

Doctrine of Holy Scriptures

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After my conversion into the Faith I was provided with a firm and incremental socialization into a reasoned trust that when I read the Bible I am reading the trustworthy Word of God. During my university years, my becoming a Christian in 1975 coincided with a strong apologetic accompaniment as I was disciplined by several enthusiastic Campus Crusade, Navigator and IntersVarsity persons. Responding to questions on the authority of Scripture was embedded in the ethos of the discipleship and evangelism training in those years, on campus and in the college and career-age church ministries that engaged me. Walter Martin, Norman Geisler, Carl Henry, John Warwick Montgomery, Ravi Zacharias, Josh McDowell, R.C. Sproul and J.I. Packers were contemporary heroes of the Faith and part of the nutrition provided by those providential circumstances in my early formation.

Shortly after becoming a Christ-follower, I spend three terms at Capernwray Bible School in England where the authority and transformational efficacy of Scriptures was tacitly assumed and explicitly taught. During the same period I spent time at L'Abri and was anchored in an intellectual and presuppositional apologetic tradition which was uncompromisingly rooted in Biblical fidelity. In fact, when I personally asked Francis Schaefer to recommend a North American seminary to me; he used the institutions' strong positions on Biblical authority as his only criterion. I provide this background to say that despite a Biblical illiteracy up to the age of 21 years, in my first and most formative years, the reasonable view of Scriptures was one of enormous and warranted respect. Sometimes after we have been building on a site, we forget the effort and importance of the early infrastructure. I now recall, with thanksgiving, that I was gifted with some terrific foundations upon which to build my life and ministry. I will extend my story just one or two steps further as a way of outlining the "narrative theology" of Holy Scriptures to follow (I believe New Testament scholar, Dr. Gordon Fee and Christian ethicist, Stanley Hauerwas, coined and/or popularized the notion of narrative theology).

In this paper I will not problematize the Bible nor deal with the plenteous critical arguments regarding Holy Scripture; but, rather, will present an affirmation of the Scriptures. In the late 1970s I closely followed the efforts and proceedings from the Chicago International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (eventually resulting in three seminal statements related to Scriptures). In some ways I considered this to be the Vatican II for evangelicals' deliberations on the status of Scriptures and a watershed series of events for those who then appreciated the importance of affirming the authority and trustworthiness of God's Word. The Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978; Packer, 1979) was a profound and creed-like articulation of a stand I wanted to take for my own – and did so. The influence of the 300 respected evangelical scholars' work resounded for about 10 years following their original meeting and when I began seminary in the early 1980s some of these same scholars were my teachers and influencers.

The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy

The Chicago Statement is the most carefully, clearly and concisely formulated contemporary statement on Holy Scripture that I know of and it fits my own sensibilities. Because of this I will devote a portion of this essay to describing that statement. I am not a Biblical scholar of stature but the formulations here resonate deeply with me and compliment the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada doctrinal statement on Holy Scripture: "The Old and New Testaments, inerrant as originally given, were verbally inspired by God and are a complete revelation of His will for the salvation of people. They constitute the divine and only rule of Christian faith and practice."

The picture, below, is one that has hung in my office for many years. It was the poster commissioned by the Council leaders:



Exhibit 1. Council on Inerrancy Poster

To personalize this in 1980, I commissioned one of my Grade 12 students who was a great artist-in-the-making to render a copy of each of the panels in oil paint for me. More than thirty years later these four full size paintings are dear to me. This poster sums up the resolution of these assembled scholars who entered into the “battle for the Bible” sparing during that critical time period. The propositions were that we must trust and understand God’s Word; we must be transformed by and apply God’s Word. The authority, veracity, credibility and trustworthiness of the Bible was then, and is now, key to our (and my) understanding, transformation and application of Truth.

The Statement warns that to deny the inerrancy of Scripture is to “set aside the witness of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit and to refuse that submission to the claims of God’s own Word which marks the true Christian faith.” This prefatory statement presented a “line in the sand” or a “shibboleth” (Judges 12:5, 6) of demarcation for evangelical Christians. My choice was then, and is now, to stand on the side of inerrancy and to pronounce this shibboleth as a signature mark of the

faith and the rule for my life and ministry. It was a logical step for these scholars to next co-construct a statement on hermeneutics; their having taken this position on inerrancy the begging question was next: “how then must the Bible be rightly understood?” Their third statement was on the transformational efficacy and application of God’s Word for the practical lives of believers.

The summary of the first Statement from the Council is as follows:

1. God, who is Himself Truth and speaks truth only, has inspired Holy Scripture in order thereby to reveal Himself to lost mankind through Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, Redeemer and Judge. Holy Scripture is God’s witness to Himself.
2. Holy Scripture, being God’s own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: It is to be believed, as God’s instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God’s command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God’s pledge, in all that it promises.
3. The Holy Spirit, Scripture’s divine Author, both authenticates it to us by His inward witness and opens our minds to understand its meaning.
4. Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God’s acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God’s saving grace in individual lives.
5. The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible’s own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church.

The Statement also includes eleven articles (affirmations and denials) as well as an exposition. In the context of the Scripture’s authors’ perspective on Scriptures (self-attestation), I will address this later but clearly the claim is that when we read the Bible we are reading exactly what God wants us to read. In other words, the words, ideas, and text were divinely constituted (though expressed in and with

human and contextual idiosyncrasies) and with the authority of the ultimate Author (God). Put another way, Scripture speaks the words of God to us and is God's Word because it has divine origins (2 Pt 1:21). God (being God) cannot fail to communicate what He chooses to communicate; however He wishes to communicate.

What we have in the canon of Holy Scriptures is divinely inspired and the witness of God to us. The Old Testament canon was fixed by the time of Jesus' earthly ministry and the New Testament canon was closed within the historical apostolic period. Jesus attested to the authority of the Old Testament canon. I hold that when I read the Old Testament, for example, I am reading precisely what God has intended me to read and what Jesus affirmed. When I read both the "red letters" of New Testament and the whole of the New Testament canon, I take these Scriptures to be the very words Jesus intended for me to read, as from Him, and that the whole process of preservation was supervised by God the Holy Spirit for our edification and to glorify God.

Of course infallibility and inerrancy are negative terms. The Chicago Statement says that "infallibility signifies the quality of neither misleading nor being misled and so safeguards in categorical terms the truth that Holy Scripture is a sure, safe and reliable rule and guide in all matters." As indicated, I am a signator to that position. The Statement says that "inerrant signifies the quality of being free from all falsehood or mistake and so safeguards the truth that Holy Scripture is entirely true and trustworthy in all its assertions." Again I sign off on this position, by my agreement.

I clearly recall the late Walter Martin's admonition to us at a Saskatoon seminar that the Bible must be read literally and literarily: that is to say that the historic context, cultural ethos, literary form and genre provide challenge and clarity in our interpretations of text. My basic position on the epistemology and ontology of revelation is that God the Creator and God the Author is able and humans are not

(not in the same league or even the same game domain); we need His help and He has given us the Holy Spirit to illuminate our understandings. My presuppositions with respect to the attributes of God trump the arrogant claims of humanism, skepticism together with the diminishing efforts of higher, lower and naïve criticism. Tony Campolo wisely says that we should know our enemies or our opposition because “they are partly right.” To strike a balance, I would propose that anti-intellectual, fideistic, easily belief-ish, unreasoned and flaccid faith can be as problematic as anti-supernatural, hyper-rationalized, materialistic and naturalistic positions. For example, it is no concession to appreciate that despite the amazing preservation of texts in transmission and translation, it is the autographa which is perfect. Having said this, I firmly believe that the constant comparison of unity of message and the internal integrity of our Holy Scriptures, as I read them in English and in numerous modern versions, allows me to be “wise for salvation” and “instructed in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:15-17; 2 Tim 2:15), as I judicially and with reliance on the Holy Spirit work to understand and apply the holy text.

A Modest Sketch of a Biblical Theology of Holy Scripture

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life (Jn 6:68)

There is both an external and internal apologetic for the authority and trustworthiness of Old and New Testaments (all 66 Books). I have delimited my overview to the internal or self-attestation aspects of Biblical authority. A typical bibliography will feature what the Bible and its writers claim about what is written. The “Scriptures” (Mk 12:10; Mk 15:28; Lk 4:21; Jn 2:22; Jn 7:38; Jn 10:35; Rom 4:3; Gal 4:30; 2 Pt 1:20; Mt 22:29; Mk 12:24; Lk 24:27; Jn 5:39; Acts 17:11; Rom 1:2; 2 Tim 3:15; 2 Pt 3:16) are self-affirmed as holy writings. Metaphors abound (Ps 119) for the Scriptures but the “Word of God” is perhaps the most telling and profound name given to Scriptures (Mk 7:13; Rom 10:17; 2 Cor 2:17; Heb 4:12; 1 Thess 2:13).

We know that “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God [God-breathed]” (2 Tim 3:16). This is a central text claiming that the Old Testament was consciously breathed or exerted upon and through the human authors. We read: “For not by the will of men was prophecy brought at any time, but being borne by the Holy Spirit, the holy men of God spoke” (2 Pt 1:21). This testimony of Scripture itself attests to God’s moving influence on the writers, to prompt and guide their writing. In the end, through various media, God has communicated what He has intended to communicate.

There are various nomenclature that merit definition and where distinction is commended. Scripture contains “records;” some revealed by God, some observed by writers and some written as orally passed along from others. “Revelation” is an act of God to communicate a new truth. “Illumination” is the work of the Holy Spirit to help humans to understand God’s Word (1 Cor 2:14; Mt 16:17). It has been helpfully said that “illumination” is the action of God on the mind of a person; whereas, “inspiration” is the revelation of the mind of God. There are several common views of inspiration. Natural inspiration is human-centered and akin to saying Shakespeare’s genius was inspired. Verbal or verbatim reporting is understood to be the mechanical transcription of God’s dictation. Concept, thought and verbal inspiration theories suggest that writers got the jist of God’s message and roughly set these to paper or, in the case of verbal inspiration, every choice of Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek word was picked by Holy Spirit, without writer discretion, without cultural and/or without contextual mediation. Plenary or full inspiration is the preferred view: holding that all Scriptures (2 Tim 3:15) are co-equally inspired by God, though different contexts and a multitude of human and unique frames are accounted for, as Holy Spirit superintended the development of text and canon and now gives us the capacity to understand.

In Genesis 1, the phrase “God said” occurs 10 times. In the Old Testament almost 4000 times, expressions such as “the Lord spoke,” “the word of the Lord came,” “the Lord said,” “thus said the Lord” appear as claims by writers acting as

oracles of God's will. Similar consciousness of inspiration and conveyance of revelation occurs in the New Testament (i.e., 2 Pt 1:20, 21; 1 Pt 1:10, 11; Acts 1:16; 1 Cor 2:13; 1 Thess 2:13; 2 Pt 3:1, 2; Mt 10:20; Mk 13:11; Lk 12:12; Lk 21:14, 15; Acts 2:4). Wayne Gruden's essay on Scripture's self-attestation concludes:

To believe that all the words of the Bible are God's words and that God can not speak untruthfully will significantly affect the way in which one approaches a "problem text" or an "alleged error" in Scripture.

He further says:

Once we have understood what these texts say about the Bible's truthfulness, it is necessary to move from the academic exercise of examining Scriptural texts to the personal question that each person must ask himself: Will I believe this? Will I believe that the words of Scripture are the words of my Creator, the One who cannot lie and that they are even now speaking to me?

This brings me to the implications of a doctrine of Holy Scriptures for the life of a believer and the ministries of servants of God.

Implications for Ministers of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ

Behold, the days come, says the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water but of the words of the Lord. And they shall run from sea to sea and from the North even to the East; they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it (Amos 8:11)

I believe the Church has been given the responsibility to share the revelation of the Gospel (the Old Testament and New Testament), in the power of the Holy Spirit, to a thirsty and needy world. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Rom 10:17; Jn 14:16; Jn 16:7-14; 1 Cor 2:4, 9-16; 2 Cor 3:12-4.6; 1 Thess 1:5; 1 Thess 2:13; Heb 3:7f; 1 Jn 2:20-27). God wants every man, woman, boy and girl to come to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and to grow, day by day, to become more like Him. Ministry is unimaginable without Scripture and the mediating work of the Holy Spirit (e.g., the oxygen and fuel for the fires of faith).

J.I. Packer says the church is “enfeebled” (1979, p. 28) when the Scripture is not given its due attention. He says “the heart of the life of faith is in fact the recognition that all the promises which God is recorded as having made to His people in the past are still in principle extended to each individual Christian in the present.” The implication for me, as a minister of the Gospel is to diligently, authoritatively and consistently present Scripture to everyone who will listen. The vocation of servants of Jesus Christ is to proclaim the Gospel to everyone, til He comes again. The ministry is to take the Good News and teach it faithfully, to baptize and make disciplines, in accordance to the revelation of God. This is done, in the power of the Holy Spirit, by making space for Truth and Love, in all the spheres of ministry. Sociologically, all religions have both sacred writ and sacred rituals. For Christian ministers the foundation of our sacred writ, the Old and New Testaments, need to be seen as authoritative, dynamic (living and enlivening), and trustworthy. The Holy Scriptures contain the revelation of God, Creator and Redeemer, to humankind. Rightly understood this revelation becomes the rule and provides the message that brings life and faith. My commitment to the Word of God is fundamental to my discernments and judgments; my baseline rule.

Alister McGrath (2007) suggested that *Christianity's Dangerous Idea* is that “the Bible is capable of being understood by all Christian believers – and that they all have the right to interpret it and to insist upon their perspectives being taken seriously [as a powerful affirmation of spiritual democracy]” (p, 2). This is intertwined with the priesthood of believers and became the key issue to bring about the Protestant Reformation. There were varied responses to the question: who has access to the authoritative view of what it means to live the Christian life? The “perspicuity” of the Bible means that, with the Holy Spirit, the Bible is clear enough for the simplest person to live by; it is deep enough for those with the highest of intellectual and spiritual capacity to benefit from; it is clear in essential matters related to faith and life; that an Biblical obscurity is the fault of our finite abilities and sinful humankind; and that unsaved persons are given the capacity to sufficiently hear and understand the Gospel such as moves them to saving faith

(Pettegrew, 2004). This said, the saints and and pre-Christians require faithful men and women to lead them, to equip them, and apprentice them in the right dividing of the Word of God.

I remember the particular “ah ha” moment when I was studying with Dr. Bruce Waltke at Regent College. He was another Faith hero for me: A couple of doctorates (one from Dallas Theological and another from Harvard), a persuasive writer, and well-respected Old Testament scholar (on NIV Translation team). He told us of a man he knew in Jerusalem who was not a believer but who had memorized the entire Old Testament. He told us that knowing, even memorizing, the Word was completely inadequate and that dead orthodoxy was of no use to God. He shared with us that much of his own study of Scriptures was done on his knees, seeking the Holy Spirit’s guidance and illumination. If anyone could be self-sufficient in handling the Word of God, it was Dr. Waltke but not so. This intellectual giant confessed the uselessness of his own skills and scholarly acumen without the Holy Spirit’s active participation in his humble learning and willingness to be transformed by Scripture. Even the wisest and most able are totally inadequate and dependent when it comes to knowing the good, perfect and pleasing will of God in Scriptures. He further emphasized that we must not only be hearers but doers (appliers) of the Word. Of course this has become a message that I must likewise pass onto others, even as Professor Waltke and many others have passed the torch onto me. This incident of teaching that promoted reverent humility in the receiving and reflecting on God’s Word has long impacted me. Many times, I’ve had to bring myself back from my instrumental use of God’s Word, to a submission to God’s Spirit and the Word; my role being simply a channel and conveyor for the transforming and confluent work of Spirit and Word.

I’ve also taken very seriously the injunction and warning of James 3:1 (“Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly”). As the unfolding of my life has been characterized by the activities of teaching and being an educator, it is a solemn thing to know that in this life and in my ministry there is an explicitly higher standard for

my workmanship (2 Tim 2:15). In this regard, I am attracted to Gordon Smith's (2014, pp. 84, 85) conclusion that there is a logo-centric source for our wisdom:

Through His self-communication, the Word is both revelation and it is the means of our sanctification and thus linked to the Spirit. The reference to the Spirit is important: the Scriptures have no transforming power in themselves as texts but only as they are linked to the Spirit . . . so the church is a community of the Word: studied, meditated upon, preached.

Indeed, we are living in a complex world and I, for one, know my need for the grace of wisdom. I can not begin to help myself or others (to be practically wise) without the affordance of God's Holy Spirit and the Word of God. David Ford (2007, p. 52) says that Christian theology requires an engagement with Scripture whose primary desire is for the wisdom of God in life now. So for the "wisdom from above" that I seek, I must humbly ask to receive the same from the Lord (James 1 and 3) and, further, I must ask Him to daily teach me from His Word. While the Scripture brings delight (Ps 119:14, 16, 24, 35, 47, 70, 77, 92, 143, 174) and joy (Ps 119:111, 162), my obedience to the Word of God and my becoming more like Jesus Christ, requires my being washed with the Word and sanctified by God's Spirit. This is what is meant to be "taught by God" (Jn 6:45; Is 54:13; Jn 14:26; Jn 16:13f; 1 Cor 2:10, 13; 1 Jn 2:27). I desire to be taught of God. There is nothing wrong with human teachings which come from creation (rightly interpreted) but the trumping or overriding authority for what is true, what is just, what is beautiful, what is godly, what is holy, and what is God's will, comes from the Holy Scriptures (as rightly interpreted). The Scriptures are necessary for Christian life and ministry. With the ministry of the Holy Spirit, Scriptures are sufficient to guide my walking in a manner worthy of His calling, through a knowledge of His revealed will and wisdom. Through Scriptures, the Lord has revealed His will and purposes (Amos 3:7; Jn 7:16; Jn 8:28; Jn 12:49f; Heb 2:3f; Eph 3:5; 1 Cor 2:7f; Rom 16:25f; 1 Cor 2:1-13; 1 Thess 2:13). God reveals Himself (Rom 1:20; Ex 34:6; Deut 5:9; 1 Jn 1:5; 1 Jn 4:7-10); His

kingdom; His covenant, His law and His salvation (Packer, 1981, pp. 21-23) through Scripture. These are entrusted to ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

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