

Biblical Authority and Moral Responsibility: The Word Cannot Be Silenced, But Must Not Be Made Void

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I

In his book *Spirit of Protestantism*, Robert McAfee Brown struggles with a question of Protestant identity. “Who are Protestants?” he asks. What does Protestantism stand for? While Catholicism has well defined-boundaries, discernable practices, and infallible dogmas, Protestantism appears “all over the place.” It does not have recognizable boundaries, and consequently it is extremely difficult to know when an individual or a church has ceased to be Protestant, and whether all who claim the title either deserve or honor it.¹

In an attempt to answer these questions, Brown identifies seven “Central Protestant Affirmations”, which, in his view, form the Spirit of Protestantism: Centrality of Grace and Life of Faith, Authority of Scriptures, Sovereignty of God, Priesthood of All Believers, The Calling, Loving God with the Mind, and Worship of God.

Of the seven, Scripture occupies a unique place.

The Reformers read their Bibles and discovered enormous discrepancies between its message and the teachings and practices of the Church. They discovered with dismay that human traditions were invested with authority which should belong to the Bible alone. Tradition both defined and interpreted the meaning of the biblical message. For Reformers, this development meant retrogression of a fatal kind. They insisted that the Church must be *a listening Church*, “which does not mean listening to its own interior monologue, but listening to the voice it hears in Scripture—the voice it dares to call the voice of God . . .” (Brown 69).

¹R. M. Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1965), XIX.

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But the degree of consistency and enthusiasm of Protestant claims about Scripture are slowly disappearing. In many circles, the Bible is no longer the only source, standard, and test of faith and practice. As *Sola Scriptura* (the locus of authority and central identifying mark of the Reformation) fades away from many Protestant minds, the concept of authority vanishes as well, and thus the sense of identity is lost. This, in Dr. Brown's view, is the Achille's heel of Protestantism. Ambiguity about authority is its vulnerable spot. This is also, in our view, the reason many churches grow increasingly more timid and Christianity less attractive.

Reasons for the Crisis

The reasons for the loss of biblical authority as formulated by the Reformers can be expressed in three points.

1. Biblicism. The rejection of tradition as a source of authority for Christian faith and practice created a vacuum. Reformers, but especially their followers, endeavored to compensate for the lost support of tradition. Scripture became less and less human in their eyes. Soon the Holy Spirit was credited for everything written on its pages. The dictational theory of inspiration reduced biblical writers to mere instruments. The claims of the Holy Spirit's exclusive authorship could not tolerate even a single error, real or apparent, without threatening the entire system of faith. In the place of an infallible pope emerges an infallible book, and denial of the human element in production of Scripture yielded a docetic Word.

2. Criticism. Reaction to this way of thinking was quick and vigorous. Several unusual questions came to the fore. There are errors in the Bible. The question is, how many, and what kind of errors are they? On what basis do we recognize them as such? If there are errors, then are we not duty bound to explain them to the contemporary mind? And finally, what happens then to biblical authority? The rise of critical scholarship charged itself to answer these and other questions by following several steps.

a) The emphasis shifted away from the Bible to Jesus. From the cradle to the Baby, as Luther would say.

b) The Bible was no longer perceived as the Word of God, but rather as a bearer of witness to the Word made flesh.

c) In the process of interpretation, the Bible as a document has been subjected to the same scrutiny as any other book.

d) The accounts of miracles and supernatural events received a serious make-over. The interpreters endeavored to explain biblical concepts and judge their validity by applying the twentieth century scientific, empirical criteria of truth.

"Can we retain a Protestant emphasis on the certainty of Scripture, and still do justice to the fact that we live in the twentieth century?" asks R. M. Brown (73). Yes, we can, he insists. However, there are conditions. First, the Bible can

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remain an absolute authority if the domain of that authority is reduced to a size appropriate for any document: to be a witness. The Bible is unique and authoritative only because it testifies of Jesus, not because it has been inspired. It does not tell us how to live, or what God's will is for us today. Only as we grasp who the Jesus of the Bible is can we receive daily guidance from it.

Second, the authority of Scripture is located in the meaning of the message, not in the words or propositions, claim critical scholars. The truth is not contained in the literal meaning of sentences. Consequently, we need not be disturbed as we read about the sun standing still (Josh 10:12-14), or Saul slaying the women and children of the Amalekites (1 Sam 15:3). With Bultmann, we will recognize the exact meaning of these and similar events as myths. Scripture is invested with the authority of a myth.

Third, the Protestant reader is particularly encouraged by the belief that the Holy Spirit speaks through the Scripture today. *He* speaks, not the words of Scripture. The words are only a vehicle. Only earthen vessels. He, the Spirit, gives the meaning at the very moment of our reading.

Finally, the same Spirit actualizes the recognition of the biblical message as authority. Through His influence we become more than just readers. We become participants in the unfolding drama of salvation. Reinhold Niebuhr observes that as we read the Word and look at the world around us, we discern the shallowness and inadequacies of non-biblical ways of looking at life, and thus we can discover some sense of life's meaning (Brown 79).

3. Alternative Loci of Authority. If we say, with Brown, Barth, and like-minded theologians, that Jesus, not the biblical statement, is authoritative, we then beg the question: who guarantees the claims of Jesus on me? With time, several answers emerged in Protestantism: personal experience, tradition, and in these postmodern times, the autonomous individual.

Personal experience of an encounter with God covers the span from mysticism to neo-orthodoxy. The claim is that the believer must look within for the authentication of his faith. Only an encounter can make biblical messages relevant, compelling, and authoritative.

The *reappearance of tradition* in Protestantism is a curious phenomenon. Its role in the Roman Catholic Church was one of the cardinal reasons for the rise of the Reformation. To be sure, the Protestant version of tradition and the consciousness of its influence on theological minds differ from the pre-Reformation times. Nevertheless, a Lutheran theology can be recognized and distinguished from an evangelical Baptist or a Methodist position. Often, the reason why certain doctrines occupy cardinal positions is based not on the testimony or the preponderance in Scripture, but simply on the particular heritage. There is, too, a recent return to the study of the Church Fathers by a number of prominent conservative scholars, such as Thomas Oden and Wayne Grudem.

The postmodern stress on the *autonomous individual* represents the latest challenge to biblical authority. Instead of relying on the Bible or ecclesiastical

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authority, there is a growing belief in the power of individual minds, guided by methods of observation, experience, and reflection, to attain the truths needed for the guidance of life. J. R. Middleton and B. J. Walsh observe:

No longer dependent on the superstitions of the past or the Bible as an external source of authoritative revelation, modern man champions his secular independence . . . And armed with the tools of modern science and technology the heroic modern individual can transform the world of objects into *subjects* of the human kingdom, serving the human sovereign and yielding its riches for human economic self-aggrandizement.²

II

Instead of rehearsing the often repeated arguments against theologies which attempt to diminish or virtually maim the authority of Scripture, I would like at this point to engage in a different exercise. The ethical discipline can be a nasty, even nosy science. It calls human beings, including theologians, to critical self-examination. What follows is a reflection on the risks and responsibilities of being right, of taking the Word of God seriously, and of handling the truth we love so dearly.

There are some serious risks to theology, to theologians, and even to Scripture, coming from conservative and liberal scholars alike.

1. Apologetic Frame of Mind. Things happen to our psyche when we constantly operate in the apologetic frame of mind where “we” are right and “other theologians” are, of course, wrong. (These attitudes may occur even when we are right about “their” wrongness.)

a) Humility may be first to suffer. Pride attacks from inside. No one knows. No one suspects. We have learned how to sound concerned and even *be* genuinely concerned. And yet, the venom of pride numbs us to the slow and imperceptible creeping in of disunity.

b) A compulsory apologetic frame of mind creates ditches and ramparts. “They” are not “us.” “We” want to come closer, but then so much may be at stake! If “we” try to reach out to “them,” it does not work. Somehow it does not come across well.

c) There is only one step between an awareness that *truth* or the *Church* are in danger—that we must act to enlighten or save—and a realization that our personal insecurity can somehow profit from the defensive posture. So we join forces, we combine efforts for a common goal, and at the same time we cater to our private, personal hurts, needs, and agendas. When that happens, conservative scholarly societies become conservative clubs. The liberal scholarly societies function as a liberal lobby. The result is not just separation and disunity. We engage in a heated “*cold war*” of sorts. A race for who can gain more influence in the field, the office, or the decision-making layers of the church.

²*Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 49.

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d) An additional risk comes when our suspicious mode of thinking leads to innocent people getting hurt. The danger is that our repentant and remorseful feelings may lead us to give up some legitimate stance as a bargaining chip for compromise and peace.

Thus the biblical authority becomes dependent on the fortunes and misfortunes of a compulsory apologetic *modus operandi*.

2. The False Protestants. The second risk comes from misconceptions about Protestantism. We return to Robert McAfee Brown's insightful analysis.

a) Protestantism as protest against something or somebody is a most common misunderstanding. Protestants protest against popes, against indulgences, against Mariology.

b) Protestantism as diluted Catholicism is the way some Catholics see their prodigal brothers and sisters. Since Protestants reject papal authority, worship of the saints, and retain only two of seven sacraments, etc., they are impoverished Catholics.

c) Protestantism as believing certain things that others do not hold is the third possible misreading. The Bible as the Word of God, the plenary inspiration, believer's baptism, righteousness by faith, the second coming of Christ, these are identifying marks of Protestantism. Identifying marks they may be, but description is not the same thing as definition. These characteristics describe; they do not identify.

d) Protestantism as the right of private judgement is the fourth possible misconception. At the onset of the Reformation, when the faithful had to believe what they were told, when personal Bible study represented a civil offence, freedom of conscience and belief loomed large. But Protestantism is more than that.

3. Reactive Theology and Belief. An apologetic frame of mind, as well as a polemic/protesting mode of thinking, create both reactive theology and reactionary belief, and these also threaten biblical authority.

a) Reactive theology is necessitated by the spread of unorthodox or dissenting views. Response to such teachings is a part of the work described in Isaiah 21 and 62 as the duty of a watchman on the walls of Zion. But should reactive work consume our entire time, determine our mood, be the sole motivator for writing and speaking? I think not.

b) By reactionary belief, we mean assent to a certain set of teachings in reaction to some opposing alternative; for example, becoming or remaining a Protestant on the basis of disenchantment with Catholicism or Orthodoxy. It will take only a short time to find good reasons for discouragement with Protestantism, and with disillusionment the power of biblical messages may be put in doubt as well.

4. My Brother's Keeper. If we believe, teach, and preach orthodox doctrines, if we are faithful in our service and ministry, if we sow the right and good seeds, God will bless us. If, on the contrary, the marriage of the "other" theo-

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gian is in trouble, if his kids rebel, if he becomes guilty of serious misconduct . . . Conclusion? Oh no, we do not *say* anything. But the thought just might cross my mind: “He is too conservative. Legalistic. The kids cannot stand it.” Or we might say to ourselves, “Oh, he is too liberal. Anything goes in his home. What can you expect?”

Am I my brother’s keeper? But who is my brother? Cain and Abel disagreed on theological issues: on atonement. The same school, identical teachers, parents, home for both of them. They were brothers and mutually keepers of each other. Disagreement on theology is unlike any other conflict. Truth is dear to us! We would die for it. *But we should not kill.*

III

The Word of God cannot be silenced. No fetters can confine its influence (2 Timothy 2:9). Yet strangely enough, Jesus called the theologians of His day to task: “So for the sake of your tradition, you have made void the word of God” (Matthew 15:6). Impossible to bind, but possible to “make void” (RSV), make “null and void” (NEB), make of “none effect” (KJV), “nullify” (NIV). What a power! What a risk for a student, a teacher, a preacher of the Word! This is where our moral responsibility for biblical authority becomes evident.

So how do we fair?

1. Biblicism. Are we biblicists? Yes and no. Yes, if we flirt too closely to a dictatorial theory of inspiration. Yes, if we close our eyes to some fingerprints of the human mind and ways of thinking in the process of inspiration. However, we are not biblicists because we confess that God used human beings, communicated His message to them, and let them express it in their own words. The work of the Holy Spirit consisted in guiding and guarding the authenticity of the message. Thus we have the Word of God expressed in human categories, just as we have divine *logos* manifested in human flesh. If biblicism divinized the Bible, the critical liberalism humanized it excessively.

2. Criticism. We may rightfully object to Historical Criticism for approaching the interpretation of the Bible as one approaches any other book. Inevitably, the authoritativeness and the sense of relevance diminished. Once we removed the supernatural, all the uniqueness vanished and it became easier to show Scripture as a piece of old literature, dated and “pre-scientific”.

But the desire to make sense out of the biblical message to the modern mind is a very important concern. This task must not be left to critical scholars alone. It is not enough to say that Scripture is relevant, nor to prove its authoritativeness on the basis of internal biblical claims. The evidence of inspiration of the Bible can *shown, demonstrated* so that non-believers can become interested. While we defend and protect the Cradle, to use Luther’s comparison again, we must show that its content, the message, speaks to the modern and the post-modern mind.

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For example, the Bible reveals the *true* condition of society. It presents the fundamental principles of behavior which transcend technology and time. The post-modern marriage faces similar stresses, and post-modern youth many of the same temptations and vices, as in biblical times. This is not a myth. This is the *truth which we possess in the earthen vessel*. Other books cannot match. Other books are not divinely inspired. Period! The Bible speaks today to the problems of AIDS, sexuality, marriage, violence. If we rehearse and expound on the issues of biblical times (idolatry, levirate, promiscuity, or cultic purity) without connecting the essence of these issues with contemporary problems, we make God's Word of no effect indeed.

This Word is the Word of Life because it presents the One who is victorious over death: Jesus. And of course, if the Bible is reliably giving us Jesus, if it is true and not mythological on that point, then why would it not be reliable on every other point concerning the human condition? Why would it not be relevant for today's life issues?

3. Alternative Loci of Authority. Personal experience (encounter) as the final criterion of biblical authenticity? No. But, the work of the Holy Spirit in enlightening the reader? Yes!

Tradition as the perimeter of theological inquiry? No. But when we write, can a non-Adventist understand us? Are we equally eloquent on grace (Lutheranism) and the second coming? Moreover, can we speak convincingly about justification by faith without falling into the ambiguity of "assurance of salvation" or universalism? Is our theologizing as free of denominational bigotry as the Bible is, while still captive to the unique message of truth given us for this generation? Is our content rich and focused, universal and particular, eternal and contemporary in the same way the Word of God is? If it is not, we again risk undermining biblical authority. The pharisaic tradition is not worse than our own idiosyncracies.

4. Apologetic Frame of Mind. As soon as we take our stand, we are categorized. These classifications are extremely simplistic and exaggerated when others try to place us. But when we classify, we think we are accurate. We use such labels as conservative, liberal, pro-ordination, against ordination of women. Yet everyone sees her/himself as "centrist". It becomes easy to see a label and not a person. "We" are not right or wrong. Rather, "we" hold certain truths that are either in or out of harmony with Scripture. "They" are not right or wrong. "They" are people who may have right or wrong ideas. If ideas are categorized easily, people are not. Consequently, our war must not be against flesh and blood, but more about the truth we hold dear, and about the Word given to us in trust. The unchristlike attitude towards those who disagree makes pluralism more appealing, and that undermines the authority of Scripture. Jesus was right and kind, firm yet gentle, uncompromising yet concerned for His opponents.

5. Are We Protestants? Yes, we are, but on condition that we understand the meaning of this term. The word "protest" comes from the Latin *pro + testari*.

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The prefix *pro* means “forth”, and *testari* stands simply for “to affirm”, “to testify”, hence *pro + testari* means “to testify *on behalf of* something”. The first two meanings of the word “protest” in Webster’s Dictionary are: “to make a solemn declaration or affirmation of; to state positively . . . or to call as a witness in affirming or denying, or to prove an affirmation.”³ Only the third meaning has the negative sense, i.e. objection to something.

So yes, we are Protestants. We feel called to affirm certain truths in our generation. If we stand against something, it is only because we are *for* something. The Reformers did not start a revolt. Their goals did not provide for, include, or plan a new church, another denomination. It was only when they had been expelled or anathematized because of their beliefs that the necessity for organization became evident.

The Seventh-day Adventists share a similar heritage. Our pioneers stood up for certain biblical truths that had remained forgotten or obscured. We must remember the days and nights these men and women spent on their knees and in the study of the Word. It was their stance that “protested” and testified. It was their testimony that became unbearable. It was due to the eloquence of their witness and the firmness of their conviction that they were unwelcome.

This has been the Bible’s lot as well. Throughout history it, too, has been persecuted, burned at the stake, exiled from among the humans. And yet it is not to be compared to the *Communist Manifesto*. It did not entice the masses to rise; it did not call to violence for truth’s sake. We release the full potential of God’s creative Word when we present the message with clarity, protesting by example, by testifying for truth in word and actions.

6. Reactive Theology. True reformation is not revolution, nor is it a reactive stance. The intentions and plans of those who witness include only a proactive testimony. Reformation comes when we build up the edifice of truth, when we live and incarnate that truth, and when we stand faithful for that truth. My old professor of evangelism at Collonges, Paul Tieche, advised us not to demolish the synagogues, the mosques, or the cathedrals in our preaching or teaching. “Build the churches, the true biblical churches in the minds of your hearers. Let the power, simplicity, and beauty of Scriptural testimony compel them to move. Then they will stay.”

7. Our Brother’s Keeper. Disagreements in theology are unlike any other disagreement. It is especially so among committed Christians. I remember how, following an incredible discussion (a dispute really), the members of the faculty at McGill would go for a cup of coffee, their conversations now friendly, as if ten minutes ago they had not quarreled. We have mixed feelings about such an attitude. Either my professors did not hold the truth they professed dear to their hearts, or they had mastered the art of disagreeing agreeably. Perhaps they had learned how to separate the human being from his/her ideas.

³Webster’s *New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983).

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Truth is dear to us. We would die for it. But we would not kill, not hurt, not malign, not doubt the “other’s” honesty.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can affirm that biblical authority is not the Achille’s heel of true Protestantism.

We release biblical authority to its optimum when we accept it as the Word which God spoke to us through human agencies.

We affirm biblical authority if we take God at His Word, rather than deciding its authenticity through our preconceived criteria.

We win people’s trust in Scripture when we make it speak to their immediate needs. Such an approach is stronger than any amount of argument from the internal testimony of the Bible.

We liberate the authority of the Bible when we express its message in terms of human beings, rather than using the jargon of theology or our own religious idiosyncracies.

We allow the exercise of biblical authority when our testimony is positive and caring. Reactive, combative, and debative modes place obstacles to Scripture’s ministry.

We allow Scripture to heal and correct erroneous convictions when we learn to care for our opponents and when, through longsuffering and patience, we give room for the influence of the Spirit of truth.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10–11)

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