

# Authored by the Book

## A Plain Account of Biblical Authority

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A few years ago I taught a course and wrote a book with Clark Pinnock, a noted evangelical theologian. In those discussions, Pinnock and I had what we felt to be a quite substantive yet civil theological exchange.<sup>1</sup> Since the exchanges of other so-called “conservatives” and “liberals” were often vitriolic we wondered why ours were not. In the end we decided that we could combine civility with substantial difference as a consequence of our peculiarly paralleled histories. I had been nurtured in a conservative religious community; he had been nurtured in a mainline/liberal tradition. He had gradually moved to the right; I had gradually moved to the left. Neither of us had moved out of anger, but with the sense that our original homes no longer quite fit and a different location would be a more honest place for us to inhabit. Further, and this is important, each of us retained a strong and clear sense of the richness and value (as well as weaknesses) of the communities that had originally nurtured us. I never lost my appreciation for the affective power within my Christian community of origin. Pinnock never lost his appreciation for the dedication to truth that was characteristic of his beginning place. We decided that these parallels in our history had taught us the same thing—namely, that the “other side” had something of value to offer. We could not accept the regnant theological caricatures by which each group demeaned, disdained, and despised the other because we had felt in our bones, and thus could not forget in our heads, the value of the communal identities on that “other side” from which we had departed.

The other side almost certainly has something of value that I need—need to hear, need to think about, and to the extent possible need to experience. That is the assumption I bring to the discussion of the topic before us. But perhaps it is also true that I may have something to be considered by those who differ with me. If so, then it is my obligation to them to be as clear as I can about my point of view so that what is of potential value to them might be most readily apparent. This, too, is an assumption with which I come to this and any conversation among those with whom I may differ theologically.

Mine might be called a “liberal” position on biblical authority. I do not object to that label so long as it does not obscure the very significant ways in which my views on the Bible (and on tradition) differs from what “liberal” has connoted in theology during much of the past century. Just as important, I am a number of things other than a liberal. If the issue is my general philosophical orientation, I am a process thinker. If the issue is theological method, I am a historicist (as that term is used on the American theological scene today). But most important, about what forms and informs me in these and many other respects, I am a Christian theologian. And that brings me to the topic of this paper.

My understanding of biblical authority will here be approached in two complementary ways, hermeneutical and theological. In each case what I “purpose” to do, if I may presume to adapt a passage from John Wesley, is “to give a plain and distinct account of the steps by which I was led, during a course of many years, to embrace the doctrine of biblical authority.”<sup>2</sup>

## Hermeneutical Analysis

Hermeneutics has to do with the process of interpretation and its proper standards. We usually assume this means the interpretation of texts and it does, but hermeneutics is not only that. Hermeneutics can and should include as well the interpretation of rituals, social structures, objects, practices and, indeed, communities. On reflection, I have come to believe that my own perspective on biblical authority derives first of all from my interpretation of the religious setting that nourished me. It was a setting in which we were formed by the biblical heritage. By biblical heritage I mean the Bible as it was effective in our community through reading, discussion, ritual, song, and prayer—in short, the Bible as interpreted in affection and intellection. The choruses sung in youth groups, the testimonies and tears in prayer meetings, the rousing hymns and anthems on Sunday morning, the sermons that addressed our fears and hopes and called us to faithfulness, the study of biblical text and Christian history in Sunday School, and most important the depth of communal affection to which all of this gave rise—these formed us. Interestingly, these formed us differently and made us different. The facets of this biblical heritage that formed us most importantly varied somewhat from person to person. For some it was music primarily, for others story, for others teaching, for others the rituals (though we would never have called them that!), for others communal structures, for others the support of relationships, for others the examples provided by role models. In addition, though immersed in the same biblical heritage, we were drawn toward different ways of thinking, acting, being. Although it was a community that at the time would have been labeled “sectarian” by sociologists (a Wesleyan, holiness sect), it was not homogenous. Though formed together, we were formed differently.

What I am offering here is a description, with evaluative tones muted. If I were to evaluate this kind of setting, I would say it was redemptive and destructive, healing and dangerous. To some degree I suspect that must be said of every religious community. Nor, in point of fact, is my community of origin one to which I could now fruitfully return. My point here, however, is to note that in this community the biblical heritage shaped us, that its power was manifest in different ways, and that it had different consequences. The biblical heritage was experienced differently and it had different results. It produced a vital pluralism.

When I turn from an interpretation of my originating community to the text that formed it and us within it, I find the vital pluralism of this community quite understandable. The Bible produced a vital pluralism in us because the Bible is a vital pluralism. In one sense this is not debated. The Bible is a collection of poems, stories, myths, legends, histories, and teachings that address the varied dimensions of being human. They inspire, instruct, inform, condemn and challenge, reveal and conceal, in a variety of ways, affective and intellectual. It is simply descriptive to say that we live out of that richness in multiple ways. But I believe that the variation in its form and mode of impact on us, is evident, too, in its teachings. Views of human relations that are authoritarian and liberationist, hierarchical and egalitarian, are found there. Adoption and pre-existence Christologies are evident in it. In the New Testament the Jewish Torah is said to be abrogated by Christ at some points and fulfilled by Christ at others. The equality of women is supported in it, as is their subordination to men. Salvation is by faith in Jesus in some portions of the New Testament and by emulating his obedience through suffering in others. To quote Clark Pinnock:

[T]here is a rich diversity in biblical teaching, which adds to its profundity.... There seems to be a variety of teachings.... Some real diversity exists [for example] between the several New Testament writers as regards the person and work of Christ, and we have no right to force one writer to say what another says. Tight consistency is not what we find when we read the Bible. It is like...an orchestra rather than a single solo instrument.<sup>3</sup>

Referring to this as the “polyphony of Scripture” Pinnock concludes: “The Bible is not coherent and unified in the way we might choose, but in the way God has chosen.”<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, the Bible can be construed as having one fundamental message, and certainly the believing interpreter always does construe it in some particular way as descriptive of its fundamental meaning. But the important point here is that there are a variety of ways the fundamental meaning of the Bible can be construed, legitimately construed. The variety of voices can be integrated in several ways, so that in its parts or as a whole the Bible speaks to us with a variety of voices.

I think it is most credible to say that the Bible teaches us precisely through its diversity, precisely by placing us in the midst of its many voices. That is a condition of its generativity. Indeed, the polyphony of claims and meanings in scripture is not its problem; polyphony is an essential part of its power. A uniform scripture is a scripture destined for irrelevance as new contexts develop, new perspectives emerge, new problems confront. Only a richly variegated and pluriform scripture can endure. Hence Pinnock says that the Bible’s diversity is to be viewed as “the divine pedagogy.... The Bible in the form it comes to us is the kind of teacher that draws us into the process of learning and helps us to think theologically and ethically ourselves in new situations.”<sup>5</sup>

That, in retrospect, is how the Bible functioned, it now seems to me, in my religious community of origin, and indeed in my own personal formation. In and through the diversity of Scripture we are led forward to think for ourselves in communities of diverse views, in situations of diverse options, in the face of problems with different resolutions. The Bible refuses our efforts to reduce it to one voice. If we edge toward rigidity, biblical voices of freedom challenge us. If we veer toward antinomianism, a transformed law is said to save. If we lapse into quiescence, we are called to action. If we exhaust ourselves in worldly doing, mystical resolutions beyond human effort lure us. If we claim God for ourselves, we are told that our knowledge is foolishness. If we hide behind our fallibility, we are challenged to speak boldly. The Bible molds us precisely through its diversity, precisely by placing us in the midst of its many voices.

How, then, can we speak of the Bible’s authority? Surely not as its singular norm to which we must adhere. It gives us no singular norm, no univocal voice, no one basic grammar, no privileged standpoint, at least of any specificity. To what, then, could we adhere? However, to deny that the Bible is in fact authoritative, basic, privileged in the Christian community is ignore the experience and practice of Christians everywhere. The Bible is authoritative in some important respect, surely, but how can that be? How can the Bible, so diverse in content as well as consequences, be that to which we could possibly conform, even if we wished to do so.

Some years ago, puzzling precisely over this, I ran across a discussion by Hannah Arendt on the concept of “authority.”<sup>6</sup> It is an account of what I would call the “normative” view of authority, the view that an authority is a singular standard or norm to which one should conform. Arendt found the origins of this concept in the development of centralized political rule among the Greeks. What could be the foundation of such a rule? The Greeks debated this matter and resolved it in different ways, but the Romans gave it a definitive answer. What can be the foundation of Roman rule? Well, of course, the foundation itself! “At the heart of Roman politics,” Arendt says, “stands the conviction of the sacredness of foundation, in the sense that once something has been founded it remains binding for all future generations.” In Rome “religion meant *religare*: to be tied back, obligated...to the legendary effort to lay the foundations, to build the cornerstone, to found for eternity. To be religious meant to be tied to the past.”<sup>7</sup> Arendt writes: “The word *auctoritas* derives from the verb ‘[to] augment,’ and what is augmented is “the foundation.”<sup>8</sup> With the Romans, this legendary foundation gradually was

transmuted into a canon, a standard of measurements and rules applicable to all behaviors and beliefs, including those of religion.

Early institutional Christianity understandably appropriated this Roman view of authority. The Christian's authority is an objective standard of measurement that validates all that conforms to it. The Apostles, witnesses to Jesus, became the "founding fathers" of the Church. The Church derived its authority from the apostolic witness so long as it conformed to that Apostolic witness. The dispute among Christians at the time of the Reformation was among Romanized Christians. Even though their practice departed from it, conceptually Protestants and Catholics alike worked with a Roman, normative interpretation of Christianity's founding event, now transmuted into a biblical canon. At the level of doctrine, the Bible was said to be, or to provide, an objective measure to be conformed to, and acknowledging its authority meant to conform to it.

But what could it mean to conform to a text so diverse in content?

And why was "conformity" so unlike the actual practice of Christian communities—the one in which I had been formed as well as those I had observed?

I began to read "tradition criticism" of the Old Testament. I found there another implicit concept of authority, one, moreover that reflected what I observed to be the actual practice in Christian churches. The work of these Hebrew Bible scholars disclosed the creativity with which each generation treated the traditions it honored.<sup>9</sup> The prophets, for example, lived from their histories, but they did so creatively—adapting and sometimes even reversing the interpretation of that history to meet the needs of new times. I read James Sanders who claimed that the theologians after the Exile had simply deleted the conquest of the land of Israel from the Torah because it made no sense in their new situation.<sup>10</sup> In these traditions, creativity rather than conformity was at work. Tradition was authoritative, but not as a fixed and singular past that must be reduplicated. Authority did not mean that which "authorizes" by virtue of being conformed to; it meant something else. What?

The concept of "authority" is not univocal in the New Testament, but one construal of what it means is particularly interesting for addressing the question at hand. Jesus, for example, is said to have spoken to the crowds as one having authority, *exousia* (Mark 1:22, Luke 4:32 and Matthew 7:29). Basic to the uses of *exousia* in the New Testament is the notion of a right and power to act or respond creatively. This power is first of all God's, then that of Jesus, and finally it is a power extended to the believing community.<sup>11</sup> The focus is on the creativity, power, freedom of the authoritative source. That is, authority has to do with the creativity appropriate to an action, not the conformity appropriate to a reaction. In fact, authority extends authority—extends the rightful freedom and power to respond creatively. Authority does not command conformity; it commends freedom. Authority viewed in this way is not an "authorizer," something that specifies unyielding standards to which one must conform. Authority is empowerment.<sup>12</sup>

This alternative view is preserved in another strand of the history of the concept of authority, one that appears in our idea of "author." An authority in this sense is that which authors—that which gives being to, forms, empowers, calls to creativity. An authority "authors!" Even literal authors testify to the fact that their creations, their characters, take on a vitality of their own. The author gives life to his or her characters, but these creations are no mere puppets—they take on a life of their own so that in a secondary sense at least they begin to author themselves. They acquire a measure of autonomy, of self-creation. They even contend against the author who continues to "write" them, taking the plot in directions unanticipated by the one who gave and continues to give them life. The author, giving life, bestows freedom; the creatures, given life, become creators. The creativity of the character continues...so long, that is, as it remains rooted in the undergirding power of the writer. Indeed the very being of the character is its dynamic

dependence on, and interaction with, the being of the author. The character cannot be who it is without the authorial grounding, but for the character to be at all is for it to be creative

I have found this to be a helpful model in thinking about the Bible's authority. It makes sense of the dynamic power of the richly variegated nature of Scripture. It makes sense of the actual dynamics of the interpretation and celebration of Scripture in the histories of Christian communities. The Bible, as scripture, is not that which norms us; it is that which forms us. We constantly interact with this or that voice within Scripture—questioning it and being questioned, listening to it and being heard, arguing with it and being challenged, denouncing it and being denounced, celebrating it and being celebrated in it, struggling with it and in the process being named. The authority of scripture is the creative power it manifests and therefore enables in those who inhabit it, its capacity again and again to create and re-create individual and communal identities.

### **Theological Critique**

Given this background, it becomes evident that both the usual conservative views of biblical authority and the typical liberal views are inadequate. Conservative theology ignores the diversity of scripture; liberal theology ignores its centrality to Christian existence. Thus both misunderstand its role in Christian life.

Conservative theology has generally held that the Bible has a univocal meaning to which authentic Christianity must conform. Popular versions of this position suppose that this one Biblical meaning or message is consistent and evident throughout. More careful conservatism acknowledges the problematic character of the Biblical text and even the manifoldness of its voices, but contends that a proper interpretation will disclose the one basic meaning or content inherent in the text itself. This general position is almost right, for two reasons.

First, when comparing different scriptural traditions, such as the Christian Bible and the texts of Tibetan Buddhism, one does indeed find that broadly speaking each has its own distinctive "take" on things. In that kind of comparative situation, talk about *a* Christian worldview, or *a* Jewish-Christian worldview, or *a* monotheistic worldview makes perfectly good sense. But in each case the singular worldview is in fact a family of perspectives, the members of which are compatible, complementary, and contradictory in various ways. The Biblical worldview is a family, a large family of great diversity.

Second, the conservative view has a measure of truth in the fact that whenever the believer confronts the scripture as believer, its various possible construals are subordinated to one that is then taken to be its fundamental and driving meaning for the believer. The gospels of liberation, justification, incarnation, sanctification, and mystical union are examples of this. In very large terms they get along with each other quite well as the different and perhaps somewhat eccentric members of a family should, but when examined with care (usually in conflict!) their honest and irreconcilable differences appear. And when each takes its turn as dominant in particular Christian communities or periods of history, its distinctiveness pours forth in its distinctive modes of life, assessments of the human condition, and interpretations of ultimacy. These can be so distinctive, in fact, that some historians are driven to speak of Christianities, each with their own Gods, Christs, and salvations.<sup>13</sup> But of most importance for our purposes, each construal is a legitimate member of the family; each has a substantive claim to family membership. While some voices are more marginal than others, among many of the most persistent voices none is the final one that demonstrably and for all time trumps the others.

Conservatives, not entirely unaware of the textual realities that drive toward this kind of conclusion, have striven mightily to deal with it through a maze of interpretive gymnastics with

which they themselves are often uneasy. Even so, they reason that some such interpretive twist simply must be right if the authority of the Bible, which they experience, is to be sustained. That they experience the Bible's authority I do not challenge. That they have such enormous difficulty giving a convincing account of it is, I think, due to their enthrallment with a Roman view of authority—their assumption that an authority is that to which one must conform.

Liberalism acknowledges the irreducible diversity within scripture and comes to the uneasy, often unadmitted, conclusion that the Bible is not authoritative at all. It is a great book, an inspiring book, even “our” book, but it has for the Christian no unique role other than that of its special familiarity. This typical liberal view is based on the same mistake as that made by the conservatives, the assumption that an authority is that to which one must conform. Liberals reason: since an authority is that which must be conformed to, and since the Bible cannot be conformed to, given its diversity, it cannot truly be authoritative for Christians. As a result liberalism has to one degree or another emptied the concept of biblical authority of all content and often it has simply abandoned the term. The loss of the term itself is not a tragedy—it is, after all, just a word. What is unfortunate, indeed tragic, is the concomitant loss among liberals of a sense of the Bible's fundamental role as formative for Christian identity. The result is a liberal Christian theology too often indistinguishable, in form or content, from any serious reflection on matters of life and death. Liberal Christian preaching is too often editorializing indistinguishable from the current political, sociological or psychological consensus, with biblical allusions. Liberal Christian religious education is too often pedagogy indistinguishable from current educational theories, practice and content, with biblical allusions. Liberal Christian nurture is too often indistinguishable from the strategies of small group leadership and community building evident everywhere, with biblical allusions added.

The consequence of liberalism's misunderstanding of authority is its misreading of humanness. Humans are historical, indelibly historical. Humans are traditioned. They are creative, innovative and they should be, but their creations arise out of the resources of inherited contexts. They reconstruct their traditions, and they should, but it is their traditions that they reconstruct. Their identities are not fixed, they are dynamic, but they well up out of the dynamic manifoldness of their inheritance. Humans do not flit around from wisdom source to wisdom source as bees move from flower to flower; they are rooted in particular histories and from these they live forward creatively. They learn, think and grow into effective identities when they have, and honor, a history from which they learn, with which they argue, about which they think, and in which they celebrate.

Humans have identities to the extent that they have effective histories, traditions. A tradition is life lived within a canon of stories, texts, rituals, doctrines, or most likely some combination of these. A durable canon is inherently diverse, as is the Christian's scripture. A durable tradition is porous (open to external influences) and fluid (internally changing), as is the Christian tradition. Christian identity derives from participation in the manifoldness of Christian tradition, rooted in the manifoldness of Christian scripture.<sup>14</sup>

Liberalism's failure to see this derives from its restricted doctrine of incarnation. God incarnate in all of the many strands of human history and, for the Christian, in Jesus Christ distinctively. But humans, too, are incarnate in particular historical strands that we might term “traditions.” Traditions are rooted in particular formative sources that we might term “canons.” We are embedded in our particular human histories even as, in Christian theology, God is embedded in human history. The liberalism of the last century, with very few exceptions, has failed to take with sufficient seriousness our human historicity, our incarnatedness in particular histories.

Conservatism, too, has compromised the doctrine of the incarnation, in this case with respect to scripture. How often do conservative theologians distinguish some version of the Biblical message from human culture, as if the Bible like all historic texts is not fully incarnate in human culture? God is incarnate, humans are incarnate, and the Bible, too, is incarnate in history. As Clark Pinnock insists, we must let the Bible be what it is, not what our theological preconceptions pressure us to think it is. The Bible is fully historical with all of the characteristics of historicity. We believe it to be fully human because it bears the marks of fallible human finitude. We believe it to be fully divine because through our interpretation, contestation and celebration of its richness we come to self-identity through a process of redemption and recreation that is not of our own doing.

Conservatism and liberalism have both slighted the doctrine of incarnation in two other ways.

First, liberals and conservatives alike have slighted our incarnation in embodiedness. Both have been unduly intellectualist. The Bible is not first of all a compendium of diverse doctrines to be reflected on and accepted or rejected; it is a collection of stories, practices, intuitions, feelings, and beliefs to be entered, explored, engaged and creatively appropriated through all the dimensions of our being. In some important ways, Protestantism was mistaken. The divine voice is as much song, dance, smell, image, object and action as it is divine word. The interpretation of scripture is an activity of the whole person and not of the mind alone

Second, liberals and conservatives both have slighted the incarnation of interpreters in communities. Both have been unduly individualistic. The Bible is many voices spoken in communities, compiled by many editors working in communities, transmitted by many bearers practicing in communities, and received today in communities. And if the Bible's plurivocity—its manifold voices—is a mark of its vitality, our interpretive diversity is a mark of ours. There is no effective interpretive diversity apart from community. Our differences as Christians are essential to our interpretive task as Christians.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Clark H. Pinnock and Delwin Brown, Theological Crossfire: An Evangelical/Liberal Dialogue (Grand Rapids, 1990; Wipf and Stock, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> John Wesley, A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, Section 1.

<sup>3</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, The Scripture Principle (Harper & Row, 1984), p. 71f.

<sup>4</sup> Pinnock, p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> Pinnock, p. 194.

<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, "What Was Authority?" in Carl J. Friedrich, ed., Authority (Harvard University Press, 1958).

<sup>7</sup> Arendt, p. 98f.

<sup>8</sup> Arendt, p. 99f.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Douglas A. Knight, Rediscovering the Traditions of Israel (Scholars Press, 1975), and Knight, ed., Tradition and Theology of the Old Testament, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> James Sanders, Torah and Canon (Fortress, 1972).

<sup>11</sup> Werner Foerster, "Exousia," in Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, vol. 2, Gerhard Kittel, ed., (Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 562-74.

<sup>12</sup> For an elaboration of the view delineated here, see Delwin Brown, "Struggle till Daybreak: On the Nature of Authority in Theology," Journal of Religion, 65/1 (1985), 15-32.

<sup>13</sup> William A. Clebsch, Christianity in European History (Oxford, 1979).

<sup>14</sup> For more on this view of tradition and Christian identity, see Delwin Brown, Boundaries of Our Habitations: Tradition and Theological Construction (SUNY Press, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> The original version of this paper was presented at The Consultation on Scriptural Authority and the Nature of God's Revelation, jointly sponsored by the General Board of Discipleship and the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns of the United Methodist Church (Nashville, December 1999).