

From Jesus to the Scriptures (and Back): Meeting the Crisis of Scripture as People of the Word

Lay Bible Institute - Fall 2016

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Part 3: Authority

Biblical Authority in the Modern Debate

The Modern Question: _____ the Bible authoritative?

A Better Question: _____ is the Bible authoritative?

Unpacking “Biblical Authority”

“Slogans and clichés are often shorthand ways of making more complex statements. In Christian theology, such phrases regularly act as “portable stories,” that is, ways of packing up longer narratives about God, Jesus, the church and the world, folding them away into convenient suitcases, and then carrying them about with us... They enable us to pick up lots of complicated things and carry them around all together. But we should never forget the point of doing so, like the point of carrying belongings in a suitcase, is that they can then be unpacked and put to use in the new location. Too much debate about scriptural authority has had the form of people hitting one another over the head with locked suitcases. It is time to unpack our shorthand doctrines, to lay them out and inspect them. Long years in a suitcase may have made some of the contents go moldy. They will benefit from fresh air, and perhaps a hot iron.”

Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 18.

Biblical Authority Begins with _____.

1. Authority to Teach

- John 7:16
- John 8:26–29
- John 14:24
- John 15:15
- John 17:6–8

- Matt 7:28–29
- Mark 1:22, 29
- Luke 4:32

2. Authority to Save

- Forgive sins
Matt 9:6; Luke 5:24
- Cast out demons
Mark 3:15; Luke 4:36
- Heal the sick
Matt. 4:23; John 4:46–54
- Raise the dead
Mark 5:35–42; Jn 11:1–44

Authority to teach... the _____ Word

- Matthew 28:20
- John 16:13

Authority to save... the _____ Word

- John 20:21–23
- Romans 1:16

Luther: “There is no other way to have sins forgiven than through the Word...The Lord, our God, has not promised to forgive our sins through any work that we do, but He has connected it with the unique work of Christ who has suffered and risen from the dead. This work he has, through the word, placed in the mouth of the apostles and the ministers of the Church, and in the cases of emergency of all Christians, to the end that they through it would distribute and proclaim the forgiveness of sins to those who desire it.”

Written Word—God teaches (“revelation-word”)
Spoken Word—God saves (“means-of-grace-word”)

“Luther gives both to Scripture (and the written word in general) and the oral testimony and preaching of the word their proper places in the Christian Church: the written word of God is primarily a “revelation-word,” which is the norm and standard of all faith, life, and teaching. The spoken word (in preaching, absolution, and sacraments) is the actual “means-of-grace-word,” through which God forgives sins, works faith, and imparts his Holy Spirit. Luther never says that Scripture has the office or ministry of reconciliation, or that Christ has given the power of the keys to the written Word; neither does Scripture itself contain any such statement. The ministry of reconciliation and the power of the keys are given to the living Christians of each generation, not to Scripture. God may work faith through the written word, namely faith in Him and His truth and promises, so that the penitent sinner can seek the Gospel in the Church from the ministry of reconciliation and be justified in believing it. In Luther’s view, Scripture is not given for the purpose that a person by means of it, independently from the Church, might care for the salvation of his soul.”

Uuras Saarnivaara (“Written and Spoken Word”)

We Confuse Biblical Authority When We...

1. Pit the authority of one form of the Word against another

Carl Braaten (Christian Dogmatics, Vol. 1): *The ultimate authority of Christian theology is not the biblical canon as such, but the gospel of Jesus Christ to which the Scriptures bear witness—the ‘canon within the canon.’ Jesus Christ himself is the Lord of the Scriptures, the source and scope of its authority.*

2. Assume that OT functions authoritatively exactly as the NT

Luther: “How Christians Should Regard Moses” (LW 35:161-174)

3. Expect New Revelations

Justin, the Lafferty Brothers, and “God told me”

4. Expect non-Christians to recognize biblical authority

1 Corinthians 2:13-14

John 2:22

1 Corinthians 15:14

5. Act as though the Scriptures are the only source of truth

Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, II.18.28

“Let every good and true Christian understand that wherever truth may be found, it belongs to his Master”

God Exercises His Authority Through Three Forms of the Word

Word Made Flesh—God teaches and saves

Spoken Word—God saves

Written Word—God teaches

Luther: "How Christians Should Regard Moses" (LW 35:161-174)

We will not have Moses as ruler or lawgiver any longer. Indeed God himself will not have it either. Moses was an intermediary solely for the Jewish people. It was to them that he gave the law. We must therefore silence the mouths of those factious spirits who say, "Thus says Moses," etc. Here you simply reply: Moses has nothing to do with us. If I were to accept Moses in one commandment, I would have to accept the entire Moses. Thus the consequence would be that if I accept Moses as master, then I must have myself circumcised, wash my clothes in the Jewish way, eat and drink and dress thus and so, and observe all that stuff. So, then, we will neither observe nor accept Moses. Moses is dead. His rule ended when Christ came. He is of no further service...

We will regard Moses as a teacher, but we will not regard him as our lawgiver - unless he agrees with both the New Testament and the natural law...

Now if anyone confronts you with Moses and his commandments, and wants to compel you to keep them, simply answer, "Go to the Jews with your Moses; I am no Jew. Do not entangle me with Moses. If I accept Moses in one respect [Paul tells the Galatians in chapter 5:3], then I am obligated to keep the entire law." For not one little period in Moses pertains to us...

One must deal cleanly with the Scriptures. From the very beginning the word has come to us in various ways. It is not enough simply to look and see whether this is God's word, whether God has said it; rather we must look and see to whom it has been spoken, whether it fits us. That makes all the difference between night and day...

The word in Scripture is of two kinds: the first does not pertain or apply to me, the other kind does. And upon that word which does pertain to me I can boldly trust and rely, as upon a strong rock. But if it does not pertain to me, then I should stand still...

Therefore tell this to Moses: Leave Moses and his people together; they have had their day and do not pertain to me. I listen to that word which applies to me. We have the gospel...

Question: Why then do you preach about Moses if he does not pertain to us?

Answer to the Question: Three things are to be noted in Moses. I want to keep Moses and not sweep him under the rug, because I find three things in Moses...

In the first place I dismiss the commandments given to the people of Israel. They neither urge nor compel me. They are dead and gone, except insofar as I gladly and willingly accept something from Moses, as if I said, "This is how Moses ruled, and it seems fine to me, so I will follow him in this or that particular"...

In the second place I find something in Moses that I do not have from nature: the promises and pledges of God about Christ...

In the third place we read Moses for the beautiful examples of faith, of love, and of the cross, as shown in the fathers, Adam, Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and all the rest. From them we should learn to trust in God and love him. In turn there are also examples of the godless, how God does not pardon the unfaith of the unbelieving; how he can punish Cain, Ishmael, Esau, the whole world in the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, etc. Examples like these are necessary. For although I am not Cain, yet if I should act like Cain, I will receive the same punishment as Cain. Nowhere else do we find such fine examples of both faith and unfaith.

Therefore we should not sweep Moses under the rug. Moreover the Old Testament is thus properly understood when we retain from the prophets the beautiful texts about Christ, when we take note of and thoroughly grasp the fine examples, and when we use the laws as we please to our advantage.