Biblical Authority and Interpretation

by Randy Maddox

The affirmation of biblical authority has been a central theme of the evangelical tradition. At the same time, the precise understanding of the nature of biblical authority has been one of the major sources of conflict within evangelicalism. It has been my experience, as one who was nurtured by and has come to identify with this tradition, that the question of the nature of biblical authority can most helpfully be answered only after one has gained an understanding of the necessity of biblical interpretation.

I. The Necessity of Biblical Interpretation

The necessity of interpreting Scripture was far from obvious to me as a beginning religious studies major. I assumed if a person wanted to determine what the Bible taught about a particular matter, all that was necessary was to read it. Behind this assumption were the implicit assumptions that the Bible always says what it means in obvious and literal ways, that biblical teachings are homogeneous, and that everyone who reads the Bible with a sincere heart will find the same message in it.

A. Shattering Assumptions: The “Literalness” of Scripture?

The first of these implicit assumptions was shattered by the experience of trying to read and understand the whole of Scripture. For example, how “literal” was I to take Jesus’ command that every man who casts a lustful glance on a woman should pluck out his eye (Matt. 5:29)? I noticed that the majority of commentators understood Jesus to be using this saying as a graphic illustration of the seriousness of lusting and not as a literal command. While this seemed reasonable, it meant that my former assumption about the “literalness” of biblical material had to be nuanced.

Even deeper questions were raised by material like the Book of Revelation, the ponderings of Ecclesiastes, and those Psalms that rejoice over the battering of Babylonian babies’ heads against the ground (e.g., Ps. 137:9). As an evangelical I was committed to the belief that even these passages had some authoritative meaning for Christians today.

And yet, my alarm over arriving at this meaning illustrated that the meaning was not immediately obvious. It was becoming clear that some type of interpretation was necessary to determine the authoritative meaning of any scripture.

Disagreements in Interpretation. This was driven home further when a second of my implicit assumptions— that everyone who reads the Bible with a sincere heart will find the same message in it—was unmasked as false.

I can still recall my alarm when I discovered that during the Civil War there were committed conservative clergy and laypersons in both the North and the South who argued fervently that their position was the biblical position. How was this possible? As I studied defenses of their positions, it became obvious that each side focused attention on the verses that reinforced their positions and avoided or “explained away” the verses that called their position into question. It was not a case of one side using the Bible as an authority and the other drawing on another authority. Rather, both groups were populated by conservative Christians who believed they were using Scripture as their authority and reading it correctly.

Homogeneity of Scripture? The encounter with the different positions on slavery supported by appeals to Scripture also served to call into question the assumption that homogeneity or total agreement through the breadth of biblical teachings. This question was deepened as I continued to deal with Scripture. On one level, there were significant differences between Old and New Testament perspectives and teachings on issues such as war. At an even deeper level, I noticed different perspectives on the significance of Jesus and the nature of the Christian life in the New Testament itself. This posed the question of whether there was any unity among these various perspectives.

B. The Dilemma

Many who have gone through similar experiences conclude that the interpretation of Scripture is arbitrary and, therefore, that Scripture cannot be the final authority in Christian thought. At the opposite extreme there are those who dogmatically declare that their interpretation is the authoritative one and that all others are false. The problem, of course, is showing how either of these claims can be objectively defended. On the one hand, to surrender Scripture as the authoritative norm for Christian faith meant that “Christian faith” then became whatever a particular group of people who called themselves Christians happened to believe at a particular time. On the other hand, the retreat to dogmatic claims about a particular interpretation seemed to ignore or belittle the fact of rival interpretations by equally committed Christians and failed to do justice to the biblical command to be ready to give a defense of one’s faith. However, if neither of these alternatives are acceptable, where do we turn?

C. A Clue: The “Hermeneutic Circle”

The most important help I received in answering this question came from the philosophical and psychological study of human understanding and interpretation, that is—hermeneutics. Hermeneutical investigation, at its basic level, deals with the question of how people understand phenomena such as written text and traditions. An important focus of this investigation has been the analysis of the “hermeneutic circle” or “circle of understanding.” This “circle” refers to how we tend to interpret new data by what we already understand and believe. This helps explain some of the problems previously mentioned. The reason, for example, that Southern Christians tend to focus on passages in the Bible that confirmed or condoned their practice of slavery was the conscious and unconscious influence of their prior commitments to slavery. Moreover, the analogous situation was true of the antislavery proponents in the North! That is why each side was blind to the biblical bases (such as they were) of the opposing side.

The natural response at this point is to declare that the problem is the interference of preunderstandings and that the solution is to remove preunderstandings altogether in interpretations. However, this is where one of the crucial characteristics of the hermeneutic circle comes into play. We have come to realize that such a removal is impossible. The essence of understanding is relating some new data to already existing ideas and notions and seeing what changes this new data necessitates or how it fits. This would be impossible if the first step in understanding was to do away with all previous ideas and notions.

Moreover, the ideal of presuppositionless understanding is also problematic from a theological standpoint. As Paul reminds us, the wisdom of God appears as foolishness to non-Christian human understanding. Why? Because they do not understand the word of the cross (I Cor. 1:18–20). That is, prior understanding is necessary to understand the range of Christian truth. In understanding theology, the idea of presuppositionless interpretation must be rejected.

What then? Have we left each interpreter stuck in their own preunderstandings? Have we become mired in total relativism, in which everyone’s opinion is equal? Not necessarily! Another important contribution of the analysis of the hermeneutic circle is the methodology it brings to deal with preunderstandings. While we cannot escape the influence of our preunderstandings in the process of interpretation, we can bring these preunderstandings to a level of self-consciousness and evaluate their appropriateness to the subject-matter being interpreted. To accomplish this, we need to cultivate an understanding of the socio-historical context and its influences. The means to developing this understanding is dialogue: dialogue with the text and dialogue with other interpreters and interpretations of the text. Often in such dialogue it becomes clear that some aspect of our preunderstanding is inappropriate to or

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judged by the matter being investigated and can be reformulated. The Copernican Revolution would be a classic example of such a reformulation, showing its possibility and its likely attendant difficulties and repercussions.

D. The Clue Applied

All of this has extreme importance when we return to the issue of biblical interpretation. Our goal should not be to deny or get rid of our preunderstandings and presuppositions and just see “what the Bible says.” This is an impossible ideal and soon becomes a cover from which we confuse “what we understand the Bible to say” with “what the Bible says”; we become the final authority rather than the Bible. On the other hand, we need not surrender to a relativism that sees everything as merely someone’s opinion. In dialogue with Scripture and each other, those sensitive to biblical authority will seek awareness of their preunderstandings and how they affect their interpretation of Scripture and will test these preunderstandings for their adequacy and legitimacy.

The Role of Biblical Exegesis. It is here that the methods of modern biblical exegesis come into play. The essential goal of these methods is to provide clarity about the original setting (historical and linguistic) and meaning of Scripture. To the degree they are successful, they provide a stimulus to counteract the interpreter’s preunderstandings and let Scripture speak in its own voice. As Donald Hagner has recently argued, the distinctive element of evangelical biblical scholarship should not be that we avoid the modern philosophical bases—though these are not above question. Neither was it the extreme differences between the two positions. Rather, it was the unexpected point of agreement between the two—in practice if not in concept. Both positions argued deductively, developing an argument for a type of authority and then imposing this understanding of authority upon Scripture. In light of the potential distorting effect of preunderstandings, this procedure is highly suspect. Ultimately, both these positions made their understanding the ultimate authority over Scripture! It seemed clear to me that if Scripture is the ultimate authority, then it is an authority on the issue of the scope and nature of its authority. Therefore, it became crucial for me to proceed inductively, turning to Scripture and seeing what claims about its own authority it warranted. As I did so, three major points became clear.

B. Scripture—A Guide to Living

The first deals with the purpose of Scripture. The clearest teaching on this issue is the familiar passage in II Timothy 3:15–17. There we are told that Scripture is able to make us “wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ,” that it is “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,” and that the study of Scripture will equip us thoroughly for every good work. The important point here is that the purpose of Scripture is focused in its instruction in salvation and its training in righteousness. What is not claimed is that Scripture should be treated as a textbook for the sciences, etc.

This is not to say that Scripture is full of false scientific statements, but rather that many of the statements treated as scientific claims by defenders and critics alike were really not intended that way in Scripture itself. A good example is the Genesis prologue. In its Hebrew form this chapter is an artfully crafted and highly stylistic literary piece. This fact, in conjunction with an analysis of its sevenfold structure and symbolic use of names (Adam = humanity, Eve = giver of life, etc.), makes it clear that the prologue is much more a theological account of the source and purpose of creation that a narrowly scientific or historical account of the details of creation. When this realization is related to the growing sensitivity to the differences between such theological reflection and modern scientific explanation, the basis is provided for a constructive integration of the authoritative teachings of the Genesis prologue and the findings of modern science.

C. Divine Word and Human Setting

A second aspect of biblical authority that becomes evident as one deals with the whole of Scripture is the tension between the Divine Word and its human setting. Because the Bible is God’s Word, it has eternal relevance and speaks to all cultures. Yet because this Word has been spoken through human words (cf. Jer. 1:9, Acts 4:23) and in human settings, it is conditioned by a historical particularity. As a result, it is sometimes crucial, in deciding the authoritative teaching of Scripture, to distinguish between the essential Divine Word and its particular historical expression.

Jesus himself provides a model for the necessity of making this distinction in the way he dealt with Old Testament scriptures (cf. Matt. 5:38–9, Mark 7, and Mark 10:2–12). As James Dunn suggests, when one studies Jesus’s use of the Old Testament, it becomes obvious he understood these texts in relation to the historical situation in which they were originally given. Jesus did not deny these scriptures were the Word of God to their original situation. He did say or imply that many of them were no longer God’s word to the situation he had brought. A similar analysis could be made of the
D. Christ—The Center of Scripture

The final point that should be noted about biblical authority is the recognition of a certain gradation in this authority. There are clear claims that the authority of Scripture lies in the Bible as a whole, not just in certain parts of it. We are not free to treat as authoritative only those verses with which we agree (cf. Pro. 30:5–6). However, this should not be constructed as meaning every part of Scripture possesses equal authority in and of itself. On the contrary, the Christian canon teaches that there is a central focal point for biblical authority—the revelation of Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1–3). Indeed, the very authority of Scripture itself is derivative of the authority of this revelation. More importantly, the authoritative meaning of any particular verse is a function of the way in which we prepare for, testifies to, or clarifies and applies this revelation.

The recognition that the revelation of Jesus Christ is the focal point of biblical authority provides a helpful perspective on the diversity present in Scripture. As expressions of the gospel in different settings with different agendas, the diversity in Scripture should be seen as a help rather than a hindrance. It presents us with several models of how we can apply the Gospel to our situation. At the same time, the demonstration of an essential unity between these various expressions provides a set of criteria for judging the appropriateness of our application.

Another implication of recognizing that the authority of Scripture is focused in the revelation of Jesus Christ is that it allows us to handle the development or progression of revelation apparent in Scripture, particularly between the Old and New Testament. A good illustration would be the biblical teachings on life after death, which are very unclear in the Old Testament, still debated among the Jews in Jesus’ day (Acts 23:6), and only settled for Christians by the experience of the resurrected-Lord (I Cor. 15:20). In light of Christ, there is no more room for debate.

E. Summary

To summarize this section, we have seen that: (1) The authority of Scripture is centered on matters of instruction in salvation and training in righteousness; (2) In interpreting Scripture it is often necessary to distinguish between the Divine Word and the human situation; and (3) We must be sensitive to the very important role of the focus of biblical authority in the revelation of Jesus Christ.

III. An Evangelical Agenda

The necessity of interpretation and the nature of biblical authority provide a helpful perspective on the on-going evangelical debates on inerrancy and biblical authority.26 Simply to defend the authority of Scripture is not enough. Indeed, it is at most the presupposition for the crucial task, which is to develop a responsible contemporary interpretation of authoritative biblical teachings. It is


2 These assumptions were shared by the American Evangelical Bible School that contributed to the development of fundamentalism. See George Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture (Oxford, 1980), pp. 110–14.


5 This is the position of classic rationalism as illustrated by Friedrich Schleiermacher, Brief Outline on the Study of Theology (John Knox, 1966), pp. 718.

6 The best general introductions to this subject are: Joel Beecher, Contemporary Hermeneutics (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980); and Edward Palmer, Hermeneutics (Northwestern University Press, 1969). For an application to biblical studies, see Anthony Thisselton, The Two Horizons (Eerdmans, 1980).

7 For a detailed exposition of this concept, see my “Hermeneutic Circle: Vicious or Victorious?” Philosophy Today 27 (1983): 66–76.


13 Some evangelical scholars seem to be trying to provide a foundation for the claim of biblical authority by a rational “demonstration” of the inerrancy of Scripture. I find such an approach both impossible and wrong-headed. As Kierkegaard has shown, the idea of the inerrancy of the authority on human arguments is ludicrous. Moreover, as Dunn has argued, it is theologically and pastorally dangerous (Dunn, “Authority of Scripture,” pp. 116–8). We would be wiser to remain with Calvin who, in my judgment-based understanding of the authority of Scripture on the witness of the Spirit (Institutes 1.3, 9).

14 Cf. L. Harold DeWolff, A Theology of the Living Church (Harper, 1953), who preceded his discussion of biblical authority with a long section on rational criteria of faith and then argues for a very selective ascription of authority to biblical materials on the basis that “A reasonable man concedes authority to the best books he can find on a given subject.” (p.83).

15 The treatment of James Boice is typical: “God’s character demands inerrancy . . . If utterance in the Bible is from God and if God is a God of truth . . . then the Bible must be wholly truthful and inerrant.” Boice, ed., Does Inerrancy Matter? (IBC Foundation series I, 1979), p. 20. Nice as obvious.

16 See Hagner “Evangelical’ Scholarship,” pp.6–7, for a similar rejection of the deductive approach to the issue of biblical authority in favor of an inductive investigation of scripture. As Bernard Ramon has argued, it is sufficient and more fruitful simply to pick out some individual texts that deal with inspiration. Rather, we must grasp the phenomenon of Scripture in its totality. Ramon, “Scripture as a Theological Concept,” Review and Expositor 79 (1974): 1469–71.


18 As a sensitive evangelical analysis of the literary character of the Genesis prologue can be found in William LaSor, et. al., Old Testament Survey (Eerdmans, 1982), pp.70–75.

Cf. Marshall, Biblical Inspiration, p. 22, for a discussion of the various senses in which the Bible is God’s Word.

There is an interesting analogy between Scripture and Jesus on this issue. The incarnation is not an account of Jesus taking on humanity in the abstract, but rather of Jesus becoming a particular first-century Jewish male of a certain height, weight, etc. And yet the essential meaning of the incarnation is not located in particularities such as height, weight, or (I think) gender.

Dunn, “Authority of Scripture” p. 207.

Ibid., pp. 207–14.

The precise understanding of this unity is a matter of much present discussion. See notes 4 and 5 above. For a particular application, see my “The New Quest and Christology,” Perspectives in Religious Studies forthcoming.


The most helpful evangelical treatment of this issue to date is Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All It’s Worth (Zondervan, 1982), pp. 60–70.