

Study Guide to
Building Your Theology, Lesson Four:
Authority in Theology

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Those of us who live in the United States know that we are basically subject to at least three governments: a county government, a state government, and the federal government (many of us are also subject to a city government). Many other nations also have multiple layers of government. In the United States, each of these levels of government has its own courts, and most levels of government have multiple levels of courts within their court systems.

Now, all governments pass laws, but as we know, not all laws are good laws. In the United States, a law is expected to conform to the dictates of the Constitution, which was written back in 1787 (and amended many times since). The problem is that not everyone agrees as to what the Constitution actually means; different courts have different understandings of what is “constitutional.” Court cases challenging the Constitution can go on for many years, working their way up through the various levels of government and the various levels of courts within those governments. Sometimes cases are settled in low-level courts. Other cases are appealed to higher courts. Some cases eventually find their way to the Supreme Court of the United States. Once this court has spoken on the “constitutionality” of a law, the decision is final. The only way this can change is if the Court reverses itself. The court is called “Supreme” because it is the final, ultimate authority.

Theology is much like this. There are many different Christian theologies that one may encounter. And as we’ve seen, Christians may disagree as to whether a particular belief can be considered “Christian.” Disputes like these have continued for many years, even centuries; some continue today. But it is also true that many issues have been “settled” (such as the statements in the Apostles’ Creed).

In this lesson we are going to examine the way the Church has dealt with the issue of authority in three periods of its history. Our three Signposts will be:

Medieval Catholicism
Early Protestantism
Contemporary Protestantism

We recommend that students watch only one Signpost at a time. After each Signpost, conduct your discussion (if you are studying this as a group) and/or read the appropriate questions and guidelines in the study guide. Review

the DVD or tape as often as needed to answer the study questions, facilitate discussion, or simply gain a fuller understanding of the subject matter. Study questions are numbered consecutively (e.g., “SQ1”) and appear in *italics*. Feel free to use your own paper if the space provided is insufficient for your answers.

I. Medieval Catholicism

As you know by now, these lessons are written from the perspective of Reformed theology. However, it’s often the case that to gain an appreciation of where you are now, you have to have some knowledge of where you once were. The Reformed understanding of authority is best understood as a response to the errors of the medieval Roman Catholic Church. We will examine medieval Catholicism’s view in two parts:

Biblical Authority Ecclesiastical Authority

A. Scripture

It’s safe to say that medieval theologians believed in the authority of Scripture. But for all practical purposes their approach to the Bible made using it as an authority all but impossible. We’ll see that this was true for at least three reasons:

Their view of **Inspiration**
Their understanding of the **Meaning** of Scripture
Claims about the Bible’s **Obscurity**

1. Inspiration

SQ1. Scripture has two origins: (1) a divine origin; and (2) a human, historical origin. Which of these origins did the medieval Roman Catholic Church emphasized to the practical exclusion of the other?

SQ2. Which philosophies formed the basis for this emphasis?

In its earliest centuries of its existence, the Christian church was mostly concerned with its physical survival. It was persecuted from many sides, and many Christians were even martyred for their faith. But once the church was well established and these threats had diminished, the church began to interact with other beliefs and to defend itself intellectually rather than physically. The church essentially took the most highly regarded secular philosophies and made them their own. If you read the works of Thomas Aquinas, for instance, whenever he mentions “the Philosopher,” he is talking about Aristotle.

SQ3. Why would these philosophies minimize the historical and human contributions to Scripture?

SQ4. What is the second reason these medieval theologians downplayed these historical and human factors in the writing of Scripture?

2. Meaning

As a consequence of these factors, medieval theologians came to a natural conclusion: If the Bible was written in a radically dissimilar way from other books, it also had to be interpreted in a radically dissimilar way.

SQ5. *According to Augustine, what provided evidence of the divine origins of Scripture?*

SQ6. *Augustine's view of the meaning of Scripture is called:*

SQ7. *John Cassian popularized an interpretive method called the:*

SQ8. *What was the "literal" sense?*

SQ9. *What was the "allegorical" sense?*

SQ10. *What was the "tropological" sense?*

SQ11. *What was the "anagogical" sense?*

SQ12. *Since neo-Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies minimized the importance of the physical world, which of these four "senses" got short shrift from medieval theologians?*

In fact, it was commonly believed that these multiple meanings were not even intended by the original writers of the Bible. This was a formula for disaster.

3. Obscurity

Taking into consideration what we've seen so far, it can hardly surprise us that the Bible would be seen as obscure by medieval theologians. But there were even more reasons for this belief.

SQ13. What was the primary language of Scripture and theology during this time?

SQ14. How common were Bibles during this period?

SQ15. According to the presuppositions of this period, who was capable of understanding Scripture?

SQ16. In these conditions, how authoritative was the Bible in guiding the church to a proper development of Christian theology?

B. Ecclesiastical Theology

Our lesson examines how medieval theologians understood church or "ecclesiastical" authority in the past, and then how they understood the authority of the church contemporary to their own time.

1. Past

SQ17. Medieval theologians looked at how the church spoke of its authority in the past. One point of reference came from men known as early church Fathers. Which Fathers are mentioned in the lesson?

SQ18. Describe the ways the different branches of the church valued the Fathers.

SQ19. What level of fallibility, if any, was ascribed to the Fathers?

SQ20. How much authority did medieval theologians ascribe to early church councils?

SQ21. List the early church councils mentioned in the lesson.

SQ22. What level of fallibility, if any, was ascribed to the Fathers?

As the centuries passed, these patristic teachings, and the conclusions of ecumenical councils, developed into ecclesiastical traditions that essentially replaced Scripture.

SQ23. List two of these extra-Scriptural “traditions” that were added to, or even opposed, Scripture.

2. Present

Medieval theologians needed a source of high theological authority to suit the needs of their day.

SQ24. They believed God established a system of _____ authorities.

SQ25. List the examples of these authorities mentioned in the lesson.

SQ26. Who could interpret the writings of the Fathers and understand the decrees of past ecumenical councils.

SQ27. Describe the interaction ordinary Christians had with the Bible.

We are now ready to proceed to our next Signpost. View the section of the video, entitled “Early Protestantism,” and then interact with the material to follow.

II. Early Protestantism

Understanding the theological authority structure of the medieval Roman Catholic Church prepares us for understanding one of the central issues of the Protestant Reformation: the issue of authority. We will see that early Protestants responded to the theological authority structure of the medieval Roman Catholic Church by addressing three matters:

The **Inspiration** of Scripture
The **Meaning** of Scripture
The **Clarity** of Scripture

1. Inspiration

Medieval theologians acknowledged that the Bible had come from divine and human sources, but they greatly downplayed the role that human beings had in the writing of the Bible. Early reformers, while agreeing with the church on the Bible’s divine origins, also placed a heavy emphasis on the Bible’s human origins.

SQ28. Read Matthew 22:41-44. Jesus is quoting from Psalm 110:1 and making an argument about the nature of the Messiah. What does this argument imply about the human origins of Scripture?

SQ29. List two other examples in the Bible where human authors of Scripture are mentioned.

2. Meaning

Fully recognizing the human role in Biblical authorship meant a significant shift in the way theologians understood the meaning of Scripture.

SQ30. Recalling the Quadriga, which meaning or sense received the least emphasis and study from medieval theologians?

SQ31. How do you think a renewed interest in the human origins of Scripture would affect this emphasis?

SQ32. What intellectual movement of “rebirth” had already taken place in Western Europe in the 1400’s?

During this time, there was a renewal of interest in classical Roman and Greek literature. But instead of reading translations of these writings, scholars of the period went back to studying the original languages. The slogan of the time was *ad fontes*, meaning “to the sources.”

SQ33. Prior to this time, studies and interpretations of these writings had been done under what authority?

SQ34. During the 1400’s, many scholars wanted the freedom to interpret classical texts without the oversight of such authority. How did this stance influence the Reformers?

SQ35. How many unified, coherent meanings did the Reformers insist each passage of Scripture had?

SQ36. What is this view of the meaning of Scripture called?

SQ37. In which chapter and section does the Westminster Confession of Faith affirm this view?

3. Clarity

In reemphasizing the human contribution to Scripture, and assigning a single coherent meaning to each passage, the Reformers went a long way in affirming its clarity or “perspicuity.”

SQ38. What technological innovation enabled multitudes of Christians to read the Bible for themselves?

SQ39. What particular action of biblical scholars also led to a widespread dissemination of the Scriptures?

*SQ40. What does *sensus literalis* mean?*

SQ41. Why did the Reformation's emphasis on sensus literalis lead to a widespread appreciation of the Bible's clarity?

SQ42. Why were Protestants initially so optimistic about the Bible's clarity?

SQ43. Why did this attitude change somewhat?

Read 2 Peter 3:16. Peter said that some of Paul's writings are "hard to understand." This is not only true of portions of Paul's writings, but difficult passages crop up from time to time in all of the Scriptures.

SQ44. List two passages in Scripture that you personally find "hard to understand."

SQ45. What does the Bible's clarity imply about the practical authority for Christianity? What does it imply about the authority of the church?

B. Ecclesiastical Authority

SQ46. Early Protestants did not utterly reject ecclesiastical authority. How did they understand it, and what relationship did they think it had to the Bible's authority?

We'll examine how early Protestants viewed ecclesiastical authority from two historical periods:

Their own **Past**
Their own **Present**

1. Past

It seems strange to many Protestants today to find that the early Reformers had a very strong regard for the authority of the church. Our lesson locates one of the sources of this modern misconception in a misunderstanding of the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* or "Scripture alone." Many modern Protestants think this doctrine teaches that we have no authority other than the Bible.

SQ47. *What does the doctrine of Sola Scriptura really teach?*

SQ48. *In what chapter and section does the Westminster Confession of Faith speak of Scripture as “the supreme Judge”?*

SQ49. *What other authorities does this portion of the Confession mention?*

Our lesson quotes from Calvin’s *Institutes* (4.9.8), where Calvin wrote that church councils need to be understood historically (“to ponder at what time it was held, on what issue, and with what intention, what sort of men were present...”).

SQ50. *What level of fallibility or infallibility did Calvin ascribe to church councils of the past? How did he recommend we treat their judgments?*

2. Present

The medieval Roman Catholic Church had established an elaborate structure of ecclesiastical authorities: priests, bishops, cardinals, and the pope, who was thought to be infallible. But as we’ve seen, the Reformers viewed infallibility as inhering only in Scripture. Notice, however, that we have only been talking of “infallibility” to this point, and not “authority.”

SQ51. Describe the early Protestant view of church authority.

SQ52. "Building a Christian theology was not a task for individuals or groups apart from such structures of authority." What does this mean, practically speaking?

SQ53. What are the practical consequences of affirming that "the Reformed Church is always reforming"?

SQ54. Why and in what circumstances should the church reform? What authority should guide its reform?

We are now ready to proceed to our third Signpost, “Contemporary Protestants.” View this portion of the video, and then complete the following portion of your Study Guide.

III. Contemporary Protestants

Up to now we’ve looked at how the medieval church and early Protestants looked at the authority of Scripture and ecclesiastical authority. Our current topic addresses the ways we should understand these issues. We’ll look first at the proper outlooks we should have on Scripture, and then at how we should understand modern ecclesiastical authority.

A. Scripture

As we did earlier, we’ll look at three issues:

The **Inspiration** of Scripture
The **Meaning** of Scripture
The **Clarity** of Scripture

1. Inspiration

These days there is considerable confusion as to how Christians should understand inspiration.

SQ55. Our lesson presents a spectrum of three views — two extremes and one in the middle. They are:

_____ *inspiration*

_____ *inspiration*

_____ *inspiration*

SQ56. What is the first extreme view mentioned in the lesson?

SQ57. Describe this view and some of the difficulties associated with it.

SQ58. What is the second extreme view mentioned in the lesson?

SQ59. Describe this view and some of the difficulties associated with it.

SQ60. What is the middle view mentioned in the lesson?

SQ61. Describe this view. How does it relate to the clarity and authority of Scripture?

SQ62. Explain how an equal appreciation of the human and divine roles in the writing of Scripture makes the Bible “normative,” or authoritative for our own day.

2. Meaning

SQ63. Our lesson presents us with a spectrum of three basic positions one can take with respect to the meaning of Scripture. List them.

SQ64. In the past a polyvalent view of Scripture was based on the fact of the divine origins of the Bible. Upon what are today’s polyvalent views based?

SQ65. How would someone committed to contemporary polyvalence look at a particular passage of Scripture?

SQ66. How would someone committed to contemporary polyvalence look at a particular passage of Scripture?

SQ67. What are some of the problems associated with the view of simplistic univalence?

SQ68. What's the difference between our interpretation of the Bible and "the Bible itself"?

SQ69. Explain the term "complex univalence."

3. Clarity

SQ70. Our lesson presents us with a spectrum of beliefs regarding the Bible's clarity. List the three positions along the spectrum.

SQ71. Why do some people maintain that the Scriptures are nearly impossible for us to understand today?

SQ72. More commonly, evangelicals affirm the Bible's utter clarity. Describe this understanding of Scripture. List one practical example of this view in the church today.

SQ73. Explain what the position taken by those who believe the Bible contains varying "degrees of clarity."

SQ74. According to the Westminster Confession of Faith, there are parts of the Bible that are “clear.” What matters do these portions address?

SQ75. What portions of the Bible can be considered to be somewhat clear? And what parts of the Bible are considered to be unclear, at least at the present time?

B. Ecclesiastical Authority

To understand the role of ecclesiastical authority in the church today, we will look at the how contemporary Reformed theologians tend to assess ecclesiastical authorities from two different eras:

Our Past
Our Present

1. Past

Reformed theologians generally hold to a spectrum of positions regarding theological authorities of the past.

SQ76. What are the extreme positions, and what is the central stance?

SQ77. Describe the extreme that orients itself around tradition. Give a practical example of a position taken by this extreme viewpoint.

SQ78. Describe the extreme that orients itself around an individual approach to Scripture. Give a practical example of a position taken by this extreme viewpoint.

SQ79. What is the moderating position between these two extremes? Describe this position.

SQ80. Does the idea of the modern church reviewing and reformulating past expressions of faith make you a little nervous? How should the church approach such “changes” in a way that can give us confidence in our theology?

2. Present

SQ81. What are the two extremes and the “middle ground” approach to authority in the present?

SQ82. The concept of “faithful formulations” sees all theological statements not in “binary” terms but in “analog” terms. Describe what this means.

SQ83. It’s easy for us to think of the statement “God is sovereign over all things” as “true.” Describe a circumstance in which this statement could be misleading.

SQ84. We generally think of the statement “Jesus is God” as being “true.” Describe a circumstance in which this statement could be misleading.