

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Richard L. Mayhue
Senior Vice President and Dean
Professor of Theology and Pastoral Ministries

After a brief look at the general concept of “authority,” this essay continues with an introductory discussion concerning the authority of God. It is developed in terms of (1) the declarations of Scripture; (2) the displays in God’s names, nature, and prerogatives; and (3) Satan’s denial. Then, God’s authority is discussed as it is invested in Scripture in the sense that the Bible is the voice of God and therefore speaks with His full authority. God’s authority in Scripture can thus be described as original, unalterable, exclusive, permanent, ultimate, obligatory, and consequential. Scripture is to be authoritatively preached and submissively obeyed since the Author of and the authority within will reward righteous obedience and condemn those who disregard and disobey His authority in Scripture.

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The concept of *authority* is thoroughly woven into the fabric of Scripture. It is unmistakably obvious from Gen 1:1 (“In the beginning God created ...”¹) to Rev 22:20 (“Yes, I am coming quickly.”) and everywhere between. This idea of “ultimate right” is inextricably linked with God’s sovereignty (Rom 11:36).

Just how important is the authority of Scripture? Listen carefully to one of the preeminent Reformers when he spoke to this very question at the Diet of Worms in April, 1521. Martin Luther, under intense pressure to recant regarding “justification by faith” and other recently embraced truths from the Bible, responded to Meister Eck in this fashion:

Since then Your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.²

¹Scripture quotations throughout this essay are taken from the New American Standard Bible.

²Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Mentor, 1955) 144.

What is truly known about authority did not originate outside of Scripture, but rather within. Thus, it is not a secular concept that has been co-opted by religion. On the contrary, it is a sacred element of the very Person of God. What Scripture properly teaches about authority has actually been shamefully distorted by this world's system and wrongfully employed by all world religions. This essay intends to explore what Scripture itself teaches about authority, especially its own.

AUTHORITY

The rightful idea of authority has fallen on hard times at the start of the twenty-first century. Illegitimate forms and expressions of authority range from the illegal and abusive exercise of authoritarianism/totalitarianism to individual authority which emerges from a postmodern mindset of selfishness.

The appropriate approach to the discussion commences with a working definition of authority in general, especially legitimate authority exercised in a proper fashion. A representative dictionary definition records that authority is the "Power or right to enforce obedience; moral or legal supremacy; right to command or give a final decision."³

Bernard Ramm suggests,

*Authority itself means that right or power to command action or compliance, or to determine belief or custom, expecting obedience from those under authority, and in turn giving responsible account for the claim to right or power.*⁴

The NT noun (102 times) most commonly translated "authority" is ἐξουσία (*exousia*). A representative lexical definition reads, "The power exercised by rulers or others in high position by virtue of their office."⁵

There are many approaches to authority in a secular worldview, e.g.,

1. oligarchical – authority exercised by a powerful few.
2. democratic – authority exercised by the people.
3. hereditary – authority exercised by those in a particular family.
4. despotic – authority exercised by one or more in an evil fashion.
5. personal – authority exercised by one person.

However, with a biblical worldview, original authority and ultimate authority reside with God and God alone. God did not inherit His authority—there was no one to bequeath it to Him. God did not receive His authority—there was no one to bestow it on Him. God's authority did not come by way of an election—there was no one to vote for Him. God did not seize His authority—there was no one to steal it from. God did not earn His authority—it was already His. God inherently

³*The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v., "authority."

⁴Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern of Religious Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959) 10 [emphasis in the original].

⁵*BDAG*, 3rd ed. rev., s.v., "ἐξουσία." Cf. *TDNT*, s.v., "ἐξουσία."

embodies authority because He is the great “I AM” (Exod 3:14; John 8:58).

THE AUTHORITY OF GOD

God’s authority becomes obvious and unquestionable when one considers three facts. First, God created the heavens and earth and that which is therein (Genesis 1–2). Second, God owns the earth, all that it contains, and those who dwell in it (Ps 24:1). Third, in the end God consumes it all in that He declared, “Behold, I am making all things new” (Rev 21:5). What follows makes the point with flair.

Where did God come from? He came from nowhere! The reason God came from nowhere is that there was nowhere for Him to come from. Coming from nowhere, He stood on nothing. The reason He had to stand on nothing is there was nowhere for Him to stand. And standing on nothing, He reached out where there was nowhere to reach and caught something where there was nothing to catch and hung something on nothing and He told it to stay there. Now standing on nothing, He took the hammer of His own will; He struck the anvil of His omnipotence and sparks flew. He caught them on the tips of His fingers, flung them out into space and bedecked the heaven with stars, but no one said a word. The reason no one said anything is that there was nobody there to say anything. So God Himself said, ‘That is very good.’⁶

God’s Authority Declared

To understand and accept the fact of God’s authority is as simple as accepting the fact of God Himself. Romans says this best: “For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God” (Rom 13:1). This *locus classicus* lays out clearly the source of all authority and articulates the principle of “Divine delegation” (cf. Job 34:13; John 19:11).

There are numerous statements in the OT which explicitly testify to God’s authority. For example, “That power belongs to God” (Ps 62:11) and “Power and might are in Thy hand so that no one can stand against Thee” (2 Chron 20:6).

Jesus declared, “All authority had been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matt 28:18). Jude wrote, “[T]o the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen” (Jude 25).

God’s Authority Displayed

The Names of God

The names of people do not always correspond to their characters or their accomplishments. But the names of God always reveal something true about Him, especially His authority.

1. For instance, *Elohim* or ‘God’ tells us that He is supreme above all things

⁶S. M. Lockridge as quoted by permission in Richard Mayhue, *Seeking God* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2000) 186 [emphasis in the original].

and all people (Gen 1:1). He is eternal while all else is temporal. He is the Creator; all has been made by Him.

2. *Jehovah* or 'LORD' occurs over 6,800 times in the OT and *speaks of God's eternal and unchanging nature*. It literally means, 'I AM.' God used it to instruct Moses (Exod 3:13–14), and Christ confounded the Pharisees with this name (John 8:58).
3. *El-Shaddai* or 'God Almighty' *points to God's invincibility and His omnipotence or all-powerfulness* (Gen 17:1–2). Nothing is too hard for God and no enemy will ever defeat Him. He can do all things.
4. A fourth name is *Adonai* which means 'Master' or 'Lord' (Deut 10:17). *It indicates authority and ownership*. Therefore, God deserves our worship, allegiance, and obedience, because from Him we have received our very existence, as well as our eternal redemption in Christ.
5. Abraham unforgettably learned about *Jehovah-Jireh*, 'the LORD will provide,' when God substituted the sacrifice to replace Isaac (Gen 22:14). The name pictures God as seeing, and thus anticipating His divine provision of the right supply at just the right time. His omniscience or all-knowingness and wisdom are in view here.
6. *Jehovah-Rophe* points to God as healer (Exod 15:26). The Shepherd's mercy, compassion, and loving-kindness show through this name. God's healing is to be understood both in a physical and spiritual sense.
7. God's holiness can be seen in *Jehovah-M'kaddesh* which means 'the LORD who sanctifies' (Lev 20:7–8). He stands as our redeemer and our sanctifier. The name reminds us that He hates sin.
8. Gideon built an altar and called it *Jehovah-Shalom* (Judg 6:24). For him it signified *the quality of peace which is central to God's nature*. Closely associated in a redemptive sense is *Jehovah-Tsidkenu* or 'Jehovah our righteousness' (Jer 23:5–6).
9. *Jehovah-Rohi*, 'the LORD is my Shepherd' (Ps 23:1), and *Jehovah-Shammah*, 'the LORD is there' (Ezek 48:35), describe God's presence to guide, protect, and make provision for our needs.

The Nature of God

The very nature of God displays His authority in that He is characterized as "unapproachable light" (1 Tim 6:16) and described as

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| • Unsearchable | Romans 11:33 |
| • Immortal | 1 Timothy 1:17 |
| • Inscrutable | Isaiah 40:28 |
| • Incorruptible | Romans 1:23 |
| • Invisible | 1 Timothy 1:17 |
| • Unfathomable | Romans 11:33 |

The following noncommunicable attributes of God pertain exclusively to His deity. They will never be experienced by anyone else. They speak of His authority.

- Omnipotence Jeremiah 32:17
- Omniscience Psalm 139:1–6
- Omnipresence Psalm 139:7–10
- Immutability Psalm 102:27
- Sovereignty 1 Chronicles 29:11–12
- Eternality Psalm 90:2
- Greatness Psalm 135:5
- Self-existence Isaiah 41:4

These next qualities find their ultimate expression in God. They describe the way in which His authority is ministered.

- Wisdom Romans 16:27
- Faithfulness 1 Corinthians 10:13
- Truthfulness Exodus 34:6
- Love 1 John 4:8
- Goodness Psalm 100:5
- Righteousness Psalm 92:15
- Mercy Psalm 86:15
- Compassion Lamentations 3:22–23
- Holiness Psalm 99:9
- Graciousness Psalm 116:5
- Patience 2 Peter 3:15
- Peace Hebrews 13:20
- Kindness Psalm 100:5
- Gentleness 2 Corinthians 10:1
- Joy John 17:13
- Forgiveness Exodus 34:7
- Justice Deuteronomy 10:18

The Prerogatives of God

God's authority is further established by His rights and prerogatives which are possessed by no one else, such as

- Creation
- Consummation
- Eternal forgiveness
- Condemnation
- Defining righteousness and sin
- Blessing
- Cursing
- Setting up kingdoms
- Striking down kingdoms

God's Authority Denied

The fact of God's authority is substantiated in a backhanded way by the

constant attacks upon it from Genesis 3 to Revelation 20. Throughout Scripture, one can see time and time again Satanic and human rebellion against God's authority. Jehoiakim attempted to destroy God's Scripture as delivered by Jeremiah (Jer 36:23). The Pharisees and scribes neglected and attempted to invalidate God's authority in Scripture (Mark 7:6–13). Jezebel attacked God's authority in the church (Rev 2:20).

God's judgments against those who defy His authority further validate His rightful possession and exercise of ultimate authority.

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| • Edenic Fall | Genesis 3:18-21 |
| • Genesis Flood | Genesis 6:1–9:29 |
| • Confused Language/Scattered People | Genesis 11:1-9 |
| • Exile of Israel | 2 Kings 17 |
| • Exile of Judah | 2 Kings 24–25 |
| • Premillennial Tribulation | Revelation 6–19 |
| • Final Judgment | Revelation 20:7-15 |

THE AUTHORITY OF GOD IN SCRIPTURE

The apologetic approach taken in this essay is unapologetically presuppositional.⁷ This starting point is selected because of the Scripture's consistent self-witness to itself.

The New Testament emphasis on veracity is most pronounced. It asserts that God is the true God, or the God of truth (John 3:33, 17:3, Rom 3:4, 1 Thess 1:9); that His judgments are veracious and just (Rom 2:2, 3:7, Rev 16:7 and 15:3); that a knowledge of God is a knowledge of the truth (Rom 1:18, 25). It asserts that Christ is the true light (John 1:9), the true bread (John 6:32), and the true vine (John 15:1). Christ bears a true witness (John 8:14, Rev 3:14); His judgments are true (John 8:16); He is a minister of the truth of God (Rom 15:8); He is full of truth (John 1:14); He is personally the truth (John 14:6, Rev 3:7 and 19:11). Further, He speaks the truth of God (John 8:40–47). The Holy Spirit is repeatedly called the Spirit of truth (1 John 5:7; John 14:17, 15:26, and 15:13). His ministry is to guide into truth (John 16:13). The gospel, or Christian faith, is called the word of truth (2 Cor 6:7, Eph 1:13, Col 1:5, 2 Tim 2:15, and James 1:18). It is called the truth of Christ (2 Cor 11:10) and the way of truth (2 Pet 2:2). The Christians are said to have found the truth, and the heretic or unbeliever to have missed the truth (1 John 2:27, 2 Thess 2:13, Eph 5:9, and 1 John 3:19). The Church is called the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim 3:15).⁸

This truth fleshes out in syllogistic fashion thusly:

1. Scripture is the Word of God.
2. The words of God are authoritative.

Conclusion: Scripture is authoritative.

⁷Steven B. Cowen, ed., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000).

⁸Ramm, *Pattern*, 22.

Both the ontological basis (God is) and the epistemological basis (God speaks only truth) are established in Scripture (Gen 1:1; Ps 119:142, 151, 160). John Frame succinctly asserts, "There is no higher authority, no greater ground of certainty.... The truth of Scripture is a presupposition for God's people."⁹ Thus, the very nature of God and God's Word is not determined inductively by human reason but deductively from the testimony of Scripture (cf. Ps 119:89; Isa 40:8).

The objection is often raised, "If the Scriptures were penned by men, then there is the highest likelihood of error in the writings!" This is countered with the following observations:

1. Human participation in the process of biblical inscripturation is not denied.
2. The idea of formal dictation is not required, although it occurred at times.
3. The background of the human writer is not eliminated.
4. The power, purposes, and workings of God the Father through God the Holy Spirit are not limited.
5. There is a delicate balance between Divine initiation and human participation in the writing of the autographa of Scripture

However, when all is said and done, Scripture is first and foremost "the Word of God," not the "word of men" (Ps 19:7; 1 Thess 2:13).

A careful study of the phrase *λόγος θεοῦ* (*logos theou*, "the Word of God") finds over forty uses in the NT. It is equated with the OT (Mark 7:13). It is what Jesus preached (Luke 5:1). It was the message the apostles taught (Acts 4:31 and 6:2). It was the word the Samaritans received (Acts 8:14) as given by the apostles (Acts 8:25). It was the message the Gentiles received as preached by Peter (Acts 11:1). It was the word Paul preached on his first missionary journey (Acts 13:5, 7, 44, 48, 49; 15:35–36). It was the message preached on Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 16:32; 17:13; 18:11). It was the message Paul preached on his third missionary journey (Acts 19:10). It was the focus of Luke in the Book of Acts in that it spread rapidly and widely (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). Paul was careful to tell the Corinthians that he spoke the Word as it was given from God, that it had not been adulterated and that it was a manifestation of truth (2 Cor 2:17; 4:2). Paul acknowledged that it was the source of his preaching (Col 1:25; 1 Thess 2:13).

Carl F.H. Henry put forth this truth of the divine inspiration of Scripture in the clearest possible way:

Inspiration is that supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit whereby the sacred writers were divinely supervised in their production of Scripture, being restrained from error and guided in the choice of words they used, consistently with their disparate personalities and stylistic peculiarities. God is the source of Holy Scripture; Christ Jesus is the central message; and the Holy Spirit, who inspired it and illumines its message to

⁹John M. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994) 127. See also Greg L. Bahnsen, "Inductivism, Inerrancy, and Presuppositionalism," *JETS* 20 (December 1977):289-305; John M. Frame, "Van Til and the Ligonier Apologetic," *WTJ* 47 (1985):279-99; Tim McConnel, "The Old Princeton Apologetics: Common Sense or Reformed?" *JETS* 46 (December 2003):647-72.

the reader, bears witness by this inscripturated Word to the Word enfleshed, crucified, risen, and returning.¹⁰

Since the origin of Scripture can ultimately be explained by divine inspiration (Zech 7:12; 2 Tim 3:14–17; 2 Pet 1:20–21) as defined above, then the authority of Scripture is directly derived from the authority of God.¹¹ Those who do not take God's authority in Scripture seriously are condemned (Jer 8:8–9; Mark 7:1–13). On the other hand, those who rightfully honor and submit to God's authority in Scripture are commended (Neh 8:5–6; Rev 3:8).

Therefore, the man of God, i.e., God's herald, is to "preach the Word" (2 Tim 4:2). This declaration is not with the authority of the preacher, but rather the authority of God embedded in Scripture (cf. 2 Tim 3:17). So Paul admonishes Titus (2:15) to speak with all authority (*ἐπιταγῆς*, *epitagēs*), like the authority of a military commander, such that no one is exempt from obedience, even the proclaimer himself.

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE IN PRACTICE

The outworking of God's authority in Scripture can be summarized in a series of negative (what it is not) and positive (what it is) statements.

1. It is *not* a derived authority bestowed by humans; rather it is the *original* authority of God.
2. It *does not* change with the times, the culture, the nation, or the ethnic background; rather it is the *unalterable* authority of God.
3. It is *not* one authority among many possible spiritual authorities; rather it is the *exclusive* spiritual authority of God.
4. It is *not* an authority that can be successfully challenged or rightfully overthrown; rather, it is the *permanent* authority of God.
5. It is *not* a relativistic or subordinate authority; rather it is the *ultimate* authority of God.
6. It is *not* merely a suggestive authority; rather it is the *obligatory* authority of God.
7. It is *not* a benign authority in its outcomes; rather it is the *consequential* authority of God.

¹⁰Carl F. H. Henry, "The Authority and Inspiration of the Bible," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 25 [emphasis in the original].

¹¹See John Murray, "Holy Scripture," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982) 256–57. Also *idem*, in "The Inspiration of the Scripture," *Collected Writings*, v. 4, 40.

While it has only been several decades since the profitable written contributions of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI), it would serve as a helpful reminder to review their summations on Scriptural authority as written and affirmed by the leading conservative evangelicals of the day.

The original document from the first conclave held in Chicago (1978) stated in summary that, “The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible’s own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church.”¹²

It is no wonder then that the very first of nineteen articles on Scripture addressed the authority of God in Scripture.¹³

We affirm that the Holy Scriptures are to be received as the authoritative Word of God.

We deny that the Scriptures receive their authority from the Church, tradition, or any other human source.

Five years later, an additional set of affirmations and denials was authored by members of ICBI. Again, it is no surprise that a statement on the authority of God in Scripture appears first.¹⁴

Article I. ***WE AFFIRM** that the normative authority of Holy Scripture is the authority of God Himself, and is attested by Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Church.*

***WE DENY** the legitimacy of separating the authority of Christ from the authority of the Scripture, or of opposing the one to the other.*

This first article affirms that the authority of Scripture cannot be separated from the authority of God. Whatever the Bible affirms, God affirms. And what the Bible affirms (or denies), it affirms (or denies) with the very authority of God. Such authority is normative for all believers; it is the canon or rule of God.

This divine authority of OT Scripture was confirmed by Christ Himself on numerous occasions (cf. Matt. 5:17–18; Luke 24:44; John 10:34–35). And what our Lord confirmed as to the divine authority of the OT, He promised also for the NT (John 14:16; 16:13).

The denial points out that one cannot reject the divine authority of Scripture without thereby impugning the authority of Christ, who attested Scripture’s divine authority. Thus it is wrong to claim one can accept the full authority of

¹²“The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.” *JETS* 21 (December 1978): 290.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Norman L. Geisler and J.I. Packer, eds. *Explaining Hermeneutics: A Commentary* (Oakland, Calif.: ICBI, 1983) 3.

Christ without acknowledging the complete authority of Scripture.

Carl F. H. Henry, one of the twentieth century's leading theologians, summarized the issues with this pithy, striking statement.

Without an authoritative Scripture, the church is powerless to overcome not only human unregeneracy but also satanic deception. Where the church no longer lives by the Word of God it is left to its own devices and soon is overtaken by the temptations of Satan and the misery of sin and death.¹⁵

Like Luther centuries ago, our minds also need to be captive to the divine authority in the Word of God in our preaching and practices.

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE IN PROCLAMATION

This book contains: the mind of God, the state of man, the way of salvation, the doom of sinners, and the happiness of believers.

Its doctrine is holy, its precepts are binding, its histories are true, and its decisions are immutable.

Read it to be wise, believe it to be saved, and practice it to be holy.

It contains light to direct you, food to support you, and comfort to cheer you.

It is the traveler's map, the pilgrim's staff, the pilot's compass, the soldier's sword, and the Christian's charter.

Here heaven is opened, and the gates of hell disclosed.

Christ is its grand subject, our good its design, and the glory of God its end.

It should fill the memory, rule the heart, and guide the feet.

Read it slowly, frequently, and prayerfully.

It is a mine of wealth, health to the soul, and a river of pleasure.

It is given to you here in this life, will be opened at the Judgment, and is established forever.

It involves the highest responsibility, will reward the greatest labor, and condemn all who trifle with its contents.¹⁶

¹⁵Henry, "The Authority and Inspiration of the Bible," 13.

¹⁶Author unknown.