

Systematic Theology for the Local Church

#10—Bibliology—Part I¹

Fulfilling Our Need for Authority

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For studies in bibliology: Begin to study Sections 6-12 in House's *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine*. Read all of Packer's *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*. Packer's book was written against the background of the debate with Fundamentalism in the late 20th century. However, his presentation of the systems of authority (reason, tradition and Scripture) is timeless. Also, begin to read Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, chapter 1, which deals with revelation, and chapter 5, which deals with the Bible as the basis for life. I encourage you to bring House's book on Sundays and Wednesdays, since we will refer to it during the studies. It is also valuable to have your notebook with the set of definitions so you can look up any terms that you are unfamiliar with.

The need for authority

Although God Himself should be the center of our thinking as we study theology, it is appropriate that we first consider how He has communicated with us. What is the nature of that permanent written record we call the Bible? The answer to this question belongs to the province of *bibliology*. Here is a simple definition of this area of theological study:

Bibliology is the doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.*

When we come to the study of the nature of the Bible, we are involved with systems of belief—Why do I believe one thing as opposed to another? And why, on the basis of what I believe, do I do one thing and not something else? This is a question of authority. What belief-action system do I place myself under, using it as the reference-point or basis for what I think, and how I act? This is significant for every human being, because it ultimately determines everything that we think and do. J. I. Packer's book *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* was written to address the problem of authority with regard to those that claim to be Christian (whether true or false). He says, "The problem of authority is the most fundamental problem that the Christian Church ever faces."²

Here are some definitions of 'authority' gleaned from the Internet. They do not have particular reference to authority in spiritual things.

- A basis for validity and trustworthiness
- The rights inherent in a position to give instructions and to expect others to follow those instructions.

Since the fall, human beings have always, in regard to moral and spiritual issues, tried to avoid the authority system that comes from God. In its place they have erected many alternatives, all of which are counterfeits, some more blatant than others. In essence, the substitutes all put the individual at the center, investing him with the capability to make his own decisions without an outside reference point. To be sure, when this obviously damages society, enough people get together and alter or abolish particular variations of authority systems. But in the final analysis, according to these systems, a human being is his own authority.

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² J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 42.

It is significant that in spiritual matters there have been within the last 200 years blatant attempts to make individual-centered systems the official position of Christianity. The extreme liberal of the 19th and early 20th centuries was very much influenced by philosophical trends that suggested that human beings could not know God as He is³, and so people might as well talk only about their thoughts concerning God. German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) was influential in popularizing this view. It is only one step from this to the position that human beings, individually or collectively, are the standard for knowing, grasping and recognizing truth, if any such thing is left! In the 19th century this was funneled through seminaries and led to the theological position that the Bible is only a human book, since people couldn't know anything about God apart from their own thoughts. In the classic liberal view the Bible is only a record of human beings' experiences of God.

Fortunately, there has been a swing away from that position in non-conservative theological thinking. But that position—which amounts to subjectivism—is always at odds with the Bible and God's system, no matter how vigorously it is espoused. Many non-conservatives today believe that the Bible is not a message from God in and of itself, but becomes the word of God to an individual when he finds something in it that touches his experience. If we look at this from the standpoint of authority, then we realize right away that the individual has managed to come to a place where he believes he is responsible to no one but himself, that he is his own authority.

God's provision of a source of authority

It does not take much thinking to realize that the Bible makes claims about itself that are totally contrary to this kind of position. For example, integral to the outlook of the Old Testament especially is the idea that God has been present in history, that He has communicated with us. In Isa. 7:14 we are taught by the concept of "God with us" that His purposes in history are focused on the incarnation. Our Lord Jesus Christ is called the Word of God, God's ultimate revelation to humanity (Jn.1:1).

According to Rom 3:23 we are, because of sin, unable to reach in any way the perfections of a holy God. This includes communication with Him. In addition to sin, there is also a separation between God and the created being. Eternal is contrasted with temporal, infinite with finite, uncreated with created. Thus, we are separated from God in two basic ways: creatureliness and sinfulness.

Thankfully, God has intervened. Left to ourselves we would bring our entire race to destruction. But God has revealed to us both Himself and His will for us. He has not left Himself without witness in nature. We have only to realize that there is a clear revelation in nature of the general character of God, His power, and His wisdom. We see also that humanity has denied this revelation and gone its own way, creating its own objects of worship. Rom. 1:18-23 portrays this graphically.

18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

³ Certainly I am not claiming that anyone can know God perfectly; we will spend eternity learning about Him. But I claim that we can know certain objectively true things about God—for example, that He is a personal being, that He is holy, loving and good and has a will and intelligence.

In addition, God has revealed Himself in special, direct ways. There is much to think upon in the hymn verse that reads:

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word.
What more can He say than to you He hath said,
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?

We see here the concept of a basis of faith, trust and salvation, and a foundation for life, not only in this world but also in that to come. The Word of God meets us in our need and directs us to Jesus Christ, who provided refuge from the penalty of our sin. The words of this hymn serve to point out to us many of the issues involved in this matter of revelation and the authority of God's disclosure to us of a message that we desperately needed to hear.

Here is a definition of 'authority' as the word is used in connection with the Bible:

Biblical authority is the quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.*

In his *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* Robert Reymond has a chapter entitled "The Bible as the Ποῦ Στῶ for Knowledge and Personal Significance." The phrase Ποῦ Στῶ (*pou stō*) is drawn from Archimedes' famous quote concerning the use of a lever and fulcrum: "Give me a [a place] where I may stand and I will move the world." It lies behind the translation 'where I may stand' and could simply be rendered 'a place to stand.' Pointing out that this fulcrum would have to come from outside the world, Reymond compares Archimedes' phrase to the provision from outside our world of a basis for life⁴:

[The Christian] recognizes that in the fact of Scripture itself he has a truly profound solution to man's need for an infinite reference point if knowledge is to become a reality. He understands that because there is comprehensive knowledge with God, real and true knowledge is possible for man, since God who knows all the data exhaustively in all their infinite relationships and who possesses therefore true knowledge is in the position to impart any portion of that true knowledge to man. The Christian believes that this is precisely what God did when he revealed himself to man propositionally. And he rests in the confidence that it is precisely in and by the Scriptures—coming to him *ab extra* (from "outside the cosmos")—that he has the "Archimedean Ποῦ Στῶ" that he needs for the buildup of knowledge and the justification of his knowledge claims.⁵

Perhaps it would be helpful at this point to summarize what we have just said as an introduction to the doctrine of bibliology:

1. The orthodox doctrine of the Church until the 18th century was that the Bible is a supernatural revelation from God.

⁴ Reymond uses the term 'propositionally' to refer to statements that can be assigned a truth value, that is, it makes sense to say about them that they are true or false. For example, "It is raining today" is a proposition or propositional statement. But "I am sad today" is not, since it cannot be evaluated as to whether it is true or not. Similarly, I would assert and Reymond would also that "Jesus died, was buried and was raised on the third day" is a propositional statement. However, many non-conservatives would say that it is not propositional and is only a statement of the feelings of a writer of the New Testament. For them it may be meaningful, but we cannot say it is either true or false.

⁵ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of The Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 115.

2. Much of so-called Christendom has fallen prey to a reversal in the basis of theology, namely that since we can't know God as He is, we cannot know if He has spoken, and the Bible is certainly not revealed truth from God.
3. The basis for a good part of Christian theology has become the individual, rather than a God who has revealed Himself.
4. The whole matter is an issue of having a basis for what we believe and do.
5. The revelation that is Scripture provides a reference point that is outside ourselves and so knowledge that is beyond us and objective.
6. We are separated from God and in His grace He has intervened to reveal to us how we can reach and please Him. This is the clear teaching of Scripture about itself. If it were not for philosophical assertions to the contrary, and our bent toward turning from God to ourselves, we would read Scripture this way.

The question of an authoritative revelation of a self-disclosing God is crucial for any work in spiritual matters. In many instances it provides the key to discerning errors in theology among those who study the Bible.

Scripture as God's authority

C. H. Spurgeon once said, "There is no need for you to defend a lion when he is being attacked. All you need to do is to open the gate and let him out!" The Bible in action is like that. As a result of its inspiration, it possesses a quality that has been described as *authority* and that assures that it is the complete expression of God's sovereign will for human beings.

One example of the Bible's presentation of its own authority is found in Jesus' view of Scripture. His view of the Old Testament showed that He believed that it was authoritative for Him, that He had to depend on it entirely and that it had permanent spiritual validity. This is suggested, for example, by the little phrase "it stands written," as found in Mt. 4:4, 7, and 10, and elsewhere. There are other passages where Jesus' outlook on the Scriptures comes through clearly.

Some who call themselves Christians pit Jesus against Scripture, wanting Christianity without the Christ of Scripture. As Packer says, "[Some] tell us that the final authority for Christians is not Scripture, but Christ, whom we must regard as standing apart from it and above it."⁶ But, writing concerning the relation of Jesus to Christian faith and practice, he points out that "The authentic Christian position on any subject . . . will be that which corresponds with what He taught."⁷ Jesus' words and actions are of highest importance for the matter of authority.

In Mk. 12:18-23 Jesus is queried by the Sadducees, who pose a hypothetical riddle in an attempt to trap Him. His reply amounts to a rebuke: "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?" The Sadducees should have known Ex. 3:6, which He goes on to cite. Consequently, Jesus chides them for not knowing from Scripture what God said and not applying it to give them the answer and to correct their error. Scripture would have told them the correct and spiritually valid answer because of its authority. Here, then, is an important sequence. The Bible possesses authority over life; it brings correct doctrine (teaching) into a life; the result, all other things being equal, is correct practice.

Jesus' view of the Old Testament and His use of it provide only one among many examples of the Bible's teaching about its own authority. We will see more in future studies.

⁶ Packer, 61.

⁷ Packer, 51.

Authority systems and Christianity

The issue of authority is of immediate relevance for every person's life. We automatically assume some source of authority, some reference point for our lives, whether ourselves or something or someone external to us. The Bible provides that authority because, due to revelation and inspiration, it is authoritative in itself. It is a unique and sufficient guide for life, and claims to be the very best one.

Packer points out that there are only three possible answers to the question of authority. We are either traditionalists, subjectivists, or biblicists. The traditionalist (in regard to "Christian" issues) holds that the Bible isn't a safe guide. Instead, he claims, we can look to tradition to supply what is lacking in Scripture, which isn't a sufficient authority because it isn't self-contained (outside information must be added to it) or self-interpreting (outside institutional sources must interpret it for the average person).

The subjectivist holds that human reason is the standard for authority. This position is decentralized (as opposed to the institutional or traditional) and has as many sub-manifestations as there are individuals. But wherever it is found it has the same simple pattern: human beings believe they are qualified to pass final judgment on the trustworthiness of the Bible and, if it is deemed unreliable in whole or in part, to substitute for it anything else they wish.

The biblicist holds that the Bible is the final authority for everything in life. Even if we don't understand it (and no one understands all of it), we are answerable to it. As a matter of fact, even if we never hear it we are still answerable to it. If a person never hears a word from the Bible, and hence never hears the Gospel, he will be lost just as surely as if he had heard the Gospel over and over for years and rejected it. The Bible possesses its authority over us independently of us.

There are several very practical implications of this. To begin with, every word of the Bible is binding on our lives. Just as our Lord Jesus Christ was in subjection to its authority, even in its finest points, so we should be, too. This means we have to study it and soak in it, then ask God how to apply it. No area of our lives is exempt from its scrutiny. We are in trouble before God if we don't say in everything, "I will start with Scripture. What does Scripture say? I will look to it first and construct my ways of behavior from it." Remember, because of the authority of Scripture, service in an organization, in a church, in a Christian school—anywhere—is of no value to God unless it is done in accord with Scripture.

This applies positively as well as negatively. We are obligated to find out what the Bible says. But we are also obligated to discern when what we are doing and what it says do not match. We are always under a divine injunction to search for and discard error, whether in what we believe or what we do. Packer summarizes this forcefully:

Inevitably, we grow up children of our own age, reflecting in our outlook the mental environment in which we were reared. The process is as natural as breathing in the air around us, and as unconscious. It is easy to be unaware that it has happened; it is hard even to begin to realize how profoundly tradition in this sense has moulded us. But we are forbidden to become enslaved to human tradition, whether secular or Christian, whether it be 'catholic' tradition, or 'critical' tradition, or 'ecumenical' tradition, or even 'evangelical' tradition. We may never assume the complete rightness of our own established ways of thought and practice and excuse ourselves the duty of testing and reforming them by Scripture.⁸

⁸ Packer, 69-70.

True worth as persons

Robert Reymond writes powerfully about the relation between human worth and the account of creation found in Scripture:

Not only is the Bible man's $\Pi\omicron\upsilon$ $\Sigma\tau\hat{\omega}$ for the justification of knowledge; it is also his $\Pi\omicron\upsilon$ $\Sigma\tau\hat{\omega}$, via its doctrine of creation and God's interpretation of his created state, for human personal significance. It is the biblical doctrine of creation in a unique and profound way that defines who we are—*personal*, significant, covenant-creatures—*unlike* God, true enough, in that we are created, but *like* him in that we are created in his image.⁹

Underscoring the importance of taking the creation account as historical, Reymond points out that the evolutionist's idea that the universe arose from nothing violates the basic dictum of science that “nothing comes from nothing.” Further, if we have come from nothingness, from “impersonal being,” how can we have any significance? In their denial of God, Reymond says, evolutionists “also destroy their own significance as human beings.”¹⁰ Concerning those that claim we have come from nothing, he concludes

These new cosmologists are advocating rank mysticism and sheer intellectual madness! The theological significance of biblical creationism is not only that it addresses and satisfies our intellectual need for a rational explanation of the universe and ourselves, but it also defines who we are as men and women and leaves us with great worth and dignity. It also provides the theistic context necessary for moral absolutes.¹¹

He concludes this interesting chapter by stressing the link between Genesis 1 and 2 and our place in the universe and before God. It is a strong statement about the essential value of Scripture as the authority for life. (In the following quote the word ‘surd’ refers to something without sound or without a voice.)

The Bible and right reason roundly condemn as willful moral perversity both the practical atheism of the modern hedonist and the atheistic affirmations of modern cosmologists, the Bible insisting to the contrary that the one living and true God alone has eternally existed, and that the universe began as the result of his creative activity.

Only the biblical response to the question of human origin makes sense, and only the theistic context behind it (1) defines men and women in such a way that they possess genuine worth and dignity, (2) provides the human sciences with an intelligent base for predication and human morality systems with the necessary base for just moral decisions, and (3) saves men and women from becoming caught up in the surd of “chaos and eternal night” (Milton), a meaningless cipher drowning in a meaningless sea of ciphers.

Genesis 1 and 2 are the bedrock of this teaching. The church had traditionally understood Genesis as teaching a divine creation *ex nihilo*, and more particularly the creation of man in his own image by a direct act of God. In this doctrine is the ground for personal significance and the justification of knowledge and an ethic men can live with. The church cannot afford to abandon this absolutely fundamental teaching of Scripture, for it is indeed the only $\Pi\omicron\upsilon$ $\Sigma\tau\hat{\omega}$, *pou stō*, for man's personal significance, his knowledge claims and a just universal ethic. The church will do so only at great cost to herself and to the people she seeks to win to faith and to a home in heaven, because only as human beings are his creatures do they have personal significance, and only as they are God's creatures are

⁹ Reymond, 116.

¹⁰ Reymond, 123.

¹¹ Reymond, 124.

they capable of justifying their truth claims and able to see themselves as *responsible* moral beings who make significant moral decisions.¹²

God's authoritative Word teaches the only path to meaning in life.

Study questions

1. Using passages such as 2 Tim. 3:16-17; Tit. 1:9, and Eph. 4:11-16, suggest some ways in which doctrine and practice are related.
2. What are some of the teachings of the New Testament about the relationship between the authority of Scripture and living the Christian life?
3. In Jn. 10:34 Jesus refutes a false doctrinal view resulting in a false practice by referring to the authority of Scripture. Study this verse in its context (note that it quotes the Old Testament). The interpretation of the words "I have said you are gods" in the Old Testament is difficult. You can answer the question, however, without resolving this problem.

The answer is on the next page. Try to do the exercise before looking!

¹² Reymond, 126.

Certain Jews had accused Him of blasphemy. In making this charge and attempting to stone Him, they were acting incorrectly. Jesus' quotation of Ps. 82:6 provides the needed corrective to their behavior. They had an improper estimate of Him. They would have understood Him and acted properly on the basis of spiritual understanding, if they had known the Scriptures ("Is it not written in your Law. . .?").

Perhaps they might have thought or said, "We are not bound by the words of Ps. 82:6." Jesus' words indicate that (1) Scripture carried full weight over them, (2) they were responsible to it, (3) it stands alone as an unchangeable reference point and (4) they came under its jurisdiction. This provides us with a succinct and powerful statement of the authority of Scripture.