

Authority & Use of the Bible

“May I also say a few words about my personal belief in the relevance of Christianity to public policy—to the things that are Caesar’s? .. I believe that by taking together ...key elements from the Old and New Testaments, we gain: a view of the universe, a proper attitude to work, and principles to shape economic and social life. “

Margaret Thatcher’s so-called “Sermon on the Mound” in Edinburgh 1988 – elicited a vigorous outcry because many anti-Conservative Scottish Christians thought she was suggesting that her party’s policies & ethics were aligned with God’s, and that as a politician, she had no right to the Bible in this way. However, Thatcher was careful **not** to claim that religious statements from the Bible justified her views, Rather, she said that for her, as a person of faith, some parts of the Bible were particularly important, they had inspired her, that they could be interpreted differently by someone else, and that the emphasis in choosing these passages was her own. Eg the importance of Law (10C’s), being responsible for our actions, the working for your own living and providing for others, the way we are called to serve something greater than ourselves, the sanctity of human rights.

How was she using the Bible?

Different ways that Christians can read the Bible :

- **Instruction manual** – follow only those clear rules and teachings that you do find. Consider the stories as historically dubious ancient writings, of uncertain value. Is this legitimate?
- **Socially important** – use the laws and teachings of the bible to construct society, based on such laws and behaviours. Legitimise forms of authority, forms of ownership, types of law. A global narrative of history, and where it is going.
- **Selective** – find and keep those parts you find helpful/ inspiring. Consider the rest to be outdated/ culturally conditioned. Who decides? The Church? Personal inspiration (anabaptists)?
- **Fundamentalist** – consider all the bible to be objectively the word of God as it stands. Magical/ absolute interpretations. Splits from anyone with different interpretations? Reject modern scientific world, as bible is textbook of all knowledge.
- **Historical text** – see it as history/ sociology, that help us to understand the setting and circumstances in which God revealed himself. Understanding these, helps us to understand the original revelation better. But then how is the Bible the word of God? Only descriptions of society.
- **Literary-critical** – texts stand on their own, as they are, no matter what historical circumstances they were written in. Reflect on how they affect us, today. To be used with imaginative freedom. But then nothing “objectively” of God – all to do with ourselves? Too easy to “read in” our own points of view and ideologies then.

3 Theories of why the Bible has authority

1. Objectively inspired by God: the authority and special status of the Bible lies in the fact that it has divine origins. It is “God-breathed” (2 Tim 3:16-17). The text “contains” divine inspiration in itself. Common early Christian view. EVANGELICALS

2. Recognition by early Church – texts were recognised as inspired by the Church. The first Christians in the Apostolic Age recognised them as foundational for Christian belief. The later Church recognised this “usage”, and “canonised” such texts as authoritative. Without the Church’s authority is declaring texts “inspired”, they wouldn’t be. CATHOLIC CHURCH. MEDIEVAL VIEW. Catholic Church MODERN VIEW emphasises the objective divine inspiration of the text.

3. Reader-response – bible texts only have the capacity to be vehicles of God’s inspiration, depending on how they interact with the spirit of the particular person reading them. They don’t

“contain” any specific holiness. (In theory, you could read Harry Potter and interact with it in such a way that you feel God’s wisdom is also being communicated in). What makes the bible authoritative, is only the way that traditionally, it has been accepted as the text of God’s communication. LIBERAL CHRISTIANS.

Problems with claiming the Bible has authority:

The bible is culturally conditioned (Jewish food laws, women not speaking in Church/ covering head)

- **Calvin said in his “Doctrine of Accommodation”** that God inspired bible texts in a way that matched the writers understanding – 7 days of creation are a kind of divine “baby talk”. Does that mean it can’t be taken seriously/ authoritative?
- **Our modern historical consciousness** – awareness that there have been very different kinds of civilisations with different histories & ideals, has made us realise that there is **no ONE narrative** that tells the story of the whole world. Does this make the bible less authoritative/ relevant?
- **the same bible passage can be understood by different people in very different ways** – or even differently by the same person at different times. If there is no single correct interpretation, does it lose authority? Can it ever be right to claim a single correct interpretation? The bible can only ever have a “tentative” authority.

The bible is mainly a story

- **there are relatively few places where the Bible gives rules/ laws / teachings about how to live.** Much of it is stories, and histories. It was written by many writers, over many hundreds of years, in different places and circumstances. How can stories have authority? “Do this!” is clearly authoritative. But “Once upon a time...”??
- **There are un-edifying events** (rapes, incest, genocides, infanticides etc).
- **There are contradictions** in the main character. God is both forgiving, and remembers sins. Predestines us, and doesn’t. Judges us for our works, or justifies us by His grace. Is both long-suffering and patient, and angry/ vengeful.
- **The NT does not clearly “follow on” the story of the OT.** It is a completely new covenant. Christians do not assume the same things are important as Jews do (eg the Torah for Jews, the Fall for Christians).

NT Wright’s solution (& view of Bible authority)

Authority is asking – who has the right to decide? To control? To organise? How can bible stories be “authoritative” in this way?

- The bible itself recognises that its authority only comes from God. What does God do with his authority? He uses it to create, to free people, to save, to guide to full and joyous life.
- God, and Jesus, **delegate this authority** to their agents - prophets & disciples.
- Their lives and actions are told and written in what becomes the Bible. It is the story of how God’s authority was carried by human agents and exercised.
- As we, the Church retells these stories, we learn what God has done & what God **wants** done. We become trained by the word of Scripture – God’s story-world.
- The authority of the Bible is not slavish imposition of single commands or random stories: it is a broad training in God’s view of things, God’s plan, and of how God dealt with His people, over time. The Church learns from this, and so the Bible becomes **God’s way of training and equipping the Church to carry on God’s work, with His authority.**

God’s authority → delegated to agents eg prophets, Apostles, to do/ say things with His authority → inscribed as stories, which carry this authority of how God does things → re-telling and understanding the stories train us, the Church → the Church can then act with God’s authority, to carry on His work.

Ultimately, the Bible is authoritative, because it carries God’s authority, delegated through agents and stories. The Church is authoritative, because it is trained by the stories of the Bible.