

The Power of God's Word: Authority

12

Chapter Objectives

After completing the study of this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. To define the word *authority*, identify the range of its application, and restate the definition of authority under the parameters of religion.
2. To identify and evaluate the ways in which the meaning of Scripture is established and the belief in divine origin and authorship through the personal working of the [Holy Spirit](#).
3. To distinguish between the objective and subjective components of authority, how they both influence meaning, and the two types of authority concerning the Bible, both historical and normative.
4. To compare and contrast three specific historical views of [illumination](#) through history from [Augustine](#), [Daniel Fuller](#), and [John Calvin](#).
5. To explain the relationship among the Bible, reason, and the [Holy Spirit](#) in reference to meaning.
6. To judge how much influence tradition, such as the works of the [church fathers](#), has on authority in the church.

Chapter Summary

As creator and source of all truth, God has the right to command belief and obedience from all human beings. Although in some cases God exercises authority directly, he normally uses other means. One way he accomplishes this is through other human beings. God communicates his message to human beings. He has the right to command human actions and speech. When appropriately interpreted, this occurs through the Bible.

Some persons have attempted to separate the illuminating work of the [Holy Spirit](#) and the objective content of Scripture. Rightly understood, the [Holy Spirit](#) illuminates, convicts, and applies the teaching of the Bible to both the human understanding and the heart. All Scripture is historically authoritative, that is, it tells us correctly what God expected or required from specific persons at particular times and places. Some of Scripture is also normatively authoritative. That means that those parts of Scripture are to be applied and obeyed in the same fashion in which they were originally given.

Study Questions

- Define authority in an evangelical Christian context.
- What is the Roman Catholic view of the delegation of divine authority, and how does it differ from the Protestant view?
- What are the three views of divine origin and authorship of Scripture, and how would you explain each view?
- What is the importance of [1 Corinthians 2:14](#) in relation to the [Holy Spirit](#)?
- Compare and contrast the objective and subjective components of authority.
- How are biblical hermeneutics and apologetics influenced by the relationship between Scripture and reason?

Definition of Authority

Religious Authority

Establishing the Meaning and Divine Origin of the Bible

The Internal Working of the [Holy Spirit](#) Objective and Subjective Components of Authority

Various Views of [Illumination](#)

The View of [Augustine](#)

The View of [Daniel Fuller](#)

The View of John Calvin
The Bible, Reason, and the Spirit
Tradition and Authority
Historical and Normative Authoritativeness

By the authority of the Bible we mean that the Bible, as the expression of God's will to us, possesses the right supremely to define what we are to believe and how we are to conduct ourselves. 📌

Authority is a subject arousing considerable controversy in our society today. This is true not only within the sphere of biblical and religious authority, but in broader areas as well. Even in societies that are still formally structured on an authoritarian basis, there is the recognition that the old pyramid model, in which authority generated from the top downward, no longer pertains, at least in its traditional form. People are resistant to dictatorial or arbitrary forms of exercise of authority. External authority is often refused recognition and obedience in favor of accepting one's own judgment as final. There is even a strong antiestablishmentarian mood in the area of religion, where individual judgment is often insisted on. For example, many Roman Catholics are questioning the traditional view of papal authority as being infallible. Added to this is the plethora of competing claimants to authority.

Definition of Authority

By authority we mean the right to command belief and/or action. 📌 The term has a wide range of application. We may think of authority as a governmental, jurisdictional matter. Here an example would be a king or emperor who has the right to enforce action. This may take less imperial forms, however. The policeman directing traffic and the property owner demanding that people stay off his land are exercising a power that is rightfully theirs.

What we have described could be termed imperial authority. There is also what we might call "veracious

authority."¹ Someone may by virtue of her knowledge be recognized by others as an "authority" on a particular subject. Her fund of knowledge in that field exceeds that of most others. As a result, she is capable of prescribing proper belief and/or action. (A document may also, by virtue of the information it contains, be capable of prescribing belief and/or action.) This type of authority is not usually asserted or exerted. It is possessed. It is then recognized and accepted by others. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that such a person *is* an authority rather than that she *has* authority. Veracious authority is a function of the knowledge one possesses and hence is intrinsic 📌, whereas imperial authority is a function of the position one occupies and hence is extrinsic 📌.

We should be careful not to confuse authority with force. While ideally the right to prescribe and the ability to enforce belief and action should coincide, in practice they do not always do so. For example, the rightful heir to a throne or a duly elected official may be deposed in a coup. An impostor or a usurper may function in the place of another. In the case of veracious authority, there is really no force except an implicit ultimatum: "Follow what I tell you, and you will be led into truth; disregard it, and confusion and error will result." The physician who prescribes a course of action to a patient really has no power to enforce that prescription. He or she is in effect saying, "If you wish to be healthy, then do this."

In this connection, the distinction between authoritativeness and authoritarianism is also important to maintain. An authoritative person, document, or institution is one that possesses authority and consequently has the right to define belief or prescribe practice. An authoritarian person, on the other hand, is one who attempts to instill his or her opinions or enforce his or her commands in an emphatic, dogmatic,

¹ Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern of Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), pp. 10, 12.

or even intolerant fashion. The uninitiated or impressionable are often easily induced to follow an authoritarian person, sometimes more easily than they can be persuaded to follow a more authoritative person.

It is also important to distinguish possession of authority and recognition of it. If they are too closely associated, or the former is measured by the latter, the matter of authority becomes quite subjective. There are persons who do not accept rightful authority, who do not heed traffic laws, or who reject the viewpoint of experts. For whatever reason, they prefer their own opinion. But their failure to recognize authority does not abrogate it.

Authority may be directly exercised by the one possessing it. It may be delegated, however, and frequently is. Often the rightful possessor of authority cannot directly exercise it. Thus it is necessary to delegate that authority to some person or agency that can exercise it. For instance, the citizens of the United States elect officials to represent them, and these officials pass laws and create agencies to administer those laws. The actions of duly authorized employees of such agencies carry the same weight and authority as the citizens themselves possess. A scholar may not be able to present her ideas in a direct fashion to everyone who has an interest in them. She can, however, put her knowledge into a book. The content of the book, since it consists of her actual teachings, will carry the same weight as would her ideas if presented in person.

Lack of effectiveness or success on a short-term basis should not cause us to doubt the genuineness of an authority. Frequently ideas, particularly if novel, are not readily accepted. Nor do they always prove workable immediately. In the long run, however, true authority will prove itself. Galileo's ideas were initially thought bizarre and even dangerous. Einstein's theory of relativity seemed strange and its workability questionable. Time has proven the worth of both, however. Jesus initially had relatively few converts, was not respected by the leaders (the authorities) of his

day, and was eventually executed. Ultimately, however, every knee will bow and every tongue confess who and what he is ([Phil. 2:10–11](#)).

Religious Authority

When we turn to the specialized issue of religious authority, the crucial question is, Is there some person, institution, or document possessing the right to prescribe belief and action in religious matters? In the ultimate sense, if there is a supreme being higher than humans or anything else in the created order, he has the right to determine what we are to believe and how we are to live. From the Christian standpoint, God is the authority in these matters because of who he is. He is the highest being, the one who always has been, who existed before we or any other being came into existence. He is the only being having the power of his own existence within himself, not dependent on anyone or anything else for his existence. Furthermore, he is the authority because of what he has done. He has created us as well as everything else in the entire world and redeemed us. He is also rightfully the authority, the one who has a right to prescribe what we are to believe and how we are to act, because of his continuing activity in the world and in our lives. He maintains his creation in existence. He continues to give us life, cares for us, and provides for our needs.

Another question arises at this point: How does God exercise this authority? Does he exercise it directly or indirectly? Some would maintain that he does so directly. Here we find the neorthodox 🗡️. To them, the authority of God is exercised in a direct act of revelation, a self-manifestation that is actually an immediate encounter between God and humanity. The Bible is not God's Word per se. It is merely an instrument, an object, through which God speaks or meets people. On those occasions, the authority is not the Bible but the self-revealing God. No permanent quality has been attached to the Bible or infused into it. There has been no delegation of the authority.

There are others who understand the authority of God to be exercised in some direct fashion. Among them are various types of “spiritists,” both ancient and modern. These are people who expect some direct word or guidance from God. In their view God speaks to individuals. This may be apart from or very much supplementary to the Bible. Some extreme charismatics believe in a direct special revelation from God. It is not simply charismatics, however, who are found here. One of the questions posed in a 1979 Gallup poll was, “If you, yourself, were testing your own religious beliefs, which ONE of these four religious authorities would you turn to first?” The options were: what the church says, what respected religious leaders say, what the Holy Spirit says to me personally, and what the Bible says. Of all those polled, 27 percent indicated they would turn first to the Holy Spirit; 40 percent indicated the Bible. Among persons between eighteen and twenty-nine years of age, however, a greater percentage chose the Holy Spirit (36 percent) than chose the Bible (31 percent).² While a considerable number of Christians would certainly regard the direct work of the Holy Spirit as a means of guidance, 27 percent of the general public and 36 percent of young adults regard it as the major criterion by which to evaluate religious beliefs.

Still others view divine authority as having been delegated to some person(s) or institution. A prime example here is the Roman Catholic Church. The church is seen as God’s representative on earth. When it speaks, it speaks with the same authority as if the Lord himself were speaking. According to this view, the right to control the means of grace and to define truth in doctrinal matters has been delegated to the apostles and their successors. It is from the church, then, that we can learn God’s intention for humanity.

² Results of *Christianity Today*–Gallup poll of American religious opinion—data supplied by Walter A. Elwell, author of “Belief and the Bible: A Crisis of Authority?” *Christianity Today*, March 21, 1980, pp. 20–23.

While the church does not discover new truth, it does make explicit what is implicit within the revelatory tradition received from the original apostles.³

An interesting contemporary view is that religious authority resides in prophets present in the church. Throughout history various movements have had such prophetic leaders. Mohammed believed that he was a special prophet sent from God. Among the sixteenth-century Anabaptists were prophets who declared messages allegedly received from God.⁴ There seems to have been a special outbreak of such persons and movements in recent years. Various cults have arisen, led by charismatic leaders claiming to have a special message from God. Sun Myung Moon and his Unification Church are a conspicuous example, but many others come to mind as well. Even within mainline evangelicalism, many people regard the word of certain “big name” speakers as almost equal in value with the Bible.

This volume proposes that God himself is the ultimate authority in religious matters. He has the right, both by virtue of who he is and what he does, to establish the standard for belief and practice. With respect to major issues he does not exercise authority in a direct fashion, however. Rather, he has delegated that authority by creating a book, the Bible. Because it conveys his message, the Bible carries the same weight God himself would command if he were speaking to us personally. 🗨️

Establishing the Meaning and Divine Origin of the Bible

³ S. E. Donlon, “Authority, Ecclesiastical,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), vol. 1, p. 1115.

⁴ Albert Henry Newman, *A History of Anti-Pedobaptism* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1897), pp. 62–67.

Revelation is God's making his truth known to humankind. Inspiration preserves it, making it more widely accessible. Inspiration guarantees that what the Bible says is just what God would say if he were to speak directly. One other element is needed in this chain, however. For the Bible to function as if it is God speaking to us, the Bible reader needs to understand the meaning of the Scriptures and be convinced of their divine origin and authorship. There are various ideas as to how this is accomplished.

1. The traditional Roman Catholic position is that it is through the church that we come to understand the Bible and to be convinced of its divine authorship 🖋️.

As we noted earlier, Thomas claimed to be able to establish by rational proofs the divine origin of the Catholic Church. Its divine origin established, the church can then certify to us the divinity of the Scriptures. The church, which was present before the Bible, gave us the Bible. It decided what books should be canonized (i.e., included within the Bible). It testifies that these particular books originated from God, and therefore embody his message to us. Further, the church supplies the correct interpretation of the Bible. This is particularly important. Of what value is it for us to have an infallible, inerrant revelation from God, if we do not have an inerrant understanding of that revelation? Since all human understanding is limited and therefore subject to error, something more is needed. The church and ultimately the pope give us the true meaning of the Bible. The infallibility of the pope is the logical complement to the infallibility of the Bible.

2. Another group emphasizes that human reason is the means of establishing the Bible's meaning and divine origin 🖋️. In an extreme form, this view is represented by the rationalists. Assurance that the Bible is divinely inspired comes from examining the evidences. The Bible is alleged to possess certain characteristics that will convince anyone who examines it of its divine inspiration. One of the major evidences

is fulfilled prophecy—rather unlikely occurrences predicted in the distant past eventually came to pass. These events, says the argument, could not have been predicted on the basis of unaided human insight or foresight. Consequently, God must have revealed them and directed the writing of this book. Other evidences include the supernatural character of [Jesus](#) and miracles.⁵ Interpretation is also a function of human reason. The Bible's meaning is determined by examining grammars, lexicons, historical background, and so on. Scholarly critical study is the means of ascertaining the meaning of the Bible.

3. The third position is the one we will adopt. This view contends that there is an internal working of the Holy Spirit, illumining the understanding of the hearer or reader of the Bible, bringing about comprehension of its meaning, and creating certainty concerning its truth and divine origin. 🖋️


The Internal Working of the [Holy Spirit](#)

There are a number of reasons why the [illumination](#) or witness of the [Holy Spirit](#) is needed if the human is to understand the meaning of the Bible and be certain of its truth. (Neither the church nor human reason will do.) First there is the ontological difference between God and humanity. God is transcendent; he goes beyond our categories of understanding. He can never be fully grasped within our finite concepts or by our human vocabulary. He can be understood, but not comprehensively. Correlated with God's [transcendence](#) is human finiteness. Humans are limited beings in terms of both their point of origin in time and the extent to which they can grasp information. Consequently, they cannot formulate concepts that are commensurate with the nature of God. These limitations are inherent in being human. They are not a result of the fall or of

⁵ William Paley, *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* and the *Horae Paulinae* (London: Longman, Brown, 1850).

individual human sin, but of the Creator–creature relationship. No moral connotation or stigma is attached to them.

Beyond these limitations, however, are limitations that do result from human sinfulness, individually and as a race. The latter are not inherent in human nature but rather result from the detrimental effects of sin on our noetic powers. The Bible witnesses in numerous and emphatic ways to this encumbrance of human understanding, particularly with regard to spiritual matters.

The final reason the special working of the [Holy Spirit](#) is needed is that human beings require certainty with respect to divine matters . Because we are concerned here with matters of (spiritual and eternal) life and death, it is necessary to have more than mere probability. Our need for certainty is in direct proportion to the importance of what is at stake; in matters of eternal consequence, we need a certainty that human reasoning cannot provide. If one is deciding what automobile to purchase, or what kind of paint to apply to one's home, listing the advantages of each of the options will usually suffice. (The option with the most advantages frequently proves to be the best.) If, however, the question is whom or what to believe with respect to one's eternal destiny, the need to be certain is far greater.

To understand what the [Holy Spirit](#) does, we now need to examine more closely what the Bible has to say about the human condition, particularly the inability to recognize and understand the truth without the aid of the Spirit. In [Matthew 13:13–15](#) and [Mark 8:18](#) [Jesus](#) speaks of those who hear but never understand and see but never perceive. Their condition is depicted in vivid images throughout the New Testament. Their hearts have grown dull, their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed ([Matt. 13:15](#)). They know God but do not honor him as God, and so they have become futile in their thinking and their senseless minds are darkened ([Rom. 1:21](#)). [Romans 11:8](#)

attributes their condition to God, who “gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear.” Consequently, “their eyes [are] darkened” (v. 10). In [2 Corinthians 4:4](#), Paul attributes their condition to the god of this world, who “has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.” All of these references, as well as numerous other allusions, argue for the need of some special work of the Spirit to enhance human perception and understanding.


In [1 Corinthians 2:14](#) Paul tells us that the natural person (the one who neither perceives nor understands) has not received the gifts of the [Spirit of God](#). In the original we find the word [δέχομαι](#) (*dechomai*), which signifies not merely to “receive” something, but rather to “accept” something, to welcome it, whether a gift or an idea.⁶ Natural humans do not accept the gifts of the Spirit because they find the wisdom of God foolish. They are unable to understand ([γνῶναι](#)—*gnōnai*) it because it must be spiritually ([πνευματικῶς](#)—*pneumatikōs*) discerned or investigated ([ἀνακρίνεται](#)—*anakrinetai*). The problem, then, is not merely that people in their natural state are unwilling to accept the gifts and wisdom of God, but that, without the help of the [Holy Spirit](#), they are unable to understand them.

The context of [1 Corinthians 2:14](#) contains corroborating evidence that humans cannot understand without the Spirit's aid. In verse [11](#) we read that only the [Spirit of God](#) knows the thoughts of God. Paul also indicates in [1:20–21](#) that the world cannot know God through its wisdom, for God has made foolish the wisdom of this world. Indeed, the wisdom of the world is folly to God ([3:19](#)). The gifts of the Spirit are imparted in words taught ([διδακτοῖς](#)—*didaktois*) not by

⁶ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 4th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 176.


human wisdom but by the Spirit (2:13). From all of these considerations, it appears that Paul is not saying that unspiritual persons understand but do not accept. Rather, they do not accept, at least in part, because they do not understand.


But this condition is overcome when the Holy Spirit begins to work within us. Paul speaks of having the eyes of the heart enlightened (πεφωτισμένους—*pephōtismenous*), a perfect passive participle, suggesting that something has been done and remains in effect (Eph. 1:18). In 2 Corinthians 3, he speaks of the removal of the veil placed on the mind (v. 16) so that one may behold the glory of the Lord (v. 18). While the original reference was to the Israelites (v. 13), Paul has now broadened it to refer to all people (v. 16), for in the remainder of the chapter and the first six verses of the next chapter the orientation is quite universal. The New Testament refers to this enlightenment of humans in various other ways: circumcision of the heart (Rom. 2:29), being filled with spiritual wisdom and understanding (Col. 1:9), the gift of understanding to know Jesus Christ (1 John 5:20), hearing the voice of the Son of God (John 10:3). What previously had seemed to be foolish (1 Cor. 1:18; 2:14) and a stumbling block (1 Cor. 1:23) now appears to the believer as the power of God (1 Cor. 1:18), as secret and hidden wisdom of God (1:24; 2:7), and as the mind of the Lord (2:16).


What we have been describing here is a one-time work of the Spirit—regeneration . It introduces a categorical difference between the believer and the unbeliever. There is also, however a continuing work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, a work particularly described and elaborated by Jesus in his message to his followers in John 14–16. Here Jesus promises the coming of the Holy Spirit (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7, 13). In some references, Jesus says that he himself will send the Spirit from the Father (John 15:26; 16:7). In the earlier part of the message he spoke of the Father’s sending the Spirit in Jesus’ name (14:16,


26). In the final statement, he simply speaks of the Holy Spirit’s coming (16:13). It therefore appears that the Spirit was sent by both the Father and the Son, and that it was necessary for Jesus first to go away to the Father (note the redundant and hence emphatic use of ἐγὼ [*egō*] in 16:7 and 14:12—“I am going to the Father”).⁷ The Holy Spirit was to take Jesus’ place and to perform his own peculiar functions as well.

What are these functions the Holy Spirit performs?

1. The Holy Spirit will teach the believers all things  and bring to their remembrance all that Jesus had taught them (14:26).

2. The Holy Spirit will witness to Jesus . The disciples will also be witnesses to Jesus, because they have been with him from the beginning (15:26–27).

3. The Holy Spirit will convict  (ἐλέγχω—*elegchō*) the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (16:8). This particular word implies rebuking in such a way as to bring about conviction, as contrasted with ἐπιτιμάω (*epitimaō*), which may suggest simply an undeserved (Matt. 16:22) or ineffectual (Luke 23:40) rebuke.⁸

4. The Holy Spirit will guide believers into all the truth . He will not speak on his own authority, but will speak whatever he hears (John 16:13). In the process, he will also glorify Jesus (16:14).

Note in particular the designation of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth (14:17). John’s account of what Jesus said does not refer to the Holy Spirit as the true Spirit (ἀληθές—*alēthes*—or ἀληθινόν—*alēthinon*), but the Spirit of truth (τῆς ἀληθείας—*tēs alētheias*). This may represent nothing more than the literal translation of an Aramaic expression into Greek, but more likely signifies that the very nature of the Spirit is truth. He is

⁷ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 5th ed. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1923), pp. 676–77.

⁸ Richard Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), pp. 13–15.

the one who communicates truth. The world is not able to receive (λαμβάνω—*lambanō*, simple reception, as opposed to δέχομαι—*dechomai*, accept) him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. Believers, on the other hand, know him (γινώσκω—*ginōskō*), because he abides with them and will be in them. (There is some dispute as to whether the tense of the final verb of v. 17 is to be understood as future or present. ἔσται [*estai*] [“will be”] seems to have somewhat better textual basis than does ἔστιν [*estin*] [“is”]. It appears likely that ἔσται was altered to ἔστιν in an attempt to harmonize this verb form with the present tense of μένω—*menō*.)

Let us summarize the role of the Spirit as depicted in John 14–16. He guides into truth, calling to remembrance the words of Jesus, not speaking on his own, but speaking what he hears, bringing about conviction, witnessing to Christ. Thus his ministry is definitely involved with divine truth. But just what is meant by that? It seems to be not so much a new ministry, or the addition of new truth not previously made known, but rather an action of the Holy Spirit in relationship to truth already revealed. Thus the Holy Spirit’s ministry involves elucidating the truth, bringing belief and persuasion and conviction, but not new revelation.

But is this passage to be understood of the whole church throughout all periods of its life, or do these teachings about the work of the Holy Spirit apply only to the disciples of Jesus’ day? If the latter view is adopted, the Spirit’s guidance of the disciples into truth has reference only to their role in the production of the Bible, and not to any continuing ministry. Obviously the message was originally given to the group which physically surrounded Jesus. There are certain references that clearly localize it (e.g., 14:8–11). There is, however, for the most part, an absence of elements that would demand a restrictive interpretation. Indeed, several teachings here (e.g., 14:1–7; 15:1–17) are also communicated elsewhere in the Bible. Obviously they were not restricted to merely the first hearers, for they

involve promises claimed and commands accepted by the whole church throughout all time. It is logical to conclude that the teachings regarding the Spirit’s ministry are for us as well.

As a matter of fact, what is taught in John 14–16 regarding the Spirit’s guidance of believers into truth is also found elsewhere in the Bible. In particular, Paul mentions that the message of the gospel originally came to the Thessalonians by way of the Holy Spirit. Paul says that it “came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction” (1 Thess. 1:5). When the Thessalonians received (παραλαβόντες—*paralabontes*) the word, they accepted it (ἐδέξασθε—*edexasthe*) not as the word of human beings, but as what it really is, the word of God (2:13). The difference between mere indifferent reception of the message and an active effectual acceptance is understood as a work of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, Paul prays that the Ephesians (3:14–19) may be strengthened with might through the Spirit in the inner man, and may have the strength to comprehend (καταλάβεσθαι—*katalabesthai*) and to know (γινῶναι—*gnōnai*) the love of Christ that exceeds (ὑπερβάλλουσιν—*hyperballousan*) knowledge (γνώσεως—*gnōseōs*). The implication is that the Holy Spirit will communicate to the Ephesians a knowledge of the love of Christ that exceeds ordinary knowledge.

Objective and Subjective Components of Authority

There is, then, what Bernard Ramm has called a pattern of authority. The objective word, the written Scripture, together with the subjective word, the inner illumination and conviction of the Holy Spirit, constitutes the authority for the Christian 🗒️.

Scholastic orthodoxy of the seventeenth century virtually maintained that the authority is the Bible alone. In some cases this also has been the position of American fundamentalism of the twentieth century.

Those who hold this position see an objective quality in the Bible that automatically brings one in contact with God; a virtually sacramental view of the Bible can result. The Bible as a revelation and an inspired preservation of that revelation is also regarded as having an intrinsic efficacy. A mere presentation of the Bible or exposure to the Bible is per se of value, for the words of the Bible have a power in themselves. Reading the Bible daily is thought to confer a value, in and of itself. The old adage, “an apple a day keeps the doctor away,” has a theological parallel: “a chapter a day keeps the devil away.” A potential danger here is that the Bible may become almost a fetish.⁹

On the other hand, there are some groups that regard the Holy Spirit as the chief authority for the Christian. Certain charismatic groups, for example, believe that special prophecy is occurring today. New messages from God are being given by the Holy Spirit. In most cases, these messages are regarded as explaining the true meaning of certain biblical passages. Thus, the contention is that while the Bible is authoritative, in practice its meaning would often not be found without special action by the Holy Spirit.¹⁰

Actually, it is the combination of these two factors that constitutes authority . Both are needed. The written word, correctly interpreted, is the objective basis of authority. The inward illuminating and

persuading work of the Holy Spirit is the subjective dimension . This dual dimension prevents sterile, cold, dry truth on one hand, and overexcitability and ill-advised fervor on the other. Together, the two yield a maturity that is necessary in the Christian life—a cool head and warm heart (not a cold heart and hot head). As one pastor put it in a rather crude fashion: “If you have the Bible without the Spirit, you will dry up. If you have the Spirit without the Bible, you will blow up. But if you have both the Bible and the Spirit together, you will grow up.”

How does this view of the Bible compare with neoorthodoxy’s view of the Bible? On the surface, at least to those of a scholastic orthodox position, the two appear very similar. The experience that the neoorthodox term revelation is in effect what we mean by illumination. At the moment in which one becomes convinced of the truth, illumination is taking place. To be sure, illumination will not always occur in a dramatic fashion. Sometimes conviction rises more gradually and calmly. Apart from the drama that may attach to the situation, however, there are other significant differences between the neoorthodox view of revelation and our view of illumination.

First, the content of the Bible is, from our orthodox perspective, objectively the Word of God. What these writings say is actually what God says to us, whether or not anyone reads, understands, or accepts them. The neoorthodox, on the other hand, do not see revelation as primarily communication of information, but rather the presence of God himself. Consequently, the Bible is not the Word of God in some objective fashion. Rather, it becomes the Word of God. When the revelation encounter ceases, the Bible is once again simply the words of the men who wrote it. In the orthodox view here presented, however, the Bible is God’s message; what it says is what he says to us, irrespective of whether anyone is reading it, hearing it, understanding it, or responding to it. Its status as revelation is not dependent on anyone’s response to it. It is what it is.

⁹ A. C. McGiffert, *Protestant Thought before Kant* (New York: Harper, 1961), p. 146.

¹⁰ In one church, a decision was to be made on two proposed plans for a new sanctuary. One member insisted that the Lord had told him that the church should adopt the plan calling for the larger sanctuary. His basis was that the ratio between the number of seats in the larger plan and the number in the smaller plan was five to three, exactly the ratio between the number of times that Elisha told Joash he should have struck the ground and the number of times he actually struck it (2 Kings 13:18–19). The church eventually divided over this and similar issues.

This means, further, that the Bible has a definite and objective meaning that is (or at least should be) the same for everyone. In the neoorthodox view, since there are no revealed truths, only truths of revelation, how one person interprets an encounter with God may be different from another person's understanding. Indeed, even the interpretations given to events by the authors of Scripture were not divinely inspired. What they wrote was merely their own attempt to give some accounting of what they had experienced. Therefore, it is not possible to settle differences of understanding by quoting the words of the Bible. At best, the words of Scripture can simply point to the actual event of revelation. In the view presented here, however, since the words of Scripture are objectively God's revelation, one person can point to the content of the Bible in seeking to demonstrate to another what the correct understanding is. The essential meaning of a passage will be the same for everyone, although the application might be different for one person than for another.

Further, since the Bible does have an objective meaning that we come to understand through the process of illumination, illumination must have some permanent effect. Once the meaning is learned, then (barring forgetfulness) we have that meaning more or less permanently. This is not to say that there cannot be a deepened illumination giving us a more profound understanding of a particular passage, but rather that there need not be a renewing of the illumination, since the meaning (as well as the revelation) is of such a nature that it persists and can be retained.

Various Views of Illumination

The View of Augustine

In the history of the church there have been differing views of illumination. For Augustine, illumination was part of the general process of gaining knowledge. Augustine was a Platonist, or at least a Neo-Platonist. Plato had taught that reality consists in the Forms or

Ideas. All existent empirical particulars take their reality from them. Thus, all white things are white because they participate in the Form or Idea of whiteness. This Form of whiteness is not itself white, but is the formula for whiteness as it were. Similarly, all occurrences of salt are salt only because they participate in the Idea of saltiness or are instances of NaCl, the formula for salt. The only reason we are able to know anything is that we recognize Ideas or Forms (some would say universals) in the particulars. Without knowledge of the Ideas we would be unable to abstract from what is experienced and formulate any understanding. In Plato's view, the soul knows the Forms because it was in contact with them before entering this world of sense experience and particulars. Augustine, since he did not accept the preexistence of the soul, took a different approach. God impresses the Forms on the mind of the individual, thus making it possible to recognize these qualities in particulars and giving the mind criteria for abstracting and for evaluating. Whereas Plato believed that we recognize the Forms because of a one-time experience in the past, Augustine believed that God is constantly impressing these concepts on the mind.¹¹

Augustine notes that, contrary to popular opinion, there are three, not two, components in the process of gaining knowledge. There must, of course, be the knower and the object known. In addition, there must be the medium of knowledge. If we are to hear, there must be a medium (e.g., air) to conduct the sound waves. Sound cannot be transmitted in a vacuum. In the same fashion, we cannot see without the medium of light. In total darkness there is no sight, even though a person capable of seeing and an object capable of being seen may be present. And so it is with respect to all knowledge: in addition to the knower and the object of knowledge there must be some means of access to the Ideas or Forms, or there will be no knowledge. This

¹¹ Augustine, *The City of God* 9.16.

holds true for sense perception, reflection, and every other kind of knowing. Thus, God is the third party in the process of gaining knowledge, for he constantly illumines the mind by impressing the Forms or Ideas on it. Knowledge of Scripture is of this same fashion. Illumination as to the meaning and truth of the Bible is simply a special instance of God's activity in the general process of human acquisition of knowledge.¹²

While Augustine has given account of the process by which we gain knowledge, he has not differentiated here between the Christian and the non-Christian. Two brief observations will point up the problems in this approach: (1) Augustine's epistemology is not consistent with his anthropology, according to which humankind is radically sinful; and (2) he fails to take into account the biblical teaching that the Holy Spirit performs a special work in relationship to believers.

The View of Daniel Fuller

Daniel Fuller has propounded a novel view of what precisely is involved in the Holy Spirit's work of illumination. This view appears to be based exclusively on [1 Corinthians 2:13–14](#), and in particular the clause, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God." Fuller maintains that what is involved here is not understanding of the biblical text, but acceptance of its teachings. He regards δέχομαι (*dechomai*) as the crucial word, for it denotes not merely reception of God's teachings, but willing, positive acceptance. Thus, the problem of the unspiritual human is not lack of understanding of what the Bible says, but unwillingness to follow its teachings. Illumination, then, is the process by which the Holy Spirit turns human will around to accept God's teachings.

Proceeding on his interpretation of [1 Corinthians 2:14](#) as signifying that the unbeliever's basic problem is unwillingness to accept God's teaching, Fuller draws

the unwarranted conclusion that sin has seriously affected human will, but not human reason. This means, says Fuller, that an objective, descriptive biblical theologian will be better able to get at the meaning of a text than will a theologian who regards the Bible as in some way authoritative. The former will not be as affected by subjective factors, since he is concerned only to ascertain what Jesus or Paul taught. He is not in any sense obligated to follow or obey those teachings. The believer, on the other hand, may find a collision between the teaching of the Bible and his or her own presuppositions, and will be tempted, unknowingly perhaps, to read back into the text a meaning which he or she expects to find there. His or her very commitment to Scripture makes misunderstanding it more likely.¹³

There are severe difficulties with Fuller's view that illumination is the Holy Spirit's working with the human will (and only the will). Apart from the fact that Fuller bases his view on but a single portion of Scripture, he has assumed that only human will, not human reason, is affected by sin. Because unbelievers' understanding is not corrupted by sin, and, unlike believers, has no personal stake in what Scripture says, they can be dispassionate and get at the real meaning of the biblical text. But is this really so? How many unbelievers are really this dispassionate or uninvolved? Those who examine the teachings of Jesus must have some interest in them. May not that interest in itself incline them to find a meaning there they find more acceptable than the actual meaning? On the other hand, the very commitment of believers gives them a more serious interest in and concern for the Bible. This commitment may involve a willingness to follow Scripture wherever it leads. The seriousness of

¹² Augustine, *Soliloquies* 1.12; *De libero arbitrio* 2.12.34.

¹³ Daniel Fuller, "The Holy Spirit's Role in Biblical Interpretation," in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and William Sanford LaSor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 189–98.

Christians' belief that the Bible is God's Word should make them all the more diligent in seeking faithfully to determine its true meaning. If one has accepted Christ as Lord, will he or she not desire to ascertain precisely what the Lord has declared? Finally, the biblical texts (cited on pp. 274–75) which indicate that unbelievers do not accept, at least in part, because they do not understand, and that the Holy Spirit opens up both heart and mind, seem difficult to square with Fuller's view that sin has not seriously affected human reason, only the will.

The View of John Calvin

John Calvin's view of illumination is more adequate than that of either Augustine or Fuller. Calvin, of course, believed in and taught total depravity. This means that the whole of human nature, including reason, has been adversely affected by the fall. Humans in the natural state are unable to recognize and respond to divine truth. When regeneration takes place, however, the "spectacles of faith" vastly improve one's spiritual eyesight. Even after regeneration, however, there is need for continuing progressive growth, which we usually call sanctification. In addition, the Holy Spirit works internally in the life of the believer, witnessing to the truth and countering the effects of sin so the inherent meaning of the Bible can be seen. Because this view of illumination seems most in harmony with the biblical teachings, it is therefore advocated here.¹⁴

The Bible, Reason, and the Spirit

At this point a question arises concerning the relationship between biblical authority and reason. Is not some conflict possible here? Ostensibly the authority is the Bible, but various means of interpretation are brought to bear on the Bible to elicit

its meaning. If reason is the means of interpretation, is not reason, rather than the Bible, the real authority, since it in effect comes to the Bible from a position of superiority?

Here a distinction must be drawn between legislative authority and judicial authority. In the U.S. federal government, the houses of Congress produce legislation, but the judiciary (ultimately the Supreme Court) decides what the legislation means. They are separate branches of government, each with its own appropriate authority.

This seems to be a good way to think of the relationship between Scripture and reason. Scripture is our supreme legislative authority. It gives us the content of our belief and of our code of behavior and practice. Reason does not tell us the content of our belief. It does not discover truth. Even what we learn from the general revelation is still a matter of revelation rather than a logical deduction through natural theology. Of course, content obtained from the general revelation is necessarily quite broad in scope and merely supplements the special revelation.

When we come to determine the message's meaning, however, and, at a later stage, assess its truth, we must utilize the power of reasoning. We must employ the best methods of interpretation or hermeneutics. And then we must decide whether the Christian belief system is true by rationally examining and evaluating the evidences. This we term apologetics. While there is a dimension of the self-explanatory within Scripture, Scripture alone will not give us the meaning of Scripture. There is therefore no inconsistency in regarding Scripture as our supreme authority in the sense that it tells us what to do and believe, and employing various hermeneutical and exegetical methods to determine its meaning.

We have noted that illumination by the Holy Spirit helps the Scripture reader or hearer understand the Bible and creates the conviction that it is true and is the Word of God. This, however, should not be regarded as

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 1, chapters 7 and 9.

a substitute for the use of hermeneutical methods.

These methods play a complementary, not a competitive role. A view of authority emphasizing the subjective component relies almost exclusively on the inner witness of the Spirit. A view emphasizing the objective component regards the Bible alone as the authority; it relies on methods of interpretation to the neglect of the inner witness of the Spirit. The Spirit of God, however, frequently works through means rather than directly. He creates certainty of the divine nature of Scripture by providing evidences that reason can evaluate. He also gives understanding of the text through the exegete's work of interpretation. Even Calvin, with his strong emphasis on the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, called attention to the *indicia* of the credibility of Scripture,¹⁵ and in his commentaries used the best of classical scholarship to get at the meaning of the Bible. Thus, the exegete and the apologist will use the very best methods and data, but will do so with a reiterated prayer for the Holy Spirit to work through these means.

Tradition and Authority

Now that we have examined the relationship between the Bible and reason, we must ask how tradition relates to the matter of authority. Does it function as a legislative authority, supplying content to the Christian faith? Some believe that revelation continued in the history of the church, so that the opinions of the church fathers carry a considerable authoritative weight. Others view the role of tradition as less formal, but give considerable respect or even veneration to the Fathers, if for no other reason than that they stood closer to the original revelation, and hence were better able to understand and explain it than are we who live so many centuries removed from the events. Some groups, particularly the free churches, ostensibly repudiate any use of tradition, eschewing it in favor of a total reliance

on Scripture.

It should be noted that even those who disavow tradition are frequently affected by tradition, albeit in a somewhat different form. The president of a Baptist seminary once said with tongue in cheek: "We Baptists do not follow tradition. But we are bound by our historic Baptist position!" Tradition need not necessarily be old, although it must at least be old enough to be retained and transmitted. A tradition may be of recent origin. Indeed, at some point all traditions were of recent origin. Some of the popular speakers and leaders in Christian circles create their own tradition. As a matter of fact, certain key expressions of theirs may be virtually canonized among their followers.

There is a positive value to tradition: it can assist us to understand Scripture and its application. The Fathers do have something to say, but their writings must be viewed as commentaries on the text, not as biblical text itself. We should consult them as we do other commentaries. Thus, they function as judicial authorities. Their authority comes from their utilization and elucidation of Scripture. They must never be allowed to displace Scripture. Whenever a tradition, whether it is a teaching of ancient origin or of a recent popular leader, comes into conflict with the meaning of the Bible, the tradition must give way to Scripture.

Historical and Normative

Authoritativeness

One other distinction needs to be drawn and elaborated. It concerns the way in which the Bible is authoritative for us. The Bible is certainly authoritative in telling us what God's will was for certain individuals and groups within the biblical period. The question being considered here is, Is what was binding on those people also binding on us?

It is necessary to distinguish between two types of authority: historical and normative. The Bible informs us as to what God commanded the people in the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, book 1, chapter 8.

biblical situation and what he expects of us. Insofar as the Bible teaches us what occurred and what the people were commanded in biblical times, it is historically authoritative. But is it also normatively authoritative? Are we bound to carry out the same actions as were expected of those people? Here one must be careful not to identify too quickly God's will for those people with his will for us. It will be necessary to determine what is the permanent essence of the message, and what is the temporary form of its expression. The reader will recall that some guidelines were given in our chapter on contemporizing the faith (pp. 130–33). It is quite possible for something to be historically authoritative without being normatively authoritative.