Practicing scriptural authority

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A recent contribution by Karlfried Froehlich to a dialogue within the Lutheran church around the role of scripture begins, "The crisis of Biblical authority in our churches must be seen in the wider context of the general crisis of authority in today's culture—a culture from which the notion of the Bible as an authoritative word for anyone has long since vanished."[1] Although presumably an exaggeration, the statement provides a helpful context or starting point for the present conversation.

It is difficult to imagine any church, much less one with roots going back to the Reformation, not granting to scripture some form of authority. The very term *scripture* implies an authoritative writing. Historically, Protestant churches were born through struggle with the church of the time over the primacy of scripture as an authority. *Sola scriptura* (scripture alone) became a catch phrase for this reliance on scripture. Today the church against which the Reformers struggled is more willing to recognize how it too privileges biblical authority. Within the context of church, scripture and authority go hand in hand.

The challenge for the church is to be a community within which scripture has authority, which practices scriptural authority, which responds with trust to the invitation of scripture to be an authority.

The article on scripture in the 1995 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* reflects this larger historical commitment: "We acknowledge the Scripture as the authoritative source and standard for preaching and teaching about faith and life, for distinguishing truth from error, for discerning between good and evil, and for guiding prayer and worship."[1] The language of the article avoids many of the fighting words frequently used in contemporary debate around the doctrine of scripture, but it makes the clear affirmation that scripture is authoritative. For the

Christian church, including its Anabaptist wing, scripture has authority and therefore holds a unique power and place. Through it, God speaks and gives life.

But, Karl Froehlich asserts, this biblical authority is in crisis, a crisis or loss of place it has in common with many other authorities formerly respected. Using the historical analysis of Jeffrey Stout as a background,[2] Froehlich sees this "flight from authority" as linked to the phases of Western intellectual history. External authorities have been replaced by an almost unquestioned faith in individual reason and judgment, resting on personal experience. Lesslie Newbigin speaks of a way of thinking that rejects appeal to traditional authorities "except insofar as they could justify themselves before the bar of individual reason and conscience."[3] The language for and explanation of the present dynamic may vary, but an overall consensus prevails: we live in a time when suspicion of all authority is dominant, with reliance on external authority largely replaced by confidence in autonomous and individual reason. The church is not exempt from this dynamic: it too has lost authority in society, and those who are part of it have been influenced by the same general trend. The result, regardless of official statements, is a significant undermining of scriptural authority within the church, which creates the crisis of authority referred to by Froehlich.

The reality described above presents a significant challenge to the church. Perhaps most obviously, a tension or gap has developed between official church statements on scriptural authority, and day-to-day life and thought of people in the congregation. Of course, one way of resolving that tension is by bringing the official church statements into line with practice. This appears to be the approach of some, including Robin Scroggs, who suggests that the claim that the Bible has authority no longer makes sense, and that we therefore "forthrightly give up any claim that the Bible is authoritative . . . in guidance for contemporary faith and morals."[4]

A more common approach in the past thirty years or so has been to defend as aggressively as possible the authority of the Bible through polemical debates around the doctrine of scripture. Harold Lindsell opened the preface of his 1976 *The Battle for the Bible* with this claim: "I regard the subject of this book, biblical inerrancy, to be the most important theological topic of this age.

A great battle rages about it among people called evangelicals."[5] For much of the second half of the twentieth century, espousing a high view of scriptural authority was the benchmark for the evangelical movement. When the Evangelical Theological Society was founded in 1949, it insisted on only one doctrinal affirmation: "The Bible alone and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written, and therefore inerrant in the autographs."[6]

Debate about what this statement meant and who was orthodox has been intense, sometimes highly technical and philosophical, and frequently vicious. Terms such as *infallible*, *inerrant*, and *plenary inspiration* were defined over and over again and minute distinctions made among various positions. In its early years, Fuller Theological Seminary's faculty devoted countless hours to debate over how to understand scripture, and some faculty left the institution, or felt forced to leave, because they did not hold the right position or were not persuaded that others on faculty held the right position.[7] Because commitment to an inerrant scripture was the primary affirmation holding some movements together (or not holding them together, in many cases), having a precise doctrine of scripture was considered critical, with the result that arguments and refinements were almost endless.

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The intensity and focus of these debates give the impression that participants considered defining and proving scriptural authority to be the key strategy in defending scriptural authority in the face of contemporary suspicion of it or hesitancy about it. Some of the arguments used, however, remind one of Eve's exaggerated response to the snake in the garden when she quotes God as having said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, *neither shall you touch it,* lest you die" (Gen. 3:3; cf. 2:17). Those concerned sought to ensure that scripture was protected, by adding an extra layer of insurance.

I question the effectiveness of this strategy. Proofs for God's existence may provide comfort to those who have faith, but they seldom persuade nonbelievers of God's existence, much less of God's personal dynamic and love. In the same way, arguments for

biblical authority tend to be inadequate for persuading those who are suspicious of it. Added to this limitation is the reality that all too often the debates appeared to be more about determining orthodoxy than about securing scripture's authority. Those who affirmed a particular doctrine were considered acceptable and faithful; those who held a somewhat different position were denounced and even rejected.

My contention is that a more effective response, and perhaps one more appropriate to the "crisis of biblical authority," is the reality of a community finding in scripture the source of life. An Anabaptist approach to scripture can never be satisfied with focus on a theoretical position. To adapt the words of Jesus (Matt. 7:21): Not everyone who has a correct doctrine of scripture will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. A communal witness to biblical authority, I suggest, is more effective in persuading people of the power of scripture than are proofs and arguments for the authority of scripture. What is more, this approach is faithful to the direction of scripture itself.

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When I make these statements, I imply a particular understanding of the nature of authority. One aspect of the so-called crisis of biblical authority is a misunderstanding of how the Bible has authority. *Authority* in many—perhaps most—contexts implies ability or power to enforce that authority. Thus the authority of law passed by legislation includes the enforcement of that law through the use of police and the judicial system. The authority of a professor includes the element of grading. The authority of a CEO of a corporation includes in various ratios the ability to reprimand, reward, and release employees. Sometimes the arguments for biblical authority appeared to accept this notion of authority and seemed to want to impose or enforce that authority.

But the Bible's authority is not enforced. Rather, biblical authority is invitational. Froehlich suggests that "in the religious realm, acceptance alone established authority, an authority that is unable to motivate compliance except by persuasion."[8] He quotes Catholic theologian Avery Dulles: "Authority is that which (or

the person whom) one has reason to trust."[9] Biblical authority thus cannot be proved or enforced but must be lived and demonstrated. As the church lives from the authority of the Bible, it witnesses to that authority and invites others to trust it and accept it for themselves.

The challenge for the church, then, is to be a community within which scripture has authority, which practices scriptural authority, which responds with trust to the invitation of scripture to be an authority. How might the church become this kind of community? I have no magic formula, no simple answer to that question. But several practices and principles can aid in the process. The final paragraph of the article in the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* provides a helpful starting point for a number of these:

> *The Bible is the essential book of the church. Through the Bible, the Holy Spirit nurtures the obedience of faith to Jesus Christ and guides the church in shaping its teaching, witnessing, and worship. We commit ourselves to persist and delight in reading, studying, and meditating on the Scriptures. We participate in the church's task of interpreting the Bible and of discerning what God is saying in our time by examining all things in the light of Scripture. Insights and understandings which we bring to the interpretation of the Scripture are to be tested in the faith community.*[10]

Scripture study is a source of delight. Psalm 1 speaks of blessed people as those whose "delight is in the law of the Lord," on which they "meditate day and night" (v. 2). Similarly, our confession of faith commits us to "persist and delight in reading, studying, and meditating on Scriptures." One inescapable prerequisite for practicing biblical authority is regular study of the Bible, as individuals and, more importantly, with other members of the church. And this study is to be embraced not as duty or obligation but as joy and delight.

Scripture points beyond itself to God. Scripture is not the ultimate or supreme authority. God is. The confession of faith speaks of the Holy Spirit nurturing "obedience of faith to Jesus Christ"; through scripture study we discern "what God is saying in

our time." Ultimately, the goal of scripture study is not to hear what *scripture* is saying but to discover what *God* is saying and doing today, and what God wishes us to do and say today. Scripture's authority is derivative; it can never replace the living God who acts and speaks today.

The primary context for authoritative interpretation of scripture is the church. There is no use of scripture that does not include interpretation. It is therefore meaningless to speak of scriptural authority without at the same time speaking about how scripture becomes authoritative. And that process requires interpretation.

The church is the community of those who have responded to God's call to become a people through whom God acts. Those in the church *practice* the faith. Scripture is not authoritative within the society of professional biblical scholars, committed Christians though they may be. Scripture is not authoritative as individuals study it by themselves, valuable as this study may be in the interpretative process. Rather, it is in the community of those committed to making scripture central to their life that the interpretive process can be authoritative.

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Ironically, the tendency in parts of the church to emphasize individual Bible study, to stress each individual Christian's responsibility to come to his or her own understanding of scripture, fits with the spirit of our times, giving individual reason and judgment supreme authority, better than it fits with a church-centred approach to interpretation. The language of the confession of faith may be inadequate when it calls for insights and interpretations to be tested in the faith community: at this point it appears to make individual study of scripture primary and broader testing secondary rather than pointing to the communal process as the norm.

Scripture study leads to transformation. The appropriate result of scripture study is not merely increased knowledge but transformation and change. Ethicist Stanley Hauerwas suggests that "North American Christians are trained to believe that they are capable of reading the Bible without spiritual and moral

transformation."[11] The Bible is not a book we should turn to when we want to find support for positions we already espouse; it is a book we turn to when we want to open ourselves up to God and to the ways God wants to change us to make us part of God's ministry in our world.

Applying a hermeneutics of suspicion to our interpretations has value. The phrase *hermeneutics of suspicion* is used of an approach in biblical studies that asks interpreters to be suspicious of the text as we have received it. This approach recognizes that biblical writers did not have complete information and wrote to support particular positions, perhaps in the midst of controversy with other positions. If we accept this premise, we will approach the text with a critical, even suspicious, mind.

We might debate the helpfulness of this kind of hermeneutics of suspicion. But I would suggest that a hermeneutics of suspicion that focuses on the interpretive process rather than on the writing process is essential. The natural tendency when doing biblical study is to discover in scripture support for previously held positions and validation for our own situations. Given this tendency, a hermeneutics of suspicion should raise questions about any interpretation that confirms previously held theological positions, or that appears to fit too comfortably with our gender, economic status, political leanings, etc. Such an interpretation is not necessarily wrong, but we have to take care so as not to read our preferences into the text.

We also need to be suspicious of readings that appear to apply primarily to others. Frequently in Bible study we discover texts that we read as God's word of judgment or correction to others. Again, such readings may not be wrong, but we must exercise caution. Even if they are legitimate readings, in most cases they are less helpful than readings that address us. We do well to remind ourselves that quoting or using scripture is seldom an effective weapon in battles with others about theology or ethics. This kind of hermeneutics of suspicion can be valuable in granting scripture authority for us.

Froehlich suggests there is a crisis of biblical authority within our churches. I expect he is correct. Developing a doctrine of scripture that helps us understand how scripture is and has come to be authoritative is an appropriate theological endeavour. But I

doubt that this effort will resolve the crisis. Rather, what is needed is for the church community to turn to the Bible and study it in anticipation that we will be transformed. Through such study we can come to see and hear more clearly what God is doing and what God wants us to do. At various key moments in the history of the people of God, scripture has played a seminal role in the beginnings of a reformation. That potential also exists today.

Notes

[1] *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 21.
[2] Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); quoted in Terence E. Fretheim and Karfried Froehlich, *The Bible as Word of God: In a Postmodern Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 11.
[3] Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996).
[4] Robin Scroggs, "The Bible as Foundational Document," *Interpretation* 49, no. 1 (1995): 23.
[5] Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976).
[6] *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1958), quoted in D. G. Hart, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 132.
[7] See the absorbing account of this conflict in George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987).
[8] Fretheim and Froehlich, *The Bible as Word of God*, 14.
[9] Avery Dulles, "The Authority of Scripture: A Catholic Perspective," in *Scripture in the Jewish and Christian Traditions: Authority, Interpretation, Relevance*, ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1982), 14.
[10] *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, 22.
[11] Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 15.

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