

The Authority of Scripture Psalm 1; John 10:1-10

Today I'm going to tackle a difficult subject: the authority of scripture. It's a difficult subject because I suppose on one hand it brings images of fiery preachers slamming fists on pulpits and wiping sweaty brows while swinging the Bible around like Casey at the bat, and that's just not how Presbyterians do things. On the other hand, authority isn't a popular topic these days. Most of us acknowledge the authority of the law, but break it anyway at least the laws governing cars. An entire genre of TV has emerged glorifying the ways people challenge the authority of police officers. George Carlin, in his typical contumelious manner, once said, "I have as much authority as the Pope, I just don't have as many people who believe it." Authority isn't something our culture handles very well. So why bother talking about it?

Because it's important and because not too many of us know what it means. It's important since many denominational disputes today center around the authority of scripture. And while most people agree the authority of scripture is one of our foundational principals there's not a lot of agreement on what that means under the banner *semper reformanda*.

To illustrate this I'll share an anecdote. There once was a man who claimed that scripture was his authority. What it said he would do, or so he claimed. God would not lead him down the wrong path, ever, as long as that path were revealed by scripture. Someone who heard the claim decided to test him about his claim. "Ok," the person said, "prove it." So the man picked up a Bible and responded, "Very well, what scripture tells me to do I'll do because God knows what's best for me." He then proceeded to indiscriminately open the Bible to find God's direction for his life, and pointing his finger to one of the pages he read, "And Judas hung himself..." Confused he opened the Bible once again, pointed his finger at the page, and read, "Go and do likewise." The challenger was beginning to crack a smile, but the man was undeterred and proceeded to open the Bible again, closed his eyes, pointed to a verse, opened his eyes and read, "What you must do, do quickly."

So lest we delve into actions God despises let's approach this subject with a bit of humility. People have done horrid things citing the authority of scripture. One of the more meaningful talks I heard at the Minneapolis conference a couple weeks ago came from an African-American pastor. He raised a cautionary flag to all the talk about the authority of scripture.

He observed that whenever a group of powerful people come together and talk about how they are reclaiming the authority of scripture his mind drifts back to the not so distant past when a powerful group of white Christians claimed scriptural authority to advocate slavery. His mind, he said, goes back to people who, under the authority of scripture, continued a program of violent social injustice against blacks in the 50's and 60's. My mind goes back a bit further, to the 3rd Reich claiming it was God's will they exterminate Jews and the church provided the scriptural authority for their genocide. Or consider those Christians who died at the hands of the Spanish Inquisition in the 15th and 16th centuries. Most current on my mind though is the hint of a suggestion that scripture for some supports our aggressive immigration law. I'm not going to get into politics, but I'm simply pointing out I sense scriptural authority is, for some, part of their equation to support the law. I also sense that even "good Christians" support grave injustices to

parts of our population that don't conform to biblical standards of conduct and they exclude and judge forgetting these are the people Jesus came to liberate.

New Testament scholar N.T. Wright stated, "When people in the church talk about authority they are often talking about *controlling* people or situations...if we are not careful, the phrase 'the authority of scripture' can come to mean simply the authority to one's own interpretation as opposed to the Catholic or some other interpretation of scripture." So, there are practical reasons to develop a *Christ-minded* perspective on the authority of scripture.

Theologians have been writing about the authority of scripture for centuries. One of the core reformed principals about scriptural authority is that scripture is self-interpretive. That is to say, anyone can pull a verse out of scripture and use it to authorize nearly any action. A *Christ-minded* view of scriptural authority, however, rests on the *consistent* message of scripture. This is how Presbyterians approach the question of the role of women in the church, although I sense we neglect it when it comes to the command to do evangelism, introducing others to our faith.

A Christ-minded view of scriptural authority is grounded in an understanding of what scripture really is and why it was written. The Bible wasn't written to be an authority on all things; science, for example. The work of astronomer Dr. Howard van Till has been helpful to me on this point. Science and scripture answer different questions so it's not intellectually honest to use one against the other. The Bible, for example, isn't going to answer the wormhole question or teach us about the basic building blocks of life. But neither is science able to answer the questions of *why* anything exists, or what stands *behind* material reality. Science and scripture speak to different truths, and are each authorities in their own right over matters within their purview.

Scripture's authority rests within a particular domain, and its unfortunate that the Church persecuted many scientists before coming to terms with this truth. In the Reformed understanding, Scripture was written to reveal to us all we need to know about God's character and His covenant with humanity. Scripture tells the story of God as a liberator, Who judges and condemns evil and sin so that His creation may experience freedom. God has the authority to move creation back to perfect order, rescuing it from the chaos of sin, which humans brought. This is the consistent message of scripture, and in this sense it functions authoritatively. If we look carefully at Christ's ministry this is how Jesus understood scriptural authority. But, he's not alone in this thinking.

When Paul wrote to Timothy that all scripture is useful, he was writing not about the New Testament, but reflecting traditional Judaism he was referring to the usefulness of the Torah in life. Torah, or the law of Mose, was the primary authority for Jews, and the other parts of our Old Testament develop the Torah's message in different ways. That's the heart of Psalm 1: obedience to the Torah is the key to living a God-honoring life. Jesus, while he consistently quoted from the Psalms and the prophets, centered his ministry around the Torah's central command of love for God and others. The Torah was Jesus' authority and we see him living by that authority in all he did and taught.

John 10 recalls Jesus' teaching about who has the authority to interpret the Torah correctly. At issue for 1st century Christians was the authority of Jesus versus the synagogue. John was written at a time of great pain for the early Christians because their Jewish families were beginning to exclude them from their communities. By the time John's gospel had been written the Christian community had finally determined that to be a Christian one had to adhere to the teachings of Jesus about Torah. Jesus is the gate and gatekeeper of authentic faith, and to listen to any other teaching puts one's salvation in jeopardy. So a Christ-minded practice of the authority of scripture is at the heart of our practice of faith.

But, what does all this mean for a 21st century group of cracked pots who need some guidance on how to live and how to be an effective relevant church? I gave you some background to how Jesus and 1st century Christians regarded the authority of scripture because I think their perspective can help us appropriately claim the authority of scripture in support of what we do.

A Christ-minded understanding of scripture's authority is visible to the extent which our thoughts, work, and ministry priorities are shaped by the cross and the resurrection. In Jesus Christ Superstar there's a moment when the crowds are coming into Jerusalem and the disciples are all singing, 'Haysannah, Hosannah'. And one of the zealots says to Jesus, 'Come on, you ride in ahead of us and you'll get the power and the glory for ever and ever and ever.' And Jesus turns round and says, 'Neither you, Simon, nor the 50,000, nor the Romans, nor the Jews, nor Judas, nor the twelve, nor the priests, nor the scribes, nor doomed Jerusalem herself, understand what power is, understand what glory is.' And then he proceeds to weep over Jerusalem and prophesy its destruction; and then he goes, steadily through the following week, to his enthronement on Calvary, which with hindsight the church realizes to be the place where all authority originates.

What does this look like in practical terms? A church directed by scriptural authority isn't distracted by arguments over non-eternal matters. Our priorities are shaped not by success, material gain, preservation of tradition or earthly influence because Christ in interpreting Torah rose up against these things that characterized his Jewish contemporaries. Rather, with a Christ-minded perspective of scriptural authority we'll strive to be the Church Christ destined us to be: His visible exhibition of justice and love in a broken world. Our priorities shaped by, for example, Christ's words, "I have come that you may have life, and have it in abundance." Let us, under the authority of scripture, join God in *this* work here and abroad.

But we'll also not shy away from calling people to repentance, as Christ did. Salvation doesn't happen simply because we've shown love and justice. It happens when someone sees their brokenness, admits their own culpability, accepts God's grace, and turns their life around based on the good news we've told them. So, claiming the authority of scripture means much more than being able to quote scripture or cite morality as evidence. A church that is guided by and submits to scriptural authority conforms itself to Christ's practice of it.

And since that's the goal of our teaching ministry, motivating us to do the things Christ did in the way he loved the Father and others, which would exhibit the extent we are conformed to the authority of scripture, today we're commissioning our teachers for the children, youth, and adults.

[Call teachers forward for commissioning]

Commissioning of Sunday School teachers:

Today you've heard my message about the authority of scripture. There is nothing more important to teach than this to our children and the adults who come to learn about faith here. You have accepted the call to be teachers of God's Word this year, Session has approved each of you as teachers, and it is my privilege to commission you to your charge.

Do you believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?

Do you acknowledge Him Lord of all and Head of the Church and through him believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and Good News to you?

Do you promise to teach the people of this church, children, youth, and adults, using your best effort and as an offering of your first fruits to God?

To the congregation: Do you pledge yourselves to support these your teachers in prayer, providing them occasional relief as needed, and encouraging them in their work? *We do.*

With God, all things are possible. Serve Christ, minister to Christ's body the Church, and teach the people with enthusiasm, intellect, and show them the love of Christ. Let us pray,

"Oh Lord, we pray for these members of your church who have stood up from among us to be teachers of your word this year. Give them energy for their task, passion for their classes, and creativity so their lessons will inspire greater faith in us. In your name, we pray. Amen."

Commissioning of Sarah Gay and Joy

Jesus came and said to his disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

Sarah Gay and Joy you have responded to the call God has given to this congregation that some of us stand up and go to offer the grace of God to people in other parts of this world. We honor your faith and courage in offering yourself for international cross-cultural mission service.

With God’s help, do you reaffirm your commitment to this work?

Sarah Gay and Joy: we do.

Will all of you as the People of God do all in your power to support Sarah Gay and Joy in their mission?

People: We will.

Call any elders forward who wish to lay on hands for commissioning.

Let us pray. Loving God, as your risen Son ascended to glory he declared that your people would receive power from the Holy Spirit to bear witness to him to the ends of the earth: Be present with all who go forth in his Name, especially your servants Sarah Gay and Joy who are prepared to serve in Cuba this week. As they minister as mission companions with your people in Cuba, may your love and your truth be known, and may their lives be strengthened by your presence among the people they serve; through Jesus Christ, the one in whom your mission in the world took flesh and dwelt among us. Amen.

Sarah Gay and Joy we commission you as short-term missionaries serving Christ’s church, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. May God bless you richly in your ministry. [Benediction]