

## **The Doctrine of the Word of God**

(Preliminary Draft, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition)

### **Part Four: The Media of God's Word Scripture's Authority, its Content and its Purpose**

[John M. Frame](#)

Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy  
Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, FL

In Memory of  
Edmund P. Clowney  
(1917-2005)

### **Table of Contents**

Preface

Abbreviations of Frequently Cited Titles

#### **Part One: Orientation**

1. The Personal Word Model
2. Lordship and the Word

#### **Part Two: God's Word in Modern Theology**

3. Modern Views of Revelation
4. Revelation and Reason
5. Revelation and History
6. Revelation and Human Subjectivity
7. Revelation and God Himself

#### **Part Three: The Nature of God's Word**

8. What is the Word of God?
9. God's Word as His Controlling Power
10. God's Word as His Meaningful Authority
11. God's Word as His Personal Presence

## **Part Four: The Media of God's Word**

12. The Media of God's Word
13. God's Revelation Through Events
14. God's Revelation Through Words: the Divine Voice
15. God's Revelation Through Words: Prophets and Apostles
16. The Permanence of God's Written Word
17. God's Written Words in the Old Testament
18. Respect for God's Written Words in the Old Testament
19. Jesus' View of the Old Testament
20. The Apostles' View of the Old Testament
21. The New Testament as God's Written Words
22. The Canon of Scripture
23. The Inspiration of Scripture
24. The Content of Scripture
25. Scripture's Authority, its Content and its Purpose
26. The Inerrancy of Scripture
27. The Phenomena of Scripture
28. Bible Problems
29. The Clarity of Scripture
30. The Necessity of Scripture
31. The Comprehensiveness of Scripture
32. The Sufficiency of Scripture
33. The Transmission of Scripture
34. Translations and Editions of Scripture
35. Teaching and Preaching
36. The Sacraments
37. Theology
38. Confessions, Creeds, Traditions
39. The Human Reception of Scripture
40. The Interpretation of Scripture
41. Assurance
42. Person-revelation: The Divine Witness
43. Human Beings as Revelation
44. Writing on the Heart
45. Summary and Organizational Reflections
46. Epilogue

### **25. Scripture's Authority, its Content, and its Purpose**

The question of Scripture's content, which I discussed in the preceding chapter, has been thought to have implications for the nature of its authority. As I indicated in the previous chapter, some have supposed that Scripture has a narrowly redemptive content and purpose, and therefore that it should not be expected to give us revelation from God in matters of interest to science, history,

psychology, philosophy, and so on. I replied that the purpose of Scripture is redemptive, but not narrowly redemptive in this sense. Redemption itself is very broad, renewing every area of human life. And since Scripture is God's personal word to us, we dare not limit its scope, telling him, in effect, that we will listen to him only on certain subjects. Would we ever lay down such an ultimatum if he addressed us personally and directly? Rather, we should listen at his feet, ready to accept whatever he should choose to say to us.

In this chapter I would like to present some more analysis of the relations between Scripture's authority, content, and purpose, by way of responding to some influential (but to my mind inadequate) views of the subject.

In the 1970s there was some controversy among the Reformed churches, particularly those of Dutch background, over the "relationship between the authority of Scripture to its content." In Reformed circles, we continue to hear of this debate from time to time.

In 1972, a study committee presented its report, "The Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority"<sup>1</sup> (henceforth NEBA) to the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), an American denomination of Dutch background. This report was in response to a request from the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (RES) which, in turn, was prompted by a request for joint discussion by the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN). The discussion led to the GKN study, *God With Us*, which was presented to the Synod of Delft in 1980. The RES (and the CRC also) had made earlier declarations about the authority of Scripture, but the GKN questioned whether these documents were adequate to deal with the contemporary issues. In particular, these documents failed to discuss the "connection between the content and purpose of Scripture as the saving revelation of God in Jesus Christ *and* the consequent and deducible authority of Scripture" (emphasis theirs) (NEBA, 16).

To accept the GKN's formulation of the problem at this point, of course, is to prejudice significantly the sort of answer one will arrive at. The GKN lays it down as an assumption of the discussion that the authority of Scripture is somehow "consequent" and "deducible" from its content. Then it asks us to discuss the connections between these. But their assumption already asserts certain connections.

We need to discuss, not assume the proposition that the authority of Scripture is consequent to and deducible from its content. What does this proposition mean, and is it true?

I think it is true in several ways: (1) Most of us come to know Jesus first, the authority of Scripture second. We are attracted to Scripture because it tells us of

---

<sup>1</sup> Grand Rapids: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, 1972.

Christ. Nobody to my knowledge determines first that the Bible is God's word and then later inquires to discover what it has to say. (2) As we have seen, if we are to trust Scripture as God's word, we must do so on the basis of its own teachings about itself—part of its content. (3) In the final analysis, it is the content of Scripture that is authoritative. The content of Scripture tells us what God wants us to believe, do, feel, what his promises are, and so on.

But there are some dangers in making the content of Scripture the source of Scripture's authority. Some have drawn false conclusions from this assumption, such as (1) that our belief in Scripture is not based on Scripture's self-attestation, but upon our autonomous value judgment concerning the significance of Scripture's message. (2) that some parts of Scripture are somewhat irrelevant to the central message and therefore can be treated as merely human words.

The relationship between the content and authority of Scripture is more complex than the GKN assumed in its call for discussion. It is true that human beings cannot confess the authority of Scripture if they have no idea of its content. But the content of Scripture is not what *makes* it authoritative. That content does not give it the unique authority that pertains to Scripture alone. Many other books present the biblical gospel, but do not on that account deserve a place in the canon. What gives Scripture an authority above that of any human being is that it is God's word. The Westminster Confession of Faith puts it this way:

The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God. (1.4)

Divine authorship is the ultimate reason why Scripture is authoritative. Its authority is absolute because God's authority is absolute, and Scripture is his personal word to us.

Since Scripture is God's personal word, *all* of it is authoritative, for, as Paul says, "All Scripture is breathed out by God" (2 Tim. 3:16), not just those parts that we find attractive, cogent, relevant, or culturally respectable.

There are nevertheless many writers who believe that the purpose of Scripture is redemptive in a narrow sense, rather than in the comprehensive sense I argued earlier (Chapter 24). On their view, the purpose of Scripture is to get us right with God through Christ, but not to tell us what to believe in areas of history, science, and so on. Jack Rogers and Donald McKim, for example, say,

Calvin, in common with the early church fathers, held that the authority of Scripture resided in its function of bringing people into a saving relationship with God through Jesus Christ...

Turretin, on the other hand, held that the authority of Scripture was based on its form of inerrant words. The Bible was a repository of information about all manner of things, including science and history, which had to be proven accurate by then-current standards.<sup>2</sup>

Rogers and McKim follow Calvin as they understand him and reject Turretin's approach. The authority of Scripture, they say, resides in its evangelistic function. But then how does its authority differ, say, from the authority of Billy Graham? I don't think this quote adequately describes Calvin's view of the matter, nor, more importantly, does it describe Scripture's own account of its authority.

And did Turretin actually believe that "the authority of Scripture was based on its form of inerrant words?" If the authority of Scripture had this kind of basis, then its authority would not differ from the authority of an accurate mathematics text. Rather, both Calvin and Turretin held that the authority of Scripture resides in the fact that God is its author.

My purpose here is not, however, to evaluate Rogers' and McKim's view of Calvin or Turretin, or of the many other historical figures they discuss in their book. In my own view, the critique of this book by John D. Woodbridge<sup>3</sup> is definitive. Woodbridge argues and documents extensively the view that neither Calvin nor the earlier church fathers observed any sharp distinction between the saving truth of Scripture and matters of science and history.

But our own view of the matter cannot be based ultimately on church history, however much such a study may help us. Our view of Scripture must, in the end, be warranted by Scripture itself. And as I have argued, Scripture itself does not limit its authority the way Rogers and McKim seek to limit it. It claims, rather (1) that God is the author of the whole biblical canon, (2) that we live by all of it (Matt. 4:4), and (3) that God has the right to speak to us about anything at all, and (4) that the purpose of Scripture is redemptive in a broad sense, not a narrow sense, and (5) the redemptive purpose of Scripture so broad that no area of human life is excluded from its concern.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [RPM Forum](#).

---

<sup>2</sup> Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: an Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), xvii.

<sup>3</sup> Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: a Critique of the Rogers-McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

## Subscribe to RPM

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).