

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Copyright Regulations 1969

WARNING

This material has been reproduced and communicated to you by or on behalf of the Anglican Education Commission (Anglican EdComm) pursuant to Part VB of the *Copyright Act 1968* (the Act).

The material in this communication may be subject to copyright under the Act. Any further reproduction or communication of this material by you may be the subject of copyright protection under the Act.

Do not remove this notice.

Author: N.T. Wright
Title of Article: How can the Bible be authoritative? (The Laing Lecture for 1989)
Title of Journal: Vox Evangelica
Edition (Year):Page 21 (1991): 7-32

CAL LICENSED COPY. UNAUTHORISED COPYING PROHIBITED.

How Can The Bible Be Authoritative?

N T Wright

**The Laing Lecture 1989, and
the Griffith Thomas Lecture 1989**

[p.7]

I am very grateful for the invitation to give this particular lecture. I should perhaps say that my reflections here arise not so much from reading lots of books about the authority of the Bible—though I have read some of the recent ones—but from the multiple experience I find myself having, of studying and teaching the New Testament at an academic level, of regular liturgical worship in which the Bible plays a central part, and of evangelistic and pastoral work in which, again, though not always so obviously, the Bible is at or at least near the heart of what one is doing. What I want to offer to you has therefore something of the mood, for me, of reflection on reality. I am trying to understand what it is that I am doing, not least so that I can do it (I hope) less badly, in a less muddled fashion. But I hope that this will not give you the impression that the issues are private to myself. I believe that they are highly important if we are to be the people that we are supposed to be, as Christians in whatever sphere of life.

The question before us, then, is: how can the Bible be authoritative? This way of putting it carries, deliberately, two different though related meanings, and I shall look at them in turn. First, how can there be such a thing as an authoritative book? What sort of a claim are we making about a book when we say that it is 'authoritative'? Second, by what means can the Bible actually exercise its authority? How is it to be used so that its authority becomes effective? The first question subdivides further, and I want to argue two things as we look at it. (1) I shall argue that usual views of the Bible—including usual evangelical views of the Bible—are actually too low, and do not give it the sufficient weight that it ought to have. (2) I shall then suggest a different way of envisaging authority from that which I think most Christians normally take. Under the second, I shall address various issues that arise when we consider how the Bible can actually *do* the job that, as Christians, we claim God has given it to do. This will involve looking at biblical authority in relation, particularly, to the church's task and to the church's own *life*.

AN AUTHORITATIVE BOOK?

Authority?

Our generation has a problem about authority. In church and in state we

[p.8]

use the word 'authority' in different ways, some positive and some negative. We use it in secular senses. We say of a great footballer that he stamped his authority on the game. Or we say of a great musician that he or she gave an authoritative performance of a particular concerto. Within more structured social gatherings the question 'Who's in charge?' has particular function. For instance, if someone came into a lecture-room and asked 'Who's in charge?', the answer would presumably be either the lecturer or the chairman, if any. If,

however, a group of people went out to dinner at a restaurant and somebody suddenly came in and said, 'Who's in charge here?', the question might not actually make any sense. We might be a bit puzzled as to what authority might mean in that structure. Within a more definite structure, however, such as a law court or a college or a business, the question 'Who's in charge?' or 'What does authority mean here?' would have a very definite meaning, and could expect a fairly clear answer. The meaning of 'authority', then, varies considerably according to the context within which the discourse is taking place. It is important to realize this from the start, not least because one of my central contentions is going to be that we have tended to let the word 'authority' be the fixed point and have adjusted 'scripture' to meet it, instead of the other way round.

Authority in the Church

Within the church, the question of what we mean by authority has had particular focal points. It has had practical questions attached to it. How are things to be organized within church life? What are the boundaries of allowable behaviour and doctrine? In particular, to use the sixteenth-century formulation, what are those things 'necessary to be believed upon pain of damnation'? But it has also had theoretical sides to it. What are we looking for when we are looking for authority in the church? Where would we find it? How would we know when we had found it? What would we do with authoritative documents, people or whatever, if we had them? It is within that context that the familiar debates have taken place, advocating the relative weight to be given to scripture, tradition and reason, or (if you like, and again in sixteenth-century terms) to Bible, Pope and Scholar. Within the last century or so we have seen a fourth, to rival those three, namely emotion or feeling. Various attempts are still being made to draw up satisfactory formulations of how these things fit together in some sort of a hierarchy: ARCIC is here one of several such attempts.

Evangelical Views

Most heirs of the Reformation, not least evangelicals, take it for granted that we are to give scripture the primary place and that everything else has to be lined up in relation to scripture. There is, indeed, an

[p.9]

evangelical assumption, common in some circles, that evangelicals do not have any tradition. We simply open the scripture, read what it says, and take it as applying to ourselves: there the matter ends, and we do not have any 'tradition'. This is rather like the frequent Anglican assumption (being an Anglican myself I rather cherish this) that Anglicans have no doctrine peculiar to themselves: it is merely that if something is true the Church of England believes it. This, though not itself a refutation of the claim not to have any 'tradition', is for the moment sufficient indication of the inherent unlikeliness of the claim's truth, and I am confident that most people, facing the question explicitly, will not wish that the claim be pressed. But I still find two things to be the case, both of which give me some cause for concern. First, there is an implied, and quite unwarranted positivism: we imagine that we are 'reading the text, straight', and that if somebody disagrees with us it must be because they, unlike we ourselves, are secretly using 'presuppositions' of this or that sort. This is simply naive, and actually astonishingly arrogant and dangerous. It fuels the second point, which is that evangelicals often use the phrase 'authority of scripture' when they mean the authority of evangelical, or Protestant, theology, since the assumption is made that we (evangelicals, or Protestants) are the ones who know and believe what the Bible is saying. And, though there is more than a grain of truth in such claims, they are by no means the whole truth, and to imagine that they

are is to move from theology to ideology. If we are not careful, the phrase 'authority of scripture' can, by such routes, come to mean simply 'the authority of evangelical tradition, as opposed to Catholic or rationalist ones.'

Biblical Authority: the Problem

When people in the church talk about authority they are very often talking about *controlling* people or situations. They want to make sure that everything is regulated properly, that the church does not go off the rails doctrinally or ethically, that correct ideas and practices are upheld and transmitted to the next generation. 'Authority' is the place where we go to find out the correct answers to key questions such as these. This notion, however, runs into all kinds of problems when we apply it to the Bible. Is that really what the Bible is for? Is it there to control the church? Is it there simply to look up the correct answers to questions that we, for some reason, already know?

As we read the Bible we discover that the answer to these questions seems in fact to be 'no'. Most of the Bible does not consist of rules and regulations—lists of commands to be obeyed. Nor does it consist of creeds—lists of things to be believed. And often, when there ARE lists of rules or of creedal statements, they seem to be somewhat incidental to the purpose of the writing in question. One might even say, in one

[p.10]

admittedly limited) sense, that there is no biblical doctrine of the authority of the Bible. For the most part the Bible itself is much more concerned with doing a whole range of other things rather than talking about itself. There are, of course, key passages, especially at transition moments like 2 Timothy or 2 Peter, where the writers are concerned that the church of the next generation should be properly founded and based. At precisely such points we find statements emerging about the place of scripture within the life of the church. But such a doctrine usually has to be inferred. It may well be possible to infer it, but it is not (for instance) what Isaiah or Paul are talking about. Nor is it, for the most part, what Jesus is talking about in the gospels. He isn't constantly saying, 'What about scripture? What about scripture?' It is there sometimes, but it is not the central thing that we have sometimes made it. And the attempt by many evangelicals to argue a general doctrine of scripture out of the use made of the Old Testament in the New is doomed to failure, despite its many strong points, precisely because the relation between the Old and New Testaments is not the same as the relation between the New Testament and ourselves.¹ If we look in scripture to find out where in practice authority is held to lie, the answer on page after page does not address our regular antitheses at all. As we shall see, in the Bible all authority lies with God himself.

The question of biblical authority, of how there can be such a thing as an authoritative Bible, is not, then, as simple as it might look. In order to raise it at all, we have to appreciate that it is a sub-question of some much more general questions. (1) How can *any* text function as authoritative? Once one gets away from the idea of a rule-book such as might function as authoritative in, say, a golf club, this question gets progressively harder. (2) How can any ancient text function as authoritative? If you were a Jew, wanting to obey the Torah (or,

¹ See J D G Dunn, *The Living Word*, ch 3. Dunn's own counter-formulation is, I think, equally misleading. He implicitly flattens out 'scripture' so as to be able to speak of 'scripture's use of itself' without real regard for the difference between OT and NT (see below).

perhaps, obey the Talmud) you would find that there were all sorts of difficult questions about how a text, written so many years ago, can function as authoritative today. Actually, it is easier with the Talmud than with the Bible because the Talmud is designed very specifically to be a rule book for human beings engaged in life in a particular sort of community. But much of what we call the Bible—the Old and New Testaments—is not a rule book; it is narrative. That raises a further question: (3) How can an ancient *narrative* text be authoritative? How, for instance, can the book of Judges, or the book of Acts, be authoritative? It is one thing to go to your commanding officer first thing in the morning and have a string of commands barked at you. But what would you do if, instead, he began 'Once upon a time...?'

These questions press so acutely that the church has, down the centuries, tried out all sorts of ways of getting round them, and of thereby turning the apparently somewhat recalcitrant material in the Bible itself into material that can more readily be used as 'authoritative'

[p.11]

in the senses demanded by this or that period of church history. I want to look at three such methods and suggest that each in its own way actually belittles the Bible, thereby betraying a low doctrine of inspiration in practice, whatever may be held in theory.

Timeless Truth?

A regular response to these problems is to say that the Bible is the repository of timeless truth. There are some senses in which that is true. But the sense in which it is normally meant is certainly not true. The whole Bible from Genesis to Revelation is culturally conditioned. It is all written in the language of particular times, and evokes the cultures in which it came to birth. It seems, when we get close up to it, as though, if we grant for a moment that in some sense or other God has indeed inspired this book, he has not wanted to give us an abstract set of truths unrelated to space and time. He has wanted to give us something rather different, which is not (in our post-enlightenment world) nearly so easy to handle as such a set of truths might seem to be. The problem of the gospels is one particular instance of this question. And at this point in the argument evangelicals often lurch towards Romans as a sort of safe place where they can find a basic systematic theology in the light of which one can read everything else. I have often been assured by evangelical colleagues in theological disciplines other than my own that my perception is indeed true, namely, that the Protestant and evangelical tradition has not been half so good on the gospels as it has been on the epistles. We don't quite know what to do with them. Because, I think, we have come to them as we have come to the whole Bible, looking for particular answers to particular questions. And *we have thereby made the Bible into something which it basically is not*. I remember a well-known preacher saying that he thought a lot of Christians used the Bible as an unsorted edition of *Daily Light*. It really ought to be arranged into neat little devotional chunks, but it happens to have got all muddled up. The same phenomenon occurs, at a rather different level, when people treat it as an unsorted edition of Calvin's Institutes, the Westminster Confession, the UCCF Basis of Faith, or the so-called 'Four Spiritual Laws'. But to treat the Bible like that is, in fact, simply to take your place in a very long tradition of Christians who have tried to make the Bible into a set of abstract truths and rules—abstract devotional, doctrinal, or evangelistic snippets here and there.

This problem goes back ultimately, I think, to a failure on the part of the Reformers to work out fully their proper insistence on the literal sense of scripture as the real locus of God's

revelation, the place where God was really speaking in scripture. The literal sense seems fine when it comes to saying, and working with, what (for instance) Paul actually meant in Romans. (This itself can actually be misleading too, but we may let it pass for the moment.) It's fine when you're attacking

[p.12]

mediaeval allegorizing of one sort or another. But the Reformers, I think, never worked out a satisfactory answer to the question, how can the literal sense of *stories*—which purport to describe events in (say) first century Palestine—how can that be authoritative? If we are not careful, the appeal to 'timeless truths' not only distorts the Bible itself, making it into the sort of book it manifestly is not, but also creeps back, behind the Reformers' polemic against allegory, into a neo-allegorization which is all the more dangerous for being unrecognised.²

Witness to Primary Events?

So, more recently, we have seen attempts on the part of many scholars to make this very difficult text authoritative by suggesting that it is authoritative insofar as it witnesses to primary events. This emphasis, associated not least with the post-war biblical theology movement, at least has the merit of taking seriously the historical setting, the literal sense of the text. The problem about that, however, can be seen quite easily. Supposing we actually dug up Pilate's court records, and supposing we were able to agree that they gave a fair transcript of Jesus' trial. Would they be authoritative in any of the normal senses in which Christians have claimed that the Bible is authoritative? I think not. A variation on this theme occurs when people say that the Bible (or the New Testament) is authoritative because it witnesses to early Christian experience. There is a whole range of modern scholarship that has assumed that the aim of New Testament study is to find the early Christians at work or at prayer or at evangelism or at teaching. The Bible then becomes authoritative because it lets us in on what it was like being an early Christian—and it is the early Christian experience that is then treated as the real authority, the real norm. In both of these variations, then, authority has shifted from the Bible itself to the historically reconstructed event or experience. We are not really talking about the authority of the Bible at all.

Timeless Function?

Another (related) way in which the Bible has been used, with the frequent implication that it is in such use that its authority consists, is in the timeless functions which it is deemed to perform. For Bultmann, the New Testament functioned (among other things) as issuing the timeless call to decision. For Ignatius and those who have taught Jesuit spirituality, it can be used in a timeless sense within pastoral practice. Now this is not a million miles from certain things which I shall be suggesting later on in this lecture as appropriate uses of scripture. But at the level of theory it is vital that we say, once more, that such uses in and of themselves are not what is primarily meant when we say that the Bible is authoritative: or, if they are, that they thereby belittle the Bible, and fail to do justice to the book as we actually have it. All three

[p.13]

methods I have outlined involve a certain procedure which ultimately seems to be illegitimate: that one attempts, as it were, to boil off certain timeless truths, models, or challenges into a

² See too redaction-criticism, where allegory is the staple diet.

sort of ethereal realm which is not anything immediately to do with space-time reality in order then to carry them across from the first century to any other given century and re-liquefy them (I hope I'm getting my physics right at this point), making them relevant to a new situation. Once again, it is not really the Bible that is being regarded as the 'real' authority. It is something else.

Evangelicals and Biblical Authority

It seems to be that evangelicalism has flirted with, and frequently held long-running love affairs with all of these different methods of using the Bible, all of these attempts to put into practice what turns out to be quite an inarticulate sense that it is somehow the real locus of authority. And that has produced what one can now see in many so-called scriptural churches around the world—not least in North America. It seems to be the case that the more that you insist that you are based on the Bible, the more fissiparous you become; the church splits up into more and more little groups, each thinking that they have got biblical truth right. And in my experience of teaching theological students I find that very often those from a conservative evangelical background opt for one such view as the safe one, the one with which they will privately stick, from which they will criticize the others. Failing that, they lapse into the regrettable (though sometimes comprehensible) attitude of temporary book-learning followed by regained positivism: we will learn for a while the sort of things that the scholars write about, then we shall get back to using the Bible straight. There may be places and times where that approach is the only possible one, but I am quite sure that the Christian world of 1989 is not among them. There is a time to grow up in reading the Bible as in everything else. There is a time to take the doctrine of inspiration seriously. And my contention here is that evangelicalism has usually done no better than those it sometimes attacks in taking inspiration seriously. Methodologically, evangelical handling of scripture has fallen into the same traps as most other movements, even if we have found ways of appearing to extricate ourselves.

The Belittling of the Bible

The problem with all such solutions as to how to use the Bible is that they belittle the Bible and exalt something else. Basically they imply—and this is what I mean when I say that they offer too low a view of scripture—that God has, after all, given us the wrong sort of book and it is our job to turn it into the right sort of book by engaging in these hermeneutical moves, translation procedures or whatever. They imply

[p.14]

that the real place where God has revealed himself—the real locus of authority and revelation—is, in fact, somewhere else; somewhere else in the past in an event that once took place, or somewhere else in a timeless sphere which is not really hooked into our world at all but touches it tangentially, or somewhere in the present in 'my own experience', or somewhere in the future in some great act which is yet to come. And such views, I suggest, rely very heavily on either tradition (including evangelical tradition) or reason, often playing off one against the other, and lurching away from scripture into something else. I have a suspicion that most of you are as familiar with this whole process as I am. If you are not, you would be within a very short time of beginning to study theology at any serious level.

My conclusion, then, is this: that the regular views of scripture and its authority which we find not only outside but also inside evangelicalism fail to do justice to what the Bible actually is—a book, an ancient book, an ancient narrative book. They function by turning that book

into something else, and by implying thereby that God has, after all, given us the wrong sort of book. This is a low doctrine of inspiration, whatever heights are claimed for it and whatever words beginning with 'in-' are used to label it. I propose that what we need to do is to re-examine the concept of authority itself and see if we cannot do a bit better.

The Bible and Biblical Authority

All Authority is God's Authority

So, secondly within the first half of this lecture, I want to suggest that scripture's own view of authority focusses on the authority of God himself. (I recall a well-known lecturer once insisting that 'there can be no authority other than scripture', and thumping the tub so completely that I wanted to ask 'but what about God?') If we think for a moment what we are actually *saying* when we use the phrase 'authority of scripture', we must surely acknowledge that this is a shorthand way of saying that, though authority belongs to God, God has somehow invested this authority in scripture. And that is a complex claim. It is not straightforward. When people use the phrase 'authority of scripture' they very often do not realize this. Worse, they often treat the word 'authority' as the absolute, the fixed point, and make the word 'scripture' the thing which is moving around trying to find a home against it. In other words, they think they know what authority is and then they say that scripture is that thing.

I want to suggest that we should try it the other way around. Supposing we said that we know what scripture is (we have it here, after all), and that we should try and discover what authority might be in the light of that. Granted that this is the book that we actually have, and that we want to find out what its 'authority' might mean, we need

[p.15]

perhaps to forswear our too-ready ideas about 'authority' and let them be remoulded in the light of scripture itself—not just in the light of the biblical statements about authority but in the light of the whole Bible, or the whole New Testament, itself. What are we saying about the concept of 'authority' itself if we assert that *this* book—not the book we are so good at turning this book into—is 'authoritative'?

Beginning, though, with explicit scriptural evidence about authority itself, we find soon enough—this is obvious but is often ignored—that all authority does indeed belong to God. 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth'. *God says* this, *God says* that, and it is done. Now if that is not authoritative, I don't know what is. God calls Abraham; he speaks authoritatively. God exercises authority in great dynamic events (in Exodus, the Exile and Return). In the New Testament, we discover that authority is ultimately invested in Christ: 'all authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth'. Then, perhaps to our surprise, authority is invested in the apostles: Paul wrote whole letters in order to make this point crystal clear (in a manner of speaking). This authority, we discover, has to do with the Holy Spirit. And the whole church is then, and thereby, given authority to work within God's world as his accredited agent(s). From an exceedingly quick survey, we are forced to say: authority, according to the Bible itself, is vested in God himself, Father, Son and Spirit.

The Purpose and Character of God's Authority

But what is God *doing* with his authority? We discover, as we look at the Bible itself, that God's model of authority is not like that of the managing director over the business, not like

that of the governing body over the college, not like that of the police or the law-courts who have authority over society. There is a more subtle thing going on. God is not simply organizing the world in a certain way such as we would recognize from any of those human models. He is organizing it—if that's the right word at all—through Jesus and in the power of the Spirit. And the notion of God's authority, which we have to understand before we understand what we mean by the authority of scripture, is based on the fact that this God is the loving, wise, creator, redeemer God. And his authority is his sovereign exercise of *those* powers; his loving and wise creation and redemption. What is he doing? He is not simply organizing the world. He is, as we see and know in Christ and by the Spirit, judging and remaking his world. What he does authoritatively he does with this intent. God is not a celestial information service to whom you can apply for answers on difficult questions. Nor is he a heavenly ticket agency to whom you can go for moral or doctrinal permits or passports to salvation. He does not stand outside the human process and merely comment on it or merely issue you with certain tickets that you might need. Those views would imply either a deist's God or a legalist's God, not the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ and the Spirit. And it must

[p.16]

be said that a great many views of biblical authority imply one or other of those sub-Christian alternatives.

But, once we say that God's authority is like that, we find that there is a challenge issued to the world's view of authority and to the church's view of authority. Authority is not the power to control people, and crush them, and keep them in little boxes. The church often tries to do that—to tidy people up. Nor is the Bible as the vehicle of God's authority meant to be information for the legalist. We have to apply some central reformation insights to the concept of authority itself. It seems to me that the Reformation, once more, did not go quite far enough in this respect, and was always in danger of picking up the mediaeval view of authority and simply continuing it with, as was often said, a paper pope instead of a human one. Rather, God's authority vested in scripture is designed, as all God's authority is designed, to liberate human beings, to judge and condemn evil and sin in the world in order to set people free to be fully human. That's what God is in the business of doing. That is what his authority is there *for*. And when we use a shorthand phrase like 'authority of scripture' that is what we ought to be meaning. It is an authority with this shape and character, this purpose and goal.

How in the Bible does God exercise his authority?

Then, we have to ask, if we are to get to the authority of scripture—How does God exercise that authority? Again and again, in the biblical story itself we see that he does so *through human agents anointed and equipped by the Holy Spirit*. And this is itself an expression of his love; because he does not will, simply to come into the world in a blinding flash of light and obliterate all opposition. He wants to reveal himself meaningfully within the space/time universe not just passing it by tangentially; to reveal himself in judgement and in mercy in a way which will save people. So, we get the prophets. We get obedient *writers* in the Old Testament, not only prophets but those who wrote the psalms and so on. As the climax of the story we get Jesus himself as the great prophet, but how much more than a prophet. And, we then get Jesus' people as the anointed ones. And within that sequence there is a very significant passage, namely 1 Kings 22. Micaiah the son of Imlah (one of the great prophets who didn't leave any writing behind him but who certainly knew what his business was)

stands up against the wicked king, Ahab. The false prophets of Israel at the time were saying to Ahab, 'Go up against Ramoth-gilead and fight and you will triumph. Yahweh will give it into your hand'. This is especially interesting, because the false prophets appear to have everything going for them. They are quoting Deuteronomy 33—one of them makes horns and puts them on his head and says, 'with these you will crush the enemy until they are overthrown'. They had scripture on their side, so it seemed. They had tradition on their side; after all, Yahweh was the God of Battles and he

[p.17]

would fight for Israel. They had reason on their side; Israel and Judah together can beat these northern enemies quite easily. But they didn't have God on their side. Micaiah had stood in the council of the Lord and in that private, strange, secret meeting he had learned that even the apparent scriptural authority which these prophets had, and the apparent tradition and reason, wasn't good enough; God wanted to judge Ahab and so save Israel. And so God delegated his authority to the prophet Micaiah who, inspired by the Spirit, stood humbly in the council of God and then stood boldly in the councils of men. He put his life and liberty on the line, like Daniel and so many others. That is how God brought his authority to bear on Israel: not by revealing to them a set of timeless truths, but by delegating his authority to obedient men through whose words he brought judgement and salvation to Israel and the world.

And how much more must we say of Jesus. Jesus the great prophet; Jesus who rules from the cross in judgement and love; Jesus who says: all authority is given to me, so you go and get on with the job. I hope the irony of that has not escaped you. So too in Acts 1, we find: God has all authority ... so that you will receive power. Again, the irony. How can we resolve that irony? By holding firmly to what the New Testament gives us, which is the strong theology of the authoritative Holy Spirit. Jesus' people are to be the anointed ones through whom God still works authoritatively. And then, in order that the church may be the church—may be the people of God for the world—God, by that same Holy Spirit, equips men in the first generation to write the new covenant documentation. This is to be the new covenant documentation which gives the foundation charter and the characteristic direction and identity to the people of God, who are to be the people of God for the world. It is common to say in some scholarly circles that the evangelists, for instance, didn't know they were writing scripture. One of the gains of modern scholarship is that we now see that to be a mistake. Redaction criticism has shown that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were writing what they were writing in order that it might be the foundation documentation for the church of their day and might bear God's authority in doing so. And a book which carries God's authority to be the foundation of the church for the world is what I mean by scripture. I think they knew what they were doing.³

Thus it is that through the spoken and written authority of anointed human beings God brings his authority to bear on his people and his world. Thus far, we have looked at what the Bible says about how God exercises his judging and saving authority. And it includes (the point with which in fact we began) the delegation of his authority, in some sense, to certain writings. But this leads us to more questions.

How does God exercise his authority through the Bible?

When we turn the question round, however, and ask it the other way

³ Paul comes into this category too, I believe.

[p.18]

about, we discover just what a rich concept of authority we are going to need if we are to do justice to this book. The writings written by these people, thus led by the Spirit, are not for the most part, as we saw, the sort of things we would think of as 'authoritative'. They are mostly narrative; and we have already run up against the problem how can a story, a narrative, be authoritative?⁴ Somehow, the authority which God has invested in this book is an authority that is wielded and exercised *through* the people of God telling and retelling *their* story as the story of the world, telling the covenant story as the true story of creation. Somehow, this authority is also wielded through his people singing psalms. Somehow, it is wielded (it seems) in particular through God's people telling the story of Jesus. We must look, then, at the question of stories. What sort of authority might they possess?

The Authority of a Story

There are various ways in which stories might be thought to possess authority. Sometimes a story is told so that the actions of its characters may be imitated. It was because they had that impression that some early Fathers, embarrassed by the possibilities inherent in reading the Old Testament that way, insisted upon allegorical exegesis. More subtly, a story can be told with a view to creating a generalized ethos which may then be perpetuated this way or that. The problem with such models, popular in fact though they are within Christian reading of scripture, is that they are far too vague: they constitute a hermeneutical grab-bag or lucky dip. Rather, I suggest that stories in general, and certainly the biblical story, has a shape and a goal that must be observed and to which appropriate response must be made.

But what might this appropriate response look like? Let me offer you a possible model, which is not in fact simply an illustration but actually corresponds, as I shall argue, to some important features of the biblical story, which (as I have been suggesting) is that which God has given to his people as the means of his exercising his authority. Suppose there exists a Shakespeare play whose fifth act had been lost. The first four acts provide, let us suppose, such a wealth of characterization, such a crescendo of excitement within the plot, that it is generally agreed that the play ought to be staged. Nevertheless, it is felt inappropriate actually to write a fifth act once and for all: it would freeze the play into one form, and commit Shakespeare as it were to being prospectively responsible for work not in fact his own. Better, it might be felt, to give the key parts to highly trained, sensitive and experienced Shakespearian actors, who would immerse themselves in the first four acts, and in the language and culture of Shakespeare and his time, *and who would then be told to work out a fifth act for themselves.*⁵

Consider the result. The first four acts, existing as they did, would be the undoubted 'authority' for the task in hand. That is, anyone could

[p.19]

⁴ Similar questions could be asked about poetry or apocalyptic writings, and interesting answers could be given. We must limit ourselves to a prime case of the problem here.

⁵ There are, in fact, some modern playwrights who have actually 'written' with this sort of thing in mind. Other analogies suggest themselves: Schubert's Unfinished Symphony, obviously, or perhaps Nielsen's (similarly unfinished) Ninth. There is a parallel here with the view of Wittgenstein, that the best kind of aesthetic criticism consists in the production of a work in continuity with that under discussion.

properly object to the new improvisation on the grounds that this or that character was now behaving inconsistently, or that this or that sub-plot or theme, adumbrated earlier, had not reached its proper resolution. This 'authority' of the first four acts would not consist in an implicit command that the actors should repeat the earlier parts of the play over and over again. It would consist in the fact of an as yet unfinished drama, which contained its own impetus, its own forward movement, which demanded to be concluded in the proper manner but which required of the actors a responsible entering in to the story as it stood, in order first to understand how the threads could appropriately be drawn together, and then to put that understanding into effect by speaking and acting with both *innovation* and *consistency*.

This model could and perhaps should be adapted further; it offers in fact quite a range of possibilities. Among the detailed moves available within this model, which I shall explore and pursue elsewhere, is the possibility of seeing the five acts as follows: (1) Creation; (2) Fall; (3) Israel; (4) Jesus. The New Testament would then form the first scene in the fifth act, giving hints as well (Rom 8; 1 Cor 15; parts of the Apocalypse) of how the play is supposed to end. The church would then live under the 'authority' of the extant story, being required to offer something between an improvisation and an actual performance of the final act. Appeal could always be made to the inconsistency of what was being offered with a major theme or characterization in the earlier material. Such an appeal—and such an offering!—would of course require sensitivity of a high order to the whole nature of the story and to the ways in which it would be (of course) inappropriate simply to repeat verbatim passages from earlier sections. Such sensitivity (cashing out the model in terms of church life) is precisely what one would have expected to be required; did we ever imagine that the application of biblical authority ought to be something that could be done by a well-programmed computer?

Old Testament, New Testament

The model already enables us to add a footnote, albeit an important one. The Old Testament, we begin to see more clearly, is not the book of the covenant people of God in Christ in the same sense that the New Testament is. The New Testament is written to be the charter for the people of the creator God in the time between the first and second comings of Jesus; the Old Testament forms the story of the earlier acts, which are (to be sure) vital for understanding why Act 4, and hence Act 5, are what they are, but not at all appropriate to be picked up and hurled forward into Act 5 without more ado. The Old Testament has the authority that an earlier act of the play would have, no more, no less. This is, of course, a demand for a more carefully worked out view of the senses in which the Old Testament is, and/or is not, 'authoritative' for

[p.20]

the life of the church; I do not think that my model has settled the question once and for all, though I believe it offers a creative way forward in understanding at least the shape of the problem. At the same time, the suggestion forms a counter-proposal to the suggestion of J D G Dunn in chapter 3 of his book, *The Living Word*. There he implies, and sometimes states specifically, that since Jesus and Paul treated the Old Testament with a mixture of respect and cavalier freedom, we should do the same—with the New Testament!⁶ But this would only

⁶ In addition, his description of this supposed cavalier freedom fails to take account of the quite evident reasons why Jesus and Paul did what they did with, eg circumcision and the food laws. Their stances were not based, as Dunn implies, on the wildly anachronistic categories of 'liberal' and 'conservative', but on definite and thought-

hold if we knew in advance that there had been, between the New Testament and ourselves, a break in (for want of a better word) dispensation comparable to the evident break in dispensation between Acts 3 and 4, between Old Testament and Jesus. And we know no such thing.

Thus, there is a hard thing which has to be said here, and it is this: that there is a sense in which the Old Testament is not the book of the church in the same way that the New Testament is the book of the church. Please do not misunderstand me. The Old Testament is in all sorts of important senses reaffirmed by Paul and Jesus and so on—it is the book of the people of God, God's book, God's word etc. But, the Old Testament proclaims itself to be the beginning of that story which has now reached its climax in Jesus; and, as the letter to the Hebrews says, 'that which is old and wearing out is ready to vanish away', referring to the temple. But it is referring also to all those bits of the Old Testament which were good (they weren't bad, I'm not advocating a Marcionite position, cutting off the Old Testament) but, were there for a time as Paul argues very cogently, as in Galatians 3. The New Testament, building on what God did in the Old, is now the covenant charter for the people of God. We do not have a temple, we do not have sacrifices—at least, not in the old Jewish sense of either of those. Both are translated into new meanings in the New Testament. We do not have kosher laws. We do not require that our male children be circumcised if they are to be part of the people of God. We do not keep the seventh day of the week as the Sabbath. Those were the boundary markers which the Old Testament laid down for the time when the people of God was one nation, one geographical entity, with one racial and cultural identity. Now that the gospel has gone worldwide we thank God that he prepared the way like that; but it is the New Testament now which is the charter for the church.

The effect of this authority

But this means that the New Testament is not merely a true commentary on Christianity. It has been pointed out in relation to B B Warfield's theological position that Warfield was always in danger of saying that Christianity would be totally true and would totally work even if there weren't a Bible to tell us all about it (but that it so happens that we have got an authoritative book which does precisely that, from as it were the

[p.21]

sidelines).⁷ But, according to Paul in Romans 15 and elsewhere, the Bible is itself a key part of God's plan. It is not merely a divinely given commentary on the way salvation works (or whatever); the Bible is part of the *means by which* he puts his purposes of judgement and salvation to work. The Bible is made up, all through, of writings of those who, like Micaiah ben Imlah, stood humbly in the councils of God and then stood boldly, in their writing, in the councils of men.

The Bible, then, is designed to function through human beings, through the church, through people who, living still by the Spirit, have their life moulded by this Spirit-inspired book. What for? Well, as Jesus said in John 20, 'As the Father sent me, even so I send you'. He sends the church into the world, in other words, to be and do for the world what he was and did for Israel. There, I suggest, is the key hermeneutical bridge. By this means we are enabled

out positions about what was appropriate within the new phase of history which, they believed, was being inaugurated through their work.

⁷ See D H Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (SCM 1975) esp, eg, 21 f.

to move from the bare story-line, that speaks of Jesus as the man who lived and died and did these things in Palestine 2,000 years ago, into an agenda for the church. And that agenda is the same confrontation with the world that Jesus had with Israel: a confrontation involving judgement and mercy. It is a paradoxical confrontation because it is done with God's authority. It is not done with the authority that we reach for so easily, an authority which will manipulate, or crush, or control, or merely give information about the world. But, rather, it is to be done with an authority with which the church can authentically speak God's words of judgement and mercy to the world. We are not, then, entering into the world's power games. That, after all, is what Peter tried to do in the garden with his sword, trying to bring in the kingdom of God in the same way that the world would like to do it. The world is always trying to lure the church into playing the game by its (the world's) rules. And the church is all too often eager to do this, not least by using the idea of the authority of scripture as a means to control people, to force them into little boxes. Those little boxes often owe far more, in my experience, to cultural conditioning of this or that sort, than to scripture itself as the revelation of the loving, creator and redeemer God.

Authority in the church, then, means the church's authority, with scripture in its hand and heart, to speak and act for God in his world. It is not simply that we may say, in the church, 'Are we allowed to do this or that?' 'Where are the lines drawn for our behaviour?' Or, 'Must we believe the following 17 doctrines if we are to be really sound?' God wants the church to lift up its eyes and see the field ripe for harvest, and to go out, armed with the authority of scripture; not just to get its own life right within a Christian ghetto, but to use the authority of scripture to declare to the world authoritatively that Jesus is Lord. And, since the New Testament is the covenant charter of the people of God, the Holy Spirit, I believe, desires and longs to do this task in each generation by reawakening people to the freshness of that covenant, and hence

[p.22]

summoning them to fresh covenant tasks. The phrase 'authority of scripture', therefore, is a sort of shorthand for the fact that the creator and covenant God uses this book as his means of equipping and calling the church for these tasks. And this is, I believe, the true biblical context of the biblical doctrine of authority, which is meant to enable us in turn to be Micaiahs, in church and how much more in society: so that, in other words, we may be able to stand humbly in the councils of God, in order then to stand boldly in the councils of men. How may we do that? By soaking ourselves in scripture, in the power and strength and leading of the Spirit, in order that we may then speak freshly and with authority to the world of this same creator God.

Why is authority like this? Why does it have to be like that? Because God (as in Acts 1 and Matthew 28, which we looked at earlier) wants to catch human beings up in the work that he is doing. He doesn't want to do it by-passing us; he wants us to be involved in his work. And, as we are involved, so we ourselves are being remade. He doesn't give us the Holy Spirit in order to make us infallible—blind and dumb servants who merely sit there and let the stuff flow through us. So, he doesn't simply give us a rule book so that we could just thumb through and look it up. He doesn't create a church where you become automatically sinless on entry. Because, as the goal and end of his work is redemption, so the means is redemptive also: judgement and mercy, nature and grace. God does not, then, want to put people into little boxes and keep them safe and sound. It is, after all, possible to be so sound that you're sound asleep. I am not in favour of unsoundness; but soundness means health, and health means

growth, and growth means life and vigour and new directions. The little boxes in which you put people and keep them under control are called coffins. We read scripture not in order to avoid life and growth. God forgive us that we have done that in some of our traditions. Nor do we read scripture in order to avoid thought and action, or to be crushed, or squeezed, or confined into a de-humanizing shape, but in order to die and rise again in our minds. Because, again and again, we find that, as we submit to scripture, as we wrestle with the bits that don't make sense, and as we burst through to a new sense that we haven't thought of or seen before, God breathes into our nostrils his own breath—the breath of life. And we become living beings—a church recreated in his image, more fully human, thinking, alive beings.

That, in fact, is (I believe) one of the reasons why God has given us so much story, so much narrative in scripture. Story authority, as Jesus knew only too well, is the authority that really works. Throw a rule book at people's head, or offer them a list of doctrines, and they can duck or avoid it, or simply disagree and go away. Tell them a story, though, and you invite them to come into a different world; you invite them to share a world-view or better still a 'God-view'. That, actually, is what the parables are all about. They offer, as all genuine Christian story-telling

[p.23]

does, a world-view which, as someone comes into it and finds how compelling it is, quietly shatters the world-view that they were in already. Stories determine how people see themselves and how they see the world. Stories determine how they experience God, and the world, and themselves, and others. Great revolutionary movements have told stories about the past and present and future. They have invited people to see themselves in that light, and people's lives have been changed. If that happens at a merely human level, how much more when it is God himself, the creator, breathing through his word.

Conclusion

There, then, is perhaps a more complex model of biblical authority than some Christian traditions are used to. I have argued that the phrase 'the authority of scripture' must be understood within the context of *God's* authority, of which it is both a witness and, perhaps more importantly, a vehicle. This is, I submit, a more dynamic model of authority than some others on offer. I believe it is a view which is substantially compatible with the Bible's own view (if one dare sum up something so complex in such an over-simplification). In addition, for what it may be worth, I believe that it is also in the deepest sense a very Protestant view, however much it diverges from normal Protestant opinion today; after all, it stresses the unique and unrepeatable events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and it insists that the Bible, not the books that we become so skilled at turning the Bible into, is the real locus of authority. In addition, actually, it is also in some senses a far more Catholic view than some others, stressing the need for the community of Jesus' people to understand itself and its tasks within thoroughly historical parameters. It is also, now that we have started on this game, a more orthodox, charismatic, and even liberal view than those which sometimes go by those labels; but to spell all this out would be some-what tedious and anyway, for our present purposes, unnecessary.

HOW CAN THE BIBLE FUNCTION AS AUTHORITATIVE?

But how, then, can scripture be properly used? How can it exercise this authority? If God has delegated his authority somehow to this book, what does he want us to do with it?

The Basis: Fundamentals and Overtones

History and Hermeneutics

How can we handle this extraordinary treasure, responsibly? First, we have to let the Bible be the Bible in all its historical oddness and otherness. We have, again and again, not done that. We have, again and

[p.24]

again, allowed ourselves to say—I've heard myself say it, over and over again—'What Paul is really getting at here is... What Jesus was really meaning in this passage...'—and then, what has happened is a translation of something which is beautiful, and fragile, and unique, into something which is commonplace and boring, and every other Christian in the pew has heard it several sermons before. I am reminded of that amazing line in Schaffer's play *Amadeus* where Salieri sees on stage Mozart's Figaro, and he says, 'He has taken ordinary people—chambermaids and servants and barbers—and he has made them gods and heroes.' And then Salieri remembers his own operas and he says, 'I have taken gods and heroes—and I have made them ordinary.' God forgive us that we have taken the Bible and have made it ordinary—that we have cut it down to our size. We have reduced it, so that whatever text we preach on it will say basically the same things. This is particularly a problem for second- and third-generation movements, of which the rather tired and puzzled evangelicalism in many British churches today is a good example. What we are seeing in such preaching is not the authority of scripture at work, but the authority of a tradition, or even a mere convention masquerading as the authority of scripture—which is much worse, because it has thereby lost the possibility of a critique or inbuilt self-correction coming to it from scripture itself.

In Romans 15, by contrast, Paul says, 'That by patience and encouragement of the scriptures you might have hope'; because scripture brings God's order to God's world. And that order will forever be breaking in as a new word, recognisably in continuity with words heard from God before, but often in discontinuity even with the very traditions by which those older fresh words were preserved and transmitted. Scripture is the book that assures us that we are the people of God when, again and again, we are tempted to doubt. Scripture is the covenant book, not just in order that we can look up our pedigree in it and see where we came from (Abraham and so on), but the book through which the Spirit assures us that we are his people and through which he sends us out into the world to tell the Jesus story, that is, the Israel story which has become the Jesus story which together is God's story for the world. And as we do that in the power of the Spirit, the miracle is that it rings true and people out there in the world know, in this or that fashion, that this strange story which we are telling does in fact run deeper than the world's stories. It does in fact tell them truths which they half-knew and had rather hoped to forget. It is the story which confirms the fact that God had redeemed the world in Jesus Christ. It is the story which breaks open all other world-views and, by so doing, invites men and women, young and old, to see this story as their story. In other words, as we let the Bible be the Bible, God works through us—and it—to do what he intends to do in and for the church and the world.

A model which suggests itself at this point—and this is more of a mere

[p.25]

illustration than the last one was—is that of the piano. Sit at a piano, hold down the loud pedal, strike a low note loudly, and listen. You will hear all kinds of higher notes, harmonics, shimmering above the note originally struck. In the same way, the retelling of the story that the Bible actually contains is to function as the striking of the low note, the basic fundamental note of God's story with his world. As we retell this story there will be harmonics audible, for those, at least, with ears to hear. The problem, of course, is that historical criticism of the Bible has insisted on striking the fundamental notes with the soft pedal on, as though by thus screening out the harmonics it might ensure that the fundamental really made its own point—and then Christians have grumbled that such criticism makes the Bible irrelevant. The equal and opposite danger is that pious Christians have only been interested in the harmonics themselves, and then by actually striking them instead of the fundamentals have produced a narrower range of tone, making up in shrillness what it lacks in historical depth and basic substance.

Story and Hermeneutic: Living in the Fifth Act

In the church and in the world, then, we have to tell the story. It is not enough to translate scripture into timeless truths. How easy it has been for theologians and preachers to translate the gospels (for instance) into something more like epistles! We must, if anything, assimilate the epistles to the gospels rather than vice versa. I would not actually recommend that, but if you were going to make a mistake that would be the direction to do it in. And as we tell the story—the story of Israel, the story of Jesus, the story of the early church—that itself is an act of worship. That is why, within my tradition, the reading of scripture is not merely ancillary to worship—something to prepare for the sermon—but it is actually, itself, part of the rhythm of worship itself. The church in reading publicly the story of God is praising God for his mighty acts, and is celebrating them, and is celebrating the fact that she is part of that continuous story. And, that story as we use it in worship reforms our God-view—our world-view-reconstitutes us as the church. The story has to be told as the new covenant story. This is where my five-act model comes to our help again. The earlier parts of the story are to be told precisely as the earlier parts of the story. We do not read Genesis 1 and 2 as though the world were still like that; we do not read Genesis 3 as though ignorant of Genesis 12, of Exodus, or indeed of the gospels. Nor do we read the gospels as though we were ignorant of the fact that they are written precisely in order to make the transition from Act 4 to Act 5, the Act in which we are now living and in which we are to make our own unique, unscripted and yet obedient, improvisation. This is how we are to be the church, for the world. As we do so, we are calling into question the world's models of authority, as well as the content and direction of that authority.

So, we have to tell the story within the world and the church; because

[p.26]

the church is always in danger of getting too like the world. I have already said that this happens in relation to authority; we use the world's authority models instead of the God-given authority models. And scripture demands, in fact, to be read in the context of traditions within the church, precisely in order that it may judge and redeem the traditions of the church. Not

that it may be under them: the traditions are second-order stories, the stories that you and I tell about who we are as Christians, which go back through Wesley and Whitefield, or through Luther or Aquinas or whoever. These are the stories that form the grid through which we read scripture; we can't do without them, but they need regular checking. And part of my whole argument here is that evangelical traditions needs checking just as well as anybody else's, checking according to scripture itself. We then have to allow the story to challenge our traditions, not to get rid of traditions but in order to see where we've come from, and who we are as the people of God in the 20th century, and to reshape our traditions honestly and properly. But, also, we must allow scripture to stretch our reason back into shape: We must allow scripture to teach us how to think straight, because by ourselves we don't; we think bent, we think crooked. Gerard Manley Hopkins said, 'The Holy Spirit over the bent world broods with warm breast and with Ah! bright wings.' And the Spirit broods over us as we read this book, to straighten out our bent thinking; the world-views that have got twisted so that they are like the world's world-views. God wants us to be people, not puppets; to love him with our mind as well as our soul and our strength. And it is scripture that enables us to do that, not by crushing us into an alien mould but by giving us the fully authoritative four acts, and the start of the fifth, which set us free to become the church afresh in each generation.

Biblical Authority and the Church's Task

The Challenge to the world's authority structures and concepts

The church is not made so that there can be a safe ghetto into which people can run and escape from the world, but so that God can shine out his light into the world, exposing (among other things) the ways in which the world has structured itself into darkness. And this is relevant to the concepts of authority themselves. The Bible is a living witness to the fact that there is a different sort of authority, a different sort of power, to that which is recognized in the world of politics, business, government, or even the academy. Do you know that moment in Jesus Christ Superstar where the crowds are coming into Jerusalem and the disciples are all singing, 'Haysannah, Hosannah'. And one of the zealots says to Jesus, 'Come on, you ride in ahead of us and you'll get the power and the glory for ever and ever and ever.' And Jesus turns round and says, 'Neither you, Simon, nor the 50,000, nor the Romans, nor the Jews, nor

[p.27]

Judas, nor the twelve, nor the priests, nor the scribes, nor doomed Jerusalem herself, understand what power is, *understand what glory is.*' And then he proceeds to weep over Jerusalem and prophesy its destruction; and then he goes, steadily through the following week, to his enthronement on Calvary, which with hindsight the church realises to be the place where all power, all real power, is congregated.

The world needs to see that there is a different model of authority. Because the world needs to know that there is a different God. When the world says, 'God' it doesn't mean what you and I mean by God. It doesn't mean the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. It means either a pantheist god: the god of all-being, a sort of nature god. Or, it means a deist-god way up in the sky who started off by being a landlord, then became an absentee landlord, and now is just an absentee. We have to tell the world again, that the God who is in authority over the world, the God who speaks through scripture, is the Father of Jesus, the God who sends the Spirit. And, therefore, we have to announce to the world the story of scripture.

This is how the gospels are to become authoritative. They are to become authoritative because, as they tell the story of who Jesus was for Israel in judging and redeeming Israel, so we continue that story—this is the great message of Luke, is it not—in being for the world what Jesus was for Israel. That is how the translation works. And that is why we need narrative, not timeless truth. I'm not a timeless person; I've got a story. The world's not a timeless world; it's got a story. And I've got a responsibility, armed with scripture, to tell the world God's story, through song and in speech, in drama and in art. We must do this by telling whatever parables are appropriate. That may well not be by standing on street corners reading chunks of scripture. It might be much more appropriate to go off and write a novel (and not a 'Christian' novel where half the characters are Christians and all the other half become Christians on the last page) but a novel which grips people with the structure of Christian thought, and with Christian motivation set deep into the heart and structure of the narrative, so that people would read that and resonate with it and realize that that story can be my story. After all, the story of the Bible, and the power that it possesses, is a better story than any of the power games that we play in our world. We must tell this story, and let it exercise its power in the world.

And that is the task of the whole church. Need I say, not merely of the professional caste within it—although those who are privileged, whether by being given gifts of study by God, or by being set apart with particular time (as I have been) to study scripture, do have a special responsibility to make sure that they are constantly living in the story for themselves, constantly being the scripture people themselves, in order to encourage the church to be that sort of people, again not for its own sake but for the sake of the world.

[p.28]

The Challenge to the World's World-View

When we tell the whole story of the Bible, and tell it (of course) not just by repeating it parrot-fashion but by articulating it in a thousand different ways, improvising our own faithful versions, we are inevitably challenging more than just one aspect of the world's way of looking at things (ie its view of authority and power). We are undermining its entire view of what the world is, and is for, and are offering, in the best way possible, a new world-view, which turns out (of course) to be a new God-view. We are articulating a viewpoint according to which there is one God, the creator of all that is, who not only made the world but is living and active within it (in opposition to the dualism and/or deism which clings so closely, even to much evangelical tradition), who is also transcendent over it and deeply grieved by its fall away from goodness into sin (in opposition to the pantheism which always lurks in the wings, and which has made a major new entry in the so-called New Age movement—and which often traps Christians who are in a mode of reaction against dualism or deism). This story about the world and its creator will function as an invitation to participate in the story oneself, to make it one's own, and to do so by turning away from the idols which prevent the story becoming one's own, and by worshipping instead the God revealed as the true God. Evangelism and the summons to justice and mercy in society are thus one and the same, and both are effected by the telling of the story, the authoritative story, which works by its own power irrespective of the technique of the storyteller. Once again, we see that the church's task is to be the people who, like Micaiah, stand humbly before God in order then to stand boldly before men.

Biblical Authority and the Church's Life

I shall be briefer about this aspect, though it could be spelt out in considerable detail—and probably needs to be if the church is to be really healthy, and not go through a barren ritual of reading the Bible but getting nothing out of it that cannot be reduced to terms of what she already knows. The purpose of the church's life is to be the people of God for the world: a city set on a hill cannot be hidden. But the church can only be this if in her own life she is constantly being recalled to the story and message of scripture, without which she will herself lapse into the world's ways of thinking (as is done in the evangelical dualism, for example, that perpetuates the split between religion and politics invented by the fairly godless eighteenth century).

How is this to be done? The church in her public worship uses lectionaries—at least, if she does not, she runs the grave risk of revolving, as C S Lewis pointed out, round the little treadmill of favourite passages, of 'desert island texts', and muzzling the terrible and wonderful things that scripture really has to say. But even in the lectionaries there are problems; because at least those that are common

[p.29]

today do their own fair share of muzzling, missing out crucial passages in order to keep the readings short, omitting verses that might shock modern Western sensibilities. The Bible is to be in the bloodstream of the church's worship, but at the moment the bloodstream is looking fairly watery. We must reform the lectionaries, and give to the church creative and positive ways of reading scripture, and hearing it read, which will enable this book to be once again the fully authoritative covenant charter.

In private reading, and in informal group meetings, we need again to experiment with new ways of reading scripture. Anyone who has heard an entire biblical book read, or even acted (think of Alec McCown on Mark, or Paul Alexander on John; I have heard the same done with Galatians, and very impressive it was, too) will realize that such things as chapter-divisions, or almost any divisions at all, can be simply unhelpful. We need to recapture a sense of scripture as a whole, telling and retelling stories as wholes. Only when you read Exodus as a whole (for example) do you realize the awful irony whereby the making of the golden calf is a *parody* of what God wanted the people to do with their gold and jewels ... and only by reading Mark as a whole might you realize that, when the disciples ask to sit at Jesus' right and left hand, they are indeed asking for something they do not understand.

It is perhaps the half-hearted and sometimes quite miserable traditions of reading the Bible—even among those who claim to take it seriously—that account for the very low level of biblical knowledge and awareness even among some church leaders and those with delegated responsibility. And this is the more lamentable in that the Bible ought to be functioning as authoritative within church debates. What happens all too often is that the debate is conducted without reference to the Bible (until a rabid fundamentalist stands up and waves it around, confirming the tacit agreement of everyone else to give it a wide berth). Rather, serious engagement is required, at every level from the personal through to the group Bible-study, to the proper liturgical use, to the giving of time in synods and councils to Bible exposition and study. Only so will the church avoid the trap of trying to address the world and having nothing to say but the faint echo of what the world itself has been saying for some while.

If we really engage with the Bible in this serious way we will find, I believe, that we will be set free from (among other things) some of the small-scale evangelical paranoia which goes on about scripture. We won't be forced into awkward corners, answering impossible questions of the 'Have you stopped beating your wife?' variety about whether scripture is exactly this or exactly that. Of course the Bible is inspired, and if you're using it like this there won't be any question in your mind that the Bible is inspired. But, you will be set free to explore ways of articulating that belief which do not fall into the old rationalist traps of 18th or 19th or 20th century. Actually using the Bible in this way is a far

[p.30]

sounder thing than mouthing lots of words beginning with 'in—' but still imprisoning the Bible within evangelical tradition (which is what some of those 'in—' words seem almost designed to do). Of course you will discover that the Bible will not let you down. You will be paying attention to it; you won't be sitting in judgement over it. But you won't come with a preconceived notion of what this or that passage has to mean if it is to be true. You will discover that God is speaking new truth through it. I take it as a method in my biblical studies that if I turn a corner and find myself saying, 'Well, in that case, that verse is wrong' that I must have turned a wrong corner somewhere. But that does not mean that I impose what I think is right on to that bit of the Bible. It means, instead, that I am forced to live with that text uncomfortably, sometimes literally for years (this is sober autobiography), until suddenly I come round a different corner and that verse makes a lot of sense; sense that I wouldn't have got if I had insisted on imposing my initial view on it from day one.

The Bible, clearly, is also to be used in a thousand different ways within the pastoral work of the church, the caring and building up of all its members. Again, there is much that I could say here, but little space. Suffice it to note that the individual world-views and God-views of Christians, as much as anybody else, need to be constantly adjusted and straightened out in the light of the story which is told in scripture. But this is not to say that there is one, or even that there are twenty-one, 'right' ways of this being done. To be sure, the regular use of scripture in private and public worship is a regular medicine for many of the ills that beset us. But there are many methods of meditation, of imaginative reading, ways of soaking oneself in a book or a text, ways of allowing the story to become one's own story in all sorts of intimate ways, that can with profit be recommended by a pastor, or engaged in within the context of pastoral ministry itself. Here, too, we discover the authority of the Bible at work: God's own authority, exercised not to give true information about wholeness but to give wholeness itself, by judging and remaking the thoughts and intentions, the imaginations and rememberings, of men, women and children. There are worlds to be discovered here of which a good deal of the church remains sadly ignorant. The Bible is the book of personal renewal, the book of tears and laughter, the book through which God resonates with our pain and joy, and enables us to resonate with his pain and joy. This is the really powerful authority of the Bible, to be distinguished from the merely manipulative or the crassly confrontational 'use' of scripture.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that the notion of the 'authority of scripture' is a shorthand expression for God's authority, exercised somehow through

[p.31]

scripture; that scripture must be allowed to be itself in exercising its authority, and not be turned into something else which might fit better into what the church, or the world, might have thought its 'authority' should look like; that it is therefore the meaning of 'authority' itself, not that of scripture, that is the unknown in the equation, and that when this unknown is discovered it challenges head on the various notions and practices of authority endemic in the world and, alas, in the church also. I have suggested, less systematically, some ways in which this might be put into practice. All of this has been designed as a plea to the church to let the Bible be the Bible, and so to let God be God—and so to enable the people of God to be the people of God, his special people, living under his authority, bringing his light to his world. The Bible is not an end in itself. It is there so that, by its proper use, the creator may be glorified and the creation may be healed. It is our task to be the people through whom this extraordinary vision comes to pass. We are thus entrusted with a privilege too great for casual handling, too vital to remain a mere matter of debate.

So what am I saying? I am saying that we mustn't belittle scripture by bringing the world's models of authority into it. We must let scripture be itself, and that is a hard task. Scripture contains many things that I don't know, and that you don't know; many things we are waiting to discover; passages which are lying dormant waiting for us to dig them out. Awaken them. We must then make sure that the church, armed in this way, is challenging the world's view of authority. So that, we must determine—corporately as well as individually—to become in a true sense, people of the book. Not people of the book in the Islamic sense, where this book just drops down and crushes people and you say it's the will of Allah, and I don't understand it, and I can't do anything about it. But, people of the book in the Christian sense; people who are being remade, judged and remoulded by the Spirit through scripture. It seems to me that evangelical tradition has often become in bondage to a sort of lip-service scripture principle even while debating in fact how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. (Not literally, but there are equivalents in our tradition.) Instead, I suggest that our task is to seize this privilege with both hands, and use it to the glory of God and the redemption of the world.

© 1991 *London School of Theology* (<http://www.lst.ac.uk/>). Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in May 2009 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>
