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The Authority of the Bible

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Authority is a dirty word today—dirty, disliked, even detested. I doubt if any other word arouses more instant aversion among the young and the radical of all kinds. Authority smacks of establishment, of privilege, of oppression, of tyranny. And whether we like it or not, we are witnessing in our day a global revolt against all authority, whether of the family, the college, the bosses, the church, the state or God.

Now the Christian is always in an ambivalent position vis-à-vis the mood of the world. We have to avoid the two extremes of an uncritical acquiescence and of an equally uncritical rejection. On the one hand, we should respond to the contemporary world with sensitivity—listening, striving to understand and where possible agreeing. On the other hand, we must continue to stand over against the world, evaluating secular society by our own objective Christian criteria, and where necessary disagreeing, protesting and rejecting. It is not the calling of the church to be a chorus girl or—to use a more biblical metaphor—a reed shaken with the wind.

If we adopt this double stance toward the world, what will happen to the debate about authority? It would be extremely foolish if our immediate reaction were completely negative and we were to give the whole anti-authority movement a blanket condemnation. For I do not hesitate to say that some of it is responsible, mature and truly Christian. It arises from the Christian understanding of human nature and our dignity as creatures made in God's likeness. It protests against the dehumanization of human beings and sets itself against all injustice and discrimination which insult both God the Creator and man the creature. It seeks to protect human beings against exploitation by "the system," "the machine," "the institution." It longs to see people liberated to enjoy their God-given freedom.

It is right, therefore, to detect a grievous misuse of authority when civil rights and freedom of speech are denied to citizens, when a racial or tribal or religious minority is victimized, when an economic system holds people in bondage to materialism or when education is hardly distinguishable from indoctrination. In such situations, when non-Christians protest, Christians should not be ashamed to be associated with the protest. Indeed, we should have initiated it ourselves.

On the other hand, much of today's anti-authority mood is more radical still. Sometimes it is a plea, not for the true human liberty which God intends, but for anarchy (a total

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abolition of the rule of law) and for an individual human autonomy (everyone a law to himself) which God never intended. Christians cannot go along with secularists when they agitate for unlimited permissiveness in social and ethical terms, nor when they foolishly imagine that “free thought” is intellectual freedom or that “free sex” is moral freedom. For Christians are convinced that neither truth nor righteousness is relative, since God has given us (by revelation) absolute standards both of what is true and of what is right. Which brings us straight to our subject: *Jesus Christ and the authority of the Word of God.*

Our starting point is the remark attributed to Charles Lamb that “if Shakespeare were to come into this room we should all rise up to meet him, but if *that Person* [Jesus Christ] was to come into it, we should all fall down and try to kiss the hem of his garment.” For myself I think we would do more than kiss his clothing. We would surely go on to acknowledge him as our Lord. We would kneel beside Thomas saying “My Lord and my God” and beside Saul of Tarsus saying “Lord, what do you want me to do?”

This is the only possible attitude of mind in which to approach our study of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Word of God, for my theme is that belief in the authority of Scripture and submission to the authority of Scripture are necessary consequences of our submission to the lordship of Jesus. I propose first to expound this theme and then to draw some deductions from it.

Exposition

What is the major reason why evangelical Christians believe that the Bible is God’s Word written, inspired by his Spirit and authoritative over their lives? It is certainly not that we take a blindfold leap into the darkness and resolve to believe what we strongly suspect is incredible. Nor is it because the universal church consistently taught this for the first eighteen centuries of its life (though it did, and this long tradition is not to be lightly set aside). Nor is it because God’s Word authenticates itself to us as we read it today—by the majesty of its themes, by the unity of its message and by the power of its influence (though it does all this and more). No. The overriding reason for accepting the divine inspiration and authority of Scripture is plain loyalty to Jesus.

We believe in Jesus. We are convinced that he came from heaven and spoke from God. He said so: “No one knows the Father except the Son” (Mt 11:27). Again, “my teaching is not mine, but his who sent me” (Jn 7:16) and “we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen” (Jn 3:11). So we are prepared to believe what *he* taught for the simple reason that it is *he* who taught it. Therefore we bring our minds into submission to his mind. We want to conform our thoughts to his thoughts. It is from Jesus that we derive our understanding of God and ourselves, of good and evil, of duty and

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destiny, of time and eternity, of heaven and hell. Our understanding of *everything* is conditioned by what Jesus taught. And this *everything* means *everything*: It includes his teaching about the Bible. We have no liberty to exclude anything from Jesus' teaching and say, "I believe what he taught about *this* but not what he taught about *that*." What possible right have we to be selective? We have no competence to set ourselves up as judges and decide to accept some parts of his teaching while rejecting others. All Jesus' teaching was true. It is the teaching of none other than the Son of God.

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What, then, *did* Jesus teach about the Bible? We have to remember that the Bible consists of two halves, the Old Testament and the New Testament. And the way he endorsed each is different—inevitably so because the New Testament had not yet been written.

The Old Testament

Jesus made several direct statements about the Old Testament's divine origin and permanent validity. He had not come to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them. Indeed, "till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Mt 5:17–18; cf. Lk 16:17). Again, "scripture cannot be broken" (Jn 10:35).

To these direct statements we should add the indirect evidence provided by the formulas he used to introduce his Scripture quotations. For example, he prefaced a quotation from Psalm 110 by the expression "David himself said in [that is, inspired by] the Holy Spirit" (Mk 12:36), and he attributed a statement about marriage written by the author of Genesis to the Creator himself, who in the beginning made man male and female (Mt 19:4–5).

More impressive than what Jesus *said* about Scripture, however, is the way he personally *used* it. His high view of Scripture as God's written Word is amply illustrated in the important place it occupied in his own life and ministry. He did not just talk about Scripture; he believed it and acted on it himself. Let me give you three examples. In each there was a potential element of uncertainty, a question or problem. In each he answered the question and resolved the problem by an appeal to Scripture. In each, therefore, his personal submission to Scripture is plainly seen.

The first is the area of *personal duty*. What did the Lord God require of him? What were to be the standards and values by which he would live his life? The devil raised such questions as these with Jesus in the wilderness of Judea, as he had raised them with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden several millennia previously. The devil tempted Jesus to disobey God, to doubt God and to desert God. But whereas in the garden Eve succumbed to the insinuations of Satan, in the wilderness Jesus resisted them. "Begone Satan!" he cried. Why? "Because it stands written (in Scripture) " 'you shall not.' " The plain

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prohibitions of Scripture were enough for Jesus. For him what Scripture said God said. There was no place for argument and no room for negotiation. He was determined to obey God his Father, and he knew that in order to do so he must submit to Scripture and do what stands written there.

My second example takes us to the area of *official ministry*. The Gospels do not describe the process by which Jesus came to an understanding of who he was (his identity) and what he had come to do (his role). It seems very probable, however, that it was through meditation in the Old Testament Scriptures. Certainly *before* his public ministry began, he knew he was the Son of God, the anointed King, the suffering servant and the glorious Son of man described by different psalms and prophets. Also, he had so fused these different pictures in his mind that he knew he could enter his glory only if he were first to serve, suffer and die. This self-understanding was confirmed to him at his baptism when the Father's voice acclaimed him saying: "You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

But immediately afterward the devil precipitated him into a painful identity crisis, challenging him repeatedly in the wilderness—"If you are the Son of God—if ... if ... if ..." —attempting to sow in his mind seeds of doubt about his identity and role.

And these temptations continued throughout his ministry. Another crisis came at Caesarea Philippi when Jesus first taught the apostles openly "the Son of man must suffer many things and be rejected and be killed," and Peter rebuked him, "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you" (Mt 16:22). Immediately Jesus rounded on Peter with the fierce words "Get behind me, Satan!" He recognized in the words of Peter the voice of the devil. It was the same question of his identity and role.

Peter did it again in the Garden of Gethsemane when he drew his sword and tried to avert the arrest of Jesus. Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; ... Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?" (Mt 26:52–54).

This "must" ("the Son of man *must* suffer," "it *must* be so") has only one explanation. It was a necessity laid upon him by Scripture. Scripture revealed to him his messianic role. And he was determined voluntarily to fulfill it, because, as far as he was concerned, what Scripture said God said.

The third area of questioning in which Jesus was involved was that of *public controversy*. Every reader of the Gospels quickly notices how many public debates they include. Regarding him as a particularly wise rabbi, individuals would come to him with their

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questions. Sometimes they were genuine inquiries like “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” On this occasion Jesus’ reply is significant. He responded with a counter-question: “What is written in the law?” (Lk 10:25–26).

Jesus was also drawn into disagreement with the religious authorities, in particular the rival groups known as the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Both criticized him and came to him with their trick questions. The Pharisees complained that his followers did not observe the traditions of the elders in ceremonial matters like washing their hands and their vessels. In his reply Jesus accused them of rejecting the commandment of God and making void the Word of God in order to keep their traditions (Mk 7:1–13). The Sadducees, on the other hand, who did not believe in survival or resurrection, emphasized the problems an afterlife would create. They asked Jesus what would happen to a poor woman who had seven husbands, one after the other, each of whom she outlived. Whose wife would she be in the resurrection? Would she have one of them (which would mean the other six were out of luck) or none of them (which would be a bit hard all around) or all seven (which somehow does not sound decent)? They thought they could dispose of the doctrine of the resurrection by ridicule. But Jesus said to them, “Is not this why you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?” (Mk 12:18–27).

Thus Jesus’ complaint to both religious groups concerned their cavalier treatment of the Word of God. For the Pharisees *added* to Scripture (namely, their traditions) while the Sadducees *subtracted* from Scripture (namely, the supernatural). Neither of them gave Scripture the respect it deserved as God’s Word written. Jesus accused the Pharisees of making it void and the Sadducees of being ignorant of it. In both cases he appealed against their teaching to Scripture. He made Scripture the judge.

In each of these three examples—concerning the realms of personal duty, official ministry and public controversy—there was a question, a problem, a dispute. And in each case Jesus turned to Scripture to answer the question, to solve the problem, to settle the dispute. When the devil tempted him, he resisted the temptation with “It stands written.” When the apostles rejected the necessity of his sufferings, he insisted that the Scriptures must be fulfilled. When the Jewish leaders criticized his teaching, he criticized their treatment of Scripture.

This evidence cannot be gainsaid. Jesus endorsed the Old Testament as the Word of God. Both in his view of Scripture and in his use of Scripture, he was entirely and reverently submissive to its authority as to the authority of God’s own Word. Now the disciple is not above his teacher, nor is the servant above his lord. How then can we, the disciples of Jesus, possibly have a lower view of Scripture than our Teacher himself had? How can

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we, the servants of Jesus, allow Scripture to occupy a smaller place in our lives than it occupied in the life of our Lord himself?

There are only two possible escape routes from this obligation. The first is to say that Jesus did not know what he was talking about, that the Incarnation imprisoned him in the limited mentality of a first-century Palestinian Jew, and that consequently he believed the Old Testament as they did, but that he, like them, was mistaken. The second is to say that Jesus *did* know what he was talking about, that he actually knew Scripture to be unreliable, but that he still affirmed its reliability because his contemporaries did and he did not want to upset them. According to the first explanation, Jesus' erroneous teaching was involuntary (he could not help it); according to the second it was deliberate. These theories portray Jesus as either deceived or a deceiver. They discredit the incarnate Son of God. They are incompatible both with his claims to speak what he knew (Jn 3:11), to bear witness to the truth and to be the truth (Jn 18:37; 14:6), and with his known hatred of all hypocrisy and deceit. They are totally unacceptable to anybody who has been led by the Holy Spirit to say "Jesus is Lord" (1 Cor 12:3). Over against these slanderous speculations we must continue to affirm that Jesus knew what he was teaching, that he meant it, and that what he taught and meant is true.

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The New Testament

The argument here is different, but equally compelling. If Jesus endorsed the Old Testament, setting his stamp of approval on it, he also foresaw the writing of the Scriptures of the New Testament, parallel to the Scriptures of the Old Testament. Indeed, he not only foresaw it, he actually intended it, and he deliberately made provision for it by appointing and authorizing his apostles.

Apostle is the title which Jesus himself chose for the Twelve, in order to indicate their role. "He called his disciples," Luke writes, "and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles" (Lk 6:13). Mark adds that he appointed them "to be sent out to preach" (Mk 3:14). The verb *apostello* means "to send," and the mission on which he proposed to send them was essentially a teaching and preaching mission.

It is true that the word *apostolos* seems to have been used once in the New Testament to describe every Christian (Jn 13:16), for Jesus sends us all "into the world" as his ambassadors, and we are all called to have some share in the apostolic mission of the church (Jn 17:18; 20:21). It is also true that the same word *apostolos* is used once or twice in the expression "apostles of the churches" (2 Cor 8:23; cf. Phil 2:25), which seems to refer to what we would call "missionaries"—Christians sent on a particular mission by the church (cf. Acts 13:3; 14:15).

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Nevertheless, the New Testament almost universally restricts the word *apostolos* to the special apostles of Christ, namely, the original Twelve, together with a very small number of later additions, notably Paul (cf. Gal 1:1) and James, the Lord's brother (Gal 1:19).

There was a double background to the word *apostle*—ancient and contemporary—which helps us to interpret its meaning and understand why Jesus chose it. The ancient background is biblical, namely, the repeated Old Testament use of the verb *to send* in reference to the prophets of God. “Come,” said God to Moses, “I will send you to Pharaoh” (Ex 3:10); and later Moses insisted over against his jealous rivals, “You shall know that the LORD has sent me ... and that it has not been of my own accord” (Num 16:28–29). It was even clearer in the case of the great prophets of the seventh and eighth centuries B.C. “Whom shall I send?” God had asked in Isaiah’s hearing. “Send me,” Isaiah had replied (Is 6:8). “To all to whom I send you you shall go,” he said to Jeremiah (Jer 1:7), and to Ezekiel: “Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel” (Ezek 2:3). Several times the word of God came to Jeremiah saying, “I have sent to you all my servants the prophets, sending them persistently” (Jer 35:15). In each case the “sending” is not a vague dispatch but a specific commission to assume the role of a prophet and to speak God’s word to the people. It is evident that when Jesus gave to the Twelve the title *apostles* and *sent* them out to teach, he was likening his apostles to God’s prophets and indicating that they were to speak in his name and carry his word to others. The prophets of the Old Testament and apostles of the New Testament were equally organs of divine revelation. As such they are the foundation on which the church is being built (Eph 2:20; 3:5).

The second background was contemporary. Recent research shows that *apostolos* is the Greek equivalent of the Aramaic *shaliach* and that the *shaliach* already had a well-defined meaning as a teacher sent out by the Sanhedrin to instruct the Jews of the Dispersion. As such the *shaliach* carried the authority of those he represented, so that it was said, “the one who is sent is as he who sent him.” In the same way Jesus sent out his apostles to represent him, to bear his authority and teach in his name, so that he could say of them: “He who receives you receives me” (Mt 10:40; cf. Jn 13:20).

Both the prophetic and the rabbinic background throw light on the meaning of the word *apostolos*. The apostle was a specially chosen emissary, the bearer of another and higher authority, the herald of a given message.

When one turns to the New Testament itself and to the New Testament’s understanding of the apostles of Jesus, it appears that they were given a threefold equipment for their task, which together render them a unique and irreplaceable group. These three qualifications were their personal commission, their historical experience and their special inspiration.

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First, their personal commission. No apostle was self-appointed, or even appointed by another man or men or even by the church. They were all personally chosen, commissioned and authorized by Jesus. This was clear in the case of the Twelve. Out of a much wider constituency of *disciples* Jesus “chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles” (Lk 6:13). It was equally clear in the case of Paul, although Christ chose him after the ascension. One of the accounts of his conversion which Luke preserves in Acts includes the very words of apostolic commissioning, *ego apostello se*, “I apostle you” or “I make you an apostle” (Acts 26:17). And in his letters Paul not only asserts his apostleship (“Paul an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God”) but vigorously defends it (for example, in Gal 1:1, “Paul an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead”).

Second, their historical experience. Again, this is very clear in the case of the Twelve. Jesus appointed them, writes Mark, “to be with him, and to be sent out to preach” (Mk 3:14). These two purposes belonged together. They could be sent out to preach only after they had been with him, for their preaching was to be a witness to him, out of their own experience, from what they had seen and heard. “You also are witnesses,” Jesus was to say to them later, “because you have been with me from the beginning” (Jn 15:27). So when the time came for somebody to replace Judas, the essential qualification Peter laid down was that he must “have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us,” and in particular that he must “become with us a witness to his resurrection” (Acts 1:21–22). Saul of Tarsus seems to have been the last apostle to be appointed. Although he was not one of the Twelve and did not know Jesus during his public ministry, yet he had been granted a resurrection appearance. Without this he could not have been an apostle. “Am I not an apostle?” he cried. “Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” And again, “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles” (1 Cor 9:1; 15:8–9). The same was true of James (1 Cor 15:7).

Third, the apostles were given a special inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Of course all Christians have received the Holy Spirit to dwell within us, to show Christ to us and make us like Christ, but Jesus promised the apostles an altogether unusual ministry of the Holy Spirit, relating to their teaching ministry. The Spirit would bring to their remembrance all that Jesus had said to them, and he would teach them “many things” which Jesus had not said to them because they had been unable to bear them. In fact, he would guide them into all the truth (Jn 14:25–26; 16:12–13). These great promises evidently looked forward to the writing of the Gospels (in which Jesus’ teaching was remembered) and of the Epistles (in which Jesus’ teaching was supplemented).

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In these three ways Jesus made a purposeful preparation for the writing of the New Testament Scriptures. He gave his apostles a personal commission, a historical experience and a special inspiration. Each was a gift from Jesus to them, and each was designed to equip them for their unique role as his apostles.

The next point to notice is that the apostles understood these things. They were conscious of the unique position to which Jesus had appointed them. They exercised the authority which he had given them, and they expected the churches to acknowledge it also. We see this in their letters, which they ordered to be read publicly in the early Christian assemblies, alongside the Old Testament Scriptures (for example, Col 4:16; 1 Thess 5:27; Rev 1:3).

Paul stated that his message was “the word of God” (1 Thess 2:13) and that the very words in which it was communicated were “not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit” (1 Cor 2:13). This is a claim not to divine revelation only, but to verbal inspiration. Further, he issued commands and required obedience, for he could say, “What I am writing to you is a command of the Lord” (2 Thess 3:6–15; 1 Cor 14:37). When he went to Galatia, they received him “as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus” (Gal 4:14), that is, as if he were himself God’s messenger, God’s Christ. He did not rebuke them for this. Far from it. His complaint was not that they formerly regarded him thus, but that now the false teachers had made them less ready to defer to his authority. And he evidently told the Corinthians that Christ was speaking in and through him, for he referred to their desire for proof that this was so (2 Cor 13:3; cf. v. 10).

Turning to other apostles, Peter identified the good news which he had preached and by which his converts had been born again as “the living and abiding word of God” (1 Pet 1:22–25). And John declared not only that what he and his fellow apostles proclaimed was what they had seen and heard (1 Jn 1:1–4), but that this original teaching of the apostles was normative for all times. Consequently, he kept calling his readers back to “what they heard from the beginning” (1 Jn 2:7, 24). Indeed, conformity to apostolic teaching and submission to apostolic authority were major tests of whether religious teachers really knew and possessed God themselves (1 Jn 4:6; 2 Jn 9–10; 3 Jn 9–10).

The authority of the apostles, which Jesus gave them and which they self-consciously exercised, was recognized by the early church. The first thing we are told about the newly Spirit-filled church on the day of Pentecost is “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42). Spirit-filled churches always do. The post-apostolic fathers understood clearly that the apostles were unique. Clement of Rome wrote to the Corinthians at the end of the first century: “The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ was sent forth from God. So then Christ is from God, and the apostles are from Christ” (para. 5). At the beginning of the second century,

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Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, wrote to the Romans: “I do not, as Peter and Paul, issue commandments unto you. They were apostles; I am but a condemned man” (chap. 4; cf. Trallians, chap. 3; Magnesians, chap. 13; and Ephesians, chap. 3). Somewhat later (about A.D. 200) Tertullian of North Africa was yet more explicit: “We Christians are forbidden to introduce anything on our own authority, or to choose what someone else introduces on his own authority. Our authorities are the Lord’s apostles, and they in their turn choose to introduce nothing on their own authority. They faithfully passed on to the nations the teaching which they had received from Christ” (*Prescriptions against Heretics*, chap. 6).

When the time came to settle the canon of the New Testament and in particular which books should be excluded, the supreme question about every questionable book was whether it possessed apostolic authority. Had it been written by an apostle? If not, did it carry the imprimatur of apostles in that it came from their circle and represented their teaching? The test of canonicity was apostolicity.

It is tragic in our day to witness the loss of this understanding. People talk of Paul, Peter, John and the other apostles as if they were foolish and fallible first-century Christians whose teaching was nothing but their own opinions and may readily be set aside if we do not happen to like it. Even biblical scholars are sometimes most irresponsible in their treatment of the apostles. “That’s Paul’s view,” they say, “or Peter’s or John’s. But this is mine. And my view is just as good as theirs, in fact better.” But no, the teaching of the apostles is the teaching of Christ. To receive them is to receive Christ; to reject them is to reject Christ.

Would that we could return to the clear-sighted understanding of the sixteenth-century Reformers on this matter! Here, for example, is Luther: “Jesus ... subjects the whole world to the apostles, through whom alone it should and must be enlightened. All the people in the world—kings, princes, lords, learned men, wise men, holy men—have to sit down while the apostles stand up, have to let themselves be accused and condemned in their wisdom and sanctity as men who know neither doctrine nor life nor the right relation to God” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 21, Concordia, 1956, p. 61).

We are ready now to summarize the argument for our acceptance of the whole Bible as God’s Word written, uniquely revealed, verbally inspired, supremely authoritative. The argument is easy to grasp, and I think impossible to refute. It concerns the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ. He endorsed the Old Testament Scriptures. He made provision for the writing of the New Testament Scriptures.

This argument is not circular, as some objectors maintain. They represent us as saying something like this: “We know Scripture is inspired because the divine Lord Jesus said

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so, and we know the Lord Jesus is divine because the inspired Scripture says so.” If that were our position, we would indeed be arguing in a circle. But our critics mistake our reasoning. Our argument is not circular, but linear. We do not begin by assuming the very inspiration of Scripture which we are setting out to prove. On the contrary, we come to the Gospels (which tell the story of Jesus) without any doctrine of Scripture or theory of inspiration at all. We are content merely to take them at their face value as first-century historical documents (which they are), recording the impressions of eyewitnesses. Next, as we read the Gospels, their testimony (through the work of the Holy Spirit) leads us to faith in Jesus as Lord. And then this Lord Jesus, in whom we have come to believe, gives us a doctrine of Scripture (his own doctrine, in fact) which we did not have at the beginning. Thus the argument runs not in a circle (Scripture witnesses to Jesus who witnesses to Scripture) but in a line (historical documents evoke our faith in Jesus, who then gives us a doctrine of Scripture).

The central issue relates, then, not to the Bible’s authority, but to Christ’s. If *he* accepted the Old Testament as God’s Word, are we going to reject it? If *he* appointed and authorized his apostles, saying to them “he who receives you receives me,” are we going to reject them? To reject the authority of either the Old Testament or the New Testament is to reject the authority of Christ. It is supremely because we are determined to submit to the authority of Jesus Christ as Lord that we submit to the authority of Scripture.

Deductions

“But,” an objector may say, “does it really matter whether the Bible is completely and infallibly true or not? Isn’t the argument rather academic and remote from real life?” No. The question of biblical authority is of immense personal, practical and contemporary relevance. Just how fundamental it is to every Christian’s everyday Christianity I hope now to show in a series of four deductions.

First, submission to the authority of Scripture is fundamental to *Christian discipleship*.

I am not of course implying by this that nobody who denies the authority of Scripture can be a disciple of Jesus in any sense at all. The facts are otherwise. There are followers of Jesus whose confidence in Scripture is minimal. But I have to add that their Christian discipleship is bound thereby to be impaired.

For what is Christian discipleship? Surely all would be agreed that, at the very least, discipleship includes worship, faith, obedience and hope. Yet each of these ingredients is impossible without a reliable objective revelation from God.

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How can we worship God if we do not know his character? Christians are not Athenians. We do not worship “an unknown God” as they did in Athens; we worship “in truth,” as Jesus said we must (Jn 4:24), and we glory in God’s “name,” his revealed character.

How can we trust God if we do not know his faithfulness? Genuine faith is never irrational. It rests on the reliability of a God who has spoken. The foundation of trust is truth—God’s truth and truthfulness.

How can we obey God if we do not know his will? Obedience is impossible if no laws or commandments have been given us to obey.

How can we hope in God if we do not know his promises? Christian hope is not the same as secular optimism. Rather, it is a joyful confidence about the future, which is aroused by and rests on specific promises about the return of Christ and the triumph of God.

Thus worship, faith, obedience and hope—four basic ingredients of Christian discipleship—depend on our knowledge of God. Worship depends on his character, faith on his faithfulness, obedience on his commandments and hope on his promises. And God’s character, faithfulness, commandments and promises are all revealed in Scripture. Therefore, Scripture is fundamental to Christian discipleship. If we would grow up into maturity as followers of Jesus, the Word of God will occupy a central place in our lives.

Second, submission to the authority of Scripture is fundamental to *Christian integrity*.

Many would deny this and would even affirm the contrary. They regard the acceptance of biblical infallibility as actually untenable and therefore charge Christians who hold it with a lack of mental integrity, with intellectual obscurantism, schizophrenia or suicide, and with other horrid crimes!

But we plead “not guilty” to these charges and insist that our conviction about Scripture arises from the very integrity which our critics say we lack. For what is *integrity*? *Integrity* is the quality of an “integrated” person who is at peace and not at war within himself. Instead of a dichotomy between various beliefs, or between beliefs and behavior, there is harmony.

Now one of the foundational and most integrating of all Christian beliefs is the truth that “Jesus is Lord” (for example, Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3; Phil 2:11). A Christian is somebody who not only confesses with his lips that Jesus is Lord, but brings every aspect of his life under the sovereign lordship of Jesus—his opinions, his beliefs, his standards, his values, his ambitions, *everything*!

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To us, then, submission to Scripture (for reasons already given) is part and parcel of this submission to the lordship of Jesus. We cannot accommodate ourselves to the idea of a selective submission—for example, agreeing with Jesus in his doctrine of God but disagreeing with him in his doctrine of Scripture, or obeying his command to love our neighbor but disobeying his command to make disciples. Selective submission is not true submission at all; there is in it a reprehensible element of pride and self-will. This is the reason why Paul refers to false teachers (precisely because they presume not to “agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ”) as “puffed up with conceit” and even as “insubordinate,” an adjective he has just used of unruly children (1 Tim 6:3–4; Tit 1:6, 10). There is about false (that is, unbiblical) teaching a certain immaturity, arrogance and lack of discipline which arise from a basic unwillingness to submit our minds to the lordship of Christ.

This principle indicates what we should do with biblical problems. In affirming the full inspiration and authority of Scripture, we are not by any means denying that there are problems—philosophical, scientific, historical, literary and moral. But then every single Christian doctrine has problems. And we must learn to deal with problems over Scripture exactly as we deal with problems over any other Christian doctrine. The example I like to give is our belief that “God is love,” for this is a fundamental part of the Christian creed shared by all Christians of all persuasions. Yet the problems surrounding the doctrine are immense—questions about the origin and continuance of evil, about why the innocent suffer, about the so-called silences of God (for example, unanswered prayers) and the so-called acts of God (that is, natural disasters). What do we do when confronted with such problems? Do we conclude that in order to preserve our intellectual integrity we have to renounce our belief in the love of God? Not at all. We retain our conviction about God’s love *in spite of the problems* for the simple and straightforward reason that this is what Jesus taught by word and deed. It is loyalty to Jesus which gives us the true principle of integrity.

It is the same with biblical problems. Of course we should grapple with them. It is no part of Christian responsibility either to pretend they are not there or to ignore them. And as we study them, some will diminish in size or even disappear (many problems which troubled former generations are no longer problems today). Yet some problems will remain. We have to be prepared to live with them, believing that if we had further knowledge, they too would be solved. We certainly should not allow the problems to shift us from our conviction regarding Scripture. For our view of Scripture depends on our loyalty to Christ, not on our ability to solve all the problems. As with the love of God, so with the Word of God: We hold this doctrine *in spite of the problems* for the simple and straightforward reason that Jesus taught it and exhibited it. And to believe a Christian doctrine because of the acknowledged lordship of Jesus Christ cannot possibly be

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dismissed as obscurantism. It is the very opposite. It is Christian humility, Christian sobriety, Christian integrity.

Third, submission to the authority of Scripture is fundamental to *Christian freedom*.

Once again, many imagine that the reverse is true. I have several times used the word *submission*—submission to the authority of Scripture and submission to the lordship of Christ. And to large numbers of our contemporaries *submission* and *freedom* are incompatible. If I am to be free, they say, I must rebel against all authority; to *submit* to any rule (whether intellectual or moral) is to lose my freedom. But those who say such things have not yet grasped the character of true freedom.

True freedom is not absolute. Intellectual freedom, for example, is not the same as free thought. What do you say of the flat-earther who denies that the earth is round? Is he free? Not at all. He is a fool. He is also a prisoner, in bondage to falsehood and fantasy. Again, what do you say of a man who denies the law of gravity and jumps from the top of the Empire State Building? His “freedom” becomes a synonym for suicide.

True intellectual freedom is found not in independence of the truth, but in submission to the truth, whether the truth is scientific or biblical. When the mind submits to the truth, it is set free from falsehood, from the human deceits and the devil’s lies, from its own subjective insecurity, from the shifting sands of existential experience and from the everchanging fashions of the world. Submission to truth is the true freedom.

Jesus himself clearly taught this. He said that whoever commits sin is the slave of sin and that, in contrast to this bondage, he could set men free. What was this freedom which he promised? “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (Jn 8:31–36). Freedom is found in discipleship, and discipleship is continuing submission to the Word of Jesus, for the Word of Jesus is the truth. No wonder Paul wrote of his resolve to “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor 10:5).

Fourth, submission to the authority of Scripture is fundamental to *Christian witness*.

The contemporary world is in great confusion and darkness. Human hearts are failing for fear. Has the Christian church any word of assurance for our bewilderment, any light for our darkness, any hope for our fear? One of the greatest tragedies of today is that just when the world is becoming more aware of its need, the church is becoming less sure of its mission. And the major reason for the diminishing Christian mission is diminishing confidence in the Christian message.

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We Christians should affirm with great confidence that Jesus is the supreme Lord, to whom all authority has been given in heaven and on earth, and that he bids us go and make disciples and teach them all his teaching (Mt 28:18–19). His commission is that we should proclaim his name as the crucified and risen Savior, and that on the ground of this one and only name forgiveness and new life are available to all who will repent and believe (cf. Lk 24:44–49). We have no liberty to alter these terms of reference which Christ gave his church in his commission. There is only one gospel. We may neither embellish nor modify nor manipulate it. We are to be the heralds of God's good news. We are charged to lift up our voice with strength, to lift it up without fear and to publish abroad the salvation of God (Is 40:9; 52:7). Our announcement is given to us; we do not invent it. All we contribute is the voice to make it known, yes, and the life and love which lie behind the voice. In this respect every Christian resembles John the Baptist. For each of us is to be but a voice crying in the world's dry wilderness, bearing witness to Christ, gladly decreasing in ourselves in order that he may increase (Mk 1:2–3; Jn 1:6–8, 19–23; 3:30).

So I conclude. I have tried to develop only two great themes about submission to the authority of Scripture. First, that submission to Scripture is part and parcel of our acknowledgment of the lordship of Jesus. Second, that submission to Scripture is fundamental to everyday Christian living, for without it Christian discipleship, Christian integrity, Christian freedom and Christian witness are all seriously damaged, if not actually destroyed.

Christ still calls us to take his yoke upon us and learn from him (assuming his yoke is a metaphor for submitting to his teaching authority); he still promises that under his yoke we shall find rest for our souls; for he still assures us both that he himself is gentle and that (unlike all other yokes) *his* yoke is easy and his burden is light (Mt 11:29–30). If you put this to the test, you will find it—as I have—to be true.¹

¹ Stott, J. R. W. (1974). *The Authority of the Bible* (pp. 1–32). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. This booklet is based on an address given at the Urbana 73 InterVarsity Missionary Convention. The original address was published in "Jesus Christ—Lord of the Universe". *Hope of the World* (InterVarsity Press, 1974, out of print).