

Building Your Theology

Lesson 4

Authority in Theology

Manuscript



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INTRODUCTION

Have you ever noticed how much of our lives we spend following authorities? I know it sounds strange to say this in the modern world, but it's true. When a car breaks down, we look for someone who knows a lot about cars. When we become sick, we look for an authority in medicine. We may not agree with everything these experts say, but we don't try to handle these and other complicated matters on our own. In nearly every area of life, if we are wise, we find the right authorities and listen carefully to what they have to say.

Something like this should be true in Christian theology as well. All too often, well-meaning Christians think that learning and living theology is such a personal matter that we don't need the help of authorities. After all, we have the Bible and we have a personal relationship with God. Isn't that enough? But as we'll see in this lesson, God has ordained a number of authorities to help us as we build our theology.

This fourth lesson in our series *Building Your Theology* is entitled "Authority in Theology." We'll be exploring some of the central issues involved in discovering and following authority as we build our theology.

We'll focus our attention on the ways Christians have handled authority in theology in three different periods of church history. First, we'll summarize the outlooks on theological authority in medieval Roman Catholicism. Second, we'll examine the approach to theological authority in early Protestantism. And third, we'll explore how we should deal with these matters in contemporary Protestantism. Let's begin by looking at the medieval Roman Catholic view on authority in Christian theology.

MEDIEVAL ROMAN CATHOLICISM

We said in an earlier lesson that this series is oriented toward evangelical Protestant theology. To understand how Protestant branches of the church view authority in theology, it's important to see how these traditions stem from the Protestant Reformation. Now, the Protestant Reformation took place for many reasons, but one of the chief causes was a dispute over the views on religious authority found in medieval Roman Catholicism. These outlooks and practices formed a crucial backdrop to Protestant views on authority in theology.

As we explore medieval Roman Catholicism, we'll touch on two topics: first, the authority of Scripture in the medieval church; and second, the resulting outlook on the authority of the church. Let's look first at the authority of Scripture in the medieval Roman Catholic Church.

AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Even prior to the Reformation, different individuals and orders within the church handled the Scriptures in different ways. But it's fair to say that the vast majority of medieval theologians believed in the authority of Scripture, at least in theory. In practice, however, the medieval church took a posture toward the Bible that made it nearly impossible to act on this commitment to the authority of Scripture.

As we investigate the medieval church's problem as to the authority of Scripture, we'll touch on three matters. First, we'll consider the extreme view of biblical inspiration during the medieval period. Second, we'll look at the excessive views on the meaning of Scripture. And third, we'll examine exaggerated claims about the Bible's obscurity. Let's think first about the medieval outlook on the inspiration of Scripture.

Inspiration

By and large, medieval Catholic theologians affirmed both that the Bible was fully inspired by God and that it came through human instruments. Unfortunately, however, during this period of church history, many theologians went to extremes in the way they understood inspiration. They emphasized Scripture's divine origins to the neglect of Scripture's human and historical origins.

The medieval overemphasis on the divine origins of the Bible came about for a number of reasons. For one, medieval theologians depended heavily on Greek philosophies — such as Neo-Platonism and Aristotelianism — that guided the categories and priorities of Christian theology in many ways. These philosophies valued eternal realities much more than temporal and historical realities. So, Christian theologians learned to think that Scripture's historical and human origins were far less essential than its heavenly origins.

Beyond this, medieval biblical scholars were so uninformed about the ancient history of Bible times that they couldn't make much practical use of the Bible's historical backgrounds in their theology. Instead, they stressed what they *did* know — namely that the Bible contained timeless truths that the eternal God of heaven had revealed — and they largely downplayed other considerations.

Medieval theologians' view of biblical inspiration wasn't the only matter that discouraged employing the full authority of Scripture. The medieval church's stress on the divine origins of the Bible also led to an unfortunate belief about the meaning of Scripture.

Meaning

It was widely assumed that, due to Scripture's celestial origins, the Bible didn't convey meaning in the same way that other books did. Rather, because God inspired it, Scripture *overflowed* with meanings. Many medieval theologians followed Augustine in believing that one proof of biblical inspiration was that texts of Scripture had manifold

meanings. Listen to the way Augustine put it in Book 3, chapter 27 of *On Christian Doctrine*:

When ... two or more interpretations are put upon the same words of Scripture, even though the meaning the writer intended remain undiscovered, there is no danger ... For what more liberal and more fruitful provision could God have made in regard to the Sacred Scriptures than that the same words might be understood in several senses?

In many ways, we can admire Augustine's high view of Scripture. The Bible is no ordinary book, and its extraordinary qualities point to its divine inspiration. We can also agree that many aspects of the Bible can be explained only in terms of God's supernatural supervision of its writing. But Augustine's outlook went much further than this. He believed that divine inspiration caused passages in the Bible to burst with multiple meanings. So, instead of concerning ourselves with what the Bible's human authors intended to convey, Augustine believed we should focus attention on the many meanings intended by God. For our purposes, we'll call Augustine's view, and related views, "classical polyvalence" — the belief that biblical texts have many levels of meaning or value because they come from God.

Perhaps the most widely known expression of classical polyvalence was the interpretive approach popularized by John Cassian, known as "the *Quadriga*." According to this approach, each biblical text should be viewed as having four distinct meanings. First, the literal sense was the plain or ordinary meaning of a text. Second, the allegorical sense interpreted texts as metaphors for doctrinal truth. Third, the tropological or moral sense produced ethical guidelines for Christian conduct. And fourth, the anagogical sense pointed to the future fulfillment of the divine promises in the eschaton, or in the last days.

The details of the *Quadriga* and other expressions of classical polyvalence are not important for our purposes — many writers have explained them elsewhere. We simply need to know that, by the time of the Reformation, most Catholic theologians believed that the meanings of biblical texts went far beyond the normal or ordinary meaning. And significantly, they tended to believe that these additional meanings were not rooted in the meaning the biblical authors intended to convey. In fact, the literal or plain sense of a passage was often considered too elementary for serious theological reflection. Instead, theologians were encouraged to value the deeper, hidden layers of meaning because they revealed the depths of God's mind to the church.

So this question of there being hidden meaning of the Scripture is a really interesting one because we have problems if we come down too hard on either side of that... One of them is it lends itself to valuing this deeper meaning over the Scripture on its face. And so, that can turn us away from what Scripture reveals directly, and lead us into, "Well, but what *else* does it mean?" ... The deeper meaning is also very quickly a process by which we can elevate some of us within the church... We see it best in the medieval church where the clergy had become a fundamentally more important group of people. Scripture

was to be kept from the commoners because the commoners could only see the superficial meaning. They didn't have the ability, the training, the skill to be able to see the deeper meaning. And if you go back and you look at medieval theology, it had gone a long way into these deep allegorical readings, and there were multiple meanings in every text, but most people couldn't get to the deep ones.

— Dr. Tim Sansbury

The medieval approaches to the inspiration and meaning of Scripture made it difficult to act on the authority of Scripture. And these approaches also led to an overemphasis on another characteristic of the Bible: its obscurity. The Bible came to be treated as a book that was remarkably unclear, except to those who had been given special supernatural insights.

Obscurity

It shouldn't surprise us that the content of the Bible would seem unclear to the average Christian prior to the Reformation. Literacy was low. Bibles were so scarce that hardly anyone had access to one. Moreover, Latin was the primary language of Scripture and theology, and for the most part, only the highly educated understood Latin well enough to make much use of it. So, it was rare indeed that people studied the Scriptures like we do today. The Bible was considered far too unavailable and obscure for the average Christian to rely directly on it in significant ways.

Not only were the Scriptures closed to the average Christian. They were also thought to be obscure even to those with the ability and opportunity to read the Bible. According to medieval theologians, God had placed multiple layers of meaning in the Scriptures that were hidden from plain view.

Imagine someone showing you a closed treasure box and asking you to describe what kinds of treasures were in the box. Of course, it would be impossible to know what was in the box because the treasures would be hidden. The same was true for the Bible in the medieval church.

By the time of the Reformation, belief in the obscurity of the Bible made it nearly impossible for the Bible to have much practical or real authority over the development of theology. In theory, the Bible remained God's inspired treasure box for Christian theology, but for all practical purposes, the Bible remained closed. It was so obscure that it was unable to guide theologians in their task.

In the medieval church, most believers affirmed that God's full intent in Scripture was known through a fourfold approach: the moral following the literal, the anagogical, and the allegorical. So the Reformers of the sixteenth century — called "Protestants" by most of us — objected to this, part in theory but especially because of what came out of that, which was a tradition of teaching that they felt was,

in some cases, a corruption of Scripture, or it obscured the original intent or authorial intent of Scripture, in favor of church authority.

— Dr. James D. Smith III

With the medieval Roman Catholic view of the authority of Scripture in mind, we're ready to turn to our second consideration: the authority of ecclesiastical theology in the medieval church.

AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

The problems raised by the medieval doctrine of the inspiration, meaning and obscurity of Scripture led to a serious question. How could the Scriptures have any authority over believers when believers couldn't handle the Scriptures for themselves? The medieval church sought to deal with this problem by exalting ecclesiastical authorities as the interpreters of Scripture. As a result, church authority began to be treated as equal to the Bible.

To understand this special role for the authority of the church, we'll look in two directions. First, how did medieval theologians understand past ecclesiastical authorities? And second, how did they understand contemporary medieval church authorities? Let's look first at the authority of the church in the past.

Past Authorities

By the time of the Reformation, the Catholic Church had developed a rather elaborate approach to ecclesiastical authority from the past. Of course, the Scriptures themselves were considered part of the heritage of the church. Yet, as we've seen, by the medieval period, the teachings of the Scriptures themselves were thought to be so obscure that other sources of guidance were required. As a result, medieval theologians looked into the history of ecclesiastical theology to determine what they should believe. The vast majority of them saw the history of the church as the history of God leading and guiding his people in the ways of truth. For this reason, what the church taught in the past was of vital interest to medieval theologians in at least two ways.

On the one hand, much attention was given to the early church fathers. The writings of men like Polycarp, Ignatius, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Justin Martyr, and later fathers such as Augustine, Athanasius and Jerome, deeply influenced the beliefs of different orders in the church. Now, these fathers were not usually considered infallible, and different branches of the church tended to favor different streams of patristic tradition. Yet it was still assumed, for the most part, that God had given special insights to these great theologians of the past and that the church must give special attention to their teachings. Seldom did medieval theologians make theological assertions without some kind of support from the early fathers of the church.

On the other hand, the medieval church depended even more heavily on the ecumenical councils of the church, such as the Council of Nicea, the Council of Constantinople, and the Council of Chalcedon. The findings of these and other councils were taken very seriously. For all practical purposes, medieval theologians regarded these findings as unquestionable summations of the teaching of the Bible. To disagree with them was tantamount to disagreeing with the Scriptures and with Christ.

As the centuries passed, many teachings of the fathers and findings of the ecumenical councils developed into official ecclesiastical traditions. And as these traditions solidified, they helped to form the extensive dogma of the church. This ecclesiastical dogma was not thought to be a human, fallible theology, but theology that bore the same authority as the Scriptures. In fact, for all practical purposes, the dogma of the church *replaced* Scripture. Before the Reformation, faithful Christians were not expected to ask, “What does the Bible say?” but “What has the church said?”

As important as past ecclesiastical authorities were to understanding the authority of the medieval church, the doctrine of Scripture at that time also created a need for a high view of contemporary theological authorities.

Contemporary Authorities

To be sure, the church continued to affirm the authority of the Bible in theory. But the Bible itself was too obscure to guide the church in contemporary issues that had not been settled in the past. So, how was the church to find guidance in their current theological controversies? Put simply, medieval theologians believed that God had established a system of living authorities in the hierarchy of the church. And this hierarchy provided the body of Christ with unquestionable teaching. The authority to settle current controversies rested in the priests, the bishops, and the pope — who was thought by many to be the infallible head of the church. When a theological decision needed to be determined, believers were not encouraged to ask, “What does the Bible say?” Instead, they were encouraged to ask, “What does the hierarchy of the church say?”

In the medieval period, they were they were deeply concerned about the meaning of Scripture, but they were operating with a pre-critical hermeneutic. In other words, they were coming at the Bible with a basic conviction that church tradition *was* the teaching of the Bible. Now, it’s kind of easy for us as twenty-first century Protestants to snicker at that, but we’re not immune to that. There are plenty of our people who are running around who will say, the teaching of John Calvin is the teaching of Scripture, or John Wesley, or Martin Luther, or whoever. So, what is happening in the Middle Ages is they are doing an approach to interpreting Scripture that is grounded in the dynamic of the rule of faith. The question that medieval interpreters are asking is, “How is the faith handed down by the apostles emerging for us through the particulars of this passage?” ... The problem that we have is that because of the way the early church saw tradition and the way that that sort of balloons in the medieval period and in the

Byzantine tradition as well ... the need, really, in the Reformation is to get back to a minimal construction of the rule of faith... The Reformers did not intend to get rid of the rule of faith in reading Scripture. They intended simply to get it back to its proper size. It had gotten kind of bloated.

— Dr. Carey Vinzant

If the only way to understand God's will is through ecclesiastical authorities, then there's no good reason for ordinary Christians to pay attention to the Bible at all. Thus, the official hierarchy of the church, not the Scriptures, became the infallible guide for contemporary theology.

With the views of medieval Roman Catholicism in mind, we're now in a position to appreciate the outlooks of early Protestantism. How did early Protestants understand biblical and ecclesiastical authority in theology?

EARLY PROTESTANTISM

Early Protestants — including those we often describe as pre-Reformation figures like Jan Hus, Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe and Girolamo Savonarola — saw many abuses committed by church authorities in their days. They addressed these abuses by reasserting the practical authority of Scripture over the church. They translated the Scriptures into the languages of the people. They published Bibles in large numbers. They promoted literacy so that people would be able to read the Scriptures. And they encouraged local pastors and the congregations that followed them to read the Scriptures for themselves. Protestants soon learned that these efforts would not solve every theological problem in the church. But following the example of Old and New Testament authors and Jesus himself, they rightly reaffirmed the authority of Scripture.

We'll look first at the early Protestant view of the authority of Scripture. Then we'll examine the Protestant view of the authority of the church. Let's consider first the Protestant outlooks on the authority of Scripture.

AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

As we've seen, the medieval Catholic outlook on the authority of Scripture was hindered by several extreme views. Early Protestant Reformers responded to these errors by recalibrating the doctrines of inspiration, meaning, and clarity of Scripture. Consider first the doctrine of inspiration.

Inspiration

From the outset we should say that, like medieval theologians, the Reformers understood that the Scriptures had both divine and human origins. On the one side, they

saw the Bible as a supernatural book from God. Luther, Zwingli and Calvin affirmed, in no uncertain terms, that the Scriptures had come to God's people through divine inspiration. They took very seriously the words of the apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16 that says:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16).

As this passage teaches, the Scriptures are ultimately from God, and they are designed to provide God's people with fully-reliable special revelation.

The inspiration of the Holy Spirit is, in the broad sense, the Spirit guiding the human authors to write precisely what God wanted to communicate, in words. So, the theological term is “confluency,” that is, you have both the human and yet the divine. And of course, that varies. Sometimes it's very obvious the divine. Other times the human seems very obvious... And yet, very exactly, God is using that human author, superintending that human author to write, in the words of the original manuscript, exactly what God wanted to communicate. And so, you have 2 Timothy 3:16, that God inspired, or that the word of God is “God-breathed,” it's breathed out — “*theopneustos*”... In either sense this is what inspiration entails, this breadth of how it is done. And yet, it is authoritative; it is absolute; it is verbal. It is again this confluency, and it is without error. We can trust it in every way.

— Dr. J. Scott Horrell

The Reformers believed that God's hand protected the Scriptures from error. God supernaturally gave biblical writers information about the present, the past and the future, and he superintended their authorship so that everything they wrote was true. Most importantly, divine inspiration gave the Scriptures absolute, unquestionable authority.

But Protestant Reformers avoided the medieval church's mistakes by *also* acknowledging that Scripture's human authors made significant contributions to the content and meaning of the Bible. Rather than treating the Bible as if it had dropped down from heaven, early Protestants stressed that the Scriptures came through human instruments and historical processes. This concern with human authorship accords well with the way Jesus and biblical writers often approached the Bible. For example, in Matthew 22:41-44, we read this account:

While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” He said to them, “How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet”’?” (Matthew 22:41-44).

In this passage Jesus used Psalm 110:1 to confound the Pharisees by explicitly drawing attention to David, the human writer of this passage. Both Jesus and the Pharisees agreed that the Messiah would be David's descendant. But in first-century Palestine, David would not normally have called his descendant "Lord." So, Jesus asked the Pharisees to explain why David ascribed this title to his son.

Notice that Jesus' argument depended on the fact that Scripture's meaning relies partly on details in the lives of its human authors. Examples like this abound of biblical writers and characters referring to Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, David, Paul, and other human instruments of God's Word. These human instruments made significant personal contributions to the Scriptures.

From these and other examples, the Reformers rightly concluded that the Scriptures rose out of real human situations. And they were written by people for particular historical circumstances. If Christians were to understand the Scriptures properly, they must not only stress the divine origins of Scripture, but also their human, historical origins.

Early Protestants' view on the authority of Scripture gave weight to both the divine and human sides of biblical inspiration. And this outlook on inspiration significantly influenced the ways the Reformers conceived of the meaning of Scripture as well.

Meaning

We can summarize the early Protestant approach to the meaning of Scripture this way: Rather than following the model of medieval Roman Catholicism by searching for hidden divine meanings in the Bible, the Reformers sought to ground all of their interpretations in the literal sense of biblical texts. Put simply, they focused on the meaning the human writers intended to communicate to their original audiences.

Now, we should be aware that early Protestants didn't break with medieval approaches to the meaning of Scripture completely. At times, vestiges of classical polyvalence — the belief that the Scriptures have many levels of meaning — appeared in the writings of the Reformation. For example, Luther's commentary on the Psalms shows a continuing dependence on this method of interpretation. Still, it's fair to say that the Reformers consistently placed far greater emphasis on the human author's intended meaning than did most of their Catholic counterparts. And, for the most part, they grounded their many applications of scriptural passages in the original meaning of the text.

To understand the early Reformers' emphasis on the literal or plain meaning of biblical texts, it helps to recall some history. This hermeneutical, or interpretive, approach to Scripture had already taken root in Western Europe through the Renaissance of the 15th century. The Renaissance, or "rebirth," derives its name from the renewed interest in classical Roman and, especially, Greek literature and culture that took place in Western Europe prior to the Reformation. Before the Renaissance, scholars, by and large, knew the ancient writings of Greece only in translation. And the interpretations of these writings were, for the most part, under the supervision of the church. At different times, the church had interpreted Plato, Aristotle and other Greek writers in ways that

deliberately supported Christian doctrine. But during the Renaissance, many scholars found patrons who supported their desire to understand the texts of the classical period, free from ecclesiastical supervision. They began to interpret these writings as their authors first meant them to be understood. And as a result, interpretations of highly-valued classical literature began to focus on their historical meaning — a meaning which often stood in sharp contrast with the teachings of the church.

Now, also during the Renaissance, new editions of the Hebrew and Greek Bibles were published. This led to a significant shift in the interpretation of Scripture as well. As we've seen, prior to these days, biblical passages were largely interpreted under the guidance of the church and in support of church dogma. But following the principles of the Renaissance, many biblical scholars — especially Protestants — began to read Scripture free from the control of the church. They sought to ground their interpretations of Scripture in the original historical meaning. This Protestant orientation toward the original meaning — or “literal sense” — as the basis of all interpretation, led to a significant shift in understanding the meaning of Scripture. Protestants now spoke of one unified, coherent meaning for every biblical passage. As the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1, section 9, puts it:

The true and full sense of any Scripture ... is not manifold, but one.

We may call this outlook a “univalent” view of meaning.

Of course, early Protestants realized that biblical passages often say much more than a simple assessment of the literal sense would indicate. They may have many implications and connections with Christian truths that go beyond the original human writers' comprehension. But all of these dimensions are still part of the single, true and full meaning because they coordinate with the literal or plain sense of the Scriptures.

When we do biblical interpretation, what we're really after is what's going on in the text literally. In other words, what did the biblical writer — whether we're talking Hosea or the apostle Paul — what did that writer generally want to intend? It's rather difficult to get into the mind of a writer in a comprehensive way to say, well, this is *exactly* what the person meant. And the one thing we have to keep track of too is, I believe, that all Scripture has dual authorship. It's both written by God and man. So, in this case, biblical writers may be writing something where the Holy Spirit is intending second, third, fourth layers of meaning that even the original writer wasn't fully aware of. But nevertheless, God uses that. I think what's really important is to come back to the literal meaning of the text. That's the anchor by which all other subsequent layers of meaning might be teased out.

— Nicholas Perrin, Ph.D.

In addition to emphasizing the human side of inspiration and the importance of the unified meaning of Scripture, early Protestants also sought to affirm the authority of Scripture by upholding Scripture's clarity.

Clarity

Rather than seeing the Scriptures as obscure and in need of authoritative ecclesiastical interpretation, the Reformers argued that the Bible was understandable. A number of factors contributed significantly to the Protestant doctrine of biblical clarity.

In the first place, the widespread use of the moveable-type printing press had made more and more Bibles available. And the availability of Bibles, in turn, made it possible for Christians to read the Bible for themselves. In doing so, they were able to evaluate whether the Catholic Church was correct when it declared that the Scriptures were obscure.

In the second place, bold pioneers had begun to translate the Scriptures into the languages of the common people. This also made it possible for people to examine the clarity of Scripture for themselves.

In the third place, the Reformers' focus on the literal sense — or *sensus literalis* in Latin — also enabled theologians to base their interpretations on something that could be examined and tested. They no longer simply needed to rely upon ecclesiastical authorities to tell them what the Bible meant. The examination of Scripture in these ways led to the widespread realization that, contrary to the Catholic view, the Bible was very clear.

These developments opened the way for Protestants to affirm the clarity of the Bible and to reinstate the Bible as the practical authority for Christianity. In this new environment, it became evident that many crucial passages that the Catholic Church had deemed obscure were actually relatively easy to understand. Protestant interpreters found that as they studied more of the Bible, more and more biblical teachings appeared to be remarkably clear.

Martin Luther at one point was teaching on the book of Romans in a university, and a verse that he came across during his lectures not only changed his life personally but really changed the face of Christianity as we know it. The verse that so impacted Martin Luther was Romans 1:17, and that verse simply says, “The just shall live by faith.” At that time the church was teaching that there were sacraments that one had to perform throughout life, where grace would be received over time, and you might get to a point of being right before God. But this verse taught, and Luther understood, that when we receive Christ through faith, *immediately* we become right before Almighty God. Of course, we want to continue doing good works and doing things to serve God — not that we might be made right, but because we have been made right through faith in Christ alone.

— Rev. George Shamblin

Now, during the early decades of the Reformation, Protestants were extremely optimistic about the clarity of the Bible. It all seemed to be a rather simple matter: Read the Bible and conform theology to God's clear revelation found there. But as the

Protestant movement continued to work through the Scriptures, Protestants themselves became more realistic. They began to speak in terms of *degrees* of clarity in the Bible. It had become evident that some portions of the Bible were clearer than others. So, when Lutherans believed one thing about a passage of Scripture, Calvinists another, and Zwinglians still another, the early, overly-optimistic view of the Bible's clarity gave way to more qualified outlooks. This more mature Protestant view shouldn't surprise us. Even the apostle Peter admitted that some things in Scripture are difficult to grasp. In 2 Peter 3:16, Peter wrote these words:

There are some things in [Paul's letters] that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures (2 Peter 3:16).

Notice how Peter put it. He didn't say that *all* of Paul's writings were easy to understand. Nor did he say that they were *all* hard to understand. Rather, he said that *some* things in Paul's writings are hard to understand.

So then, in contrast with the medieval church, the Protestant Reformers exalted the Bible over the authority of the church. Protestants understood that they were not cut off from God's revelation in Scripture. They affirmed the clarity of Scripture, and as a result, the Bible was reinstated as the absolute authority over all ecclesiastical authority.

The Reformers understood that man is sinful and that, inherently, we are inclined to take those things of God and distort them, diminish them, and misapply them. And they had witnessed that in the Roman Catholic Church, and that's actually, of course, what precipitated much of their conflict with the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. And so, it was their conviction that the authority of God's Word *has* to be the ultimate authority. And while the Catholic Church would have said at the time, and still to this day, that they agree that the Bible is the supreme authority, they believe that the church is empowered to interpret that authority, which, followed logically, means that the church really has the ultimate authority. And the danger there is men are sinful. Just as the Reformers understood then, it is true now and anytime that we have an ecclesiastical structure that seeks to impose an interpretation of Scripture on Scripture, then we are making the Word of God submit to the interpretation of a sinful man or a sinful collection of men, and that's always dangerous. So, for the Reformers and for us today, it's critical that everything that we approach must agree with the Word of God and submit to the Word of God.

— Dr. Steve Curtis

Now that we've looked into the early Protestant view on the authority of Scripture, we're in a position to see how early Protestants also viewed the authority of the church.

AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

The Protestant views of the inspiration, meaning and clarity of Scripture allowed early Protestants to reinstate the Bible as the only unquestionable rule of faith and life over church authorities. And, as evangelicals today, we must do the same. Still, we need to add an important qualification. As much as early Protestants affirmed the authority of the Bible, they didn't utterly reject all ecclesiastical authority as they built their theology. On the contrary, Protestants believed that God had granted secondary, fallible authority to the church in submission to the infallible teachings of Scripture.

It will help to explore the Protestant view of the authority of the church by looking in two directions. First, how did early Protestants understand past ecclesiastical authorities? And second, how did they understand their contemporary Protestant authorities? Consider first early Protestant outlooks on ecclesiastical authority from the past.

Past Authorities

Even though it's hard for many of us to imagine, early Protestants recognized a great deal of authority in the teachings of church fathers and early church councils. The Reformers maintained a robust doctrine of the church. They believed strongly that the Holy Spirit had led the early church into many important truths that needed to be recognized by Christians in their day.

As we mentioned in an earlier lesson, the Reformers spoke of the authority of Scripture under the rubric of *Sola Scriptura* — “Scripture alone.” Unfortunately, many evangelicals today have a serious misunderstanding of the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. In our day, many evangelicals believe that the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* implies that we should have no authority but the Bible. But this wasn't the position of the Reformation, and it's not a true implication of the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. The Reformers insisted on *Sola Scriptura*, not because they believed that the Bible was the only authority for believers. Rather, they meant that the Bible was the only *unquestionable* authority for believers. As strange as it may sound, Protestants didn't tenaciously defend the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* because they dismissed all other authorities out of hand. They defended it precisely *because* they held other theological authorities in high regard.

One of the things you see in the Reformers, especially in Calvin, is they don't see a fundamental conflict between their belief in *Sola Scriptura* — or their belief in the authority of Scripture as the foundation of the church — and their reverence for the church fathers. They saw themselves as restoring the church to an earlier, purer tradition that was represented in the Fathers... And they wanted to support their understanding of the Bible from church

tradition, so they didn't really see them as fundamentally competing principles. But they also didn't place the authority of church tradition and the early church fathers at the same level as scriptural authority.

— Dr. Jeff Dryden

For the sake of convenience, it's helpful to refer to a summary of these matters in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1, section 10:

The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.

This paragraph strongly affirms the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures is “the supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined.” In other words, all judgments of the church are to be made according to the standard of Scripture. But notice the language here. The Holy Spirit speaking in the Bible is “the supreme judge.” Now, if something is the *supreme* judge, it follows that there are other judges that are *not* supreme. In fact, the confession mentions a number of these other authorities in this passage. In what appears to be order of importance, it mentions councils; ancient writers, or church fathers; doctrines of men, referring to the teachings of others in the church in the past and present; and private spirits, that is, the inward sense or conviction regarding a particular matter. The *Westminster Confession* recognized these authorities, but gave them a secondary standing — authority under the *absolute* authority of Scripture.

Now, Catholic theologians often accused the Reformers of rejecting ecclesiastical authority. But the Reformers were careful not to reject the past as they maintained their doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. Early Protestants often supported their views with references to the early church fathers. In fact, with each revision of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin added more and more interaction with early church fathers — not less. In addition, one passage in Calvin's *Institutes* plainly reveals his outlook on the authority of church councils. Listen to what Calvin said in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 4, chapter 9:

I am not arguing here either that all councils are to be condemned or the acts of all to be rescinded, and (as the saying goes) to be canceled at one stroke. But, you will say, you degrade everything, so that every man has the right to accept or reject what the councils decide. Not at all! But whenever a decree of any council is brought forward, I should like men first of all diligently to ponder at what time it was held, on what issue, and with what intention, what sort of men were present; then to examine by the standard of Scripture what it dealt with — and to do this in such a way that the definition of the council may have its weight and be like a provisional judgment, yet not hinder the examination which I have mentioned.

Several important ideas stand out in Calvin's words here. First, he insisted that the councils of the church need to be understood historically. They were not timeless, direct revelation from God himself. The interpretative methods of the Renaissance — a focus on the literal-historical sense — should be applied to church councils. Believers should “ponder at what time [a council] was held, on what issue, and with what intention, what sort of men were present.”

Second, the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* led Calvin to insist that the teachings of the church should finally be evaluated in the light of Scripture. As he put it here, “the standard of Scripture” must be applied.

But third, and most importantly for our purposes here, Calvin claimed that the doctrines of the past should be accepted “like a provisional judgment.” That is to say, the longstanding, ancient findings of the church should be accepted as our provisional or preliminary judgments. We should accept their teaching until the weight of careful, biblical exegesis proves them wrong.

Calvin's strategy reflected the wisdom that guided all but the most radical Protestants in his day. The vast majority of Protestants understood the high authority that should be acknowledged for the early church fathers and for the creeds of the church. They approached these past ecclesiastical authorities with provisional acceptance, tempered by a commitment to the supremacy of Scripture.

Having seen how early Protestants viewed the authority of the church in relation to past ecclesiastical authorities, we should turn to how Reformers understood their own contemporary Protestant authorities. What kind of authority did they acknowledge for themselves and others as they sought to answer current theological concerns?

Contemporary Authorities

As you'll recall, the medieval Catholic Church developed an elaborate system of living theological authorities, culminating in the infallible pope. The Protestant Reformation largely amounted to a rejection of this ecclesiastical authority. Only the authority of the Bible was to be accepted as unquestionable. The pope, church councils, and other ecclesiastical authorities were fallible and subject to error.

Now, it's important to understand that early Protestants highly respected the authority of duly-ordained teachers in the church. The individual scholars, or “Doctors of the Church,” as they've been called, deserved high regard as Protestants developed Reformation theology further. In fact, Protestants of nearly every denomination created confessions, catechisms and creeds of their own that were acknowledged as secondary authorities in the church. These early Protestants had such high regard for duly-ordained contemporary theologians for a reason. They believed the Scriptures taught followers of Christ to honor the authorities God had placed in the church. Many portions of Scripture touch on this matter. For instance, in Titus 2:1,15, Paul instructed Titus with these words:

Teach what accords with sound doctrine... exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you (Titus 2:1,15).

The heart of the Reformation was the question of authority because everything else, all the things that we believe in, stem from our choice about what our authority is... The New Testament tells us that we rest on Christ the chief cornerstone, the apostles and prophets of the first century as the foundation of the church, but then we have church authorities of evangelists, pastors and teachers. And so, church authorities are very important to us because presumably they're going to have wisdom and they're going to have experiences that help them submit themselves to the truth of God revealed in Scripture. But those authorities must always be in submission to the Lord Jesus and his affirmation of the unquestionable authority of the Bible.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

This balance between biblical and ecclesiastical authority may be summed up in an old slogan that is often repeated in Reformed circles: “The Reformed church is always reforming,” or as it is often abbreviated in the Latin phrase, *semper reformanda* — “always reforming.” These slogans indicate that the Reformed branch of the church fully recognized that, as important as ecclesiastical authorities may be, they must always be subject to the scrutiny of Scripture.

Now that we've looked at views on authority in theology during the periods of medieval Roman Catholicism and early Protestantism, we're in a position to consider the third topic of this lesson: contemporary Protestantism.

CONTEMPORARY PROTESTANTISM

“Authority” is a notion that evokes strong negative reactions among evangelical Protestants today in many parts of the world. Many of us see how authorities often abuse their power and we naturally resist them. As we've seen, through the millennia Christians have struggled with these matters even in theology. So, what should we learn from the ways our forebears dealt with theological authority? What are the values and dangers of authority for contemporary evangelicals as we build theology today?

We'll answer these questions about contemporary Protestantism first by addressing the kinds of outlooks we should have toward the authority of Scripture. Second, we'll suggest some important perspectives we should have toward the authority of the church. Let's turn first to the authority of Scripture.

AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

The Bible's authority over the Christian is an absolute authority in every part of their life. To do otherwise is really to set ourselves up as God. To look at the Bible and say, “Well, I'm not going to follow that part but I'm going to follow this part,” or, “I'm going to obey this

little verse and not this little verse,” is, in one sense, to set ourselves over Scripture and to determine what is true and what is not, what we follow and what we won’t, and when we do that, we’ve become little gods ourselves. We’ve set ourselves up as the god of the universe. And that is idolatry. So, to deny Scripture and not live by its authority in one sense is to try to supplant God and make ourselves that authority. So, it’s very important that Scripture dominate the Christian’s life in almost every area, or in every area, so that they really do give God his proper place as the ultimate authority.

— Dr. Michael J. Kruger

We’ll explore contemporary views of the authority of Scripture by touching on three issues that have concerned us throughout this lesson: the inspiration of Scripture, the meaning of Scripture, and the clarity of Scripture. In our day, a number of different viewpoints on these subjects claim to follow the Reformation tradition. We’ll look into these views and assess their value, beginning with modern perspectives on the inspiration of Scripture.

Inspiration

At least three views of inspiration are popular among contemporary Protestants. On one end of the spectrum is a view we often call romantic inspiration. On the other end of the spectrum is a similarly extreme view called mechanical inspiration. And between these extreme views is an outlook that has been called organic inspiration. Let’s look briefly at all three of these views.

Romantic inspiration is widely endorsed by more liberal-leaning Protestants. In this view, the Bible is inspired in a “romantic” sense, much like great writers, artists, and composers — like Shakespeare, Rembrandt, or Bach — were “inspired.” So, God motivated biblical writers, but he didn’t superintend their writings. In this view, the Scriptures are just the opinions of men. The Scriptures are, therefore, fallible and lack absolute authority over the church. Now, needless to say, this outlook on inspiration must be rejected by those who adhere to the spirit of the Reformation. This view abandons the central Protestant commitment to *Sola Scriptura* by denying both the reliability and the ultimate authority of the Bible.

On the other end of the spectrum is mechanical inspiration, or as it’s sometimes called “inspiration by dictation.” To one degree or another, this outlook asserts that biblical authors were relatively passive as they wrote the Scriptures. In this view, God essentially authored the Bible himself, while human writers acted as his compliant secretaries. On the whole, this view leads away from the Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura* by denying the importance of the human author’s historical context and the original meaning. As the Reformers were careful to note, denying the value of the literal sense of Scripture hinders the practical authority of Scripture. The meaning of the Bible can no longer be assessed and followed, and we’re forced to read our own ideas into the Bible. As a result, the Bible itself no longer serves as our supreme authority in theology.

Contemporary Protestant theology must avoid the extremes of both romantic and mechanical inspiration by re-affirming the fully organic nature of inspiration. In organic inspiration, God moved biblical authors to write and superintended their writings so that they wrote infallibly and authoritatively. But he didn't circumvent their personal thoughts, their motivations, their feelings or their theology. On the contrary, the human *and* divine dimensions of inspiration were not at odds at all. Rather, all of the Bible presents God's timeless truths, but in highly-human, culturally-conditioned texts. All of the Bible's teachings are normative for all times, but its teachings are tied to the context of particular circumstances. The Protestant view of organic inspiration emphasizes both the human and the divine, the historical and the transcendent qualities of the whole Bible. In this view of inspiration, the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* is maintained. Without a doubt, of the three major ways Protestants think of biblical inspiration, the doctrine of organic inspiration most fully accords with the principles that gave rise to and led the Protestant Reformation.

One of the things I love about the Bible is the variety of the authors and how the Holy Spirit worked through each of those individual authors with their uniqueness of who they were, their experiences, their lives, in order to bring us a full picture of who God is and what that means for us. So, when we see how God used different authors, it seems that what the Holy Spirit does is internally works with them to give them the sense of what to write, of what to say, but through their own personality and through their own experiences. So, it's alive, it's rich, it's full. It allows lots of people to connect with it in different ways, as opposed to something being very mechanical. God, I think, appreciates the experiences we go through, and the Holy Spirit then indwells those authors in a way that gives them an inspiration of what to write and then works through who they are in their personalities.

— Dr. Dan Lacich

In addition to stressing the organic nature of inspiration, modern Protestant theologians must also evaluate the authority of Scripture by rightly assessing the meaning of Scripture.

Meaning

Once again, we have a spectrum of positions that represent Protestant thinking on the meaning of Scripture. But not all of the options further the ideals of the Reformation. On one end of the spectrum is a view that we'll call "contemporary polyvalence." On the other end is a view that we'll call "simplistic univalence." And in the middle is a view that we'll call "complex univalence." Let's touch first on contemporary polyvalence.

In recent decades, some Protestant theologians have spoken of the polyvalence of biblical texts because they believe that the Scriptures have different meanings. But

whereas classical polyvalence affirmed multiple meanings because of the Bible's divine origin, contemporary polyvalence is usually based on the ambiguities of human language.

In effect, contemporary polyvalence teaches that biblical passages are empty vessels for interpreters to fill with meaning. Now, those who adhere to this view recognize that, just as a vessel has a given shape, the grammar of biblical texts establishes some basic parameters of meaning. But, within these parameters, the specific meaning is supplied by biblical interpreters. On this basis, it's argued that we must reject the Reformation's stress on *sensus literalis*. Instead, we should pour our own interpretations into passages, giving little or no concern to the original or literal meaning of the text.

Unfortunately, this contemporary notion of polyvalence renders the authority of Scripture null. It gives human interpreters the right to pour their own ideas into the Scriptures. And for this reason, we must reject it.

On the other end of the spectrum is the concept of "simplistic univalence." This view rightly promotes the notion that every passage of Scripture has just one meaning. But it wrongly denies that a single meaning may be complex. Take for example John 3:16:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

A Christian with simplistic univalence in mind might say something like this: "This verse is very simple. John 3:16 tells us that we must believe in Christ."

John 3:16 is a well-known verse that Christians often summarize in very simple ways. But in reality, this verse touches on all kinds of far-reaching topics. It speaks explicitly of God's love. It reminds us of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. It talks about the world, eternal punishment and eternal life. Each of these topics is complex in itself, and there are a myriad of logical connections among them. So, while we're right to say that John 3:16 has one, unified meaning, the complexity of that meaning exceeds any summary we're able to make of it. And different interpreters can rightly emphasize different facets of its one meaning.

When we fail to see that the meaning of Scripture is so complex that it always exceeds our interpretations, we run a serious risk. We risk identifying our *interpretation* of the Bible too closely with the Bible itself. Our interpretation takes on the authority of the Bible, and we reject *Sola Scriptura* — the belief that the Bible *always* stands above our interpretations.

In the center of the spectrum is "complex univalence," which accords with the early Reformation outlooks. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* describes complex univalence in Chapter 1, section 9, where it says these words:

When there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

In this view, each passage has one meaning. But this one meaning is complex and multifaceted, revealed by the web of multiple reciprocities established by the whole teaching of Scripture.

People use a word like “univalence” in different ways. But in the best sense, the univalence of Scripture means it has one value, every portion of it has one unified significance. Now, that unity of significance is complicated. It’s complex. It’s not simple. It’s not as if we’re able to summarize the one meaning of a Bible passage by one phrase or one sentence that’s ever so simple because every portion of the Bible is complicated. But every portion of the Bible coheres. That’s what we mean when we say it’s univalent — it holds together. Polyvalence, the opposite of univalence, supposes that, really, what the Bible has, any given passage in the Bible has multiple meanings so that you can just go on and on and on and on as to what this passage means and that passage means. And it doesn’t matter whether these various values or significances of that passage have any coherence at all. But the truth is that univalence is what we believe in as evangelicals, but not a simplistic univalence. It’s a complex univalence. So, we can recognize that the Bible, and any passage in the Bible, has a unified meaning, and in that sense it is univalent.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

The Reformation notion of complex univalence affirms that the Bible presents authoritative meaning rather than waiting for us to provide it. It also restrains us from lowering the Scriptures to the level of our simplified summaries of the Bible. Every Scripture text stands as authoritative above our very best efforts to interpret the text. This outlook of complex univalence provides a way of handling the meaning of Scripture that will enable us to further the theology of the Reformation in our day.

We’ve looked at the authority of Scripture by considering contemporary Protestant views on the inspiration and meaning of Scripture. We’re now in a position to speak of modern Protestant views on the Bible’s clarity.

Clarity

It will help us again to think in terms of three points along a spectrum. On one end, we face contemporary tendencies toward utter obscurity. On the other end we face contemporary tendencies toward utter clarity. But in the middle rests the Reformation doctrine of degrees of clarity.

Scripture has this quality, if you will, of clarity. Now, that doesn't mean it's always easy for us to understand, and of course, Peter famously says that some things Paul has written are hard to understand, and that we have to understand what the source of difficulty is when we interpret the Bible. One of the difficulties is we're finite creatures... And so, when we come to a subject that's inherently complex like God is, even though Scripture itself is clear in itself, it's sometimes challenging to understand. But the last thing that's important — and the Westminster Confession talks about this — that those things which are necessary for salvation are clear so that even the simple can understand them.

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

It's not difficult to find Protestants today who treat the Bible as almost entirely obscure, or hidden from us. Often, in the spirit of deconstruction and post-modern hermeneutics, these Protestants think about Scripture in the same way that they think about all other literature. Like other literature, they consider the Scriptures obscure because they believe the Bible is self-contradictory and self-defeating. In their view, the history of biblical interpretation has revealed so many exegetical difficulties that it's nearly impossible to determine how we should understand the Bible today.

On the other end of the spectrum, some contemporary Protestants believe in the utter clarity of the Bible. They consider nearly all Scriptures so clear that they can understand them quickly and easily. More often than not, advocates of such views simply dismiss out of hand all interpretations that do not come from their very narrow Christian communities.

Exaggerating the clarity of Scripture is a great temptation to many theologians in the Protestant tradition today. We want desperately to keep the Scriptures removed from modern skepticism and cynicism. But to oversimplify the clarity of Scripture in this way doesn't represent the Reformation's outlook on the clarity of Scripture. As we've seen, the early Reformers admitted that some portions of the Bible are difficult, if not impossible, to understand.

In the middle of our spectrum on the clarity of Scripture is a position that acknowledges degrees of clarity. This is the position adopted in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1, section 7.

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

Notice that the confession distinguishes that which is “necessary ... for salvation” as clear in one place or another. But it also admits that not everything else in Scripture is equally clear. In other words, the Bible is neither entirely unclear nor entirely clear.

You’ll recall that in a previous lesson we distinguished among various levels of confidence that we have in different Christian doctrines. We used the model that we called the “cone of certainty.” Toward the bottom of our cone of certainty, we have beliefs that we hold tenuously because we have low levels of confidence about them. At the top, we have those core beliefs that we hold tenaciously; to give them up is to give up the Christian faith. And between these extremes we have everything else that we believe with varying degrees of confidence.

In many respects, it helps to think of the clarity of Scripture in similar terms. In the first place, many aspects of biblical teaching — including the knowledge of what is required for salvation — need little or no scholarly effort to understand. As the *Westminster Confession* puts it, the “learned” and “unlearned” alike may understand these things. Other biblical information fits into this category, too. In fact, enormous portions of the Bible are fairly easy to understand. For example, it’s not hard to see that God created the world, or that there were men named Abraham, Moses, and David, or that Israel went into Egypt and later into exile. The New Testament plainly teaches that Jesus grew up in Nazareth and that there were apostles. These and innumerable other features of Scripture are so clear that no one needs to put forth scholarly or academic effort to know them.

Do we need special methods to understand the most basic truths of the Bible? I believe the answer is “no” because most of the Bible is very clear... As Peter tells us, God has clearly revealed his power and being to us, as well as everything that pertains to life, godliness, and salvation, because he has called us by his goodness. Or, as the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 1, section 6 puts it, “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.” So, any regular person, even though they aren’t a biblical scholar, can still understand the Bible using the proper methods, according to the various genres and the most basic knowledge God has granted us... Someone once said that what surprised them about the Bible wasn’t the difficult to understand portions, but the especially clear and obvious portions that proclaim truth and salvation, parts that are understandable to anyone. That’s what they found shocking. So, I believe that the portions of the Bible that discuss salvation, the many verses discussing man’s sinfulness, the salvation God offers in Christ, and his coming judgment, so long as someone can read, or can hear someone else read, they are capable of understanding.

— Dr. Biao Chen, translation

In the second place, some aspects of Scripture are known only by serious students who study subjects like ancient history, text criticism, biblical languages, interpretive methods, or theology. Among these matters we might count things such as Paul's eschatology, or the historical purpose of the book of Genesis. These and other aspects of Scripture require more scholarly attention. But with sufficient academic efforts, many things that initially appear to be obscure become clearer to us.

Finally, some portions of Scripture appear to remain unclear no matter how much effort we put forth. Some of the more obvious examples of these dimensions of Scripture arise when we try to harmonize parallel portions of Scripture like Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, or the New Testament gospels. Even though great strides have been made in these areas, many problems still appear to be unsolvable.

So, as we approach the Scriptures, we must always remember that some dimensions of the Bible are clearer than others. Only when we face this reality can we responsibly handle the authority of Scripture. It's true that every part of Scripture is unquestionably authoritative. But, on a practical level, we're able to grasp and use its authoritative guidance to varying degrees, depending on the relative clarity of the different parts of Scripture. So, to uphold the Reformation tradition in our day, we must avoid contemporary extremes on the clarity of Scripture and affirm that clarity is a matter of degree.

With these contemporary Protestant perspectives on the authority of Scripture in mind, we should turn our attention to the authority of the church in today's theology.

AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

We'll focus again in two directions: first, we'll look at how contemporary Protestant theologians should view past ecclesiastical authorities; and second, we'll address how they should view contemporary Protestant authorities. Let's look first at the authority of the church in the past.

Past Authorities

As we've seen, early Protestants understood that the Holy Spirit had taught the church many truths before their time. As a result, they sought to maintain proper respect for the teachings of the early church fathers, the creeds, and longstanding traditions of the church. In effect, early Protestants accepted the teachings of the church as provisional judgments. Yet, they also balanced this practice with a strong affirmation of the supremacy of Scripture over the teachings of the church. They relied on and built on the past, but they also subjected all teachings of the church to the unquestionable standard of Scripture.

Unfortunately, theologians today sometimes find it difficult to hold firmly to both sides of this early Protestant position. Some lean heavily toward traditionalism. Others move toward biblicism. But many in the Protestant tradition practice *semper reformanda*, between these extremes.

On one side, some contemporary theologians fall into the trap of “traditionalism.” By traditionalism, we mean they stray toward practices that closely resemble medieval Roman Catholic traditionalism. Now, Protestant theologians affirm the authority of Scripture, and they certainly reject the traditions of Catholicism. But many times, traditionalists so highly treasure past expressions of their faith that, on a practical level, they fail to scrutinize the past adequately.

It’s sort of ironic because we Protestants protest the idea of a magisterium or a church tradition that is on par with Scripture. And yet, in practice we do that as well sometimes. You probably know people who will emphasize a particular confession of the church — the Belgic, or the Heidelberg, or for many of us, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. It’s really kind of got the same kind of authority as the Bible for many of us. And yet, right in the very first chapter of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, it says that Scripture is the final authority on all church councils, on all church theological disputes... Tradition is a good guide, but it’s a terrible master. We each have a role to play in God’s mission, and we’re to embody the story of Scripture in a unique way, benefitting from the example of others, the example of tradition, but not being mastered by it.

— Dr. Gregory R. Perry

On the other side, some modern theologians go to the opposite extreme as they deal with ecclesiastical authority from the past. In a Christian version of Enlightenment modernism, they fall into what may be called “biblicism.” These theologians act as if each person must come to the Bible and decide every theological issue without the aid of past Protestant tradition.

For the Reformers and for Christians throughout the ages, they have understood the Scriptures to be the source and witness to divine revelation. But this has never meant for Christians that we don’t need traditions, nor that we aren’t standing in a particular tradition ourselves. So this idea that *Sola Scriptura* would mean a rejection of all creeds except for one’s own reading the Bible, is simply not what the Reformers meant, nor is a wise way forward.

— Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington

Time and again, Protestant theologians have reacted to traditionalism by saying things like, “It doesn’t matter what the church has said. All I care about is what the Bible says.” This kind of rhetoric goes far beyond submitting to the Scriptures as our final authority. It neglects the wisdom that God’s Spirit has granted to the church. Instead, it grants theological judgment only to the individual or groups of individuals who are currently at work.

To continue in the spirit of the Reformation today, we must re-affirm the principle of *semper reformanda*. We must strive to affirm the supremacy of Scripture without ignoring the importance of Reformation tradition.

Semper reformanda today requires that we accept as provisional judgments not only the early church fathers and councils, but also our own confessions and traditions. But these authorities from the past should *always* be subject to the unquestionable teaching of Scripture. To further the Reformation today, we need to learn how to give this kind of weight to ecclesiastical authorities from the past under the authority of Scripture.

The idea of *semper reformanda* really is communicating that the church reformed is always reforming. And the reason why that matters is it's a way of communicating, the church always stands under the authority of Scripture. So, any time we discover that in our practices we're living outside of what we think the biblical witness calls us to, we must be willing to reform... And so the church's always being willing to reform is an important idea to say, we stand under Scripture; we need to be willing to test even our interpretations of Scripture. But we can't just go by whatever is trendy at any given time. And that is partly why, in order for the church to always be reforming, it means we have to be in conversation with the past. We have to figure out what people from different ages thought — how has God's Spirit worked in the past so that whatever we're saying today still falls within what God has always been teaching and how he's been leading his church through the ages? — so that we are willing to reform under the Scriptures, reform our lives, reform our thoughts, without ever starting a new religion, because we are the religion of God the Father, the Son and the Spirit — nothing new.

— Dr. Kelly M. Kopic

Having looked at the authority of the church and the way Protestant theologians today should relate to past authorities, we should turn to an equally important matter. How should today's theologians assess contemporary Protestant authorities? How should we understand the authority of theological formulations that are developing in our day?

Contemporary Authorities

Early Protestants affirmed the value of theology developed by duly ordained leaders in their day. But they also guarded against exalting contemporary authorities in the church over the teaching of Scripture. Unfortunately, once again, contemporary Protestant theologians often find it difficult to follow these early outlooks. They tend to go to extremes in the ways that they understand Protestant theologians living in their own day.

On the one side, some theologians tend to be skeptical about doctrinal formulations today. On the other side, many tend to be dogmatic about doctrinal

formulations in our times. But the way of authentic Reformation theology is to strive for faithful doctrinal formulations. Theologians who are severely skeptical about contemporary doctrinal formulations reject all sense of authority or need of submission to what the church says today. On the other end of the spectrum, theologians who are extremely dogmatic insist that contemporary formulations are perfect.

We have to be very careful about the ways we evaluate contemporary Christian beliefs. On the one side, there's a skepticism that often grows among evangelical Christians where we think that if it's something that's new ... that it must be wrong because the truth is in the past. And unfortunately, this reveals the fact that they do not believe that Holy Spirit is still active and alive in the church today in ways he has been in the past... On the other side, you get people who go the other extreme and say things like, "Well, if it's old fashioned, if it comes from the past, it's irrelevant for today. What we need is some new ideas." And we mustn't go down that track either because Holy Spirit is not just working in the church today; he's been working in the church for millennia. And so, as we realize that there is truth in the past, we must build on that truth from the past. The interpretations of the church through the millennia should be very impactful on the ways we think and live in our day today. Theology, you see, is dependence on the Holy Spirit, helping us to learn the Scriptures and to apply them with the wisdom that he's given the church in the past but with relevance for the issues that we face today.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

The severe skepticism and dogmatism that we face in our day exists in part because doctrinal statements are often thought to be simply true or false. In reality, it's much more helpful to create faithful doctrinal formulations by considering a range of possibilities between true and false. All theological statements are more or less true or false depending on how closely they mirror the infallible teaching of Scripture.

On the one side, in contrast to the skeptical view, we find that some theological positions describe the teaching of the Bible well enough that we may call them true and consider them valuable. Now, these statements are not perfect, of course. But they're close enough to be accepted as true, unless some qualification arises that reveals otherwise.

On the other side, some theological positions are so far from the teaching of Scripture that we're right to label them as false. Unlike those who cling dogmatically to the authority of contemporary formulations, we can reject these formulations unless some qualification later shows that they're acceptable.

Consider, for instance, a contemporary doctrinal formulation that states, "God is sovereign over all things." We normally should have no problem with saying that this is true. The Bible does teach that God is sovereign over all his creation. Yet, because this statement can be improved upon, it is, in some sense, imperfect. If, perhaps, we're distinguishing biblical faith from Deism, this statement could actually give a false

impression. Deism teaches that God, in his sovereignty, doesn't interact with historical events after his initial act of creation. So, the statement "God is sovereign over all things" could actually lead us away from the reality of divine providence — that God is intimately involved with his creation.

In the end, in regard to contemporary theological formulations, some theological statements are close enough to Scripture to be counted as true; others are far enough from Scripture to be counted as false. In either case, being dogmatic and assuming that all contemporary formulations are true, will not benefit us. But being skeptical and ignoring the value of contemporary ecclesiastical authority is also not helpful. All theological formulations can be improved, but we shouldn't disregard them simply because they've been formulated in our day. This is nothing more than the early Reformed maxim, *semper reformanda* — "always reforming."

This is what we mean when we say that the aim of contemporary Protestant theology is to produce faithful theological formulations. We humbly and responsibly use all the resources God has given us — exegesis of Scripture, interaction in community, and Christian living — to develop faithful doctrinal formulations. We seek to conform our teachings, as much as possible, to the teachings of Scripture. The closer our doctrines are to Scripture, the more authority they have. The further they are from Scripture, the less authority they have. But in all cases, the theology of the church must always be held in submission to the Scriptures.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we've explored the relationship between biblical and ecclesiastical authority in theology. We've looked at a number of outlooks that developed during the period of medieval Roman Catholicism. We've also seen how the movement of early Protestantism corrected these views. And finally, we've explored the need to apply the outlooks of the Reformation to biblical and ecclesiastical authority in contemporary Protestantism.

Building a Christian theology requires us all to wrestle with authority, both the authority of Scripture and the authority of the church. As we've seen in this lesson, we're led astray from the truth unless we reaffirm in the strongest terms the absolute, unquestionable authority of Scripture. This is our safeguard, our sure anchor in theology. At the same time, we must never neglect what God has done in his church. Those who have gone before us were not perfect. The teachers of the church today are not perfect. Yet, as fallible as they may be, God has established authorities in the church that we are to honor. If we keep these principles in mind, we'll be able to avoid many problems that have plagued Christian theology in the past and in our own day. We'll be able to build theology that will serve the body of Christ and bring honor to God.

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