

ST2B

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What is Theology? Pt. 3

Believing Through Scripture

Part B: Performing the Scriptures

Introduction

The collection of texts that Christians call ‘the Bible’ is, in an important sense, no ‘ordinary’ series of writings. They are read as *scripture*, and therefore as religiously authoritative for the communities of believers. In other words, Christians do or perform these texts in a way different from the way they read and perform other texts – through the performance is claimed the *knowing of God*. In a sense, then, these texts present God for knowing, they mediate the divine – and that notion of *mediation* is important for appreciating the vitality of these books within Christian communities.

This needs to be unpacked a little more. Much Christian talk of God and the knowing of God use terms such as those, or imply what is involved in the concepts, of *directness* or *immediacy*. We have already seen something of this firstly in terms of the way that the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* has frequently been understood and used (especially in the ‘free churches’) – by way of rendering the knowledge of God by the reading of *only* the scriptures themselves, without reference to the wider debates, conversations and aids (tradition) involved in 2000 years of Church reading of these texts. Secondly, there is something of it in the very way that many construe the authority of the scriptures themselves – that they are divinely imprinted precisely at the level of their origin, that they are the presence of God to us because they are inspired, and because they are inspired they are inerrant (they do not err or make mistakes). In a sense, then, God has become entextualised, embodied not merely in the person of Jesus the Christ but immediately in this set of texts.

I have suggested that this model for construing the scriptures needs to be seriously tested, and that the theological problems that have been observed in it are not only testing but too demanding for the model to be maintained –

- in particular inerrancy (a concept fitting for propositions or statements of fact) does not fit well with the **diversity of content** in scripture. Scripture contains *more than* merely statements of fact.
- **Christology** – the analogy between scripture and God becoming human, and that God-man remaining sinless (and, of course, then not making mistakes) underplays the uniqueness of the incarnation.
- **Providence** – the inerrancy model works only when a strongly deterministic model of God’s providential guiding is assumed. The question is whether this is true to the understanding of providence that scripture itself allows us to develop.
- There is the further problem that according to the likes of B.B. Warfield the original texts alone were inerrant, but that the scriptural texts we now possess (after copying) are not inerrant (and that errors crept in at the copying stage). In other words, the *inerrancy concept tells us little about the texts we actually possess and read as scripture.*

Inerrantists often give the impression that the theory of inerrancy is the only way in which to think and ground the authority of scripture – it is not that scripture is inerrant because it is authoritative but rather authoritative because it is inerrant. So biblical authority is wholly external to (or objective) and without reference to the content of scripture or the subjectivity of the reader(s). Indeed, a very good case can be made that it actually misrepresents and reduces the content, and its shape is generated by theologically problematic assumptions – assumptions which distort the very sense of scripture by (1) separating God and revelation (in that revelation has to do with the words, *behind* which is God), and (2) making the very text of the scriptures substitutionarily authoritative in the absence of the being of God.

I have suggested that the inerrancy model is different from the way, for example, Luther conceived of the scriptures – and pursuing this further may be profitable in relating the authority of the scriptures more closely to their actual contents, may also declare more appropriately the sense of the mediation of the divine in and through the creature, and furthermore may return the authority to God (with the scriptures being engraced as participative within that authority). So Migliore makes an important point when he claims that

For the sixteenth-century Reformers, the authority of Scripture was rooted in its liberating message, in the good news of God's gracious acceptance of sinners offered in Jesus Christ. The Bible was experienced not as an arbitrary or despotic authority but as a source of renewal, freedom, and joy. [Migliore, 1991, 40]¹

It is worth briefly having a look at the text which is supposedly key to the matter, 2 Tim. 3:15f.

[F]rom childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. [v 16] All scripture is inspired (breathed) by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, [v. 17] that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

We need to take care in reading these verses lest we pour too much extraneous content into what is meant by 'inspiration'. Notice how the scriptures are spoken of – inspiration is closely associated with function, and the scriptures' function has to do with leading one to the saving God (and the teaching and training are more than statements of

¹ Edward Farley and Peter Hodgson argue that "scriptural authority, while it may be in some sense indispensable to Christian theology, also has a dark underside in its potentiality for obscurantism, resistance to science, authoritarianism, and 'book religion' – veneration of the book 'as a holy object'." ['Scripture and Tradition', in Peter C. Hodgson (ed.), *Christian Theology*, 35].

fact), and the scriptures are assumed to be trustworthy in so doing. Certainly in order to fulfil that function they must bear reliable and trustworthy witness to the events of divine unveiling (e.g., the raising of Jesus from the dead) – but the very concept of *witness* may help us distinguish what it is necessary to assert about the nature of the scriptural texts and their authority and what is not, particularly distinguishing it from the inerrancy model, some versions of which have the tendency of making the bible into God's given textbook on doctrine, science, ancient near eastern history, and so on.

Karl Barth (1886-1968)

It is a more recent attempt to revive such a notion against the C19th historical critical method of 'liberal' German theology (the bible is a text dissected to see what is historically true) and C17th Protestant orthodoxy (the bible is an historical record of revelation) that we will turn to now (to Karl Barth's reclaiming a *theological* reading of scripture – that scripture serves the purpose of challenging us in encounter with the sovereign God).

Some Suggested Reading:

My main suggestion is to read through the text entitled 'Revelation' (details listed below), and then read it again along with the web notes on it:

<http://www.geocities.com/johnnymcdowell/Revelation.htm>

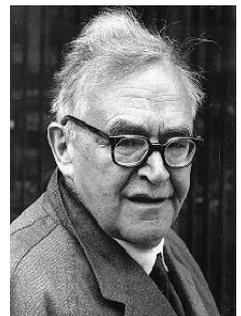
Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.1*, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 99-111.

Karl Barth, 'Revelation', trans. J.O. Cobham, in *Revelation*, ed. John Baillie (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), 41-81.

Karl Barth, 'The Christian Understanding of Revelation', in *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings 1946-52*, trans. E.M. Delacour and Stanley Goodman, ed. Ronald Gregor Smith (London: SCM Press, 1954), 205-240.

Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), ch. 3.

Francis Watson, 'The Bible', in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 57-71.



Who Was Karl Barth and Why is He Important for Theology?

- b. 10 May 1886, Basel, Switzerland
 - educated under some of the great liberal theologians of the time – Adolf von Harnack (at Berlin) and Wilhelm Herrmann (at Marburg)
 - Reformed church parish minister at Geneva (1909-1911) and Safenwil (1911-1922)
 - Protested against WWI and the theology that was used to justify it
 - 1916 ‘The Righteousness of God’ and ‘The Strange New World in the Bible’ – began to break away from his liberal theological heritage
 - professor at Göttingen, Münster, Bonn, and Basel
 - resisted Nazism in the 1930s and 1940s, and criticised the theologies justifying it
- *Influence* – *Christian History* magazine recently published a list of the ten most influential Christians of the twentieth century. Karl Barth, the only academic theologian in the list, ranked fifth among such notable figures as evangelist Billy Graham, Mother Theresa, and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. Love him or loath him, Barth’s reputation has been immense. So much so that theologians like Thomas F. Torrance eulogise that Barth stands alongside the greatest thinkers in the theological hall of fame; and that critics like Richard Roberts feel constrained to reckon that a theology that does not attempt to seriously engage with Barth is not a theology that understands the twentieth century aright.
 - *Theology* – Barth’s post-1916 break with liberalism saw him gradually turn to the bible, the early church fathers, and the Reformers in order to develop a theology that undermined/criticised/provided an alternative to the theological liberalism and the conservative theological heritage of post-Reformation Protestant orthodoxy.

Barth on Scripture

Scripture’s Subject-Matter (Sache)

From the essay of 1916, ‘The Strange New World in the Bible’, Barth announces a different way of reading the bible from that in which he was trained at university. Barth had learned to read the bible as a text that was to be dissected by historical-critical tools and as a text that spoke of certain *experiences* of God (the focus is on the human, and that

the *individual* human, in theologies of experience). His theological ‘breakthrough’, he later tells us, comes when he learned to read the bible according to their *subject-matter*. That subject-matter was –

- Not primarily the recounting of historical matters, even of a ‘special’ history (by implication, it was not the delivery of true statements – e.g. doctrine – either)
- Not even primarily the testimony of religious heroes to *their special religious experiences*
- But rather the challenge of a free (unpossessable) and righteous God to our world’s unrighteousness and confidence in itself. The bible witnesses to the divine *Krisis*, a radical protest against this world [Barth-Harnack Correspondence, 32].

So even at this point Barth was concerned that the subject-matter of the bible should be able to speak through the texts, and that the texts should not be allowed to speak of themselves or of anything else (that would be to read the bible improperly). He develops these themes through his theological writings from then on (with varying degrees of intensity and emphasis).

The Threefold Word of God

In CD I.1 Barth develops the 3fold Word of God – incarnate, written, and preached. Each are distinguished from one another, but yet the inner circle of the incarnation provides the necessary heart or essence of what it is that scripture and the preaching educated by scripture are and do (or at least should do if they are to be faithful to the free God who became incarnate in Jesus Christ).

• *The Event of Revelation* –

- ‘Revelation ... is not merely a matter of communication of divine truth about the relation between God and man’ [‘Revelation’, 54]
- ‘in Jesus Christ ... alone, there enters upon the stage of human life that which is really new, that which is hitherto unknown, because veiled and hidden’ [‘Revelation’, 45]

- ‘*Jesus Christ as the eternal Word who was made flesh*’ [‘Revelation’, 49]
 - ‘*We acknowledge God’s true and sole revelation just in the fact that we acknowledge the true manhood of Jesus Christ*’ [‘Revelation’, 54]
 - “*Revelation does not in fact differ from the person of Jesus Christ nor from the reconciliation accomplished in Him.*” [CD, I.1, 119]
- *Scripture as Witness to, or a token of, Revelation* –

Holy Scripture as such is not the revelation. And yet Holy Scripture *is* the revelation, if and as far as *Jesus Christ* speaks to us through the witness of His prophets and apostles. Holy Scripture is a *token* of revelation. ... But there has never yet been a faith in the revelation which has passed by this token, a faith which was not rather awakened, nourished and controlled precisely through the instrumentality of *this* token. [‘Revelation’, 67]

Gunton rightly points out a weakness in the metaphor of witness with regard to the bible as Christian scripture: “sometimes witnesses speak of what they see, or at any rate that they are in external relation to that which they record.”² Certainly while the metaphor needs to be supplemented by others, Barth’s theology of scripture certainly does not want to maintain that the witnesses are ‘external’ to the events witnessed to, but are wholly personally involved – drawn into the event of God’s Self-giving in Jesus Christ in a way that enables them to become mediators of God’s Self-giving to scriptural performers.

‘*Holy Scripture is not the revelation. And yet ... is the revelation...*’ [‘Revelation’, 67] – by this paradox Barth maintains that the text of scripture cannot be equated/identified with revelation (since revelation is the person of God in Christ), but its witness to Christ can be used by Christ to reveal himself.

It is a very human witness:

² Gunton, 1995, 76.

What we have in the Bible are in any case human attempts to repeat and produce this Word of God in human words and thoughts and in specific human situations [CD, I.1, 113]

Barth speaks of the writers' capacity for error and their "fallible human word" [CD, I.1, 116] – and yet he trusts in the general reliability of their witness.

It [inerrancy] errs on the side of Scripture rather than the human, where what is required is a proper balance and an awareness of the divine ability (and will) in grace to take up and use imperfect instruments. It is preferable to see inspiration as that divine activity whereby God enables the biblical writers to make their witness to himself and his saving actions. [Nigel Wright, 52]³

The place of scripture as a witness to revelation is vital: "there has never yet been a faith in the revelation which has passed by this token, a faith which was not rather awakened, nourished and controlled precisely through the instrumentality of *this* token" ['Revelation', 68]

Although distinct from it, the identified sacramental *means* of revelation (scripture and proclamation) function *indispensably* as what Torrance calls the "earthen vessels" and "corporeality" of revelation in order to mediate revelation to people today (revelation's contemporaneity).⁴ In this sense, then, the communities of Christian readers are necessarily tied to the biblical text. These texts simply provide a witness that cannot be learned elsewhere, and it is this that enables John Calvin to claim that Christians learn to see the world through the spectacles given us by the bible.

Summary: For Barth, then, scripture is authoritative *because of its content* – it is not a series of propositions (doctrinal or historical) as such, but the indispensable witness to an Agent, a character in a series of narratives and worshipful testimonies, to God in Christ, and by that content all scripture is to be read and judged.

³ Nigel Wright, *The Radical Evangelical: Seeking a Place to Stand* (London: SPCK, 1996), 52.

⁴ T.F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 105.

Historical Criticism

[For more detail on this see question 3 at

http://www.geocities.com/johnnymcdowell/Barth_Course_Seminar3_Lecture.html]

In his correspondence with Harnack in 1923 Barth made it clear that he was not rejecting altogether historical critical research on the biblical texts. Instead he was criticising its misuse (its having become the *only* or proper way to read the bible – fails to be addressed by the subject matter)⁵ and was seeking to restore it to its rightful place as a ‘preparatory’ aid to reading the scriptures according to their subject matter (it can highlight and criticise naïve readings of the bible).

Subjectivism and Adoptionism?

Barth talks about the bible’s *becoming the Word of God* through the contemporary event of God’s Self-revealing.

the Scripture with this content must always become again and again the thing we started with, the object of authentic recollection in which the Church with its proclamation looks and moves forward to the future. [CD, I.1, 108]

Or again, he speaks of the bible as the Word of God only in the event in which God speaks through it: “[T]his implies that Holy Scripture, too, is the Word of God. ... In this event the Bible is God’s Word.” [CD, I.1, 109]

Does this mean that Barth denies the authority of scripture as being something that is based on what it is in and of itself, and is only applied by the reader who finds it inspiring? Some commentators consequently argue that Barth has a subjectivist view of the authority of the bible (it is not authoritative in and of itself). Stanley Grenz, for example, reasons that

Thinkers influenced by Karl Barth and neoorthodox Word of God theologies routinely differentiate between the Bible and the transcendent Word in a

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, 20: “The practice of historical criticism is no innocent practice, for it intends to fend off church authority and protect freedom for the autonomous interpreter.”

manner that seems to reduce biblical authority to our subjective reception of the divine address that confronts us through the human words of the Bible. [in Grenz and Franke, 2001, 67]

But several things must be borne in mind:

- Barth speaks of scripture as something objective above and beyond the church [see, e.g., *CD*, I.1, 100f.]
- It can become revelation to us (God can reveal God's Self through it) precisely because of what it is: "It does not become God's Word because we accord it faith but in the fact that it becomes revelation to us." [*CD*, I.1, 110] "[T]he biblical witnesses [like Grünewald's John the Baptist] point beyond themselves." [*CD*, I.1, 111] Moreover, while many critics of Barth do not see this, Barth does speak of "the event of inspiration in which they [the prophets and apostles] become speakers and writers of the Word of God. ... Jesus Christ has called the Old and New Testaments into existence" [*CD*, I.1, 115].
- That which provides a measure [*CD*, I.1, 104], and norm of church proclamation and life, and by which "the very Church itself stands or falls" [*CD*, I.1, 101]

Therefore, by its nature – as that which is the primary witness to God in Christ (apostolic witness) – scripture has (or should have if the church is to be true to itself) authority over all that the church does and says. "Thus Scripture imposes itself by virtue of this its content." [*CD*, I.1, 108]

Externalistic Metaphor

The Bible then becomes authoritative because it lets us in on what it was like being an early Christian—and it is the early Christian experience that is then treated as the real authority, the real norm. In both of these variations, then, authority has shifted from the Bible itself to the historically reconstructed event or experience. We are not really talking about the authority of the *Bible*, at all.

Moreover, as Gunton points out, the concept is too externalistic.⁶ N.T. Wright adds a more instrumental image to that of witness in order to resist the problem:

I have argued that the phrase ‘the authority of scripture’ must be understood within the context of God’s authority, of which it is both a witness and, perhaps more importantly, a vehicle.

Conclusion

The question of the authority of scripture has divided Christians from one another for at least a century and a half in relation to the inerrancy principle. However, I submit that the cardinal issues of the Christian scriptures are not so much whether they are authoritative but rather in what ways are they authoritative, and what kind of authority have they? (for whom are they authoritative, and how?). In other words, the way that the scriptures are actually used demands attention, and whether that use does justice to the complexity of the scriptures *as texts* and these texts *as scripture*. Ways of conceiving scriptural authority can be very different, but we should attend to what these theories do to the practices of reading the scriptures – does the particular theory perform the scriptures well? – after all, our theories and our practices mutually reinforce and influence one another, and there is no room for a naïveté about scripture for someone whose personal integrity is that of being faithful to the God to whom the scriptures bear testimony.

Other ways of understanding the authority of scripture abound, and the inerrantist would do well to remember that many of these are *not ways of undermining the authority of the bible as scripture* but rather ways of trying to determine how best to comprehend and appreciate the bible while taking its *contents* into account.⁷ In the perspective that I

⁶ Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation*, 76f.

⁷ Migliore says that “Since the beginning of the church, every Christian theology has implicitly or explicitly acknowledged the authority of Scripture. The serious question has never been *whether* Scripture is a primary authority for Christian faith and life but *what sort of* authority it is.” [Migliore, 1991, 40]. Moreover, as David Kelsey maintains, “the decision to adopt these writings as ‘canon’ is not ... a separate decision over and above a decision to become a Christian.” [Kelsey, 1975, 165] There is something of the warning against the inerrantist’s rejection of this move as a reduction of the authority of the bible in Pinnock’s supportive comments in 1978 on the ‘new’ Evangelical non-inerrantists [Pinnock, 1978, 67]:

have spoken of in this lecture, authority is determined by what the scriptures do – and they do much more than merely relate the content of Christian doctrine, or sacred history, or the divine commands (in other words, they are more than information sharing manuals). Concepts such as *trustworthiness*, *reliability* and *witness* demand serious and detailed historical-critical work in order to unpack their usefulness in relation to the content of the scriptures – but, at least in advance of this, they perform a theologically significant role and deserve to be developed further without constraint from the problematic concept of biblical inerrancy.

Scriptural authority, then, is not the defining belief of a Christian – hence there is no mention of it in the early ecumenical creeds. But it is perhaps better seen as the background belief (believed because performed) that makes possible other beliefs and practices. Consequently, when we have to confess our *faith in scripture*, our *belief in the bible*, we should suspect that something somewhere in the theology of our confession has gone wrong. As Paul Ricoeur argues,

Maybe in the case of Christianity there *is* no sacred text, because it is not the text that is sacred but the one about which it is spoken. ... [I]t is not a sacred text in which the Qu'ran is sacred (for a Muslim would say that to read the Qu'ran in English is not to read the Qu'ran; one must read it in Arabic). [But Christianity *translates* its scriptures]⁸

What does that mean for talk of scriptural authority? Migliore offers a suggestion:

“the new evangelical view which dispenses with inerrancy is less a retreat from a high position on the authority of the Bible, than a move toward greater doctrinal *simplicity*. What most evangelicals want to know is how they can trust and use the Scriptures available to them, despite difficulties that crop up through transmission, translation, or inherently.”

⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 68.

To speak of the authority of the Bible rightly is to speak of its power by God's Spirit to help create and nourish this new life in relationship with God and with others.⁹

N.T. Wright:

The phrase 'authority of scripture', therefore, is a sort of shorthand for the fact that the creator and covenant God uses this book as his means of equipping and calling the church for these tasks. ... Why is authority like this? Why does it have to be like that? Because God (as in Acts 1 and Matthew 28, which we looked at earlier) wants to catch human beings up in the work that he is doing. He doesn't want to do it by-passing us; he wants us to be involved in his work. And as we are involved, so we ourselves are being remade. He doesn't give us the Holy Spirit in order to make us infallible—blind and dumb servants who merely sit there and let the stuff flow through us. So, he doesn't simply give us a rule book so that we could just thumb through and look it up. He doesn't create a church where you become automatically sinless on entry. Because, as the goal and end of his work is redemption, so the means is redemptive also: judgement and mercy, nature and grace.¹⁰

Migliore:

Scripture is the unique and irreplaceable witness to the liberating and reconciling activity of God in the history of Israel and supremely in Jesus

⁹ Migliore, 46.

¹⁰ "God does not, then, want to put people into little boxes and keep them safe and sound. It is, after all, possible to be so sound that you're sound asleep. I am not in favor of unsoundness; but soundness means health, and health means growth, and growth means life and vigor and new directions. The little boxes in which you put people and keep them under control are called coffins. We read scripture not in order to avoid life and growth. ... Nor do we read scripture in order to avoid thought and action, or to be crushed, or squeezed, or confined into a de-humanizing shape, but in order to die and rise again in our minds. Because, again and again, we find that, as we submit to scripture, as we wrestle with the bits that don't make sense, and as we hand through to a new sense that we haven't thought of or seen before, God breathes into our nostrils his own breath—the breath of life. And we become living beings—a church recreated in his image, more fully human, thinking, alive beings."

Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Scripture serves the purpose of relating us to God and transforming our life. [40f.]

To speak of the 'authority of the scriptures' is also to remind that knowledge of God is prevenient gift and pre-eminent regulation in our knowing of all things, and that we are dependent on the testimony of others in the process. Knowledge here is not acquired by way of human insight, but is rather *responsive*, and gratefully so.

So whatever is meant by the humanity of scripture it is not properly a way of speaking of the scriptures as the product, and subsequent record, of human religiosity, insight or reasoning in any way that is pre-eminently creative rather than responsive. And yet, one of the functions is to remind that there is a sense in which it is indeed appropriate to speak of the creativity of the writers, compilers and canonisers, since they are not pure and perfect receivers of the divine giving any more than we are as scriptural readers.

The concept of 'witness' when applied to the scriptures is one way of enabling these emphases to be retained.

- It also has the advantage of being able to provide criteria for the choosing of this set of texts as scriptural rather than another
- Thus it is able to answer ontological questions (what is it about these texts?) and not merely functional (how does the communities for whom these texts are scripture use them?)

Other Reading

Colin E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation: The 1993 Warfield Lectures* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), esp. Lecture 4.

Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

David R. Law, *Inspiration* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001).

Gerard Loughlin, 'The Basis and Authority of Doctrine', in Colin E. Gunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 41-64.

J.K.S. Reid, *The Authority of Scripture* (Methuen & Co., 1957), esp. ch. V.

John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003).