

What do Presbyterians believe about the authority of Scripture?

William Placher
Wabash College

William C. Placher is LaFollette Distinguished Professor at Wabash College. An elder at Wabash Avenue Presbyterian Church in Crawfordsville, Indiana, he served on the committees that drafted both the Brief Statement of Faith and the current Presbyterian Catechisms. Callings, the latest of his dozen books, examines Christian vocation.

The most honest answer would be: different Presbyterians believe many different things. People in our church today have different understandings of Scripture's authority, and that's not a new development; it has been in some degree true throughout the history of our tradition. But there is a core of shared beliefs. What follows are some fairly consistent themes, drawn particularly from Calvin and the *Book of Confessions* (most of the language is not at all inclusive, but I've left it as it is in the interest of historical accuracy).

Necessity. We will not understand God rightly if we do not turn to Scripture. Calvin believed that creation itself ought to reveal God to us, but that sin so distorted our vision that we could not see how clearly the world points to its creator. We need the Bible to function like eyeglasses, to help us see God at work in the world. The light of nature, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* explained, is "not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation" (*Book of Confessions* 6.001), and therefore we need the Holy Scripture to guide us.

Sufficiency. In the face of Catholic appeals to the authority of the church and its tradition alongside Scripture, the *Scots Confession* emphasized that the Scriptures alone are "sufficient to instruct and make perfect the man of God" (3.19). Likewise, the *Second Helvetic Confession* began by declaring that in Scripture the church "has the most complete exposition of all that pertains to a saving faith, and also to the framing of a life acceptable to God" (5.002). We do not need other authorities to provide additional information. Moreover, we do not need any human authorities to vouch for Scripture's authority — its authority (quoting the *Scots Confession*) comes "from God" and does not "depend on men or angels" (3.19).

From the book

Frequently Asked Questions About Sexuality, The Bible, and The Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues

A collection of essays considering the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in church life and leadership.

The Witness of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit, Calvin taught, inspired those who wrote Scripture, and the decisive reason to accept Scripture's authority comes not from "human reasons, judgments, or conjectures" but from "the secret testimony of the Spirit." Just as "God himself spoke to the fathers, prophets, [and] apostles," the *Second Helvetic Confession* confirmed, so God "still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures" (5.001). "Our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof," according to the Westminster Confession of Faith, is "from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts" (6.005).

Interpreting Scripture by Scripture. If the meaning of one biblical passage is obscure, and it's something important for us to know, the point will always be made more clearly somewhere else in Scripture. The *Second Helvetic Confession* asserts that the best way to interpret the Scriptures is "gleaned from the Scriptures themselves (from the nature of the language in which they were written, likewise according to the circumstances in which they were set down, and expounded in the light of like and unlike passages and of many and clearer passages)" (5.010).

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Likewise the *Westminster Confession of Faith* maintains that "the infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself" (6.009). When something isn't clear, we should look for other passages which address the matter more clearly. *Westminster* again: "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 ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them" (6.007).

Correct Translation. Obviously, in believing what the Bible says, we have to make sure we get its meaning right. As a scholar influenced by Renaissance humanism, Calvin carefully sought correct texts and accurate translations. Sometimes, of course, translation is a complicated issue. In the United States before the Civil War, for instance, defenders of slavery noted that many admired Old Testament figures had slaves and that Paul sent the runaway slave Onesimus back to his owner Philemon. Thus, they said, the Bible approves of slavery. Critics of slavery, however, pointed out that the institution the Bible calls "slavery" was very different from what existed in the United States: it was not based on race, slaves could often achieve their freedom, and so on. Eventually, that recognition of historical difference carried the day among Presbyterian interpreters. We

recognized that the slavery of biblical times was a different thing from slavery in the United States. The Bible wasn't approving the latter. Correct translation of words describing human activities and institutions involves understanding what those activities or institutions really were in their original context.

Accommodation. Calvin's doctrine of "accommodation" stated that the Bible often expresses things in simple form so that its original readers could understand them—like parents speaking "baby talk" to their children. Thus there are biblical passages that assume that the world is flat or that the sun and moon are the two great lights in the sky (though of course the stars are really much bigger than the moon). In such cases, Calvin wrote, their author "did not treat scientifically of the stars, as a philosopher would; but he called them in a popular manner, according to their appearance to the uneducated, rather than according to the truth." No need to explain several thousand years of scientific theory in order to make a simple point: "He who would learn astronomy, and other recondite arts, let him go elsewhere." When the Bible takes the worldview of its original audience for granted as background, accepting the authority of the Bible need not mean accepting the truth of that worldview.

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Focus on Teaching. Calvin recognized that the biblical writers "were not very exact as to the order of dates, or even in detailing minutely every thing that Christ said and did." Their concern was to teach their readers about who Jesus is and how he saves us; they were not much worried about chronological details. He thought, for instance, that Matthew had probably drawn together material Jesus had preached on a number of different occasions to form the Sermon on the Mount, rather than reporting exactly a sermon delivered at one time. As Charles Hodge, the greatest theologian of Princeton orthodoxy, would say centuries later, the Bible is trustworthy in what it teaches, not in everything its human authors may have believed or assumed. They took for granted the geography, science, and other beliefs of their time and place; such things were not the faith they were teaching.

Conclusion. We must not pick out the parts of the Bible we like and ignore the rest. Scripture speaks with *authority*. But we should be sure we understand what it means. Sometimes we translate terms which referred to an activity or institution in biblical times as if they referred to a very different activity or institution in our time; that leads to misunderstanding. Sometimes Scripture

presupposes the view of the world that would have been taken for granted by its original readers so they could understand; such presuppositions are not what it teaches. When we have doubts about such matters in a particular case, we should use Scripture to interpret Scripture – we should look at any one passage in the light of the rest of the Bible, not in isolation.

With respect to current debates on homosexuality, for instance, we should start by looking at the biblical passages where the Bible talks, or seems to talk, about this issue. What exactly do the words mean? Are the activities or institutions being discussed the same as activities or institutions today? Is what is said about homosexuality what the passage means to teach, or something assumed in order to make a point about something else? When we have doubts about such matters, what do we learn from setting these passages in the larger biblical context – the whole story of covenant, redemption, and bringing more and more outsiders into the household of faith? In asking questions like these, we are faithful to the Presbyterian tradition with respect to biblical authority.