



The Authority *of* Scripture

Part 1 of a Series of Papers on
BAPTIST BELIEFS

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ABSTRACT

The question of authority has always been central to Christian theology. From the time of the early church through the Reformation, believers have debated where to find the final word on what they should believe and how they should live. This paper offers a theological and pastoral affirmation of biblical authority rooted in the Baptist confessional tradition. It argues that a faithful doctrine of Scripture must be grounded in divine origin, centered upon the person and work of Christ, mediated by the Holy Spirit, and discerned within the gathered community of believers.

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Introduction

The question of authority has always been central to Christian theology. Since the early church, the people of God have continually asked where final judgment in matters of faith and life rests. In the present moment, however, this question arises with renewed urgency. The contemporary crisis of authority reflects a broader cultural shift in which trust in the church, along with its affirmation of the divine authority of Scripture, has been significantly questioned.

Digital culture intensifies this skepticism by multiplying competing voices. In his article “5 Ways the Digital Age is Transforming the Way You Think,” Samuel D. James states, “Traditional authority structures have given way to an ephemeral ‘equality’ that means the random blogger is as powerful as the veteran pastor, or the anonymous Twitter account can demand deference merely

with a powerful story.”¹ The result is an environment where truth is increasingly treated as negotiable and moral norms as outdated. Within such a context, Christian proclamation struggles to be heard as anything more than one narrative among many.

This crisis affects the church in two distinct but related ways. In the pulpit, preaching competes with rival authorities that claim greater immediacy and relevance, whether political ideology, charismatic personalities, therapeutic discourse, or prosperity-oriented spirituality. Ministerial authority, once assumed by virtue of office and calling, must now be constantly justified. In the pews, believers arrive already shaped by cultural narratives that sometimes distort or blatantly contradict Christian doctrine and ethics. Scripture becomes an option rather than the quintessential authority, and when Scripture is

1 Samuel D. James, “5 Ways the Digital Age Is Transforming the Way You Think,” Crossway, September 6, 2023, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/5-ways-the-digital-age-is-transforming-the-way-you-think/>.

consulted selectively, obedience often becomes conditional, and discipleship is reduced to personal affirmation.

The church cannot respond to this situation merely by reasserting authority in rhetorical terms. It must embrace a renewed and theologically coherent doctrine of Scripture capable of restoring both intellectual credibility and pastoral confidence. The premise of this paper is that a Baptist doctrine of biblical authority, faithful to its confessional heritage, must be Christ-centered in focus, Spirit-centered in operation, and church-centered in application. Such doctrine affirms Scripture's divine origin, acknowledges its dynamic mediation through the Spirit, and recognizes its authority is received and lived out within the gathered community under the lordship of Christ.

The paper consists of a discussion of four presuppositions: First, Scripture is God-breathed. Second, Christ is the central message and authority of Scripture. Third, the Spirit's role in interpretation reinforces the authority of Scripture. Fourth, authority is exercised within the communal life of the church. The paper also includes a discussion of the pastoral implications of scriptural

authority for preaching, discipleship, and governance. Finally, the paper ends with a synthesis oriented toward the renewal of the church's faithfulness to the authority of Scripture among contending voices.

Scripture as a Gift from God

The classical foundation for the doctrine of Scripture's authority rests upon two closely related texts: 2 Timothy 3:16–17 and 2 Peter 1:20–21. Paul's affirmation that "all Scripture is God-breathed" grounds authority not in church decree or human insight but in divine origin (2 Tim 3:16). Scripture proceeds from God and therefore bears his character, purpose, and truth. The text's usefulness "for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training" flows directly from its origin (2 Tim 3:16 ESV).² As Wayne Grudem proposes, "the authority of Scripture means that all the words in Scripture are God's words in such a way that to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God."³ This divine origin grounds the formative and corrective role that Scripture plays in the life of the church. Authority is therefore inseparable from spiritual formation, "that the man of

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptures are quoted from the ESV.

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 21.

God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:17). Scripture has the authority not only to govern life, but to give life.

Peter complements Paul’s affirmation by locating prophetic speech within the sovereign work of God the Spirit. Prophecy does not arise from human interpretation or initiative but from men

“Scripture has the authority not only to govern life, but to give life.”

“carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). Inspiration was therefore neither mechanical dictation nor autonomous creativity. It is best understood as the divine-human concurrence in which God inspired human authors within their specific historical contexts. Scripture has authority because it was given by God.

Scripture is not inspired merely to preserve doctrinal precision but to produce a people capable of faithful obedience. Obedience is an appropriate response to authority. Within the Baptist

tradition, Article I of the *Baptist Faith and Message* (2000) articulates the divine authorship and purpose of Scripture. Scripture is confessed to have “God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter.”⁴ This formulation binds together authority, purpose, and reliability.

The clause “*without any mixture of error*” affirms inerrancy in the original writings. R. Albert Mohler, Jr. argues that this affirmation is not a peripheral concern but the theological foundation of authority: “If the Bible is not without error, then it is not ultimately authoritative.”⁵ Inerrancy of Scripture as proposed by the *Baptist Faith and Message*, properly understood, does not elevate Scripture above God but reveals God. His perfection is seen in the perfection of the text. This should strengthen the church’s confidence in the word of God and the God of the word.

Furthermore, the authority of Scripture does not rest upon our ability to draw out its meaning, but upon the character of the God who speaks. Authority is grounded on who God is rather than on what the reader may be able to discern according to his or her ability or

⁴ *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2000), Article I.

⁵ R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “The Authority of Scripture: Inerrancy and Interpretation,” in *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ed. Thomas White (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2017), 45.

education. The church should trust Scripture because it trusts the God who gave it.

Christ as the Center of Authority

Scripture is inherently authoritative as God's word. Scripture bears authoritative witness to the triune God, climactically revealed in Jesus Christ (Heb 1:1–2). The authority of Scripture is therefore inherent and mediatory. It is the authority of Christ communicated through the canonical text.

This Christocentric orientation guards against two common distortions. On the one hand, it prevents bibliolatry by refusing to detach Scripture from the living Lord to whom it bears witness. On the other, it resists relativism by insisting that Christ's lordship is normatively disclosed in Scripture rather than in private experience or cultural consensus.

Kevin Vanhoozer provides such an anchoring by locating authority within the communicative action of the triune God. Scripture functions as the "norming norm" that governs the church's doctrinal and ethical performance.⁶ Authority, on this account, is not a static deposit but a dramatic direction: God continues to address his people through the canonical script that orders the church's speech and practice.

Lordship and Regulation

For Baptists, the authority of Scripture is inseparable from the direct lordship of Christ over his church. James Leo Garrett, Jr. observes that other Baptist doctrines—soul competency (an individual's ability and accountability to respond to God) and the priesthood of believers—presuppose an authoritative Scripture capable of governing belief and practice.⁷ Without such authority, freedom collapses into autonomy and congregational discernment into fragmentation. Thus, biblical authority is not an abstract principle but the concrete means by which Christ governs his people. The church does not create authority; it receives and obeys it. Christ rules his church through Scripture, such that submission to Scripture is submission to Christ.

The Spirit's Work of Illumination Establishes Authority

Any adequate doctrine of biblical authority must account not only for the origin of Scripture but also for its reception. Divine inspiration ensures the trustworthiness of the text; illumination ensures its intelligibility and efficacy within the life of the church. The *Baptist Faith and Message* rightly affirms that

⁶ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 126–130.

⁷ James Leo Garrett, Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (North Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL Press, 2000), 85–92.

the Holy Spirit illuminates Scripture, thereby enabling believers to receive, understand, and obey the word of God.⁸ It is the gracious work of the Spirit by which the meaning already present in the text becomes transformative in the life of the reader.

The distinction between revelation and illumination is theologically decisive. Revelation refers to God's once-for-all self-disclosure in the written word. The Spirit's task in illumination is not to supplement what is revealed in the written word but to open the eyes of the church to behold the glory—God's glory—already present within it. In this sense, illumination safeguards both the sufficiency and the finality of Scripture.

There should not be emphasis, therefore, on a purely rationalistic approach to interpretation. Without the Spirit's illumination, Scripture may be analyzed but not truly heard, examined but not obeyed (Isaiah 6:9–10). The problem is not merely cognitive but spiritual. As Paul teaches, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14). Illumination, therefore, is not an optional supplement to interpretation

but an essential condition for faithful understanding. The authority of Scripture is received not by intellectual mastery but by humble dependence upon the Spirit who reveals the word.

The Spirit's active role in interpretation must not be construed as countering textual objectivity. The Spirit does not grant meanings disconnected from

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authorial intent or canonical context. Millard Erickson rightly insists that illumination leads believers into the text's objective meaning for faithful application, not into private revelations.⁹ Authority is preserved precisely by maintaining the primacy of the canonical text over subjective experience.

Illumination preserves the authority of Scripture precisely by directing believers back to the text rather than away from it. J. I. Packer clarifies the

⁸ *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, Art. II, Sec. C.

⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 233–245.

relationship between the authority of Scripture and the work of the Spirit, noting that the Holy Spirit does not bypass the text to provide new insights but rather acts as the divine illuminator: “The Spirit’s office is to glorify Christ; and He does this, not by leading us away from the written Word to some new and private ‘revelations,’ but by opening our eyes to see the glory of Christ already set forth in the Word.”¹⁰ Therefore, the authority of the Bible is rooted in God being its source and is actively lived out through the Spirit in the life of the church.

This emphasis is pastorally and ecclesiastically crucial. In many contemporary settings, appeals to the Spirit are frequently invoked to justify doctrinal novelty and nuance, ethical revision, or simply personal preference. Such deviation can be witnessed within the *Rhema* Word movement or what is sometimes called “direct revelation” theology. Kenneth Hagin, a proponent of direct revelation, states in his work *I Believe in Visions*, “The Lord said to me ... the reason there is no more power in your ministry is because you have been a Word preacher and not a Holy Ghost preacher. A Word preacher just preaches the letter

of the Word, but a Holy Ghost preacher preaches by the revelation of the Spirit.”¹¹ When illumination is severed from textual objectivity, authority subtly shifts from Scripture to experience, from canon to consciousness. The result is not spiritual freedom but interpretive anarchy, in which every lone impression can claim divine sanction, and consensus on doctrine in the body of Christ collapses.

A responsible doctrine of illumination therefore maintains a careful distinction between meaning and application. The meaning of the text is given by God through the inspired authors and fixed within the canonical form. Illumination does not create meaning; it clarifies it. Application, by contrast, must be contextual and dynamic. The Spirit brings the fixed meaning of the text into living engagement with ever-changing situations, guiding the church in discerning how obedience takes concrete form in particular times and places. Authority, therefore, resides not in new interpretations but in faithful obedience to objective and enduring scriptural truth.

The balance between carefully studying the Scripture and depending on the Spirit’s illumination of the text also clarifies the pastoral task. Ministers

10 J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God: Some Evangelical Principles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 101.

11 Kenneth E. Hagin, *I Believe in Visions* (Tulsa, OK: Faith Library Publications, 1972), 52.

are not mediators of private revelation but must always submit to the carefully drawn-out message of the text. Preachers and teachers are called to labor in the text with prayerful dependence upon the Spirit to illuminate it. Preaching then becomes an act of disciplined looking and listening before it becomes an act of proclamation. Teaching becomes a faithful submission to the church's affirmation of the authority of Scripture rather than a display of originality. In this way, illumination strengthens rather than weakens ecclesial authority, grounding proclamation in Scripture and safeguarding the church from both authoritarian control and charismatic subjectivism.

The inseparable cooperation of Scripture and Spirit thus emerges as a central pillar of biblical authority. Without the Spirit's illumination, Scripture is not rightly understood and received. Without Scripture, spiritual experience becomes unreliable and divisive. The authority of Scripture, therefore, rests in the unity of text and Spirit together. Millard J. Erickson explains, "the same Holy Spirit who inspired the biblical writers must also illumine the readers of Scripture if its message is to be understood and properly applied."¹² The Spirit who inspired the word continues

to teach it, and the word he teaches continues to judge, renew, and govern the church.

Authority of Scripture in the Life of the Church

A doctrine of biblical authority, however carefully articulated, remains incomplete unless it is embodied in the concrete practices of the church. Authority is not merely a theological claim to be defended; it is a pastoral reality to be lived out by the body of Christ. Scripture exercises its authority not abstractly but through proclamation, formation, governance, and ethical discernment, all of which find their clearest expression in the church. In this sense, pastoral ministry becomes the primary arena in which the church's confession of authority is either confirmed or contradicted.

Expository preaching remains the primary pastoral act of submission to biblical authority. A pastor who faithfully remains in the text of Scripture exemplifies submission to the authority of Scripture and thereby shepherds his flock to practice the same. The sermon does not create authority; it merely presents it. The preacher need not seek out novel explanations of the text if he wishes to affirm that Scripture is authoritative. All he needs to do is stand as

12 Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 258.

a steward charged with declaring what God has already spoken. As theologian John A. Broadus observes, “The preacher is not to invent a message, but to deliver the message which God has given in His Word.”¹³ The authority of Scripture expressed in the pulpit is exercised not by rhetorical force, personal charisma, or one’s position, but by faithful exposition of the biblical text.

This understanding fundamentally reshapes the task of preaching. In a world of competing voices, the preach-

“Christ displays the authoritative nature of the word through the changing of lives.”

er’s first responsibility in demonstrating the authority of Scripture is not innovation but interpretation, not persuasion but obedience. Expository preaching seeks to unfold the meaning of the text in its literary, historical, and canonical context, and then to bring that meaning into living engagement with the congregation. In this process, the preacher submits both mind and message to the discipline of Scripture and by so doing embodies submission to Scripture in

his own life. Christ displays the authoritative nature of the word through the changing of lives.

Preaching that surrenders authority to the Scriptures, such as expository preaching, protects the church from two perennial dangers. On the one hand, it guards against authoritarianism, in which personal opinion masquerades as divine command. When preaching is tethered to the text, the preacher’s authority remains derivative and accountable. On the other hand, it resists consumerism, in which sermons become motivational speeches designed to satisfy felt needs rather than to confront with divine truth. Paul foretells of such a demand in his letter to Timothy, “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions” (2 Tim 4:3). Expository preaching insists that the church’s deepest needs are not defined by culture but by divine revelation through the Scriptures.

Moreover, preaching becomes a primary means of spiritual formation. Through the regular exposition of Scripture, the congregation learns not only what to believe but how to read, how to discern, and how to obey. Authority thus becomes pedagogical and pastoral rather

13 John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1870), 10–11.

than coercive. The pulpit models submission before it demands obedience. In this way, preaching becomes the living enactment of the church's confession that Scripture is the supreme standard of faith and practice.

Discipleship: Authority as Formative Governance

The goal of biblical authority is not control but formation. Scripture governs the church in order to shape a people conformed to the image of Christ. Discipleship therefore functions as the pastoral outworking of biblical authority. Authority from the Scripture is formative, directing not only belief but habit, affection, and vocation.

In this sense, discipleship becomes the lived expression of biblical authority. Through teaching, mentoring, catechesis, and spiritual discipline, Scripture forms Christian character over time. Belief is shaped by doctrine, but doctrine is tested by obedience. The authority of Scripture is confirmed not merely by confessional assent but by transformed lives, and transformation comes through submission to the Bible's authority. As Paul insists, the purpose of Scripture is that the servant of God may be "complete, equipped

for every good work" (2 Tim 3:17). Authority, therefore, aims at competence in holiness and faithfulness in calling.

This formative vision guards against a reduction of authority to doctrinal policing. While doctrinal clarity remains essential, Scripture governs more deeply by bearing fruit, ordering desires, and disciplining practices. The word trains conscience, moderates ambition, purifies intention, and directs vocation. In this way, authority becomes a means of sanctification rather than a mechanism of control.

Discipleship also locates authority within the rhythms of ordinary Christian life. Scripture governs prayer, family, work, community, and witness. Authority is not confined to ecclesial decisions but permeates daily obedience. When believers learn to read Scripture as a rule of life rather than merely a source of information, authority becomes internalized rather than imposed. As Timothy George observes, the authority of the Bible is not a "static property" for manipulation, but a "dynamic reality" that only becomes effective as the Spirit applies the word to the human heart. This ensures that the church's strength is found in "sustained formation" rather than enforcement of rules.¹⁴

¹⁴ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Academic, 2013), 324.

Polity and Ethics: Authority as Congregational Direction

Biblical authority also governs the corporate life of the church through its polity, sacramental practice, and ethical discernment. Within the Baptist tradition, Scripture stands as the supreme norm shaping congregational governance. Authority is exercised not through hierarchical decree but through communal submission to the word under the lordship of Christ. Congregational decision-making becomes an act of theological discernment rather than dogmatic control.

On matters of church order, Scripture regulates leadership, discipline, ordinances, and membership. Believer's baptism and the Lord's Supper are not merely inherited customs but biblically mandated practices that shape the church's identity. Authority safeguards these practices by grounding them in revelation rather than preference. In this way, Scripture preserves continuity with the apostolic witness while guiding how we apply it today. Any deviation that ascribes authority in any other institution besides Scripture is perhaps what James Leo Garrett, Jr. referred to when he commented, "To multiply the sacraments beyond the two instituted

by Christ is to move from biblical authority to ecclesiastical invention. When the church claims the power to 'create' means of grace that the New Testament does not warrant, it subtly shifts the seat of authority from the Word of God to the traditions of men."¹⁵

Ethical discernment must be governed by Scripture as the final court of appeal. In a moral landscape marked by rapid change and contested norms, the church cannot rely upon cultural consensus as a reliable guide. Scripture provides the moral standard by which the people of God discern faithfulness in matters of justice, sexuality, integrity, family, and public life. Authority functions not to withdraw the church from engagement, but to anchor its witness in truth.

Biblical authority safeguards unity. When Scripture stands above politics, personalities, and ideology, the church is protected from fragmentation. When we consider the anthropological diversity within the church, there is not a more powerful cord that can hold together people from different cultures and worldviews than Scripture. Scripture stands as the first and last judge of all things pertaining to life, and it does so not by casting out diversity, but by

¹⁵ James Leo Garrett, Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, 4th ed., vol. 2 (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 512.

bringing all diversity under one common authority, which is Christ.

Authority of Scripture directs the mission of the church by clarifying its identity and purpose. The church knows who sent it and who it belongs to because the Scripture holds authority in the life of the church. In Matthew 28, the directive to go is given based on Christ's authority: "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me'" (Matt 28:18). The authority of Scripture is the basis for Christian mission.

Taken together, all the aspects we have discussed, such as preaching, discipleship, and polity, reveal that biblical authority is not an abstract principle, but a living authority exercised through the ordinary practices of the church. Authority is what shapes proclamation. It forms character, orders community, and directs mission. Where Scripture is faithfully preached and taught, and humbly obeyed, the church becomes not merely an institution that confesses authority, but a people visibly under the authority of the word of God.

Conclusion: Scripture as the Living Voice of the Living God

In response to the contemporary crisis of authority in the church, this paper has attempted to provide a Baptist doctrine

of the authority of Scripture that is systematic and grounded in the very Scriptures it ventured to scrutinize. The

"Authority is what shapes proclamation. It forms character, orders community, and directs mission."

fragmentation of authority in culture, intensified by digital influences, moral relativism, and competing narratives, has created an environment in which the church's confidence in the word of God is repeatedly tested. Yet the crisis confronting the church is not ultimately cultural but theological. At stake is not merely the credibility of the pulpit or the coherence of discipleship, but the church's understanding of how the living God continues to speak, rule, and form his people through his word.

The proposition this paper put forward is that a faithful Baptist doctrine of biblical authority is held together by four inseparable strands, although more may be articulated: the divine origin, a Christ-centered focus, the Holy Spirit's mediation, and the church's responsibility. First, Scripture's authority rests fundamentally in its divine origin. As

God-breathed revelation, Scripture does not derive its authority from the church, tradition, or experience, but from the God who spoke truthfully and purposefully through its human authors. The confessional affirmation of inerrancy functions not as an abstract claim but as a theological safeguard, preserving the church's confidence that the God who reveals himself in Scripture does so faithfully and without deception, and thus the authority of Scripture is established in principle and matter.

Second, the authority of Scripture is inseparable from its Christological center. The Bible does not stand as an autonomous authority alongside Christ but as the appointed witness to him who is God's final and definitive word. The authority of Scripture is therefore inherent and mediatory: It is the authority of the risen Lord exercised through the canonical text. This Christocentric orientation protects the church both from bibliolatry, which absolutizes the text apart from the living Christ, and from relativism, which appeals to Christ while neglecting the normative witness of Scripture. To submit to Scripture, in this sense, is to submit to the lordship of Christ himself.

Third, the role of the Holy Spirit is indispensable in the mediation of biblical authority. Inspiration ensures the

divine origin of Scripture, but illumination ensures its living efficacy in the church. The Spirit does not supplement the canon with new revelation, nor does he authorize private meanings detached from the text. Rather, he opens the minds and hearts of believers to receive, understand, and obey the word already given. Authority, therefore, is neither a static property of the text nor a subjective impression of the reader, but a living and divine instruction in which the triune God continues to confront, exhort, and transform his people through Scripture within their contemporary settings.

Fourth, biblical authority is exercised within the communal life of the church. The Baptist affirmation of the priesthood of all believers does not dissolve authority into interpretive individualism but locates discernment within the gathered community under the word. Confessions, traditions, and congregational practices serve as subordinate norms that stabilize faithful interpretation and guard the church from both authoritarian control and doctrinal anarchy. Authority flows from Scripture, through the Spirit, into the disciplined life of the community, shaping proclamation, discipleship, governance, and ethical witness.

Taken together, these dimensions yield a vision of biblical authority that

is neither coercive nor obsolete, neither rigid nor relativistic. Scripture still stands today not as a relic of a vanished past, but as the living voice of the living God addressing his people in every generation. Its authority is valid even among dissenting voices. In a world filled with voices and skepticism, Scripture summons the church out of confusion into obedience, out of fragmentation into unity, and out of self-rule into the glad service of Christ.

In an age tempted to invent new authorities, whether cultural or political, the church's renewal will not arise from its ability to innovate, but from a return

to fearful reverence for the word of God. The future of Christian witness depends upon renewed attentiveness to the word already spoken. When the church again receives Scripture as the supreme standard of faith and practice, reads it as the witness to Christ, hears it through the Spirit, and obeys it together as the people of God, the pulpit will recover its clarity, the pews their discernment, and the church her vocation. The authority of Scripture, rightly understood, is not the burden of the past but the gift of God for the life of the world and the glory of his name.



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