

Chapter 5 AUTHORITY

Let Them Hear Them

The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house – for I have five brothers – so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead' (Luke 16:22-31).

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Jesus' illustration recorded in Luke 16 of the rich man and Lazarus in the afterlife brings home the powerful point that the Word of God is authoritative.¹ The rich man in anguish in Hades pleads with Father Abraham to send Lazarus from his comforting side back to his five brothers in this life to warn them of what awaits them in the life to come. Abraham's response to the rich man is that his brothers already *have Moses and the Prophets*, meaning, the Old Testament Scriptures. Because of this he says, *let them hear them* (Luke 16:29). The rich man insisted, though: *if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent* (Luke 16:30). Abraham reasserted the truth: *If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead* (Luke 16:31).

What's the point of this illustration? Consistent with the Old Testament prophets, Jesus points His people to the enduring authority of the Word of the living God. Moses proclaimed to Israel that in the days to come in the Promised Land, they would have disputes and legal cases among themselves. When this happened, they were to go to Jerusalem ('the place that the LORD your God will choose,' Deut. 17:8, 10), present their case to the priests and judge, and wait for their verdict. Then what? The Lord would reveal His will to them and 'you shall do all according to what they declare to you...you shall be careful to do according to all that they direct you' (Deut. 17:10). Even as God revealed Himself to Moses (Exod. 18), He would do the same through the priests and judges in days to come. Generations later, as the Word of the Lord was being codified into the canon, Isaiah called the people of God back to the Law of God. Instead of seeking out mediums and necromancers, Isaiah said, 'To the teaching and to the testimony!' (Isa. 8:20). The 'teaching' or *torah* (תּוֹרָה) was 'the revelation of God expressing His will for man's obedience' and the 'testimony' (תְּדוּעָה) was 'His revelation expressing His will as a system to be believed.'² The mediums and necromancers that 'will not speak according to this word...have no dawn...will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry... will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness.... And...will be thrust into thick darkness' (Isa. 8:20,

1. For an introduction to biblical authority, see J.I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God: Some Evangelical Principles* (1958; repr., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992).

2. Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-18*, 3 vols. (1965; repr., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 1:319.

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21, 22). In other words, ‘there is no hope outside of what the Lord has spoken; every utterance, however spirit-authorized, which fails to accord with his word is darkness without light.’³

Jesus constantly called His disciples and opponents back to the Scriptures as well: His disciples before (Luke 9:22; 18:31) and after His death and resurrection (Luke 24:25-27, 32, 44-47), the devil (Matt. 4:1-11), the Sadducees (Matt. 22:29), and the Pharisees (Matt. 22:34-40). The apostles’ practice of appealing to the authority of Scripture is what Acts and the epistles are all about! As we saw in 2 Peter 1:19, Peter pointed us to the Word not to the Papacy or Tradition in himself. Paul even described the Bereans as noble because they searched the Scriptures to determine if his words to them were true (Acts 17:11).

The Scriptures therefore are authoritative. This authority is the inherent right they possess making them necessary for us to believe all that they say and to obey all that they command.⁴ Remember the phrase from the Heidelberg Catechism that I cited above: ‘true faith’ includes ‘a sure knowledge by which I hold as true all that God has revealed to us in his Word’ (Q&A 21). This authority of Scripture is why the Westminster Confession says, ‘it ought to be believed, and obeyed...and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God’ (1.4).⁵

The question I want to explore with you is *how* do we know the Scriptures are authoritative? The old debate between the Roman Catholics and Reformed Catholics was and continues to be this: do we come to this persuasion *primarily* through the Church’s testimony or through the testimony of the Scriptures themselves? Therefore, *secondarily* this confidence comes by means of the Church.

3. J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1999), 86-87. ‘Those who pretended to speak the word of the Lord from sources others than this have not even a glimmer of light about them’ (Allan Harman, *Isaiah: A Covenant to be kept for the sake of the Church*, Focus on the Bible [2005; repr., Ross-Shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2011], 107. See also John L. Mackay, *Isaiah: Volume 1*, EP Study Commentary (2008; repr., Welwyn Garden City, UK: EP Books, 2018), 218.

4. Francis Turretin defined it as, ‘The right and dignity of the sacred books, on account of which they are most worthy of faith with regard to those things which they propose to be believed and of our obedience in those things they command us to omit or to do’ (*Institutes*, 1:62).

5. *Reformed Confessions: Volume 4*, 235.

The Spirit's Witness

The Word of God clearly evidences and testifies of its own authority. This is primary according to the Scriptures themselves. The *way* the Scriptures impress this upon our heads and hearts is the Holy Spirit's witness or testimony. In the next section below we will come back to the witness of the Word itself. It is important to recognize that the Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures is 'behind' the Word as the cause of their authority. The Church's witness is important, too, as we will see, but it is only the means by which the Word is proclaimed so that the Spirit can do His work. He has an internal witness to us as well as an external witness in the Word itself (primary) as well as through the Church (secondary).

In Romans 8 we read of the Holy Spirit's internal testimony to our believing hearts that we are children of God. There Paul says our identity and existence is that we are not 'in the flesh' (ruled by our sinful desires) but 'in the Spirit if [*since*] in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you' (Rom. 8:9). This is why 'we are debtors' not to live according to our sinful desires (the flesh) but to live according to the Spirit's desires for us (Rom. 8:12). All who live in this way, what Paul calls being 'led by the Spirit of God,' are in fact 'sons of God' (Rom. 8:14). Paul says 'sons' because inheritance customs and laws at that time generally passed down through firstborn sons and other sons. His point is that *all* believers, whether male or female, are sons who receive an inheritance (see verse 17). As sons, we 'did not receive the spirit of slavery' but 'the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"' (Rom. 8:15). This Spirit, in fact, 'bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ' (Rom. 8:16-17). Note a twofold internal witness in verse 16: it is the Spirit who bears witness *to* us and He does so '*with* our spirit.' In the same way that the Spirit testifies that we belong with Christ to God the Father as sons, so He testifies that the words our Father has breathed out to us in Scripture are His authoritative words to us, His children. In fact, Jesus calls His words 'spirit and life' (John 6:63).

What is this inner witness of the Spirit to our spirits and with our spirits? Is it the same thing that Mormon missionaries tell you to ask God for when you read their holy texts? They speak of a

‘burning in the bosom’; is this the same thing?⁶ Not even close. This internal testimony of the Holy Spirit ‘does not consist of ecstasy or enthusiasm. It is a certain light that is sprinkling our mind in such a way that the mind is affected softly by it, while showing the reasons implanted in the Word itself, criteria that were previously hidden.’⁷ To use the language of the Westminster Confession, ‘our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness *by* and *with* the Word in our hearts’ (I.5; emphasis added).⁸

The Word’s Own Witness

Even as the Spirit bears witness to our spirits and with our spirits, so similarly He bears witness to His Word and with His Word. Better, with His Word through His Word. This is why we say that the Word testifies of its own trustworthiness in and of itself (*autopistos*).⁹ This means that the authority of Scripture is derived from its origin and source, which is God Himself. Let me illustrate by asking you to think about a diamond. Its refraction of light, its glowing brilliance in the sun, and its ability to cut glass all testify that it is a diamond. It has this ability to testify of itself.¹⁰ As the Belgic Confession says, ‘we believe without a doubt all things contained in [the canonical books]...because they prove themselves to be from God. *For even the blind themselves are able to see that the things predicted in them do happen*’ (art. 5).

In what ways do the Scriptures testify of their own authority, that they are from God? The Westminster Confession is helpful

6. For an explanation of this from a Mormon perspective, see ‘Your Bosom Shall Burn within You.’ Found at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/manual/doctrine-and-covenants-student-manual/section-9-your-bosom-shall-burn-within-you?lang=eng> (Accessed January 20, 2021) and Rachel Nielsen, ‘What If I Don’t Feel a Burning in the Bosom?’ Found at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/2014/06/what-if-i-dont-feel-a-burning-in-the-bosom?lang=eng> (Accessed January 20, 2021).

7. Johannes Maccovius, *Scholastic Discourse: Johannes Maccovius (1588–1644) on Theological and Philosophical Distinctions and Rules* (Apeldoorn, The Netherlands: Instituut voor Reformatieonderzoek, 2009), 59.

8. *Reformed Confessions: Volume 4*, 235.

9. ‘*autopistos* (αὐτόπιστος).’ Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 49.

10. ‘Like a precious jewel proved itself by its effects’ (Maccovius, *Scholastic Discourse*, 61).

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in listing ‘the many...incomparable excellencies,’ but it explicitly mentions six ‘arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God’:

1. the heavenliness of the matter;
2. the efficacy of the doctrine;
3. the majesty of the style;
4. the consent of all the parts;
5. the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God);
6. the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation (I.5 cf. Westminster Larger Catechism, Q&A 4).¹¹

First, *the heavenliness of the matter*. In the Scriptures we are not dealing with myths, with old wives’ tales, or with morals to make us better people, but with a message from heaven to earth. In the Scriptures we read God’s own address to us – His ‘living and active’ Word (Heb. 4:12). This heavenly message is that the Triune God made the world, sent the Son to redeem it, and gives His Holy Spirit as a guarantee of final consummation.

Second, *the efficacy of the doctrine*. This means that what the Word teaches actually has an effect upon our minds and hearts. The Word of God is not merely a book; it is speech – God’s speech! When we listen to Him by reading the Bible, we learn what He says about sin and come to know why things are the way they are in our world today. When we learn what He says about Jesus Christ, we put our living trust in Him, not as an idea but as a Person. When we hear His laws, the Spirit causes us to seek to obey them because it is obedience to Him.

Third, *the majesty of the style*. The God who is ‘robed in majesty’ (Ps. 93:1) speaks in the Word. This doesn’t mean that it is so incomprehensible that it has to be from another world, but that there is something elevated in the poetry and prose that evidence its divinity. This means that there is something about the doctrines as well. Human reason could not produce the Trinity, Incarnation, satisfaction, resurrection, and fulfillment of prophecy. This must be a book from another source and not from man.

Fourth, *the consent of all the parts*. The God who made the form of this world and filled it in six days to reflect His beauty and creativity also evidences Himself in the harmony of the Word He has spoken.

11. *Reformed Confessions: Volume 4*, 235, 300.

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There is harmony in the one Bible between its two testaments. What illustrates this is that from Old to New Testament is a time span of 1,000–2,000 years. Over this period dozens of authors wrote as they were ‘carried along by the Holy Spirit’ (2 Pet. 1:21). Moses wrote in Hebrew, Daniel partly in Aramaic, and John in Greek. They wrote from different continents, what we call Africa, Asia, and Europe. All their words are harmonious, from prophecies to their fulfillment.

Fifth, *the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God)*. God did not reveal His Word so that we would have a self-help book as a means to our own desired ends of health and wealth. The Bible is a book about God. This is why medieval Christians described the task of theology, saying, ‘Theology is taught by God, teaches [about] God, and leads to God.’¹²

Sixth, *the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation*. Since God has spoken and that speech is found in Scripture, it means that it is God’s message of salvation to the world. No other ideology, philosophy, or theology in any holy or non-holy book offers the remedy for humanity’s sin like the Bible:

- Buddhism says eliminating desire through meditation, religious practice, and/or asceticism leads to becoming eternally unconscious in nirvana.
- Confucianism says social conformity and virtuous living give you a sense of heaven on earth.
- Hinduism says salvation is the result of eliminating evil in your life, both in this life and in all the lives you will live (reincarnation), until you are pure enough to merge with Brahma, the great force.
- Islam means *submission* to the will of *Allah*. This submission is expressed in continual practice of the ‘five pillars’ of fasting, pilgrimage to Mecca, giving alms, prayer five times a day, and making the confession, ‘There is no God but God (*Allah*) and Muhammad is the Prophet of God.’ The result of performing these is paradise if *Allah* wills it for you.
- Judaism (modern) says that *Adonai* chose Israel and to be a part of it is salvation (whether in an afterlife or just this life).

12. *Theologia a Deo docetur, Deum docet, et ad Deum ducit*. A medieval summary of St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 5 vols. (1911; repr., New York, NY: Christian Classics, 1981), 1.1.7.

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- Shintoism says Japan fell from the heavens, the Emperor is a god, and the people are children of the gods. Japan was the center of the world (the World War II red sun with rays shining out) and its supremacy would be heaven on earth.
- Sikhism says repeating God's name and loving humanity brings you salvation.
- Taoism says heaven on earth comes through achieving balance/harmony between yin and yang.
- Zoroastrianism (an ancient religion that is still faintly existent) says salvation is the result of your struggle against evil and victory over it.

All of these have an idea of salvation, whether it's a better life now or in the afterlife. Note that in all of them 'salvation' is the result of human works. The revealed religion of the Old and New Testaments is that *God saves sinners*.

The Church's Witness

The authority of the Word of God is demonstrated primarily by God Himself and His Word and secondarily by the Church. Let me come to *the Church's witness*. Turretin spoke clearly of the Church being a servant of the Word. He said, 'For the Bible with its own marks is the argument on account of which I believe.' That's our second point above. Then he said, 'The Holy Spirit is the efficient cause [the power] and principle from which I am induced to believe.' That's our first point above. Finally, he said, 'But the Church is the instrument and means through which I believe.' He summed this up like this:

...why...do I believe the Bible to be divine, I will answer that I do so on account of the Scripture itself which by its marks proves itself to be such. If it is asked whence or from what I believe, I will answer from the Holy Spirit who produces that belief in me. Finally, if I am asked by what means or instrument I believe it, I will answer through the Church which God uses in delivering the Scripture to me.¹³

The Holy Spirit is the one who convinces us of the authority of the Word through the Word. As a secondary means, the Church and other external witnesses help us to see this as well. But it has to

13. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:87.

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be in this order: Spirit and Word and then Church.¹⁴ This is why Ephesians 2:20 is so key to us. What we learn there is that the Church is built upon the Scriptures and it gets any authority it has from the Scriptures. The Scriptures did not come to be because of the Church. The Westminster Confession said it like this:

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the *church* to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly *evidence itself* to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the *Holy Spirit* bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts (WCF 1.5).¹⁵

One objection that both Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians make to our understanding of scriptural authority is that the Church existed before Scripture; therefore, the Church and its tradition either grants to Scripture its authority or Scripture is added to the existing tradition that led the first-century Church. First, we don't discount the testimony of the Church in relation to the authority of Scripture. When the Belgic Confession says that 'we believe without a doubt all things contained in [the canonical books],' the first thing it goes on to say in terms of proof is 'not so much because the church receives and approves them as such' (art. 5). In other words, the Church's testimony matters; it's just third in line behind the witness of the Spirit and the witness of the Word itself. Yet Rome typically fires back that St. Augustine wrote that he was led by the Church to believe: 'But should you meet with a person not yet believing the gospel, how would you reply to him were he to say, "I do not believe?" For my part, I should not believe the gospel except as moved by the

14. Turretin even went so far as to say that the Church was an introductory and ministerial means of belief (*Institutes*, 1:87-88).

15. *Reformed Confessions: Volume 4*, 235.

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authority of the Catholic Church.’¹⁶ John Jewel (1522–71), English Bishop of Salisbury, commented:



These few poor words have been tossed...and wrung, and pressed to the uttermost, to yield out that was never in them. For hereby ye would fain prove that the authority of the Church...your church of Rome, and none other, is above the authority of God’s Word; that is to say, that the creature is above the Creator that made heaven and earth.¹⁷

In speaking of the Church’s authority, Augustine spoke of the Church’s ministerial authority, meaning it has authority as a servant, as a means of bringing the gospel as found in Scripture. In other words, Augustine was saying that without the outward ministry of the Church, he would not have understood the gospel. The medieval theologian, Gregory of Rimini (d. 1358), illustrated Augustine’s meaning as being the same as if ‘in Christ’s own day, a believer had said, “I would not believe the gospel were it not that the miracles of Christ move me to do so.” In these sorts of statements one can indeed discern a certain stimulus to believe the gospel, but not some sort of first principle that would give grounds for believing in the gospel.’¹⁸

16. Non crederem evangelio, nisi me ecclesiae catholicae auctoritas commoveret. Augustine, *Against the Epistle of Manichaeus Called ‘Fundamental’* 5:6 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene-Fathers: First Series*, trans. Richard Stothert, ed. Philip Schaff, 14 vols. (1887; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, fourth printing 2004), 4:131 col. 1. On this passage in Augustine, see Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.3; Vermigli, *Early Writings*, 182; Jon Balsarak, “The Genevan Churches and the Western Church,” in *A Companion to the Reformation in Geneva* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 153–59.

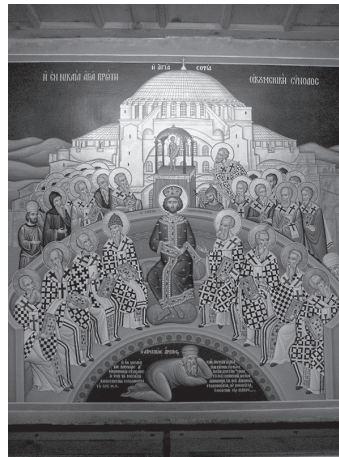
17. John Jewel, (), 864. See Oberman, *Forerunners*, 56–57.

18. Cited in Marijn de Kroon, *We Believe in God and in Christ. Not in the Church: The Influence of Wessel Gansfort on Martin Bucer*, trans. Maria Sherwood Smith, Princeton Theological Seminary Studies in Reformed Theology and History (2004; first English edition, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 10.

Conclusion: One Main Application versus Rome

Let me conclude this chapter with one application versus Rome’s understanding of this issue. What all this means is that the Church discerns the Word of God and distinguishes it from other false books, but the Church does not make these books the Word of God.¹⁹

Rome bases its whole claim upon a circular argument: why do we believe the Bible is divine? Because the Church says so. Why do we believe what the Church says? Because the Bible says it is authoritative. How do we know that this teaching of the Word is true? Because the Church says so. The circle never ends. This is why John Calvin once wrote, ‘Against opposing arguments they will set up this brazen wall – who are you to question the interpretation of the Church?’²⁰ The Scriptures, therefore, are our highest and supreme judge in all doctrinal controversies. At the great Council of Nicea (325), Emperor Constantine (272–337) didn’t appeal to the Great Tradition, but to the Word to resolve the Church’s doctrinal strife over the Son’s relationship to the Father:



For the gospels, the apostolical writing, and the oracles of the ancient prophets, clearly teach us what we ought to believe concerning the divine nature. Let, then, all contentious disputation be discarded; and let us seek in the divinely-inspired word the solution to the questions at issue.²¹

While the Church will always have error until Christ comes again (1 Cor. 11:19), we ultimately listen to God speaking in the Scriptures more than we listen to Popes, theologians and ourselves. As Jesus

19. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:92

20. John Calvin, ‘Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote,’ *Selected Works of John Calvin*, trans. Henry Beveridge, ed. Jules Bonnet, 7 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983), 3:69.

21. Theodoret, *The Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Blomfield Jackson in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 14 vols. (1892; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, fourth printing 2004), 3:44.

said, not even a person coming back to life after having been in heaven is needed to bring people to faith in Him. They – we – already have Moses and the Prophets and now the New Testament: let them and us hear them (Luke 16:29). In other words, you should have more confidence that God is speaking to you when you read and hear Scripture than if someone rose from the dead to tell you a message from the afterlife.