

## COMMITTEE ON CHURCH DOCTRINE

(2016 A&P, p. 265–78, 39)

### **UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE** (A&P 2015, p. 273–74)

As reported to previous General Assemblies, the Committee on Church Doctrine has been developing a paper on “Understanding and Interpreting the Scriptures”, commonly referred to as biblical hermeneutics. As we noted in our report last year this is a very timely topic for The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

We have a document ready to share with the church and are looking forward to the responses its use will engender. We also believe, even at this stage of its development, it has great value and hope that it will assist all of us as we seek to know more fully the revelation of God’s will, character and purpose written in the scriptures.

### **UNDERSTANDING AND INTERPRETING THE BIBLE An Aid for Those Wishing to Better Understand the Bible’s Authority, and for Those Wishing to Study and Interpret It**

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#### **1. Introduction**

The Bible is centrally important to Christians because “the written word bears witness” to the living Word, Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> In the Presbyterian tradition, the Bible’s vitality to the life of faith is evident in various places including, but not limited to, the Bible itself, our subordinate standards, ordination vows, and the devotional lives of those who seek to follow Jesus. The Bible is our “canon”, meaning “that which regulates, rules, or serves as a norm or pattern for other things.”<sup>2</sup>

Eugene Peterson writes: “Language is spoken into us; we learn language only as we are spoken to. We are plunged at birth into a sea of language.... Then slowly syllable by syllable we acquire the capacity to answer: mama, papa, bottle, blanket, yes, no. Not one of these words was a first word.... All speech is answering speech. We were all spoken to before we spoke.”<sup>3</sup> In a similar way, just as a child’s talking is directly impacted by the language used by his or her parents, the life and actions of God’s children are directly impacted by the word of God heard in scripture.

However, for all the importance that the Bible holds for Christians, the scriptures are not always easy to interpret. Along with a great diversity in style and approaches within the Bible itself, a large distance in time and place exists between us and the people who wrote the Bible. The culture, the geography and even the spiritual practices portrayed in the text remain in many ways foreign to our twenty-first century Canadian lives. That said, it is written that “the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and your heart for you to observe”. (Deuteronomy 30:14) Christians approach the Bible in the faith that the Holy Spirit will shed light on what seems dark to us.

The intent of this document is to provide some background information and help for those wishing to understand the nature of the Bible’s authority for Christians, and for those wishing to interpret the Bible, especially given its centrality to the Christian life for Presbyterians. In the Reformed tradition there has been no definitive rule for how to interpret scripture; however, various principles have been proposed which aid in this process. Such principles are meant to help guide us as we seek to discern God’s will in scripture with the help of the Holy Spirit. This document seeks to draw attention to some of these principles and to tools for using them.

We begin by looking at what is meant by Biblical authority and inspiration, followed by some notes on the writing and assembly of the Bible as we know it. We then give some examples of models for understanding what the Bible means for us as Christians, and tips on how these may be helpful for studying and interpreting scripture.

We also offer a word about vocabulary. Various terms are used to describe what are commonly called the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament is also sometimes called the “Hebrew Scriptures”, “First Covenant”, or “First Testament”. The New Testament is also sometimes called the “Greek Scriptures”, “Second Covenant”, or “Second Testament”. In this report we will use the terms most common among Presbyterians in Canada today – The Old and New Testaments. As we do so we honour the fact that the books of the Old Testament are sacred scripture for our Jewish brothers and sisters.

## **2. The relationship of scripture to God’s authority**

When making statements about various topics, many people quote or appeal to the Bible. When people say “The Bible says...” or “God’s word says...” they are often appealing to God (through the Bible) as an authoritative voice who lends strength to a point of view. Yet we also know that two people quoting from the Bible may also be claiming very different things. So when we try to evaluate different claims, it’s important to understand the nature of any claim to authority, especially since, for people of faith, there is no higher authority than God.

What is God’s “authority”? In short, it is God’s almighty and creative rule. It is when and how God makes God’s will be done. This power belongs to God to exercise; that is, God is free to act as God desires. The Swiss theologian Karl Barth sheds some light on the nature of God’s authority by comparing Jesus to ancient ideas of what a judge is: “In the biblical world of thought, the judge is not primarily the one who rewards some and punishes others; he is the man [sic] who creates order and restores what has been destroyed.”<sup>4</sup> God’s authority is the power to give and renew the life of the universe.

Let us continue to go deeper. According to Anglican Bible scholar Tom Wright, God’s authority “is the sovereign rule of God sweeping through creation to judge and to heal. It is the powerful love of God in Jesus Christ, putting sin to death and launching new creation. It is the fresh, bracing and energizing wind of the Spirit.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Presbyterians declare that God’s authority is revealed in the mystery of the relationship of the Trinity.

So what does “the authority of scripture” mean, and how does that relate to God’s authority? It is helpful when answering this question to consider these things:

1. All true authority is from God.
2. Jesus Christ, fully human, fully divine, reveals the nature of God’s authority. (In Matthew 28:18, Jesus says: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”)
3. As the Bible is the primary way we learn about God’s dealings with creation, the Bible is where, led by the Holy Spirit, we encounter this authority. Thus, as Wright notes, “the authority of scripture” is shorthand for “God’s authority exercised through Scripture.”<sup>6</sup>
4. The authority of scripture thus refers to the Bible’s ability, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to make and nurture a new relationship between readers, God, others, and the world.<sup>7</sup>

Still, as the sixteenth-century Reformer John Calvin wrote “the Word will not find acceptance in [human] hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.”<sup>8</sup> To look more closely at the connection between God’s authority and scripture, we turn now to the idea of “inspiration”.

## **3. What does it mean to say the Bible is “inspired”?**

Out of many ways to understand this term, a helpful place to start is here: to say the Bible is “inspired,” according to Wright, can mean that the Holy Spirit “guided the very different writers and editors, so that the books they produced

were the books God intended his people to have.”<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the words of scripture are also expressions of the faith of men and women who came to profound understandings of God in their daily life, in the midst of both joy and suffering. As we believe that God’s Spirit is at work in prodding human faith, so there is also inspiration in people trying to understand their experience of God’s presence and action in the world. Inspiration at the level of the production of what Christians know as the Bible stretched from ancient Israelite times to a few hundred years after Christ.

As it says in the Westminster Confession, the books of the Bible “are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life” (1.2). Because of this, and because God inspired the writers to produce the books God wanted God’s people to have, “God...still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures”.<sup>10</sup>

But inspiration does not only refer to the Bible itself and its creation; inspiration needs also to be involved in the relationship between the written words and the reader. As the Westminster Confession states, “we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word” (1.6). That is, without the Holy Spirit working within us, the Bible would be merely interesting ancient literature and history, beautiful even, but not sacred; the Spirit is required for the words of scripture to speak to us and light the path to the way of God for us.<sup>11</sup>

#### **4. Who wrote the Bible?**

The Bible is not a book in the modern sense of the word where we think of a single human author. The Bible is a library – a collection of ancient writings by dozens and dozens of authors spanning over a thousand years.

Many different people wrote and edited the Bible. Sometimes it is hard to know who wrote certain books – for example, the letter to the Hebrews. Ancient convention did not always demand that authors identify themselves. Sometimes the books are connected to particular people – for instance, through the titles which have become attached to them over the years – but ancient ideas of authorship may not have been quite the same as ours. So we have writings like the letter to the Romans, which clearly was from the apostle Paul, but at the same time we have letters like the one to the Colossians which says that it was written by Paul, but whose authorship is disputed by some scholars. Even if the identity of the author is not certain, early Christian communities concluded they were the word of God. We believe that the Holy Spirit continues to connect Christians to what God is saying through these texts in order to form faith and life.

This means, of course, that not everyone agrees about who wrote different biblical books. There is also much ongoing discussion about the effect of the process of writings being passed down through time, and what roles the editors who put the text together – who are also considered as being inspired by the Holy Spirit in their work – had in the shaping of scripture. In all of it, it is important to remember that communities of faith agreed upon the writings that would be authoritative for their lives.

John Calvin placed a high emphasis on the Bible. He knew that human writers and editors are not perfect, but felt that, ultimately, God was the author of scripture, though the revelation of this depends on the Holy Spirit acting inwardly upon the readers. In a sense, people write and read sacred texts, but God moves hearts.<sup>12</sup>

#### **5. Who decided what books would be in the Bible?**

Various people wrote, edited and collected the texts of what we call the Bible over a span of more than a thousand years. Some suggest that the community was collectively using many early writings by the time of King David (about the year 1000 BCE). As the community developed, and as time went on, other writings were added including psalms and various prophetic works. A significant time for this collection occurred while the Israelites were in exile in the Babylonian Empire in the 6th century BCE. While we are used to Bibles which have a fixed order, this was not always the case. Even at the time of Jesus the order of the books of the Hebrew Scriptures (the only writings he would have known as sacred), including the Greek translation known as the Septuagint, had not been fully fixed. Changes continued to happen in both Judaism and Christianity, so that the collection used by much of modern Judaism, called the Tanakh, has a very different order than any Christian Old Testament. Protestant Bibles also differ from Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox ones because the reformers of the 16th century sought to clarify which books should be used when making decisions about doctrine. Books which were mostly Greek Jewish texts, commonly called the Apocrypha, were excluded – they were considered helpful for instruction, but not sacred.

Very early in the Christian movement, Jesus' words were considered authoritative (see 1 Corinthians 7:10, 9:14) and at least once quoted as scripture (see 1 Timothy 5:18b). This was also happening for the writings of the apostles (see 2 Peter 3:16).

In the debates about which books to include in the New Testament, it was “widely conceded” argues American Religious Studies professor Bart Ehrman, that for a book to be accepted as scripture it needed to meet four criteria. It needed to be: (a) ancient (near to the time of Jesus), (b) apostolic (written by an apostle or companion of an apostle), (c) catholic (meaning it needed to have wide-spread acceptance among churches), and (d) orthodox (the views presented needed to be right teaching).<sup>13</sup>

The New Testament came into being after a long process of discussion and debate. The first time we encounter an exact listing of the 27 books that would be included is in a letter written in 367 CE by an influential bishop named Athanasius. Through it all, both before this listing appears and in the debates that continued afterward, the Holy Spirit guided his people to ensure they had access to the books that told God's unfolding story. The process of Christian texts being included in the Bible took place over a long period of time and involved a wide range of Christians.

## **6. Jesus' perspective**

As Christians, it is also helpful to reflect on Jesus' own usage of scripture. The gospels often depict Jesus' followers as calling him “Rabbi”, that is “Teacher” or “Master”. Although the term did not have the same type of official or formal meaning as it has taken on in later Judaism,<sup>14</sup> it still indicates the respect and authority which many granted to his teaching. Jesus the Rabbi, our Lord, frequently appealed to scripture as an authority. As a Jewish teacher, Jesus joined in the interpretation of scripture. He was part of a tradition of interpretation going back to the prophets and earlier, and used scripture in his teaching and debates with other religious teachers. Jesus' interpretation of the Law and the prophets can help to shape our own interpretation.

Take, for instance, when Jesus asked about or was asked about the greatest commandment (Matthew 24:34–40; Mark 12:28–34; Luke 10:25–28); movement from the loving God (Deuteronomy 6:5) to loving neighbour (Leviticus 19:18) involves linking texts based on associated ideas (love) in a way that has each interpret the other. This example also shows how he stood in an interpretative community – others before and after him made a similar connection between loving God and loving neighbour.<sup>15</sup> Jesus also built on or expanded scripture based on his interpretation (“You have heard...but I say to you...”). He also joined in what became a common rabbinic method for exploring the interpretation of scripture, conversation and debate. He confronted various religious leaders, including members of rival Jewish groups, the Sadducees and Pharisees (Matthew 22:23–33; 15:1–9). Three of the gospels even show Jesus using this type of argument beyond human debates – when he is tempted by the devil, Jesus counters the devil's use of scripture with his own quotations (Matthew 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–12). Like Jesus, we are called to use all the tools for interpretation at our disposal in the twenty-first century. This includes historical-critical analysis and other methods which have been devised over the centuries.

The New Testament proclaims Jesus to be the living Word to whom the written scripture bears witness, and who thus is the measure of Christian interpretation of scripture. Jesus says that the scriptures testify about him (John 5:39), and “cannot be broken” or “cannot be set aside” (John 10:35). In addition he says that his words “will never pass away” (Mark 13:31). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also said that he came to “fulfill” the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5:17).

## **7. Other perspectives within scripture itself**

Several biblical writers highlight that the Bible is not just a storehouse for information, but a means by which we learn about God's will and are equipped to live it out. A psalmist writes of the Lord's Law as “reviving the soul”, “making wise the simple”, “enlightening the eyes”, and “sweeter also than honey” (Psalm 19:7–10). Observing God's commandment brings blessings (Deuteronomy 28:1–14). Scripture teaches how to walk in the way of the Lord. In a passage intended to comfort God's people, assuring them that God will restore them after they have been exiled to a foreign land, the writer of the book of Isaiah declares that God's message and promise is never diminished: “For the word of our God stands forever.” (Isaiah 40:8)

In addition to what Jesus said, there is a consistent pattern within the Bible itself stressing not only the centrality but the divine origin of the inspiration of scripture. Perhaps most famously in the New Testament, the apostle Paul,

while writing to Timothy, says that “All scripture is God-breathed.” (2 Timothy 3:16) Here, the author was referring to the Old Testament and was encouraging Timothy to be well-schooled as he prepared for ministry.

While encouraging God’s people to make every effort to enter God’s Sabbath rest – a term equivalent to the Kingdom of God in the letter to the Hebrews – the writer of the letter notes that “the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword” and “able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12) This speaks of an ongoing power in the lives of those reading the letter; moreover, it reminds us that the word of God is not always (not often?) safe and easy in the good news that it brings, but causes us to bare the secrets of our hearts before God, and works to transform even our innermost thoughts.

In 2 Peter, we read that “no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” (1:20–21) In this letter, followers of Jesus are encouraged through hardship to hold fast to right teaching. One of the emphases is on the fact that prophetic words recorded in the Bible were of divine inspiration: their utterance and authority depend on the work of the Holy Spirit.

## 8. Understanding *sola scriptura*

There are five great *solas* of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. These are short Latin summary statements which highlight key emphases of those who desired to reform the European church. They are *sola fide* (by faith alone), *solus Christus* (through Christ alone), *sola gratia* (by grace alone), *soli Deo gloria* (glory to God alone), and *sola scriptura* (by scripture alone). *Sola scriptura* refers to the Reformers’ strong belief that Christianity should, first and foremost, look to the Bible to understand the origins and shape of our faith. According to Tom Wright, in the great debates of that time, this phrase meant that “nothing *beyond* scripture is to be taught as needing to be believed in order for one to be saved. On the other hand, it gave a basic signpost on the way: the great truths taught in scripture are indeed the way of salvation...”<sup>16</sup>

Karl Barth used the term “the scriptural principle”, which is closely linked to the idea of *sola scriptura*: truth is found in scripture, and “every *doctrine* must therefore be measured against an unchangeable and impassable standard discoverable in the scriptures.”<sup>17</sup> Such a principle is at work today in the ordination vows of The Presbyterian Church in Canada when, in the preamble, it states: “The scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as the written Word of God, testifying to Christ the living Word, are the canon of all doctrine, by which Christ rules our faith and life.” (Book of Forms section 447)

The *sola scriptura* emphasis can also be seen in Living Faith, one of our subordinate standards:

The Bible has been given to us  
by the inspiration of God  
to be the rule of faith and life.  
It is the standard of all doctrine  
by which we must test any word that comes to us  
from church, world, or inner experience (5.1).

The emphasis here is that we turn to the scriptures, in part, to check, that our thoughts and actions in the present day do not go against what the Bible shows to be the way of God. But *sola scriptura* does not mean that the Bible is the only book Christians should read, or the only source for learning about God. We also have reflections and expressions of women and men down the ages, theology and poetry and prayer, the traditions of the churches, and signs of God working outside the churches too. The Bible is a measuring stick and not a god; we must beware turning a book, however holy, into an idol.

## 9. The role of tradition in how we understand scripture and its authority

People understand tradition in different ways. Some people think that *sola scriptura* means that tradition has no role to play in the church. This is a fairly new view and doesn’t honour the practice and understanding of the early church or the reformers of the sixteenth century. The churches, and the traditions of the churches, offer a community for interpreting the Bible; thus, the traditions of the churches have authority, but only insofar as they stand on the firm foundation of scripture. Of course, different churches, and even different people within the same church, will have different understandings of that foundation, but we work out our interpretations using the gifts which God has

given to us, relying on the Holy Spirit to guide us. The gifts include the work of Biblical scholars and theologians, teachers and companions who help us in our reading, and our own reason and imagination. (For an explanation of tradition and the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” see below, p. 276, 278.)

Whenever we read and interpret the Bible, we are part of a community of other people who are also reading and trying to understand its meaning. Even if we are reading alone, our reading is shaped by other people: translators and scholars of the text, teachers who have shared ways for finding meaning, and also by the way that society around us thinks about what the Bible is for and about. In the Presbyterian Church, we believe that acknowledging the community nature of reading the Bible is important. Even more, we think that it is essential that we remember that we are not alone in the task of interpretation, but are stronger together.<sup>18</sup> Sometimes we must even help one another unlearn things we thought we knew, in order to find our path as pilgrims.

We rejoice in the gifts of interpretation, thoughtful reflection, and imagination which God has given to many. Christianity has a long tradition of scholarship that includes various viewpoints. Bible scholars and theologians and others continue to wrestle with the meaning of the text as it was written and for addressing the needs of the world today. While the multitude of approaches may be bewildering at times, God has also given us minds with which to think, to evaluate the work, and even to add to it.

## 10. The “literal” sense of scripture

In popular vernacular, the expression “taking the Bible literally” (or uncritically) has almost become synonymous with fundamentalism; a movement that sprung from a meeting of mostly American churchmen in 1895 in Niagara-on-the-Lake that tried to stress certain “fundamentals” of the faith.<sup>19</sup> Today it is often used to more broadly refer to strict, conservative theological positions on various topics. However, an uncritical “literal” reading of scripture does injustice to the history, layers and interpretation of the text.

For ancient Christians, it was not uncommon to interpret the Bible through various methods at the same time; the four key readings were: the literal, or the plain sense or surface meaning of a text; the allegorical, a reading which interprets the characters, events and images as symbolic meaning; the anagogical, looking for what the text might tell you about the end of all things; and the moral, or interpreting the text in terms of what it means for how you should behave. Influenced by the humanism of the Renaissance, the reformers of the sixteenth century argued that the literal sense represented the one most intended by the first writers, and should be preferred. The reformers who sought the literal sense would have pursued the historical, cultural, and linguistic background and context to better understand a passage, all of which is necessary when trying to find out what the first writers intended. Yet, in interpreting the Bible, Christians seek to discern God’s will for today, meaning that uncovering what the first writers intended is always only a first step. Thus, in the twenty-first century, some interpreters have returned to ancient methods, while others find insight using literary and artistic methods.

Occasionally, words like “infallible” or “inerrant” are used to describe scripture. Are they appropriate? The Committee on Church Doctrine has previously provided guidance on this question in their 2010 response to Overture No. 15, 2009:

In recent confessional documents, The Presbyterian Church in Canada does not use the words “inerrant”, “literal inerrancy” or related terms such as “infallible” or “without error in the original autographs” with respect to the nature of the Bible. We recognize that all these terms are subject to considerable range of interpretation in an extensive body of literature.

The words used to describe the Bible, as Holy Scripture of the Church, in Living Faith and A Catechism for Today are “necessary”, “sufficient” and “reliable.”<sup>20</sup>

## 11. New interpretations and changing understandings

Looking back through church history, we find several examples of Christians changing their interpretation of the Bible and theology in ways that affect Christian understanding of the world. Sometimes change results from new understandings of the text itself and translation. Sometimes people have reinterpreted particular passages on the basis of considering wider visions of the way of God shown elsewhere in the Bible, such as God’s justice or the offering of mercy. Sometimes developments in the world we experience prompt us to look at scripture with new eyes. Notable instances of change include altering interpretation on slavery and race, supporting the ordination of

women in many Protestant churches, and turning to a new understanding of and relationships with people of other faiths. In Canada, new understandings of scripture have helped churches answer the call to seek reconciliation with Aboriginal peoples.

Sadly, we must confess that the Bible has not always been used to promote the common good for all people. Some passages have been identified as “texts of terror” for advocating anything from the oppression of women to genocide.<sup>21</sup> Faithful men and women have sought to address difficult Biblical passages in many ways over the years; for some, this has prompted new models for reading the Bible, such as feminist and postcolonial, which have provided churches with new insights.

Not everyone accepts each new interpretation. But there has never been a time when there has only been one interpretation of the Bible. Even in the Bible itself there are tensions: four gospels, several creation stories, differences of opinion from one letter writer to another, and more. New interpretations will always be proposed to address new (and old) issues. As Living Faith declares: “Relying on the Holy Spirit, we seek the application of God’s word for our time.” (5.4) The church must always look afresh at the Bible and do the difficult, but rewarding work of more fully understanding what the text can teach us today.

## 12. The role of worship

While seeking to understand scripture and its authority, we are wise to remember the central place of preaching in the life of the church. When God’s people gather as a worshipping community, the written word, through the work of the Holy Spirit, is proclaimed and points to the Living Word, Jesus Christ. It is a moment when the world behind the text, meets the lives and current world of the hearers, and seeks to equip God’s people to engage in Christ’s mission to the world. Jesus himself, when visiting the synagogue in Nazareth, used the moment of public worship to read scripture (Isaiah 61:1, 2) and proclaim its fulfilment in himself: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:21) Question 67 in *A Catechism For Today* links the reading and study of scripture with worship in a helpful way: “The regular reading and study of scripture, together with the hearing of the word in public worship, are some of the richest joys of Christian commitment.”

When God’s people gather to pray, sing, celebrate the sacraments, read scripture and interpret it, they are nourished on the words of eternal life. As we are reminded in Deuteronomy 8:3 – a passage quoted by Jesus when he was being tempted by the devil – “one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” When God’s people gather, they don’t do it because a speaker has something unique to say on his or her own, but in hopeful anticipation that God’s energizing and probing wisdom will speak a fresh word to them, their communities and world.

## 13. An awareness of our own contexts

While we work prayerfully and thoughtfully to hear God’s word in the Bible, it is also important that we be aware of our own contexts. Every person has a history which includes an upbringing, socio-economic context, linguistic frame-of-reference, perspective, etc. It is very difficult to be fully impartial or “objective” when we read the scriptures. We must be honest about that.

While we work to listen for God’s word to us in the present day, we may be tempted to think that our own initial reading of scripture is the only reading. One way to grapple with this temptation is to ask intelligent questions about the passages under consideration, such as:

- What does God seem to be doing in this text?
- Might God be doing something similar in our world?
- Who are the persons or groups in this text?
- How are we dissimilar or similar?<sup>22</sup>

Another way to grapple with this temptation to think that our own reading is the only reading is to learn from those who are different from ourselves – especially by listening to the way they interpret the Bible, and by listening to the questions they ask of various passages. For example, Professor Musa Dube from Botswana asks “How can we know and respect the Other?”<sup>23</sup> By learning to ask broader questions and from different perspectives, we may see new aspects of God’s word.<sup>24</sup>

The process of studying a text to draw out a meaning is called exegesis. But the process of reading a meaning into a text, a meaning which may not have originally been present, is called eisegesis. Much like “proof-texting”, the practice of finding an isolated passage and quoting it out of context to support a point-of-view, deliberate eisegesis contaminates biblical study. Every student of the Bible must be careful to examine their motives and ask whether or not they are seeking God’s will, or simply their own.

Hopefully the principles listed below will help in the process of interpretation. But it needs to be stressed that the choices we make about which passages to study and which to ignore or gloss over may be choices that reflect our own biases and agendas. As Christians, we should approach scripture with humility, seeking God’s will. Sometimes we will find what we expect to find. Other times, we will be surprised, and may need to adapt to a different perspective.

#### **14. One perspective on why scripture is authoritative**

In light of what has been said, here are six points that may help us think about how scripture is authoritative.

1. Scripture is the primary way we learn about and encounter God’s will.
2. God uses scripture to judge and to heal.
3. Jesus himself appeals to the authority of scripture.
4. If we look within the Bible itself, its authors confirm divine origin.
5. God’s people have affirmed its use as authoritative for thousands of years and we stand in solidarity with them as an ongoing community of faith.
6. Biblical authority appears in the way that reading the Bible, through the power of the Holy Spirit, can generate new relationships between the reader, God, other people, and creation, as they look to pattern themselves in the living Word, Jesus Christ.

#### **15. Images and metaphors for what the Bible is and does**

Over the years, people have used various models to help understand the Bible as they have sought to interpret scriptures. None of the models are perfect, and they do not always agree; some make more sense in certain situations than in others. Still, each can be helpful in some ways, so we point out a selection here, with strengths and weaknesses.

##### The Bible as story

In this view, the Bible’s various parts come together to tell one overarching story of God’s relationship with the world; this story begins with creation, reaches a climax with Jesus, and ends with the vision of a new heaven and a new earth in the book of Revelation. This image helps us to understand the wider movements and themes within scripture better, and to see our place within them. However, looking at the Bible in these terms can obscure the fact that the Bible is not set up like an ordinary story, but is made up of many books, some of which are not stories at all. Moreover, the Bible-as-story model does not always make it clear that any overarching narrative is a theological interpretation, and threatens to fit the Bible to the interpretation.

##### The Bible as reference library

This model depicts the Bible as a collection of books which you use to look up information that you need when you need it. You can consult more than one book at a time to see how one might help you understand another. This understanding takes the variety of types of writing in the Bible seriously, helping you to read poetry as poetry and history as history, and so on. However, this does not necessarily stop you from spending too much time in one section of the library, while neglecting others.

##### The Bible as script for sacred living

Another way of thinking about the Bible is that it is like the script of a play or a musical score which readers must bring to life in their actions in the world. Feminist Reformed theologian Letty Russell writes that

The Bible continues to be a liberating word as I hear it together with others and struggle to live out its story. For me the Bible is “scripture,” or sacred writing, because it functions as “script,” or prompting for my life. Its authority in my life stems from its story of God’s invitation to participation in the restoration of wholeness, peace, and justice in the world. Responding to this story has made it my own story, or script, through the power of the Spirit at work in communities of struggle and faith.”<sup>25</sup>



This model focuses on the way that the Bible forms people into disciples. Will Willimon is a bishop in the United Methodist Church. He notes, “The truthfulness of scripture is in the lives it is able to produce.”<sup>26</sup> One great strength of this understanding of the Bible is that it takes into account the fact that people are embodied creatures; it acknowledges that reading the Bible should change the whole person, and not just the way that a person thinks. Sadly, the witness of the lives of readers of the Bible is not always convincing. It is also not always easy to know how to perform a book like, for example, 1 Chronicles.

#### The Bible as eyeglasses

Calvin compared the Bible to the eyeglasses we must use to see clearly.<sup>27</sup> Using that same metaphor, American theologian Garrett Green writes, “The scriptures are not something we look at, but rather look through, lenses that refocus what we see into an intelligible pattern.”<sup>28</sup> That is, in this model, the Bible changes the way we see, allowing us a vision of truths about the world that we would not be able to see without God’s word, including granting readers a vision of God working in creation. This image helpfully reminds us that the Bible is never the goal of the churches’ mission, but rather is used in looking for God at work in the world. Still, this model in itself does not tell us where to look in the world, and there is always a danger that we will bring the Bible to bear on one area of the world while missing God where we are not looking.

#### The Bible as lamp/map/compass

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” we read in the Psalms (119:105). This image and others like it, such as map or compass, present the Bible as a tool for helping you find your way in the world. To that end, this view focuses on the life of faith as a journey, bringing out the important aspect of discipleship as following Jesus Christ. A strength of this image is that travelling involves the whole self, and seeing the Bible as a guiding light reminds us that the life of faith is not just about intellectual beliefs. A beacon is also light available to more than one person. No one needs to be guided by this light alone. Yet, this model is mainly for the pilgrims; it does not say much about the world and its transformation through the power of the grace of God.

#### The Bible as measuring tool

The scriptures can be pictured as a ruler, as a measuring tape, as a level. As mentioned earlier, the word “canon” is connected to the idea of measuring. This model emphasizes the word of God’s role in the judgement of human actions, as a check on whether people measure up. Perhaps because of this, it seems to be the image most favoured by people drafting subordinate standards and texts for occasions such as ordinations. This model offers a way to set a standard for a church. However, problems can arise when people think of the Bible as exactly like a kilometre or a litre: such units of measurement as these have simple, defined standards, easily consulted, but the Bible’s standard is God’s own self, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and any measurement of life taken by human beings from the Bible will always be an interpretation open to revision through new insights offered by God.

### **16. Aids for interpreting the Bible**

As Christians who conclude that the Bible is authoritative, we want to do our very best in our attempts to understand what the Bible is revealing to us about the word God is speaking to us today. If we are to honour the Bible’s richness, we will admit that no one person can figure it all out by themselves: we need one another, as well as the faithful who have gone before us; we need help interpreting scripture. So here is some help in the often multi-layered process of interpretation. Below are several insights which seek to honour the authority and complexity of scripture as we seek to interpret it.

#### 16.A The Holy Spirit

It should be stressed again that it is only with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, that we can faithfully interpret scripture. As it states in the Westminster Confession (1.5), “our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority [of the Word of God], is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.” This affirmation is echoed in Living Faith 5.1: “The Holy Spirit gives us inner testimony to the unique authority of the Bible and is the source of its power.” On our own, we have no capacity to fully grasp the words we read and seek to live.

## 16.B Heinrich Bullinger

Bullinger was a 16th century Swiss theologian. He held 5 principles of interpretation that are helpful today.<sup>29</sup> Each principle is listed below with some short explanation. Some language has been updated to reflect modern usage:

1. Scripture should be interpreted by scripture, the more obscure passages by the clearer

This means, if one passage is confusing, we look at other passages on similar topics. The hope is that other passage(s) will be able to shed light on the more difficult one.

2. With attention to language, to historical setting, to the author's intention

This means that looking to a word's meaning and context can be important. For example, the word "cool" today means more than just a low temperature. Some biblical words also have more meanings that the original author may have had in mind. Context is very important. For example, if a passage says that "All chocolate is bad," but it was originally written to a group of people who were all allergic to chocolate, then we have to take that into consideration. The author was surely looking out for their health and not pronouncing a universal principle for all-time. This is a light-hearted example, but others exist for more serious issues.

3. In the light of the church's understanding of scripture

We're encouraged to lean on the enduring wisdom of the church and its teachers. It has long and deep wisdom, dating back centuries from which we can benefit. There are many different commentaries available. Bible teachers and ministers should also be a helpful resource to know the historic wisdom of the church. In The Presbyterian Church in Canada, we expect ministers to have been trained in both historic and present-day understandings of the Bible.

4. Any authentic interpretation of scripture will increase love for God and love for humanity

Jesus emphasizes the great commandment as loving God with our whole being and our neighbours as ourselves. Therefore, any interpretation that instead advances hate, greed, etc. is surely misplaced. We must have this central command in mind as we interpret scripture. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world...".

5. All true interpretations of scripture presuppose that the heart of the interpreter loves God and seeks to do God's will

When we go to the Bible to find out what it "says" about something, we must ask whose agenda we are trying to further. It is sometimes possible to find small chunks of scripture and pull them out of context to support a variety of views. So we need to pray before we read the Bible, asking that God purify our motives so that they align with God's own. Interpretation is not an abstract dusty exercise, but an act of love and devotion, furthering what Jesus taught us to pray: "Your will be done." (Matthew 6:10)

## 16.C The United Presbyterian Church of the United States of America

In 1982 this denomination produced a resource to help summarize some of the basic principles of interpretation from the Reformed tradition. Here are these six basic rules for interpreting the Bible found in this tradition's confessions:

1. First, Jesus Christ, as our redeemer, is the central focus of scripture.
2. Second, our appeal should be to the plain text of scripture, to the grammatical and historical context, rather than to allegorical or subjective fantasy.
3. Third, the Holy Spirit aids us in interpreting and applying God's message.
4. Fourth, the doctrinal consensus of the early church as summarized in the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Definition of Chalcedon is the "rule of faith" that guides us.
5. Fifth, all interpretations must accord with the "rule of love," the two-fold commandment to love God and to love our neighbour.
6. Sixth, interpretation of the Bible requires human scholarship in order to establish the best text, to understand the original languages, and to interpret the influence of the historical and cultural context in which the divine message has come.

Some of these principles are reflected in Bullinger's approach. Yet they stand as strong summary statements of much of the wisdom in the Reformed tradition.

#### 16.D Living Faith and The Westminster Confession of Faith

Living Faith, the most recent subordinate standard of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, includes a section on the Bible which has been partly excerpted above. As a statement of our faith, its words offer a guidepost for our work of interpretation by providing a framework for understanding the aims and reasons behind interpretation.

The whole section is reproduced here:

- 5.1 The Bible has been given to us  
by the inspiration of God  
to be the rule of faith and life.  
It is the standard of all doctrine  
by which we must test any word that comes to us  
from church, world, or inner experience.  
We subject to its judgment  
all we believe and do.  
Through the Scriptures  
the church is bound only to Jesus Christ its King and Head.  
He is the living Word of God  
to whom the written word bears witness.
- 5.2 The Holy Spirit gives us inner testimony  
to the unique authority of the Bible  
and is the source of its power.  
The Bible, written by human hands,  
is nonetheless the word of God  
as no other word ever written.  
To it no other writings are to be added.  
The Scriptures are necessary, sufficient, and reliable,  
revealing Jesus Christ, the living Word.
- 5.3 Both Old and New Testaments were written  
within communities of faith  
and accepted as Scripture by them.  
Those who seek to understand the Bible  
need to stand within the church  
and listen to its teaching.
- 5.4 The Bible is to be understood in the light  
of the revelation of God's work in Christ.  
The writing of the Bible was conditioned  
by the language, thought,  
and setting of its time.  
The Bible must be read in its historical context.  
We interpret Scripture  
as we compare passages,  
seeing the two Testaments in light of each other,  
and listening to commentators past and present.  
Relying on the Holy Spirit,  
we seek the application of God's word for our time.

The Westminster Confession of Faith has long been a subordinate standard in The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Its first chapter is about scripture and stresses how necessary it is. The confession states that “The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his glory, man's [sic] salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture....” (1.6) At the same time, it states that “All things in scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.” (1.7) In other words, if it is necessary for salvation, scripture will offer sufficient and clear understanding.

When it comes to the matter of interpretation, the confession states that “The infallible rule of interpretation of scripture is the scripture itself.” This means that other parts of scripture should be searched to shed light on more obscure passages. As it goes on to explain, “when there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.” (1.9)

The Westminster Confession also confirms that “our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority [of scripture], is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.” (1.5)

### 17. A Note on the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral”

People often talk about the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” as a helpful tool when trying to interpret something. Although John Wesley (1703–1791) never used the term, he did refer to these ideas. Here is the quadrilateral:

Scripture	Tradition
Reason	Experience

The idea is that you reflect with these four lenses to understand something better and make a decision. However, this was never intended to be a four-legged stool, i.e. never was it intended that these four things be weighed equally. To Wesley, scripture was primary, and our tradition and reason helped us better understand scripture. Further, “experience” was never our ‘isolated modern experience’. What was meant was our experience of God’s Spirit helping us grow in obedience to his word.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps it’s helpful to understand the quadrilateral like this:

1. Scripture guides us.
2. Reason, Tradition and our Experience of God’s Spirit helping us grow in obedience to his word help us better understand how scripture guides us.

### 18. Conclusion

The Bible has long been authoritative for God’s people. It has also been the primary place where we seek God’s will no matter what lies before us. Through the Bible, guided by the Holy Spirit, we listen for what God is speaking to us today.

Speaking of himself as “the gate for the sheep,” Jesus said that his sheep follow him “because they know his voice.” (John 10:4) We have offered this document in the hope that it may help provide some basic background to scripture and its authority, and also some practical tools for when we try to interpret the Bible as we seek to know Jesus’ voice and follow him.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Living Faith 5.1.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Jackson Flanders, Jr., Robert Wilson Crapps, David Anthony Smith, *People of the Covenant: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (London: SCM Presss, 1949), p.134–35.

<sup>5</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Last Word* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2005), p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> Wright, *The Last Word*, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> See Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 1991.

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. xx of The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I.vii.4, p. 79.

<sup>9</sup> Wright, *The Last Word*, p. 37ff.

<sup>10</sup> Second Helvetic Confession.

<sup>11</sup> See Douglas John Hall, *What Christianity is Not: An Exercise in “Negative” Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), p. 52–3.

<sup>12</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*: “God is its Author. Thus, the highest proof of scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it.” ... “the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.” 1.7.4.

<sup>13</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity* (Oxford University Press, New York, NY: 1999), p. 308ff.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Craig Evans, *Jesus and His World: The Archaeological Evidence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), p. 85.

<sup>15</sup> See the footnotes in Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Wright, *The Last Word*, p. 72.

<sup>17</sup> Karl Barth, “The Doctrinal Task of the Reformed Churches”, delivered at the General Assembly of the Union of Reformed Churches at Emden, September 1923.

<sup>18</sup> Living Faith 5.3.

<sup>19</sup> These were: the verbal inerrancy of scripture, the divinity of Jesus Christ, the virgin birth, the substitutionary theory of the atonement, and the physical resurrection and bodily return of Christ.

<sup>20</sup> Readers are encouraged to read the entire report found in the A&P 2010, p. 287–90.

<sup>21</sup> The phrase “texts of terror” comes from Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984).

<sup>22</sup> These four questions are based on a set of questions proposed by The Rev. Dr. Stephen Farris in a course for lay preachers and leaders of worship.

<sup>23</sup> “Toward a Post-Colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,” in *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women’s Theology*, ed. Kwok Pui-lan (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), p. 89–102, 98.

<sup>24</sup> One helpful resource in this regard may be, Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *Embracing the Other: The Transformative Spirit of Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), particularly the chapter “Overcoming the Gendered Division of Humanity”, p. 91–114.

<sup>25</sup> Letty M. Russell, “Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation”, in Letty M. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 1985, p. 138.

<sup>26</sup> William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN: 2002), p. 130.

<sup>27</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.6.1.

<sup>28</sup> Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 107.

<sup>29</sup> See Heinrich Bullinger, *Decades*, Parker Society ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1852), Third Sermon for the First Decade.

<sup>30</sup> In an essay called “the Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley” that appeared in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* in the Spring 1985 edition, historical theologian Albert Outler says this: “The term “quadrilateral” does not occur in the Wesley corpus—and more than once, I have regretted having coined it for contemporary use, since it has been so widely misconstrued. But if we are to accept our responsibility for seeking *intellecta* for our faith, in any other fashion than a “theological system” or, alternatively, a juridical statement of “doctrinal standards,” then this method of a conjoint recourse to the fourfold guide-lines of scripture, tradition, reason and experience, may hold more promise for an evangelical and ecumenical future than we have realized as yet—by comparison, for example, with biblicism, or traditionalism, or, rationalism, or empiricism. It is far more valid than the reduction of Christian authority to the dyad of “scripture” and “experience” (so common in Methodist ranks today). The “quadrilateral” requires of a theologian no more than what he or she might reasonably be held accountable for: which is to say, a familiarity with scripture that is both critical and faithful; plus, an acquaintance with the wisdom of the Christian past; plus, a taste for logical analysis as something more than a debater’s weapon; plus, a vital, inward faith that is upheld by the assurance of grace and its prospective triumphs, in this life.”

**Recommendation No. 7** (adopted, p. 39)

That the document “Understanding and Interpreting the Bible” be commended to congregations, presbyteries and other groups in The Presbyterian Church in Canada for their use.

**Recommendation No. 8** (adopted, p. 39)

That sessions, presbyteries and other interested groups using the document “Understanding and Interpreting the Bible” report comments to the Committee on Church Doctrine through the Assembly Office by January 31, 2017, and that the results of these comments be reported to a future General Assembly.