

GLASS STRUCTURES
AND BOUNCY
CASTLES

A CHALLENGE TO STAUNCH EVANGELICAL
APPROACH TO THE BIBLE

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INTRODUCTION

“The Bible is lost to the church in terms of its power to evoke the resolve to live or die by it.”¹

There are two directions to which people can orient themselves when considering their position on the Authority of the Bible. And more often than not, the two positions are produced by the attitudes of particular streams of Christianity.

There are those who scurry for safety from the confines of brittle glass structures, beautifully constructed cathedrals of doctrine honouring God and all he stands for whilst encapsulating his mystery in the fragile pillars of a questionless faith. From within these transparent confines it is possible to see and judge the rest of world as being distinctly separate and other. They are perhaps characterised by ‘purity’.

Then there are those who recklessly throw themselves around a bouncy castle of ideas, working out answers that result in questions, rebounding off the walls of doubt to collide with the gentle cushioning of more ideas. It is so interesting and liberating that it is easy to step out to grab others to join in with their questions. They are perhaps best characterised by ‘unity’.

Too much of either is too much, but I must admit, glass hurts more than airbags.

I want to suggest that the traditional evangelical position on the Authority of the Bible is held within the confines of the glass structure. I do this in response to a sermon that I recently preached where Peter declared to Jesus “You are the Messiah. The Son of the Living God.” I found that I could not repeat these words without feeling confused about their meaning, which in turn resulted in my questioning whether they are worthwhile words to me in the first place. Obviously to Peter they were, but to me they are too

inaccessible because they are, in effect, first century jargon. For me to say that these are authoritative meant that I would have to know what Peter meant by the words Messiah and Son of God and also have an understanding of he knew Jesus to be. Then if he was really such a faith hot-shot, we need to explain how Jesus rebukes him four verses later and refers to him as being equivalent to Satan.

In short, I will never really know what Peter meant by what he said. So the questions “What did Peter mean? What did these words mean to him?” before we can ask “what do they mean to me?” I felt conflicted. Either I could repeat them in vacuous hope, or not repeat them at all.

I think it is more helpful to view the Bible as being viscous rather than frozen. It is a book that can stand the test of time without being seen as an absolute, and that to say it is an absolute is to actually minimise the impact that it can have on matters of faith.

STANDARD EVANGELICAL POSITION

J.I. Packer constructs the evangelical position on Biblical Authority is based on seven elements: inspiration, canonicity, self-authentication, sufficiency, clarity, mystery and consciously submitting to them.² His explanations of these are worth reading, but are weakened because he doesn't consider the impact of subjective interpretation.

Many of his elements rely far too heavily on ‘assumption’ disguised as faith. For instance, his third element is that *scripture is self authenticating*. His proof text is 2 Timothy 3.16. Packer assumes that Paul felt that the letter he was writing was in fact Scripture. But, for William Mounce there is simply not enough evidence to confirm this. He argues that Paul's reference to the scripture definitely includes the Old Testament and probably (at not too much of a stretch either) includes the oral and perhaps written traditions of Jesus' words.³ It seems that to assume that the idea Paul felt he was writing new scripture is foreign to most, if not all, of his texts.

Packer then states that

“ . . . evangelicals hold that the obedience of both the Christian individually, and the Church corporately, consists precisely in *conscious submission*, both intellectual and ethical, to the teaching of Holy Scripture, as interpreted by itself and applied by the Spirit according to the principles stated above.”⁴

This statement is a derivative of an assumption that the teaching that comes from the scripture is infallible enough to be prescriptive for our life. He concludes that

“[God’s] authority is [the scriptures], and its authority is His.”⁵

But here he is too narrow—implying that all of God’s authority is restricted to the scriptures is a little dangerous.

Packer also assumes that *canonicity is final*. It would certainly be a brave person to suggest the addition of any book to the current canons, especially given the outcry resulting from the Jesus Seminar’s suggestion of including the Gospel of Thomas. But the reliability of our canon today is questionable if not at a macro-level of including books, then at a micro level where the very recorded words are questioned. Robert Funk suggests that the New Testament that we know is a construction of 5000 different fragments,⁶ so we don’t know for sure what is *absolutely* authentic and what is not. Admittedly, we do have the best guess but this is surely not enough on which to base *absolute* authority.

Roy Harrisville is more resolved to Packer’s assumption than Packer is. Packer concedes at least in part that it is essential to understand something of the language and context of the authors of the Bible if we are to glean much meaningful truth from its pages. Harrisville sees historical critical method as the Trojan horse of Christendom that led to the Jesus Seminar.⁷ It seems to me to be a shame that he cannot be positive about some of the Seminar’s findings. We need not swallow what we call liberal, but like chewing gum we can chew on it for a while.

Packer’s assumption of the rigidity of the canon is supported by an assumption that those who have shaped the canon were assisted by the Holy Spirit—not a bad assumption in and of itself. But, if anything could be learned about the consistency of the manifestations of the Holy Spirit in the last century it would be that the Holy Spirit is actually not consistent at all. What one says is a work of the Holy Spirit, another says is psychosomatic⁸, what one says is a ‘word from the lord’ may turn out to simply be ‘a thing that they think’. I accept that it is easy to fob this off as a cynicism, but I have seen too many people who make too much of ultimately airy faiths that dissipate in the atmosphere of time.

CANON

The establishment of the New Testament canon has been taken *a priori* to have been an inspired event in itself. But the difficulty today is ‘chicken and egg’ as F.F. Bruce states:

“ . . . books were included in the canon, it is believed, because they were inspired; a book is known to be inspired because it is in the canon.”⁹

We can see that early on some of the texts were regarded as scripture e.g. where Origen applied allegorical interpretation to passages in the New Testament¹⁰ a technique he would only ever apply to what he would consider scripture. But because *he* saw it as scripture does not mean it was so. Whatever the criteria for determining what is and is not scripture, it is evident that those who made this decision could only make a best attempt at that which could be regarded as useful to the church. I am not disputing that these are very good, and undoubtedly *the* best, guesses, but I am cautioning the outright acceptance of much of the New Testament being embraced by 2 Timothy 3.16. Whilst I admit a huge indebtedness to those who have laboured to locate the closest to authentic documents of the Apostles—these findings are crucial to our understanding of the events and theological dimensions of 1st century Christianity—they have and only ever will be providing a basis for us to draw upon for defining our faith.

My point, though, is to illustrate how as evangelicals we can will say that all “Scripture is God breathed” and assume that this statement includes the Epistles and Revelation—this is in fact an assumption based on reading into the text under the guise of evangelical doctrine of faith. But in no way does this diminish the effectiveness of any of the scripture. Paul did have in mind that he was writing definitive and helpful Christian doctrine and to dismiss his work as irrelevant is to do a grave disservice to our faith, but I am wondering if attributing *absolute* authority to them may in fact be just as damaging. Our choice is too bury our head in the sand and assume that the Canon is what we like to think is God breathed, or we can tread carefully with acceptance that what we have is the best we’ve got.

The reason the canon has stood the test of time in so few forms is that the community of faith has allowed it to. As McGrath suggests “. . . the people and the book coexist with one another . . .”¹¹ Indeed the retention of the canon of the centuries is solely attributable to the church. But this would now imply that the community tradition is the ultimate authority for the definition of the canon. The issue that then arises is, whether or not the community can reopen the canon. If, for instance, a second letter to the Romans were to be discovered and it passed all the ‘tests’, on what grounds would it be prohibited? The traditional position that Revelation’s final verses (22.18-19) are applicable to the entire Bible is a terribly poor reading of that text.

Finally, the fact that there are *different* canons of scripture compiled from thousands of *different* fragments of ancient texts between 100 and 300 years after the Christ events implies that what we have is best guess decided

more often than not by some kind of majority vote. Therefore any definitive claims of truth from these documents must be slightly tarnished. The canon is not a constant.

AUTHORITY

Wright expresses how the traditional evangelical view of authority in churches implicitly refers to control.¹² The glass structures require the authority of the Bible be defined in this manner because their foundation relies upon the regulations of the church that are located in the canon of scripture—especially the New Testament. As we have seen though, such a notion relies upon the constancy of the canon which as we have seen is an extremely good best guess variable. But even if the canon were constant, this understanding of authority is flawed.

I can see that authority operates at two levels. The first is latent *authority* which is the intrinsic quality that something may possess like the latent energy in a battery. It exists and in many cases operates in the background but when it is engaged with through experience, which may be unintentional, it becomes the second type of authority i.e. *potent* authority. Potent authority is recognised or exerted and has the support of consequences—a light bulb experiences the power of the battery only when it is connected to it. Law also illustrates this well. Law has an authority that dictates how citizens should and should not conduct themselves. This is an authority which it possesses. However, its authority is not in effect unless a citizen responds to it, either in obedience, or in disobedience until punishment is meted out.¹³ The Law still has latent authority over people, but they may only ever experience it when they either recognise it, hence subjection, or they break the law out of ignorance and incur its punishment—at which point they become all too aware of its latent authority. Therefore authority is not authority unless willingly recognised as such.

The Bible can be seen in the same way. That it has latent authority is not controversial. What can be seen as dissenting is that its authority is meaningless to those who do not know it. Even further though is that many of the consequences of disobedience to this latent authority will only be *understood* after death—but for the grace of God. To those who reject it, it becomes meaningless. Authority, is therefore on the *pragmatic* level, subjective.

SUBJECTIVITY

Tom Wright crystallises this notion when he says that what we are seeing is not the authority of the scriptures, rather we are seeing the authority of the interpreter. Most interpreters have assumed that the canon we have received in the 21st century is the definitive canon for our faith. The “Word of God” is rendered authoritative by their assumption which is a derivative of their desire.

The crisis of the authority of anything has been exacerbated by the current postmodern condition¹⁴ which has resulted in a reckless deconstruction of everything that can be perceived, a result of which, is expressed by how the potency of any authority is conceded solely by the perceiver.

On a philosophical level this may not be consistent, i.e. that absolutes can exist outside the perimeter of perception is not an unreasonable concept or assumption, but the merit of these absolutes is only encountered when they are embraced. And this is the difference between Packer and Wright. Packer is insisting that there are truths that the Bible holds as being undeniable, Wright is accepting this but is saying that because interpretation is subjective, these truths are and always will be distorted. Wright’s position ultimately concludes (and perhaps here is a weakness) that if we choose not to know these truths then they are *effectively* meaningless.

The primary basis of subjectivity in this argument is that the communication method of the Bible is language. Language is an inadequate method of communication. Foucault suggests that language cannot faithfully represent it’s object because of the constantly increasing number of new relationships between words.¹⁵ This increase of combinations increases the permutations which increases the number of semantic possibilities. We are constantly having to interpret our communication which is never perfect as shown by the diagram below.

English to English	John thinks, interprets his thoughts and then communicates them to Joan.	Joan hears the words and interprets them into thoughts for understanding.
English to Swedish	John thinks, interprets his thoughts into English and then communicates them to Sven.	Sven takes most of the English words, translates most into Swedish words, reassembles them into Swedish sentences, interprets them into thought.
Aramaic to Greek to English	You get the picture . . .	

If interpretation renders language as a variable, where does that leave authority of a written book?

There are enough difficulties here without introducing more arguments from Wright. The premise for Wright's argument is simply that much of what we call the Bible is actually narrative. He wonders firstly how any text can be authoritative and then how a story can be authoritative without interpretation. Finally if it is story steeped in history, further interpretation is required before that authority can be established. How can we say that the book of Judges or Acts is authoritative? He gives the example of a commander giving out orders to his troops. Authority would be present in concise statements of action that required as little interpretation as possible, but what authority would there be in him recounting the story of the Battle of Britain?¹⁶ Perhaps there are some good guidelines for strategy there, but surely to use exactly the same strategy would not be the wisest thing to do in a completely different war with completely different technology. Interpretation into action would be required at some point and dare I say it, deviation from the narrative essential. But as Alister McGrath says there is no such a thing as "pre-suppositionless exegesis"¹⁷ because all the academic work that we do is in fact bringing our own or other's understandings to the text. We seem to only reach conclusions by feelings and consensus.

As an ironic result of this process, Packer¹⁸ attributes absolute authority to the interpreter (though he would not admit that). I would suggest that the only reason any authority would exist from the scripture is because it is experienced by the people of faith. The revelation of God is after all in the context of the experience of his community and in this respect, the final authority of scripture rests not in its words, but in its revelation. The latent authority of scripture must be *interpreted* for its potency to be realised.

CONCLUSION

The quote from Harrisville on the title page is good one. He has seen something of scripture that he thinks is very obviously evident. We all will be judged by this book whether we like it or not. But, the nature of that judgement probably has less to do with rigid structures, codes of practice, instructions for relationships etc., and more to do with the fluidity of such uncertain things as attitude, belief and faith. To extract anything else from this book is to turn it

into something that it is not.¹⁹ To make it into something it is not, will ensure its authority belongs not to God but the reader.

The absolute authority of the Bible is experienced to some degree in the traditional evangelical approach, but the beauty and the horror of its truth is that individuals can take from it what they need, want or expect. Unfortunately in these times of doubt, we cannot assume that the Bible is frozen solid in time—we the readers are not the mad-scientists who will resuscitate it's existence through cryogenic historico-critical method. It's already alive. It has the ability to speak as profoundly to someone who gives it a single glance as the scholar who spends hours wrestling with a particular passage. It is viscous but still potentially fluid. It's truth seems to depends more on the reader's intent than on their knowledge of its background.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Harrisville, *The Loss of Biblical Authority*, 48

² J.I. Packer, 'Hermeneutics and Biblical Authority', *Themelios* 1/1 (1975), 3–11

³ William D. Mounce, *Word Biblical Commentary 46: Pastoral Epistles* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), 567–568

⁴ Packer, *Authority*, 5

⁵ Packer, *Authority*, 5

⁶ Robert W. Funk, *The parables of Jesus: Red letter Edition*, (Sonoma, California: Polebridge Press, 1988), 2

⁷ Harrisville, *The Loss of Biblical Authority*, 50

⁸ Perhaps I doubt too much, but I do wish that someone could conduct a survey into comparing the percentage success rates of psychosomatic healing with faith healing. The two seem so inextricably intertwined, I would be surprised if there was much difference at all and what difference there is, that to my mind is what would constitute a miracle. (And that is why this is a footnote!)

⁹ F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 263

¹⁰ Bruce, *Scripture*, 268

¹¹ Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 165

¹² Wright, *How can the Bible be Authoritative?*, 9

¹³ Some would say that that the very involvement in society is subjection to the law but I would contend that it is not involvement that subjects someone to Law, there cannot in fact no subjection, which is an act of the will, to something that is unknown.

¹⁴ Even though it could be regarded as trite and common to introduce postmodernity—which we all now is becoming a little passé—to deny its influence would be tragic.

¹⁵ Chris Horrocks and Zoran Jevtic, *Introducing Foucault*, (Cambridge, UK: Icon Books, 1999), 51

¹⁶ Wright, *How can the Bible be Authoritative?*, 10

¹⁷ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 64

¹⁸ And is it too much to suggest that this is all evangelicals?

¹⁹ Wright, *How can the Bible be Authoritative?*, 11