May God give us the humility, the wisdom and the strength and conviction we need, so that we might be found faithful in our day, just as so many of our evangelical forebears were faithful in theirs. Amen.

Rob Smith lectures at Sydney Missionary and Bible College in Sydney and is a member of the team at St. Clement's Anglican Church, Mosman. He is a graduate of Moore Theological College and is also a well-known Australian Christian singer/songwriter.

This paper was presented at the Anglican Church League's conference on the Bible – "Living and Active" – held at St. John's Cathedral, Parramatta, on 11th May 2002.

© Rob Smith and the Anglican Church League, 2002.
www.acl.asn.au

