

Abstract

“EPISTEMOLOGY AND AUTHORITY:
THE PROBLEM OF THE CRITERION AND THE PRIMACY OF SCRIPTURE”

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Determining the ultimate authority for Christian doctrine is both an issue of fundamental importance and can be seen as a particular manifestation, in the field of theological inquiry, of a more general epistemological problem, namely the problem of the criterion. After articulating this philosophical problem in theological terms, the main candidates for sources of authority in matters of doctrine – Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience – will be examined. Some major problems associated with taking any of the latter three as the ultimate source of authority will then be discussed, noting especially their inability to provide an adequate solution to the problem of the criterion. It will then be seen that Scripture fares better through a discussion of the notions of inspiration and self-authentication and their relationship to the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, drawing especially on contemporary work in theology and religious epistemology. The paper will close with a brief and selective look at some proponents of the primacy of Scripture from within the Anglican tradition. This paper will argue that Scripture is uniquely suited to act as a final authority for Christian theology in that, through the work of the Spirit, it brings its own evidence with it, avoids the serious philosophical and theological problems that result from taking another source as final,

and fits seamlessly within the larger theological framework of God's self-revelation in the economy of salvation. As such, it is my contention that Scripture should be regarded as the ultimate source of authority for Christian doctrine.

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Epistemology and Authority:
The Problem of the Criterion and the Primacy of Scripture

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The issue of authority for Christian doctrine is of central importance to theological inquiry. It stands behind virtually every major theological controversy in the history of doctrine, sometimes explicitly and visibly taking center stage, but more often subtly shaping the contours of the discussion and drawing the battle lines in advance of the conflict. This is to be expected of the most fundamental epistemological question of theological prolegomena. One's answer to the question of the ultimate or final source of authority for Christian doctrine – and its relation to other sources – quite literally undergirds every claim of theology.

What may not be immediately apparent is that this issue is a particular manifestation, in the field of theological inquiry, of a more general epistemological problem. This problem, most memorably articulated by the Roman philosopher, Sextus Empiricus, was used to advance his position of epistemic skepticism by posing a dilemma for those who would claim any source of authority or criterion for human knowledge. The basic line of argument is as follows. For any claim to knowledge the question arises as to the criterion for determining the claim's truth. Whatever criterion is given, however, is subject to the same question: by what criterion can this criterion be validated? The skeptic's claim is that ultimately there are only three ways to proceed: circular reasoning, an infinite regress, or agnosticism. Since the first two options are unacceptable, the only real option is skepticism in the form of suspension of judgment. In other words, the argument is intended to show that there is no *ultimate* or *final* criterion for truth (authority), since all candidates for this position require support or justification from another source. While this philosophical problem will not be addressed directly, a version of the problem has manifested itself throughout the history of doctrine in the sphere of

theological prolegomena. The problem then becomes whether it is possible, and if so how, to determine the final authority in theological matters. As such, it will be helpful to take a closer look at the problem of the criterion to see what the basic features of an adequate solution might look like and what light this might cast on the question of authority in theological matters. In order both to display the significance of the issue for theology and to bring these speculative insights to life, some historical instances of the problem will be examined.

Having laid the theoretical framework for our topic and its relevance for the history of Christian doctrine, we will be in a position to examine the main candidates for sources of authority in theology – Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience – and comment briefly on their origins and relationship in the history of doctrine. Some major problems associated with taking any of the latter three as the ultimate source of authority will then be discussed, noting especially their inability to provide an adequate solution to the problem of the criterion. We will then see how Scripture fares better through a discussion of the notions of inspiration and self-authentication and their relationship to the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. The relation of Scripture to the other sources of authority will then be discussed with the aim of salvaging them as genuine sources by placing them in their proper relation to Scripture. In the course of our discussion, we will have the opportunity to respond to some of the more serious attempts by contemporary theologians to undermine the authority of Scripture, especially concerns raised by William Abraham's work on the propriety of the concept of canon as a criterion for theological inquiry. We will then consider and respond to the more substantial objections which our analysis has thus far raised but not yet addressed. Finally, we will take a brief

and selective look at some proponents of the primacy of Scripture from within the Anglican tradition, from its beginning down to the present day. It is my contention that Scripture alone can provide an authoritative norm for Christian theology which does not ultimately suffer from fatal philosophical and theological problems and, as such, should be regarded as the ultimate source of authority for Christian doctrine.

The Problem of the Criterion: Situating the Sources of Authority

First, then, let us take a closer look at the problem of the criterion as it is expressed in the writings of Sextus Empiricus. The same basic problem is articulated, in slightly different ways, in two places in the *Outlines of Scepticism*.¹ In both contexts, the issue concerns disagreements or discrepancies among various impressions of reality. The question which introduces the problem of the criterion is whether one can pass judgment in favor of one impression over against the others. Through a series of carefully planned questions, Sextus systematically examines each possible response to its logical conclusion in an attempt to show that the only convincing option is suspension of judgment. The first, and most detailed, iteration of the problem runs as follows:

Anyone who prefers one appearance to another and one circumstance to another does so either without making a judgement and without proof or making a judgement and offering a proof. But he can do so neither without these (for he will be unconvincing) nor yet with them. For if he judges the appearances he will certainly judge them by means of a standard.² Now he will say of this standard either that it is true or that it is false. If false, he will be unconvincing. But if he says that it is true, then he will say that the standard is true either without proof or with proof. If without proof he will be unconvincing. But if with proof, he will certainly need the proof to be true – otherwise he will be unconvincing. Then when he says that the proof which he adopts to make the standard convincing is

¹ 1.114-117 and 2.19-20.

² Or “criterion.”

true, will he do so after judging it or without judging it? If he has not judged it he will be unconvincing. But if he has judged it, then clearly he will say that he has judged it by means of a standard – but we shall demand a proof of that standard, and then a standard for that proof. For a proof always requires a standard in order to be confirmed, and a standard always requires a proof in order to be shown to be true. A proof cannot be sound if there is no standard there already, nor can a standard be true if a proof has not already been made convincing. In this way standards and proofs fall into the reciprocal mode,³ by which both of them are found to be unconvincing: each waits to be made convincing by the other, and so each is as unconvincing as the other.

If, then, one cannot prefer one appearance to another either without a proof and a standard or with them, the different appearances which come about depending on different conditions will be undecidable. Hence so far as this mode too goes suspension of judgement about external existing objects is introduced.⁴

There are several important steps to this argument. First, every time one holds a belief to be true, she does so on the basis of some criterion of truth – otherwise there is no reason to prefer this belief to any other, including its contrary. Sextus believes that this establishes the logical priority of the criterion of truth over the truth claim. This criterion answers on what basis the truth claim is judged true. For instance, if one were asked on what basis she held that *snow is cold*, she might reply that it is a deliverance of sense experience. The criterion for this truth claim, then, would be sense experience or, more precisely, the claim that *the deliverances of sense experience are true*. He then goes on to point out that the criterion itself is a truth claim in need of validation. Just as in the first instance, this claim cannot be assumed true, which would beg the question, but must be proven true. To return to our example, on what basis does one judge that *the deliverances of sense experience are true*? And here we face the horns of an uncomfortable dilemma. Whatever (proof) one proposes in support of this claim will, in turn, have to be shown

³ I.e., circular reasoning.

⁴ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, edited by Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 30-31.

true on the basis of some other criterion of truth. One cannot appeal again to the same criterion (sense experience, for instance) because the truth of this criterion is precisely what is up for debate – it would beg the question. However, any new criterion would itself be subject to a similar need to be validated on the basis of some further proof, which in turn would need to be judged in accordance to a yet new criterion *ad infinitum*. If, then, we deny the skeptic's posture of suspension of judgment, we are faced with the dilemma of circular reasoning or an infinite regress.

This problem, which has shown up in a variety of forms throughout the history of philosophy,⁵ has not generated as much attention among philosophers as one might expect. Those who have addressed the problem tend to do so indirectly, admitting the force of the argument, but attacking the skeptical conclusion on other grounds. Roderick Chisholm, for instance, accepts one horn of the dilemma.⁶ “What few philosophers have had the courage to recognize,” he says, “is this: we can deal with the problem only by begging the question.”⁷ He believes that there are really only three approaches to the relationship between the content (“what do we know?”) and the criterion (“how do we decide whether we know?”) of knowledge: (a) skepticism, which suspends judgment since an answer to either question depends on an answer to the other, (b) ‘methodism,’⁸

⁵ Most notably by Montaigne, “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” in *The Essays of Michael de Montaigne*, translated and edited by Jacob Zeitlin (New York: Knopf, 1935), 266.

⁶ Robert Amico, on the other hand, regards the conditions of the problem as impossible to meet, but attacks the skeptical position on other grounds, *The Problem of the Criterion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), 143.

⁷ Roderick Chisholm, *The Problem of the Criterion*, The Aquinas Lecture, 1973 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1973), 37.

⁸ Which he associates with empiricists like Locke and Hume.

which begins by assuming a criterion and establishes the content on its basis, and (c) ‘particularism,’⁹ which assumes some body of knowledge from which a criterion is derived. His reason for preferring (c) to (a) is that the latter has no more to recommend itself than the other two approaches, and (c) conforms with his ‘common sense’ intuition that we do, in fact, know things.¹⁰ Whether or not this takes seriously the full merits of Sextus’ argument,¹¹ it is important to note that he takes circular reasoning to be the only means of providing an answer to the problem.

If, then, Sextus’ argument presents the only viable alternatives, and one is committed to a body of truth claims, then the only option, however unpalatable, would appear to be circularity. This is because taking the skeptical position would not allow one to espouse any truth claims and the only other alternative, the search for a criterion by means of an infinite regress of criteria, would never terminate and, thus, never provide the grounds for establishing one’s belief set. And yet, the prospect of circularity at the foundation of human knowledge certainly seems troubling. It would appear that one must either accept, like Chisholm, this circularity as an unavoidable and inexplicable element of human knowledge, or else seek some way to blunt the force of the charge of circularity.

It is commonly held, however, that circular reasoning is always problematic. This is because circular reasoning begs the question – it utilizes the content of the conclusion

⁹ Which, in addition to being his position, he associates with common sense realists like Reid and Moore.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹¹ For instance, presumably Sextus would say that, unlike (b) and (c), (a) does not commit one to an obviously fallacious form of reasoning. Though, of course, there are heavy costs for the skeptic’s position as well. As someone once said, in an attempt to avoid the possibility of error, he eliminates the possibility of arriving at any truth.

in the argument for that conclusion. But if the conclusion is in need of support, then it cannot legitimately be used as a premise in support of itself. One way to blunt the force of this charge is to recognize that, so far as human knowledge is concerned, circularity is inevitable. This is due to the fact that human knowledge is based on faculties from which the human knower cannot extricate herself. There is no way for a human knower to temporarily set aside, for example, the use of her sense organs in order to establish their reliability. All attempts to establish the reliability of sense perception must rely on the deliverances of sense perception. In other words, it is not possible to articulate a noncircular argument for the reliability of sense perception.¹² What was not, at least in the Modern period, clearly seen – perhaps because it strikes a serious blow to the whole Enlightenment project – is that this is likewise true of all our faculties, including reason. If, for instance, one thought that the reliability of reason could answer Sextus’ challenge for a criterion for truth, she would be mistaken. For she would then have to provide a proof for the truth of this criterion, and this proof would certainly make use of reason in terms of both process and content. The fundamental problem is that none of our cognitive faculties can authenticate itself. The authority of each can be challenged, and it cannot speak in its own defense. As Reid pointed out, “If a man’s honesty were called into question, it would be ridiculous to refer it to the man’s own word, whether he be honest or not.”¹³ This might not seem at first to blunt, but rather to sharpen, the charge of circularity. And yet, if it is the case that circularity at this most basic level is unavoidable,

¹² This conclusion is examined at great length in William Alston, *The Reliability of Sense Perception* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

¹³ Thomas Reid, *Inquiry and Essays*, ed. Ronald Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 276.

then it would, to my mind, take a good deal of the sting out of the charge of circularity.

What other option is there? Even the skeptic cannot avoid this charge, for he must utilize reason in his attempt to discredit reason. As Alvin Plantinga humorously points out, skeptical arguments very rarely begin with some such proviso as the following:

Well, here is an argument for general skepticism with respect to our cognitive faculties; of course I realize that the premises of this argument are themselves produced by cognitive faculties whose reliability the conclusion impugns, and of whose truth I am therefore extremely doubtful.¹⁴

While this does seem to weaken the skeptic's general argument and show that circularity at the most fundamental level of human thought is universal, it does not, for all that, provide an answer to the problem of the criterion. A good solution to the problem would provide a self-authenticating criterion to dull the force of the circularity.

Now my concern in outlining this general epistemological problem is primarily as it relates to sources of authority for Christian doctrine. It is certainly not my intention to provide a solution to the more general epistemological problem, but rather to see if any light might be cast on the theological issue of authority if it is viewed as a particular manifestation in the realm of theological inquiry of this more general philosophical problem. The first step, then, would be to state the problem of the criterion in terms of theological prolegomena. Now the question of authority in theology is parallel to, but distinct from, the question of authority in epistemology more generally. It is distinct in that its concern is not with how we arrive at the truth about anything at all, but how we arrive at the truth in theological matters. As such, it need not address directly the questions surrounding circularity in the foundations of human rationality – for this is not a problem unique to Christian Theology, but applies equally to all human inquiry.

¹⁴ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 226.

However, this does not mean that the charge of circularity will not play a significant role in the discussion. It only means that, if it shows up, the circularity will not concern the foundations of human rationality as it does in the general philosophical problem, but the fundamental sources of theological inquiry. Despite this difference, the question of authority in theological matters is parallel to the more general problem of the criterion in that both are concerned with the ultimate basis of truth in their respective areas of inquiry. The latter is concerned with the criterion for truth in all areas of human knowledge; the former is concerned with the criterion for truth in theological matters only.

Now the problem might be stated as follows. Any theological claim is either judged true on the basis of some criterion, some source of authority, or else not. In the latter case, the claim is unsupported; it has nothing to recommend it either to others or to oneself. If, however, it is judged true on the basis of some source of authority, then the question arises as to the trustworthiness¹⁵ of that authority. In order to answer this question, one must either enlist the help of the first authority or another authority. In the former case, one would be guilty of circular reasoning and in the latter, an infinite regress. Perhaps an example would help to illustrate the problem. Suppose a person found herself convinced of the claim that *God exists*. If challenged by an agnostic as to the basis on which she judged this claim true, she might respond by citing a rational argument,¹⁶ perhaps along the lines of Thomas' First Way. Suppose further that she happened to be an

¹⁵ Or "truth" or "reliability." The problem could be stated in any number of ways, which might significantly affect the stringency of the required solution. However, the precise formulation is not critical to my argument here.

¹⁶ She needn't start there, of course. She might cite her own religious experience or the testimony of Scripture or the Church's tradition.

eminent Thomist capable of a profoundly compelling articulation of Thomas' argument, so that the agnostic found himself unable to fault any particular step in the argument or its basic logic. Still, he might ask on what basis she judged reason trustworthy. Any rational argument proffered in support of reason would, of course, be viciously circular. Any appeal to a different source of authority, on the other hand – for instance, the near universal basic trust afforded reason in the tradition of the Church – would be open to a similar question as to its trustworthiness. At this point she would have to return to a source to which she has already appealed (reason or tradition) or continue to supply new sources *ad infinitum*. Now this is the most straightforward application of the problem of the criterion to the realm of theological inquiry, but it is not the only one. In fact, if it were, one might be forgiven for thinking it not so serious a problem at all¹⁷ to have provided a rational argument for God's existence so compelling that the only way to avoid its conclusion is to call reason itself into question. However, the problem can be expressed in ways that are not so easily dismissed. This occurs, in particular, when the sources of authority do not appear to agree on some point of doctrine. To modify our original example, suppose that the challenge to our eminent Thomist comes, not from an outside challenge to one source, but from an internal disagreement among her sources of authority. She is, we may suppose, convinced by the rational argument for God's existence, but also plagued by doubts in light of her own personal experience of the absence of God in her life. Once she became aware of this tension between her reason and her religious experience, she would need to decide to which source of authority she

¹⁷ This is, after all, the general view of many serious philosophical problems to the layman.

would give preference. She would be tempted¹⁸ to give priority to reason, but if she reflected on the basis on which she is prioritizing reason, she would find herself facing the familiar dilemma of circularity or an infinite regress. Any rational argument in favor of reason, or against experience, would presume the priority she is trying to establish. And, likewise with any appeal to experience.

Now this may all seem a bit too hypothetical to be of serious concern. But something very much like this problem of authority has been at the center of theological controversies throughout the history of doctrine. In fact, Jaroslav Pelikan, commenting in his magisterial history of Christian doctrine on the relevance of this issue to modern Christian thought, writes “[i]f only because of its prominence in *every major doctrinal controversy of all the preceding centuries*, the question of authority could not be avoided”¹⁹ at Vatican II. While it would take us well beyond the scope of our present concern to trace the role of this issue throughout the history of Christian doctrine, it would be helpful to situate the problem in one of its many historical iterations. One of the clearest examples of the place of authority in theological controversy occurred in connection with the Reformation. On the eve of the Reformation, the prevailing view was that tradition, expressed through the teaching authority of the Church, was the ultimate source of theological authority. Crudely put, if a Christian wanted to know what to believe on some theological issue, she would look to the teaching of the Church’s magisterium. Something like this state of affairs obtained throughout most of the Church’s history prior to the Reformation, though the relationship between Scripture,

¹⁸ Especially as a Thomist!

¹⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition, vol. 5: Christian Doctrine and Modern Culture (since 1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 328, emphasis mine.

tradition, and the contemporary teaching of the Church, which was the reason for trusting the Church's teaching on these matters, was conceived of quite differently at different stages in that history. A. N. S. Lane, modifying slightly the classification of Heiko Oberman, helpfully identifies four main views on the relationship among Scripture, tradition, and the Church's teaching.²⁰ Two of these had shown up prior to the Reformation: the coincidence view and the supplementary view. On the coincidence view, the earliest view, the teaching of the Church, tradition, and Scripture all coincide.²¹ What the Church teaches just *is* what Scripture and tradition affirm. In a later development of this view, Vincent of Lérins held that Scripture is materially sufficient, in that it contains all things necessary, but formally insufficient, in that it requires the Church for its proper interpretation. In either case, one looks to the teaching of the Church, on this view, because the Church teaches what the apostles taught, in oral and written forms. On the next main view to emerge, the supplementary view, tradition was seen as a supplement to Scripture, adding, in addition to interpretation, authoritative content. This arose primarily in relation to ceremonial practices which had a long and distinguished history in the Church, but for which there was no explicit scriptural basis. The result, on this view, was to view Scripture as both materially and formally insufficient.²² It also bolstered the teaching authority of the Church, since it now spoke authoritatively in its interpretation of Scripture and of tradition on matters ceremonial,

²⁰ A. N. S. Lane, "Scripture, Tradition and Church: An Historical Survey," *Vox Evangelica* 9 (1975): 37-55.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

²² *Ibid.*, 40.

and paved the way for authoritative pronouncements on matters of doctrine not specifically derived from Scripture.

On both views, however, one looked to the contemporary teaching of the Church on matters of doctrine precisely because this was understood to be identical with, or provide an authoritative interpretation of, the teaching of Scripture. Now what holds in theory does not necessarily translate into practice. It is entirely probable that most Christians on the eve of the Reformation were not cognizant of the historic basis of the teaching authority of the Church, but rather looked to the Church in matters of doctrine out of custom and habit. So, when Luther challenged the contemporary Church's teaching²³ on the basis of the authority of Scripture, the effect was a crisis of authority. All of a sudden, the final source of authority in matters of doctrine was an open question. Luther was highlighting a disagreement between these two sources which, on the coincidence and supplementary views, was not supposed to be possible. Lane labels Luther's position – that past and present tradition is an aid to, not an authoritative norm of, interpretation, and that Scripture is both materially and formally sufficient – the ancillary view.²⁴ It is important to note that both sides in this dispute recognized that the fundamental issue was one of authority, and both accepted the authority of Scripture.²⁵ The question which came into focus during the Reformation was which source of

²³ Not, primarily, tradition. See Richard Bauckham, "Tradition in relation to Scripture and Reason," in *Scripture, Tradition, and Reason: A Study in the Criteria of Christian Doctrine*, eds. Richard Bauckham and Benjamin Drewery (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 121.

²⁴ Lane, "Scripture, Tradition and Church," 42.

²⁵ And the authority of tradition, for that matter. Though Protestants valued tradition and accepted its authority, this authority was judged according to the standard of Scripture. In this regard, the parties were closer on their view of the authority of Scripture than tradition.

authority was the ultimate or final source. The only way to avoid this decision is to hold that Scripture and tradition are never in conflict. Any apparent conflicts must be a result of a misinterpretation of Scripture. This, however, was not an option for Luther who was convinced that the tradition had erred in the past²⁶ and in the present teaching of the Church.²⁷

For the purposes of our discussion, the important aspect of this historical controversy is that it constitutes a clear example of the problem of the criterion in its theological formulation. That is, theological disagreement was a particular, concrete historical instantiation of the application of two different ultimate sources of authority. What is more, both Luther and his Catholic opponents recognized that the issue ultimately turns on the question of authority. And this is precisely the point at which they reached an impasse. They could not resolve their theological disputes because they disagreed on the final source of authority. Where Luther, for instance, saw a clear contradiction between the Bible and a point of Church teaching, his opponents were committed to the view that any interpretation of Luther's which contradicted a point of Church teaching must be a misinterpretation of Scripture. But they could also not provide a noncircular argument for the priority of their source. Every attempt by Luther to point to some discrepancy between the Church's teaching and the teaching of Scripture presupposed the formal sufficiency of Scripture. Likewise, every attempt by his opponents to deny these discrepancies or to argue that Luther's view would lead to a

²⁶ This is evidenced, for example, by the fact that the fathers do not always agree.

²⁷ For example, in the indulgences controversy, the theological justification for which was grounded in Latin mistranslations of the Greek New Testament. See Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition, vol. 4: Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 307-309.

plurality of individual interpretations assumes the formal insufficiency of Scripture. Thus, these attempts both involve circular reasoning and for precisely the same reason that it crops up in the more general epistemological problem of the criterion. When it comes to justifying an ultimate source of authority, the justification will inevitably be circular since, on the assumption that it is the ultimate source, there is no higher source of authority to which one could appeal. Thus, we are back in the same position: with a criterion which is in need of justification, and a justification that can only be evaluated on the basis of some criterion. It would seem, then, that some sort of resolution to the problem is a prerequisite to the resolution of any doctrinal controversy.

Sources of Authority for Christian Doctrine

In one sense, there is broad agreement concerning the ultimate source of authority for Christian doctrine. That is, simply, that God is the ultimate authority. Any other authority for Christian doctrine will, in one way or another, derive its authority from God. Our knowledge of God, and his dealings with humanity, is grounded in God's self-revelation. This self-revelation manifests itself differently in the various subsidiary sources of authority up for discussion, but it remains the well-spring of those sources.²⁸ Reason, for instance, attempts to grasp signs of God's self-revelation in nature, including the human mind. Scripture presents God's self-revelation in written form, through the inspiration of a variety of human authors. Tradition principally seeks to reflect on God's self-revelation in Scripture. And, experience examines God's presence and activity in the situations and circumstances of everyday life. Thus, however optimistic one is

²⁸ Thomas Oden, *The Living God: Systematic Theology*, v. 1 (San Francisco: Harper, 1987), 330.

concerning the ability of reason to arrive at theological knowledge, even this knowledge is ultimately dependent on God's self-revelation in creation. That being said, although God's self-revelation is the foundation of all theological knowledge, it is communicated through one or more of the subsidiary sources of authority. What we know of God, we have discovered through rational reflection on some aspect of the created order, or through the testimony of the Scriptures, or through that testimony mediated through centuries of reflection, or through the discernment of God's present activity in our experience. As a result, this general agreement that the ultimate authority in matters of doctrine is God, while important to keep in mind, only pushes the question back one step. The main disagreements emerge when the relationship among the subsidiary sources of authority comes into view.

It would make sense, then, before proceeding any further, to offer a brief description of the four main candidates²⁹ which have been put forward as sources of authority. Problems with, or objections to, each of the sources will be considered in due course. At present, the aim is simply to describe the main characteristics of each source as it has been generally understood in the Christian tradition. Scripture was, from the earliest accounts, regarded as an authority *par excellence*. This was largely due to the fact that God's clearest and most dramatic self-revelation took the form of his saving deeds in history. Though there was a long history of God's dealings with his people, this story reached its climax in the person and work of the incarnate Son.³⁰ Access to these

²⁹ There is, of course, a sense in which any enumeration of candidates will be arbitrary. I think it is fair to say, however, that these four are the ones most often appealed to in theological prolegomena. Others, however, have been suggested. See, for example, Christopher Seitz. *World Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 87, n. 4.

³⁰ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 29.

historical events, in turn, depended on the testimony of the apostles, first in oral and then in written form.³¹ Since the account of the climax of God’s revelation could only be found in this apostolic witness, the importance of Scripture as a source of authority for Christian doctrine was unquestioned in the early church. Furthermore, the early church understood the Scriptures, initially referring only to the Old Testament but later including the New Testament writings, as the Word of God – “the unimpeachable sourcebook of saving doctrine.”³² These events were of such significance for the human race, that God ensured, through the inspiration of the human authors, that the events there recorded were faithfully recalled and transmitted.³³ This is why, as Oden notes, the church, “ecumenically consents to the premise that the Spirit has so reliably protected this recollection and transmission of scripture that no truth essential to salvation has been lost.”³⁴ Scripture, then, is the written testimony, inspired by the Spirit, to the saving words and deeds of God in history.

The next source of authority to consider is tradition. The first thing to note is that term “tradition” has been used in a variety of ways in discussions of authority. It sometimes refers to oral traditions in contrast to written ones. Other times, it specifies that which the Church teaches which is not contained in Scripture. In still other instances, it picks out the content, both oral and written, which the Church passes down to succeeding generations. So, in the early church, for instance, discussions concerning the relationship between Scripture and tradition are often muddled because we read a modern

³¹ More on this aspect of oral tradition in the section on tradition.

³² Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 52-53 and 61.

³³ Thomas Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), 552.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

notion of tradition (as oral tradition handed down in the Church) into a context in which it meant, primarily, an act of authoritative transmission – a handing down, in oral or written form, of a doctrine which Jesus or his apostles taught.³⁵ But, in this sense, tradition could apply to both Scripture and oral tradition. And, in fact, out of the early apostolic tradition, in this broader sense, came both Scripture (written tradition) and oral tradition. As oral tradition died out in the middle of the third century, what remained was Scripture and the teaching of the church concerning this written tradition. It is at this stage that the relationship between Scripture and tradition (in this latter sense) became an open question.³⁶ For the purposes of this discussion, then, tradition will simply refer to the teaching and reflections of the Church throughout history.³⁷ Oden is perhaps oversimplifying matters when he points out that since “[s]cripture is the only written access that tradition has to the Christ event...[t]radition is simply the history of the exegesis of Scripture.”³⁸ But, his underlying point must surely be correct. The content which forms the basis for all future Christian theological reflection is contained in the Scriptures. Even when that content is brought into dialogue with extra-biblical concepts and traditions, it is done so in an attempt to clarify or explain or interpret that foundational content. As Bauckham likewise insists, “[o]ne cannot take the tradition seriously without taking seriously its basically *interpretative* relation to Scripture.”³⁹

³⁵ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 30-31.

³⁶ Lane, “Scripture, Tradition and Church,” 38-39.

³⁷ Not only in the sense of official pronouncements of the Church, but also in the myriad voices of Christian thinkers reflecting on theological matters.

³⁸ Oden, *The Living God*, 337.

³⁹ Bauckham, “Tradition in relation to Scripture and Reason,” in *Scripture, Tradition, and Reason*, eds. Bauckham and Drewery, 127.

Now, by itself this does not answer the question as to the necessity of the teaching tradition of the Church for a proper interpretation. It may be that, though tradition is basically interpretative, it is nonetheless essential to a proper understanding of Scripture. Alternatively, it may be understood as a helpful aid in, but not strictly necessary for, the interpretation of Scripture. In either case, tradition is concerned with reflection on and interpretation of the traditions of the apostles contained in Scripture.

The character of reason as a source of theological knowledge is, at least initially, more straightforward. It has been suggested that, in general, reason is “the (human) capacity to know truth through thought.”⁴⁰ Now, we could modify this to narrow its scope to theological inquiry. In this way, reason as a source of theological doctrine would be *the human capacity to know theological truth through thought*. But, this immediately raises the question as to the distinctiveness of reason over against tradition. For, on the broad definition just given, tradition would appear to be a species of reason. That is, the Church’s reflection on the Scriptures would certainly count as an example of theological truth known through thought (though, not through thought *alone*). Reason and tradition would not be identical, of course, since reason could arrive at theological truths on the basis of thought concerning the natural world or the contents of the mind. This is one way of conceiving of reason as a source for theological doctrine. Alternatively, one could conceive of reason more narrowly as only those theological truths that human thought could know, unaided by Scripture. Although this latter conception has the benefit of not overlapping with tradition, it seems to leave out too much that clearly involves its use. Here it would be helpful to make a distinction between reason as a general human

⁴⁰ Robert MacSwain, “Some Orienting Thoughts on ‘Reason’” (lecture, The Anglican Tradition of Reason, Sewanee, TN, January 18, 2018). This was proposed as a working definition for the purpose of the class.

capacity and reason as an original source of knowledge. In the former sense, reason plays a role in all human knowledge, since knowledge involves true belief, and belief is a species of thought. In the latter sense, however, reason is, by itself, responsible for only a small portion of human knowledge, i.e. *a priori* knowledge. If one were to include the deliverances of reason applied to the content of the natural world, then reason would be the source of a good deal of theological knowledge, i.e. natural theology. Strictly speaking, though, natural theology is the result of the application of the human capacity of rational thought to the data provided by the created order.⁴¹ The data itself is not derived from reason, but from God's self-revelation in his effects (creation). Thus, reason is principally an intellectual capacity, not an independent source of knowledge, but can be understood, in an extended sense, as a contributory source of natural theology (when applied to the data of the natural order) or tradition⁴² (when applied to the data of Scripture). In other words, the authority of reason lies in the capacities of human reflection and judgment. At this point, it is important simply to note the distinction between reason as a general capacity and reason as a unique source. This distinction may prove helpful as we discuss the relationship between reason and the other sources of authority for Christian doctrine.

The last authority to consider briefly is experience. Appeal to experience can take two basic forms. It can appeal broadly to any personal experience and bring it to bear on the theological question at hand or it can appeal more narrowly to what we might call *theological* experiences (experiences of God's presence, grace, absence, etc.). In the

⁴¹ Leaving aside for simplicity's sake questions of, for instance, the rationality of nature, the reliability of sense perception, etc.

⁴² Or "revealed theology," if you prefer.

former case, experience might serve as an aid in understanding doctrine, but is primarily descriptive, not a normative authority. When experience has been appealed to historically it is in the latter sense, and specifically the means by which an individual appropriates the gospel, or a theological truth, for herself.⁴³ It is through experience that the contents of Scripture and tradition are “received, understood, and validated.”⁴⁴ It is the arena of personal application; the medium through which the logician’s cold formula, *All men are mortal*, becomes the existentialist’s passionate conviction, *I, too, must die*. As such, it plays a crucial role in an individual’s Christian life. Furthermore, it can form the basis for personal testimony to the truth of the gospel. John Newton’s life, for instance, was personally touched by God’s forgiveness and grace. As a result, he did not produce a theological tome on the grace of God, but simply testified to his experience of being formerly lost, but now found. Personal experience can act as a source of authority to the extent that it provides testimonial evidence for the truth of the gospel (or a theological truth) in the lived experience of one individual.

Another way to think about these sources of authority is to view their respective roles along the trajectory of theological inquiry. God funds theology through his self-revelation in nature and history. The testimony to the great acts of God in history is handed down (‘tradition’ in its original sense) in oral and then written form. Once the initial testimony has been recorded in written form (Scripture), subsequent tradition is concerned primarily with preserving and reflecting on this apostolic deposit of faith. In fact, rational reflection on the books of nature and Scripture by individual thinkers in

⁴³ Oden, *The Living God*, 339.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

different times, places, and cultures are individually examples of, and collectively constitutive of, tradition. Then, in each succeeding generation, the contemporary Christian uses her reason to reflect on Scripture, nature, and tradition (which is itself a diversity of previous reflections), and appropriates the truths of theology through personal experience. Thus, theological knowledge comes to each individual from God's self-revelation in nature and Scripture through the rational reflection of previous generations and one's own thought, and is appropriated through personal experience.

Some Problems with Tradition, Reason, and Experience

The first thing to point out with respect to tradition, reason, and experience is that they are all legitimate and helpful sources of authority for Christian doctrine. The Church's long and rich tradition of reflection on the articles of faith is of tremendous value. It provides perspectives and avenues of thought which originate in radically different social, historical, and cultural contexts, and which would likely not occur to most. As a result, it is one of the best ways to guard against, and compensate for, one's own social, historical, and cultural biases and idiosyncrasies of thought. Furthermore, many theological issues which continue to be of concern to us today have been treated at length in the tradition of the Church. We may not always agree with the arguments or conclusions we find there, but it would be unwise to neglect them entirely. They may, in fact, save us considerable time and effort. As far as reason is concerned, the human capacity to think about and make judgments on theological matters is not only extremely valuable, but indispensable. It is a God-given faculty of human thought, given so that we might understand – among other things – our world, our true Good, and the means by

which to pursue it. Reason is involved in the deliberation and assessment of all claims of knowledge, and thus, all theological claims. Not only does it play this indispensable role in our own theological reflection, but it also forms the basis of the theological reflection which constitutes the tradition of the Church. Lastly, the experience of God in one's own life – the appropriation of theological truths as true *for me* – is an extremely important aspect of Christian discipleship. The testimony of personal experience can be a powerful authority, through which one has not only heard rumors of, or understood intellectually, God's goodness, but "tasted and seen" it firsthand. It is, to use a favorite example of Jonathan Edwards, the difference between knowing *about* honey and *tasting* it. Furthermore, the personal testimony of one individual can serve to strengthen the conviction of others, who see in her a particular confirmation of a more general theological truth.

The problems arise, not in connection with their use as sources of authority in Christian theology, but when they are treated as *final* authorities. As such, it will be helpful to examine some of the difficulties which arise for each source of authority if we take it to be the final authority. Assume then, for the sake of argument, that tradition is our final source of authority for matters of doctrine. The first difficulty has to do with the nature and function of tradition. Recall from our earlier discussion that tradition is essentially the reflection on and interpretation of the content of Scripture throughout history. The contents on which tradition reflects – the first principles, to use the Thomistic phrase – are derived from Scripture. Since everything in the conclusion is contained somewhere in the premises, when Scripture provides the premises, tradition is simply teasing out the implications of what is already implicit in Scripture. When

Scripture does not provide the premises (or does not provide all of them), the resulting conclusion does not possess normative authority, but must be judged by another authority. As such, any authority that it has will be derivative and parasitic on the authority of Scripture. As Kevin Vanhoozer notes, “tradition has no independent authority. Tradition is but the moon to Scripture’s sun: what light tradition casts, and what authority it has, is secondary and derivative.”⁴⁵

So when, for example, Basil of Caesarea suggested, on the basis of the five points later incorporated in the article on the Holy Spirit in the Nicene Creed, that the Holy Spirit is God, he did so on the basis of what he perceived to be the implications of the Scripture’s testimony concerning the Spirit.⁴⁶ That is, he pointed to passages in Scripture which seemed to attribute divine titles, attributes, and activities to the Spirit. In particular, the Spirit is called “the Lord,”⁴⁷ described as the “giver of life,”⁴⁸ who “proceeds from the Father,”⁴⁹ who, just like the Father and the Son, is “worshipped and glorified,”⁵⁰ and who “spoke by the prophets.”⁵¹ The relevant point for our purposes is not the accuracy of his exegesis or the logic of his argument, but rather to illustrate the derivative nature of

⁴⁵ Kevin Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority After Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 139.

⁴⁶ Saint Basil the Great, “De Spiritu Sancto” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol 3.*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 2-50.

⁴⁷ Basil discusses each at length, but I will supply just one example for each. 2 Corinthians 3:17.

⁴⁸ Psalm 104:30.

⁴⁹ John 15:26.

⁵⁰ Matthew 28:19.

⁵¹ 2 Peter 1:21.

tradition's authority. The conclusion at which the Church ultimately arrived concerning the divinity of the Holy Spirit was based on premises held on Scripture's authority.

Another difficulty on the assumption that tradition is the final source of authority in matters of doctrine is the problem of disagreement within the tradition. The fathers, of course, do not speak with one voice, but often disagree on the interpretation or implications of Scripture for a particular point of doctrine. In such cases, how is one to decide which traditions to accept and which to reject? Here again we come face-to-face with the theological version of the problem of the criterion. An appeal to a different authority will only push the question back one level. On the other hand, any appeal to tradition – either to the contemporary teaching of the Church or to any element within the history of tradition – as an arbiter will be, at best, arbitrary or, at worst, circular. The question as to why one should prefer one part of the Church's tradition over another cannot itself be answered by tradition. This is because the authority of each part of the tradition is not independent, but relative to its fidelity to Scripture. Bauckham approvingly adopts a helpful distinction by Gerald O'Collins between “‘foundational revelation’ (in the biblical period) and ‘dependent revelation’ (in the history of the church).”⁵² While foundational revelation gains new meaning when the message of Scripture is proclaimed in new contexts, this process “must remain *subject* to the apostolic account of its fundamental meaning.”⁵³ Thus, one of the difficulties for tradition as an ultimate source of authority is that it cannot adjudicate between different voices from within the tradition.

⁵² Bauckham, “Tradition in relation to Scripture and Reason,” in *Scripture, Tradition, and Reason*, eds. Bauckham and Drewery, 128.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

In a related way, tradition is unable to adjudicate differences between two distinct sources of authority. For example, suppose reason presents a powerful argument for a position which contradicts the teaching of the Church's tradition. One who takes tradition as the final authority would be incapable of providing a noncircular resolution to the disagreement. If the proponent of the rational argument asks why the traditionalist should prefer tradition to reason, the traditionalist would have to appeal either to tradition or another authority. Appealing to tradition would clearly beg the question. But, any appeal to another authority would betray the fact that tradition is not her final authority.

Thus, tradition faces some serious difficulties if it is viewed as a final source of authority for matters of doctrine. Suppose we assume, then, that reason is our final source of authority and see if it fares any better. The first thing to note in this connection, which we have already had occasion to point out, is that reason is a capacity for thought, not a source of original content. In the realm of theology, it relies on nature and Scripture to provide the content on which it works. In this sense, we must judge reason at least *materially* insufficient as a source of authority. Even if we grant the content of the natural order as reason's native content, reason would still appear to be materially dependent on Scripture, either directly or through tradition, to bridge the gap between natural theology and a full-fledged Christian theology – unless, that is, one identifies Christianity with natural religion. As Oden notes, all three authorities – reason, tradition, and experience – “remain essentially dependent upon and responsive to Scripture, since they must appeal to Scripture for the very events, interpretations, and data they are remembering, upon which they reflect, and out of which their expression becomes transformed.”⁵⁴ So, as with

⁵⁴ Oden, *The Living God*, 336.

tradition so also with reason, its distinctively Christian authoritative content is derived from another source, namely Scripture. As such, it is materially insufficient.

The question now is whether or not reason is formally sufficient. Now reason does seem to be more in its element as a capacity for reflection and judgment on content which is derived from another source. Furthermore, this capacity of thought is an inescapable feature of all human intellectual inquiry and *ipso facto* of theological inquiry as well. This is quite simply the only means whereby humans may appropriate⁵⁵ theological truths, regardless of the source through which they are discovered. The question, however, is not whether humans make use of reason in all theological inquiry, but whether reason possesses in itself a reliable means of adjudicating among a variety of positions or between sources of authority in matters theological. On this point, the Christian tradition has raised several concerns with respect to reason's competencies and limitations. So, while on the whole affirming the basic trustworthiness of reason as a capacity of thought, there has been a persistent tendency to point to its limitations *vis-à-vis* Christian doctrine. As Oden observes, "[r]ight use of reason in Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions resists the overextension of the claim of reason, that it could be omniscient or the final source or judge of all truth."⁵⁶

The basic reason for this reticence within the tradition to make rational thought the final authority in matters of doctrine is the limitations of reason in terms of the effects of its inherent finitude, inescapable biases, and sin on its normal operations. As a result,

⁵⁵ At least in the sense of giving intellectual assent. There is a sense, I suppose, in which experience can appropriate theological truths which differs from rational assent, but even there it seems to rely on a basic intellectual grasp of the truth which is then applied to the individual personally.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 339-40.

each of these limitations deserves to be treated in turn. First of all, reason's operation is affected by its inherent limitations. There is almost universal consent within the history of doctrine that there are theological truths which transcend the capacity of reason. These theological truths – many of them mysteries central to the Christian faith – are acknowledged to be, not irrational but, super-rational. That is, they can be shown to not conflict with reason, but reason cannot fully grasp their import or demonstrate their truth.

A classic example of a theological truth which transcends, but does not conflict with, reason is the doctrine of the Trinity. There have been countless attempts by theologians to think deeply about the trinitarian nature of God. These attempts, however, typically aim to clarify the main claims involved or to set them out in a such a way that they can be shown to be logically consistent. Rational inquiry into the mysteries of the faith only goes so far – in this case, to the important, but relatively modest, position that there is nothing logically inconsistent involved in the doctrine. Even highly technical contemporary discussions tend to maintain this focus on logical consistency⁵⁷ or, when they attempt to go further, end up departing from orthodox teaching.⁵⁸ Now if there is a category of theological truths which transcend reason, then there is a part of Christian doctrine of which reason is not competent to judge. Furthermore, as the example above illustrates, it would seem that if reason was given free reign on a topic which transcends its capabilities, it would likely depart from Christian orthodoxy. But, there does not seem to be a way to clearly demarcate the line which, if reason crosses, it has overstepped its

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Peter van Inwagen, "And Yet They Are Not Three Gods But One God," in *God, Knowledge, and Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 222-59.

⁵⁸ See, e.g., Richard Swinburne's account, in *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), which is generally taken to amount to tritheism. See, e.g., Edward Feser, "Swinburne's Tritheism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4, no. 3 (1997): 175-84.

finite abilities. In other words, phenomenologically the deliverances of reason seem identical on both sides of the line. Something similar is at play with Kant's antinomies, in which two contradictory claims are both given a rational demonstration.⁵⁹ Although they serve a different rhetorical point in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, the relevance to our discussion is that a person can see that she has overstepped reason's capacities, not by the arguments which reason puts forward (which both seem reasonable), but only when (or more likely, *if*) she notices the antinomy. The finite nature of human reason, then, seems to imply that there are some areas of theological inquiry concerning which reason is not competent to judge, but which are nonetheless central points of Christian doctrine.

In addition to its inherent finitude, reason is also profoundly shaped by social, cultural, and personal biases and blind spots. This does not render reason impotent, as some relativists and constructivists aver, but should at least rein in any unrealistic understandings of reason as pure objectivity or entirely trans-cultural in nature. The fact is there are many examples of beliefs which were nearly universally held in a particular culture and at a particular time, purportedly on rational grounds, which were seen at a later time to be more a product of the time or place than a deliverance of reason. For instance, Aristotle's belief that women were not and could not be men's equals⁶⁰ was a remarkable blind spot in an otherwise careful, systematic, and rational thinker. What was, to him, basically self-evident was almost certainly conditioned, and reinforced, by the surrounding culture. Richard Lints helpfully distinguishes, in this regard, *native*

⁵⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 470-495.

⁶⁰ Aristotle, "Politica" in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1132.

rationality from *cultural rationality*. The former refers to those elements of reason that “are part of the very constitution of our beings as creatures of God,” while the latter refers to the elements of reason that “depend on the culture we inhabit.”⁶¹ Furthermore, there is a sense in which reason is constrained by its environment and, in particular, by the plausibility structures at play. Although logically distinct, plausibility and truth have a complex relationship with one another. Plausibility often exercises unnoticed influence on one’s assessment of truth by eliminating from consideration claims which seem implausible. But, plausibility is itself largely a function of, and therefore relative to, a given group’s current understanding of the world.⁶² In addition to being unnoticed, the influence of plausibility on one’s rational assessment of truth is also quite strong and can seem for all the world like a deliverance of reason, not a result of the external constraint of one particular socially and culturally conditioned understanding of the world. This, I think, is the (small) grain of truth in Richard Rorty’s otherwise untenable quip that truth is “what your peers will let you get away with.”⁶³ Now, this is not the place for a full-blown discussion of contemporary objections to reason and human knowledge from the quarters of constructivism and relativism. Suffice it to say that I do not think these lines of argument constitute a fatal blow against reason or human knowledge.⁶⁴ And, it is possible to reflect critically on, and thus mitigate the effects of, these biases and blind

⁶¹ Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 117.

⁶² See, e.g., Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 29-52.

⁶³ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1979), 176.

⁶⁴ See, e.g., Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

spots of one's social, historical, and cultural context. What they do underscore, however, is the need for caution and humility with respect to the capabilities of human reason. To my mind, this is especially true with regard to theological claims, which often have fundamental implications for one's view of the world and, thus, stand in opposition to the prevailing structures of plausibility current at any given time and place. Oden's measured assessment seems to strike just the right balance. "The Christian tradition," he writes, "does not characteristically view reason as autonomous, as if completely separable from other relational, historical, and social modes of knowing the truth. Reason, rather, seeks to provide for religious discernment some appropriate tests of cogency and internal consistency."⁶⁵

Reason, then, is affected by the limitations of finitude and cultural context. Furthermore, its normal operations are also affected in more or less subtle ways by human sin. Now, the reality of human sin is, or ought to be, an uncontroversial element of Christian theology. As Niebuhr once said, "the doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith."⁶⁶ At least with respect to the present reality and universality of sin, this seems fairly obvious. And, while it is possible to maintain either of two opposite extremes – namely, that sin basically renders reason useless or that it has no affect whatsoever on reason's operations⁶⁷ – I would argue that the truth lies somewhere in between. Sin does not damage the God-given faculty, but can,

⁶⁵ Oden, *The Living God*, 340.

⁶⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Man's Nature and His Communities: Essays on the Dynamics and Enigmas of Man's Personal and Social Existence* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 24.

⁶⁷ As a side note, while there are good examples of the latter view, the former view seems to be more like a caricature, than the substance, of some Reformed views of human depravity.

and often does, influence its operations. Another way of putting the matter is that there are “cognitive consequences of sin.”⁶⁸ Individuals do not approach questions of truth – at least theological truth – as impartial observers, but as people with a vested interest in the truth. Theological knowledge is intimately tied up both with knowledge of humanity⁶⁹ and self-knowledge. They are related in several ways, but two of particular importance here. First, what one says about God affects what one can say about humanity (in general and in particular), and *vice versa*. Second, and more importantly, because of the reality of our lived experience of failure before God, i.e. the reality of sin, and the desire to extricate ourselves from culpability (or just from looking bad), we have a vested interest in what turns out to be true concerning God and other related theological matter. And this vested interest can profoundly influence the theological investigation itself.

One clear historical example of this dynamic at work can be seen in Augustine’s *Confessions*, in which he describes his prolonged interest in the sect of Mani. Augustine had long been troubled by a version of the problem of evil which focused on the ultimate cause of personal evil. In particular, he struggled to come up with an explanation which would adequately account for the particular instances of personal evil in his own life. Then he was introduced to the Manicheans, who adhered to a form of gnostic dualism which regarded good and evil as separate and distinct forces. On their view the soul was good and the body evil, and therefore their aim was to escape, by means of secret knowledge (*gnosis*), the shackles of the evil body and attain wisdom. The particular

⁶⁸ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 213. Cf. his interesting discussion on the “noetic effects of sin,” 213-40.

⁶⁹ As Calvin, for instance, so clearly perceived. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 35-39.

details of Manichean gnosticism are not our concern, but rather Augustine's prolonged flirtation with it. After all, as a philosophical or theological system, Augustine recognized it was seriously flawed,⁷⁰ but he was attracted to it nonetheless. The ultimate reason for this attraction – which he was blind to at the time, but which became clear in his more spiritually and intellectually mature hindsight – was an elaborate attempt to avoid personal guilt. For on the Manichean view, the locus of personal identity was the soul, not the body or a combination of the two. Since, then, it was the body that was the cause of evil, and the individual was *really* to be identified with the soul, on this view Augustine was not responsible for his sin. “It still seemed to me that it is not we who sin,” he wrote, looking back on this time in his life, “but some other nature within us that is responsible. My pride was gratified at being exculpated by this theory.”⁷¹ In other words, the reality of personal sin had a profound affect on Augustine's thinking at this time, and influenced his rational capacity to judge the truth of a theological position which, if false, would leave him personally responsible for his sin. He goes on to say, “I liked to excuse myself and lay the blame on some other force that was with me but was not myself. But in truth it was all myself. My impious ideas had set up a division, pitting me against myself, and my sin was the more incurable for my conviction that I was not a sinner.”⁷² With characteristically uncanny insight into his motivations and thought processes, Augustine understood that he was not applying the pure light of reason to this theological issue precisely because he had a dog in the fight. As a sinner not yet ready to

⁷⁰ Not even the great (and long-awaited) teacher, Faustus, could answer his questions and objections.

⁷¹ Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997), 88.

⁷² *Ibid.*

confess and be healed, Augustine was predisposed to look favorably on any system, however flawed, which could explain evil in such a way that he could avoid personal responsibility. And yet, this realization is the mature retrospective view of a highly self-reflective thinker. At the time of his interest in the sect, the appeal was very real and seemed to him the best explanation of the relevant data. And this, I would maintain, is the situation in which humans find themselves with respect to reason's partiality. Humans have a vested interest in the results of theological inquiry – generated by their own beliefs, actions, and lifestyle – which, in turn, influences the results of that inquiry. As the illustration from Augustine also shows, this is not an insuperable difficulty for reason – he did, after all, eventually become aware of the influence of sin on his cognitive functions (though, as he insists, this awareness arose as a result of an external act of grace). It does, however, represent a serious limitation, and one which is directly applicable to reason's ability to adjudicate in theological matters. This is one reason why Scripture's ability to challenge our thinking has been understood as such a great asset. As Luther rightly perceived, "the word of God always comes as *adversarius noster*, our adversary. It does not simply confirm and strengthen us in what we think we are and as what we wish to be taken for. It negates our nature, which has fallen prey to illusion; but this is the way the word of God affirms our being and makes it true."⁷³

As a result of these limitations – due to the finite nature of reason and the effects of cultural context and personal sin on the normal operations of reason – reason does not always speak with one voice. This is true among rational thinkers living at the same time, among those living at different times (as evidenced by the history of tradition), and also

⁷³ Gerhard Ebeling, *Introduction to a Theological Theory of Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 17.

within the thought of a single rational agent over time.⁷⁴ The question, thus, arises as to how to arbitrate between divergent deliverances of reason. There are some differences among these different relationships of disagreement, and the problem can manifest itself in a variety of ways. For example, it could manifest itself in the thought of two contemporary theologians who are equally well-educated and acquainted with basically the same relevant literature on a particular topic, but who nonetheless come to quite divergent views. Or, the problem might show itself in an individual, aware of the fact that sin has clouded her theological judgment in the past, who does not know in the present if she can trust her rational processes.⁷⁵ That being said, the same basic issue seems to apply to all of them. Whether, for instance, the disagreement arises between two contemporaries or the same individual at different times, the underlying problem remains the same. If one cannot trust all deliverances of reason in theological matters, how does one decide which to trust? It seems to me that here, again, the problem of the criterion rears its ugly head. For, in any of the scenarios sketched above, an appeal to reason would simply rely on the faculty whose very operations are called into question by the rational disagreement under consideration. If reason's operations were influenced negatively, by its finitude or the affect of one's cultural context or personal sin, without one's being aware of this influence, then a similar influence could be operative in the attempt to deliberate between competing claims. If Augustine, for instance,⁷⁶ in reflecting on his intellectual move from Manichean dualism to orthodoxy, asked himself

⁷⁴ Or in some instances, for example in the case of antinomies which result from the application of reason to issues above its competence, within the thought of a single rational agent at the same time!

⁷⁵ Similar examples could easily be imagined for all the relationships of disagreement.

⁷⁶ And contrary to fact (see below).

why he judged his later position true when it was arrived at using the same rational faculties which initially misled him to affirm the teaching of the Manichees, a rational argument offered in favor of the later view would hardly constitute a satisfying response. Rather, as Augustine's actual view makes clear, he needed to appeal to another authority to decide this matter. He was enabled to see the way in which sin had influenced his former views, not by the exercise of reason but by God's grace and through the words of Scripture. On the other hand, since we are operating under the assumption that reason is the final authority, one cannot appeal to another authority to arbitrate (e.g. that one position had tradition on its side) without elevating its authority above reason. In other words, the options available to resolve the disagreement seem to be either an appeal to reason or an appeal to another, more primary, authority. Neither option, however, is without difficulty, since the former involves circularity and the latter runs counter to our assumption.

Not only is reason unable to arbitrate between competing claims of reason, but it also runs into difficulties if it acts as judge when reason is in conflict with another source of authority. To use the example of Swinburne's tritheism referenced above, when a deliverance of reason (tritheism) conflicts with the received tradition (Trinity), it raises the question of which authority deserves priority. In an attempt to answer that question, one must appeal either to one of the sources in support of itself, or one of the sources (or a third) in support of another source. But neither option seems good, since the first involves circular reasoning and the second, at best, only pushes the question back one step, and ultimately ends in either an infinite regress of appeals or circularity. Swinburne could appeal to reason to support his priority of reason only on pain of circularity. But, if

he appealed to any other authority in support of reason, he would be admitting an authority above reason, and this authority, in turn, would need to provide credentials. Thus, it seems that reason, insofar as it is not capable of judging those areas of doctrine which exceed its capacities and of resolving conflicts internal to rational inquiry and between reason and other sources, is also not *formally* sufficient as a source of authority in matters of doctrine.

Thus, reason faces some serious difficulties if it is viewed as the final source of authority for matters of doctrine. Let us, then, see how experience fares if we take it to be our final source of authority. The first thing to point out with respect to experience is that it has been used in a variety of ways over the course of the history of doctrine. Most often when an appeal is made to experience today, it refers to an individual's personal experiences in general (i.e., what it is like to be that particular person with her background, circumstances, and life experiences). These are then brought into constructive dialogue with other sources of authority. A good example of a method of theological reflection which utilizes experience in this way is Education for Ministry (EfM). After some object of thought is introduced for reflection, the group views the object through four lenses: tradition (which includes Scripture, church teaching, tradition, and church history), cultural perspectives (philosophy, literature, politics, pop-culture, etc.), personal positions (beliefs, attitudes, etc.), and "action" (lived experience, actions taken, thoughts/feelings associated with an action, etc.).⁷⁷ As participants reflect on what this object of thought means to them within the context of their socio-cultural and

⁷⁷ Education for Ministry, "Common Lesson Two: Methods of Theological Reflection," accessed February 9, 2018. http://efm.sewanee.edu/assets/uploads/CLSM_Chapter_2.pdf

personal experiences, and bring those into dialogue with any insights from “tradition,” they are engaging in theological reflection which is intended to speak to their current situation. The relevant point is that pretty much every aspect of a person’s experience can be drawn on in order to reflect theologically on the proposed object of thought. This was not, however, the way experience was historically incorporated into theological reflection. Rather, experience tended to refer to the application of the truths of the gospel, or of Christian doctrine more broadly, to the individual’s life. On this view, experience plays the crucial role of appropriating theological truths personally. Although this use of experience is an extremely important element of a vital Christian faith, it is primarily receptive. On this view, Oden notes, “Scripture and tradition are received, understood, and validated through personal experience, but not judged or arbitrated or censored by it. Rather Scripture and tradition amid the living, worshipping community are the means by which and context in which one’s personal experiences are evaluated as ‘of God’s family’ (1 John 4:4).”⁷⁸ As such, experience does not act as an independent authority in theological matters, but bears internal witness to other external authorities. As we had occasion to note earlier, the exception that proves the rule is when this experiential knowledge of theological truths is itself used as testimonial evidence to the truth of the gospel. It is an exception in that experience is playing a contributory, not receptive, role; it proves the rule in that it is dependent upon, and bears witness to, a more fundamental source of authority.

Now there is, I believe, good reason why the foregoing use of experience dominates the history of doctrine. In this role it supports, amplifies, and vitalizes

⁷⁸ Oden, *The Living God*, 339.

Christian theology. However, the moment personal experience, construed more broadly, becomes an independent authority which is allowed to judge, or arbitrate between, other sources, Christian theology is in danger of losing its moorings. This is because personal experiences must be reflected on and interpreted in order to be useful for theological reflection. But, to interpret these experiences is to apply some framework or lens to the events in question. When this framework is overtly theological, when the concepts utilized to interpret one's experience are drawn from Christian theology, it can result in the sort of fruitful appropriation of theological truths to one's own experience that we discussed above. It also corresponds, in rough outline, to the contemplative process. And yet this is clearly dependent on the prior derivation of theological concepts from other sources. The experiences do not interpret themselves; neither do they rule out competing interpretations. When, on the other hand, the interpretative framework utilizes concepts which are not derived from Christian theology, the meaning of the events – and their relevance to theological reflection – loses its distinctively Christian force. This is not to say that there are no non-Christian concepts which are, or ought to be, properly utilized in interpreting experience, or that such a use might not generate genuine insight. Rather, such insights will be based on the application of a concept to one's experience drawn from another authority. As such, the weight of the authority given to experience will be derivative of the that given to the authority from which the interpretive concepts are derived. Furthermore, these concepts may or may not cohere with a Christian theological framework of thought. In the former case, they may carry some (derivative) authority, and in the latter case, they would carry none. In either case, however, the only way to determine whether or not the concepts cohere with the larger body of Christian doctrine is

to judge the concepts (and their resulting interpreted experience) on the basis of this body of previously accepted doctrine.

Perhaps an example or two would help to illustrate the point. Suppose a woman was convinced – by reflection on the opening chapters of Genesis or the Thomist distinction between act and potency – that all contingent existence is gift. If she found herself overwhelmed with gratitude to God for her own existence – or the existence of a particularly vibrant tulip, say – she might properly understand this experience as an appropriation or personal validation of the more general theological concept. On the other hand, suppose a man was convinced – by the prevailing cultural trends or considered it a self-evident truth – that all natural desires are good. Suppose further that he, though a married man, found himself naturally attracted to another woman. If he tried to understand his attraction through the lens of ‘natural desires are good,’ he might, if still attracted to his wife, conclude that polyamory is a good, or, if not, that he should end his marriage to pursue this new attraction. But certainly both the concept and the application of that concept would meet with strong resistance from the Christian tradition. Christian theology, after all, teaches that many of our natural desires (e.g. selfishness, ambition, greed, envy, lust, etc.) are sinful and must be denied rather than acted upon. Several aspects of this illustration are worthy of comment. First, the application of a non-Christian concept to the man’s particular situation turned out to be inconsistent with Christian doctrine. It need not have, of course, but it is always a possibility that it will. Secondly, the authority of his experience is dependent on the authority of the source from which he derived the interpretive concept, in this case, his cultural milieu. The experience itself does not carry its own authority, but depends on a particular understanding of that

experience which may or may not be in line with Christian teaching. Lastly, in order to ascertain whether his interpreted experience is a trustworthy guide, it must be judged against the larger body of Christian doctrine.

Another complicating factor has to do with the effects of human bias and sin on this process. In much the same way as bias and sin affects the use of reason, it also affects how one interprets personal experience. Again, humans do not approach theological reflection in isolation from their own background and lived experience. Rather, these experiences shape and color our general outlook, the questions we ask (or do not ask), and the way in which we understand the whole range of theological inquiry. We are aware, if only subconsciously, that to affirm any given theological claim has implications for how we assess and understand the world. To accept, for instance, a form of Christian particularism seems to entail that some will not be saved. This has intellectual consequences which might cause one difficulty, but it also has personal consequences. Not only will “some” not be saved, but particular individuals we know and love may not be saved. Furthermore, our experience of these individuals and the quality of their lives may be extremely positive. In this scenario, it would be difficult to assess the theological claim without letting one’s personal experience influence the outcome, especially if those experiences were operating subconsciously. This general problem would only be amplified if experience were regarded as an independent authority whose deliverances, often influenced by bias and sin, were allowed to exercise authority over other sources.

Another way of viewing this situation is in terms of the problem of the criterion. When one’s experiences conflict with one another or with another source of authority, on what basis does one determine which authority to accept? In the first case, where two

experiences conflict with one another, appeal will have to be made to an outside authority. Otherwise, one would be appealing to the authority of experience (as judge) against the authority of experience (in one of the conflicting experiences). But, if experience misled in that particular instance, why should it be any different when it acts as judge? When one's experience conflicts with another authority (e.g. reason or tradition), the only options available to arbitrate end up being circular or contradicting the assumption that experience is the final source of authority. If, for instance, one asked why experience was preferred to tradition, a reply which appealed to experience would clearly beg the question. On the other hand, a reply which appealed to tradition (or any other source) would concede the argument in favor of that authority (or another further up the line). Thus, experience finds itself in very much the same situation with respect to the assumption of its final authority as tradition and reason. It cannot provide an account of its presumed status as a final authority which is not ultimately circular or self-refuting.

The Primacy of Scripture

What the foregoing discussion has shown is that any justification of tradition, reason, or experience as the ultimate source of authority will inevitably be circular, since an appeal to any other source would be to admit a higher court of appeal – a yet more ultimate source of authority. And, this conclusion applies *mutatis mutandis* to any ultimate authority. Although each authority considered also had its own peculiar problems, the common problem is the inability of each source to justify itself. In other words, it is possible to call the authority of the authority into question. And, it appears that the only response available is viciously circular. The only way to avoid this difficulty

would be to find a source of authority which is self-authenticating. This would not avoid circularity but blunt its force.

At first glance, Scripture seems to be in precisely the same position as tradition, reason, and experience. That is, just as one could imagine each of the other sources conflicting with another source and creating a stalemate of sorts, so also with any claim derived from Scripture. In that situation, appeal to another source to decide the matter would mean that Scripture was not the ultimate authority, but appeal to Scripture would beg the question. But this is precisely where some theologians have appealed to Scripture's unique status as the Word of God, conveying, through the inspiration of the various human authors, the testimony of God himself. Now, as we have had occasion to mention already, the ultimate authority for Christians is, of course, God. So, if there were a way to connect God's authority – which is ultimate, but to which we do not have direct access – with the testimony of God in Scripture, then we might have a means of embracing an acceptable circularity with respect to Scripture, through a reliance on the indubitable authority of God.

Although there are many theologians who implicitly or explicitly rely on some such account of Scripture's authority being grounded or confirmed in the testimony of God, probably the most fully developed account is found in the writings of John Calvin. Thus, it will make sense to take a look at his treatment in some detail so as to see the inner logic of his position, especially as it relates to our larger argument here. The first observation which Calvin makes concerns the proper response of humans to the speech⁷⁹

⁷⁹ I take it that much of Scripture can best be understood as divine speech. For one contemporary account of how Scripture could be thus understood, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

of God. “When that which is set forth is acknowledged to be the Word of God,” he writes, “there is no one so deplorably insolent—unless devoid also both of common sense and of humanity itself—as to dare impugn the credibility of Him who speaks.”⁸⁰ In other words, once we have determined that it is God who is speaking, we must accept the claim on his unquestionable authority.⁸¹ To acknowledge that God communicated something and at the same time doubt its veracity would be, for Calvin, the height of human arrogance or, at any rate, an unacceptable position for the Christian. This much is relatively uncontroversial, but Calvin then proceeds to discuss the basis on which a text (viz. Scripture) is acknowledged to be the Word of God. And his first aim is to deny that the basis for this acknowledgement can be found in the consent of the church or in rational argument.

Calvin strongly rejects the idea that the authority of Scripture is conferred on it by the church in its act of acknowledging it as the Word of God, “[a]s if the eternal and inviolable truth of God depended upon the decision of men!”⁸² His incredulous reaction to this idea is based on what he takes to be the true basis of our acknowledgment of Scripture as God’s Word. As we will see shortly, for Calvin, this is the work of the Holy Spirit. And so those who look to the consent of the church to ground their acceptance of Scripture’s divine origin, “mock the Holy Spirit when they ask: Who can convince us that these writings came from God?”⁸³ They have neglected, or even scorned, this important

⁸⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 74.

⁸¹ This does not eliminate the need to interpret Scripture – and determine what teachings apply to us, in what sense, and to what extent – or to sidestep important hermeneutical questions.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 75.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

aspect of the Spirit's work in the economy of salvation. This is not, however, the only reason proffered against this position. Calvin, taking a long view of salvation-history, points out that the teaching of the apostles and prophets must have had authority before the church began to exist. The church is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets"⁸⁴ without whose preaching and teaching there would be no church. There is a logical priority of the self-revelation of God, mediated through the teaching of the apostles and prophets, to the existence of the church, which must render any subsequent pronouncements of the church concerning Scripture essentially receptive in nature. Thus, John Webster notes that the church's acknowledgement of Scripture's divine origin, "has noetic but not ontological force, acknowledging what Scripture is but not making it so."⁸⁵ For Calvin, the divine origin of Scripture is an inherent feature of the text itself.⁸⁶ As a result, to claim that the decision of the church confers authority, rather than recognizes an authority already present, is akin to the claim that my decision concerning the sweetness of honey is what makes honey sweet. Thus, "Scripture exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do of their color, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste."⁸⁷ We will have occasion at a later time to pick up some contemporary challenges to this view, specifically as it relates to the formation and nature of the canon.

⁸⁴ Ephesians 2:20. Calvin probably thought of this in terms of the witness of Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles, instead of the near consensus view today that it refers to apostles and prophets in the New Testament era. That said, his basic point remains; namely, that the apostolic witness to God's saving acts in history, commissioned by Jesus himself, is logically prior to the Church, which exists as a result of that gospel proclamation.

⁸⁵ John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 63. He is relying for this distinction on G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 78.

⁸⁶ Though, as we will see, his analysis of the human reception of this inherent quality is subtler than it may at first appear, depending at essential points on the work of the Spirit.

⁸⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 76.

Suffice it to say at this point that Calvin is unconvinced by the objections of his day and responds to them within the context of the broad sweep of God's salvific revelatory activity.

Not only does Calvin deny that the basis for one's acknowledgement of Scripture's divine origin can be found in the decision of the church, he also denies that it can be found in rational argument. There is certainly a place for rational argument, but for Calvin it is primarily defensive in nature – clearing away obstacles and objections to Scripture, but never enough to establish it as God's Word. There are two main reasons for this claim. The first is that, since Scripture (God's Word written) is Calvin's final source of authority, it is not fitting that he should appeal to anything less than God as its ultimate support. Echoing Hilary of Poitiers' statement that "He whom we can know only through his own utterances is a fitting witness concerning himself,"⁸⁸ Calvin says, "God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word."⁸⁹ The second reason is rooted in Calvin's understanding of the soteriological purpose of God's self-revelation in Scripture. This self-disclosure of God's nature and purposes is offered, not as a matter of speculative interest, but in order to secure salvation for humanity. And this message of salvation is appropriated through faith – i.e. believing the promises of God. In order, then, that we might have the assurance of faith⁹⁰ which "piety requires,"⁹¹ not "beset by the instability

⁸⁸ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* I. xviii, quoted in Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 79, n. 15.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁹⁰ Hebrews 11:1.

⁹¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 79.

of doubt or vacillation,”⁹² the conviction that the promises are truly God’s promises must likewise rest, not on the authority of reason, but on the authority of God.

Therefore, having rejected both the decisions of the church and the arguments of reason as a basis for the divine origin of Scripture, Calvin proceeds to offer his own account. The heart of his position is that “the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.”⁹³ Calvin finds evidence for this position, of course, in the teaching of Scripture itself,⁹⁴ but also takes it to be “nothing other than what each believer experiences within himself.”⁹⁵ The basic idea is that as a Christian hears or reads the words of Scripture, the Holy Spirit testifies in her heart to their truth and divine origin. Even more importantly for our purposes, however, Calvin claims that in the process whereby the divine origin of Scripture is confirmed by the inward testimony of the Spirit in our hearts, “Scripture is indeed self-authenticated.”⁹⁶ This is a striking claim and, at first, hard to make sense of. How is it exactly that the Spirit’s activity in testifying to the truth and divine origin of Scripture can be described as Scripture’s self-authentication? I think his thought process runs along the following lines. If Scripture really is God’s Word written – the Spirit-inspired utterances of human writers – then it bears the testimony, not of human ingenuity, but of the Spirit of God. Without

⁹² Ibid., 78.

⁹³ Ibid., 79.

⁹⁴ He cites, among other passages, the Spirit in our heart as both seal and guarantee of faith (2 Corinthians 1:22): 80.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 80-81. Comments like this from Calvin may appear to make experience the final norm, but I do not think this is what Calvin had in mind. I take these claims to be simply an expression of the phenomenology of belief, not intended as evidence for the veracity of the experience. In any case, this is how one contemporary analytic philosopher develops this line of thinking, as we will see below.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 80.

denying the humanity of Scripture, what Webster calls its “natural history,”⁹⁷ Calvin would certainly maintain that God is its principal author, and in it we hear the very words of God.⁹⁸ In essence, then, Scripture is the testimony of the Spirit. Thus, when the Spirit testifies⁹⁹ in the heart of a Christian to the divine origin of Scripture, the Spirit is testifying to his own testimony. Or, to return to Calvin’s language, the written testimony of the Spirit (Scripture) is authenticated by the inner testimony of the Spirit. This is, I think, the sense in which Scripture can be said to be self-authenticating. It is really shorthand for the internal testimony of the Spirit to the Spirit’s testimony in Scripture. This self-authentication is not the capacity of the scriptural texts to provide their own authentication, but the capacity of the Holy Spirit to authenticate his testimony in Scripture. On this view, the Spirit’s internal testimony confirms both *that* the testimony in Scripture is God’s and the veracity of its own internal testimony. So, in another striking phrase, Calvin maintains that the belief in the divine origin of Scripture “is a conviction that requires no reasons; such, a knowledge with which the best reason agrees—in which the mind truly reposes more securely and constantly than in any reasons.”¹⁰⁰ Not only is this conviction held more firmly than any rational argument, since it is based on the sure testimony of God, but reason itself testifies that it is

⁹⁷ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 19.

⁹⁸ Thus, e.g., Scripture comes to us “from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men,” *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 80.

⁹⁹ But, how does one know that a purported experience of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit is in fact a real one? For Calvin, I think the only specificity we get is that it’s effective at producing faith. In our discussion of Plantinga’s religious epistemology below, however, we’ll see that he offers an externalist (not an internalist) account. That is, he doesn’t need to know that he knows in order to know. Rather, he comes to be convinced of some claim, and if the belief is true and produced by a process which confers warrant, then he has knowledge. More on this later.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, emphasis mine. We will have occasion to return to this phrase a little later on.

eminently rational to believe the testimony of God.¹⁰¹ Therefore, while reason is not able to demonstrate the divine origin of Scripture, it can confirm the rationality of accepting the testimony of the One who alone can authenticate Scripture.

Now, it should be noted that this is the point at which Calvin's discussion makes a unique contribution to our present concern. Of course, Calvin's aim is not to provide a solution to the problem of the criterion, but his treatment of the basis on which humans accept the authority of Scripture is clearly relevant. Even his treatment of the inadequacy of both church decision and rational argument to serve as a basis for acknowledging Scripture's divine origin has parallels to our earlier discussion. So, it may be worthwhile to see how Calvin might respond to the problem of the criterion applied to Scripture as the final source of authority in matters of doctrine. At first glance, the situation seems to be precisely the same. For any theological view held on the basis of Scripture, one might ask on what basis Scripture is judged a reliable authority. And, just as in our discussion of tradition, reason, and experience, so also with Scripture, the only options are to appeal to the same authority again or to another authority, and both are unattractive options. Appealing to another authority would make Scripture's authority derivative on that authority, and hence not the ultimate authority. Appealing to Scripture in support of Scripture, on the other hand, would clearly be circular. However, Calvin's notion of self-authentication might be of service here. This is true especially if we understand the "self-authentication of Scripture" as shorthand for the internal testimony of the Spirit to the Spirit's testimony in Scripture. In that case, one might imagine the hypothetical situation

¹⁰¹ Thus, Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1981), 1q1a8, reply 2: "for although the argument from authority based on human reason is the weakest, yet the argument from authority based on divine revelation is the strongest."

modified as follows. Calvin holds a theological claim on the basis of (the Spirit's testimony in) Scripture. If one asks him on what basis he judges Scripture to be the Spirit's testimony, Calvin would point to the internal witness of the Spirit. If asked, further, on what basis he judges the Spirit's testimony (in terms of both internal witness and external Scripture) a reliable authority, he would appeal again to the Spirit's testimony as self-authenticating. This would, of course, be circular reasoning, but a form of circular reasoning that Calvin would no doubt find entirely acceptable. If God's testimony is called into question, to what higher authority could one possibly appeal?

Furthermore, this is not, in Calvin's thought, some *ad hoc* solution to a puzzling epistemological problem, but rather a natural outgrowth and implication of his more general understanding of "the way in which we receive the grace of Christ."¹⁰² He begins by noting that all the benefits of the objective work of Christ are of no value to us unless and "until we grow into one body with him,"¹⁰³ and the objective work is subjectively appropriated by faith. And yet, "since we see that not all indiscriminately embrace that communion with Christ which is offered through the gospel, reason itself teaches us to climb higher and to examine into the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits."¹⁰⁴ Here Calvin, of course, sees the Spirit's activity as effecting in the elect – but not the reprobate – that faith through which their love for Christ is enkindled and his benefits appropriated. However, the precise details of the complex inner workings of divine grace and human agency are not our concern here. The

¹⁰² Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 537-592.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 537.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

larger point – which few would deny, and which is all that is relevant for our purposes – is that the Spirit plays an active role in the human reception of grace. The Spirit is “the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself,”¹⁰⁵ the love by which and in which we love God. It is within this larger context of the work of the Spirit in the reception of grace that Calvin understands the Spirit’s internal testimony concerning Scripture. Apart from the testimony of God, we are plagued with doubts – so much so “that not without hard struggle is each one able to persuade himself of what all confess with the mouth: namely, that God is faithful.”¹⁰⁶ I think, in passages like this one, we get a clear glimpse of Calvin’s realism with respect to human experience. He is not suggesting that, since Christians have received the grace of God, they are impervious to doubts or struggles. In fact, he goes on to say that, “[e]specially when it comes to reality itself, every man’s wavering uncovers hidden weakness.”¹⁰⁷ And this is one of the main reasons, for Calvin, why the Holy Spirit ascribes authority to Scripture, namely to bolster our confidence in the gospel through faith. When we move from a fundamental reliance on our own capacities to a fundamental reliance on the promises of God sealed on our hearts by the Spirit we move from shifting sand to solid ground. In contrast to feelings of wavering and doubt, there is, for Calvin, “a far different feeling of full assurance that in the Scriptures is always attributed to faith. It is this which puts beyond doubt God’s goodness clearly manifested for us.”¹⁰⁸ But that cannot happen without our truly feeling its sweetness and

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 538. Again, take “effectually” or leave it.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 560.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Here Calvin references Col. 2:2; 1 Thess. 1:5; Heb. 6:11 and 10:22.

experiencing it in ourselves.”¹⁰⁹ In other words, because God wants us to trust in his promises, and the means whereby those promises are communicated to us is in Scripture, he also confirms the truth of these promises – and that they are, indeed, God’s promises – through the inner testimony of the Spirit.

This inner witness is all the more important and necessary, for Calvin, because we do not come to Scripture as neutral inquirers, but with a “blindness and perversity” that prevent us from seeing “the light of God’s truth.”¹¹⁰ What he has in mind here are two of the difficulties with reason that we had occasion to note earlier. First, reason’s scope is limited, and the total contents of Christian doctrine exceed reason’s competence. Secondly, sin exercises an influence on the operations of reason which render (at least some of) its conclusions suspect. This is especially true in the case of theological claims purporting to describe our moral state and our relationship to God. We have a vested interest in coming out of such encounters unscathed or needing to make only minor modifications to our life and self-image. The unwelcome news that our lives do not receive the unqualified approval of God – in fact, that we are so desperately lost in the guilt and power of sin that our only hope is to throw ourselves on the mercy of God – can be resisted by powerful internal (if largely subconscious) forces. It is mainly for these reasons that, “without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the Word can do nothing.”¹¹¹ Just as we receive the grace of Christ through the Spirit, so also we see the light, or taste the sweetness, of God’s Word through the inner workings of the Spirit. Thus, there is an

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 561.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 580.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

intimate connection between the Spirit's work in drawing us to Christ and illuminating our minds. Calvin says that, "as we cannot come to Christ unless we be drawn by the Spirit of God, so when we are drawn we are lifted up in mind and heart above our understanding. For the soul, illumined by him, takes on a new keenness, as it were, to contemplate the heavenly mysteries, whose splendor had previously blinded it."¹¹² In a striking image, Calvin describes Scripture's inability to illuminate the human mind, apart from the Spirit's inner witness, to the sun's impotence with respect to the blind. "Indeed," he says, "the Word of God is like the sun, shining upon all those to whom it is proclaimed, but with no effect among the blind. Now, all of us are blind by nature in this respect. Accordingly, it cannot penetrate into our minds unless the Spirit, as the inner teacher, through his illumination makes entry for it."¹¹³ Again, the purpose of situating Calvin's notion of the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit within the larger context of his understanding of the reception of grace is not necessarily to affirm (or deny) any particulars of his larger theological vision. Rather, the point is to see that the work of the Spirit in testifying to Scripture is seen as one aspect, though admittedly an important aspect, of God's activity of self-revelation in the economy of salvation.

This idea – of the importance of setting Scripture within its larger doctrinal context – has, in the intervening years between Calvin's day and our own, fallen into neglect. There has been a general tendency to isolate Scripture from its larger theological framework and discuss it as a separate, preliminary epistemological question which one must answer before proceeding to theology proper. This tendency is most obviously seen

¹¹² Ibid., 582.

¹¹³ Ibid.

in the movement of the doctrine of revelation, and of the role Scripture therein, to the beginning of most systematic theologies, conceptually providing the foundation upon which all that follows will rest. On this view, Scripture's role "comes to be thought of in such a way that Scripture precedes and warrants all other Christian doctrines as the formal principle from which those other doctrines are deduced."¹¹⁴ But surely something has gone wrong here. As some contemporary theologians have pointed out, views of revelation, inspiration, and Scripture rely on logically prior doctrines, like the doctrine of God and soteriology, and can only be fully appreciated within that context. It would be hard to flesh out an understanding of how God inspired the human authors of Scripture without relying pretty heavily on one's doctrine of God, for instance. Now, to make use of a helpful Thomist distinction, in the order of discovery, this temporal priority of Scripture or revelation may make sense, but not in the order of being. In other words, it may be that human knowers first encounter the Christian God through Scripture, but Scripture as a revelation of God must be seen, in retrospect, as logically dependent upon, and temporally subsequent to, the being and nature of God. Furthermore, once Scripture is removed from its native environment, it becomes all too easy to fail to realize the implications of this rich theological vision for Scripture.

The Primacy of Scripture in Contemporary Theology

John Webster is among those contemporary theologians who see the importance of situating Scripture within the larger framework¹¹⁵ of dogmatic theology. Not only that,

¹¹⁴ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 12-13.

¹¹⁵ It might be objected that this rich theological framework in which Scripture is situated is itself a product of tradition. This is certainly correct, and I have no issues with the use of tradition. The claim is simply that

but he provides a framework for understanding the nature and authority of Scripture which incorporates the basic insights of Calvin (and others) on the primacy of Scripture and the importance of understanding it in terms of the role it plays in the divine economy of salvation, and also furnishes the conceptual resources to respond to some of the more significant contemporary challenges. As such, it would be wise to consider the basic details of his account in relation to our present concerns. Webster begins by noting that “[t]he doctrinal underdetermination and mislocation of the idea of revelation can only be overcome by its reintegration into the comprehensive structure of Christian doctrine, and most especially the Christian doctrine of God.”¹¹⁶ As such, he proposes that the biblical writings be understood “in light of their origin, function and end in divine self-communication.”¹¹⁷ This simple and, when one comes to think of it, relatively uncontroversial suggestion has profound implications for how one understands Scripture in the economy of salvation. It, in effect, reorients the discussion – moving not from what we can say about Scripture to what (on that basis) we can say about God, but rather from what we can say about the nature and self-revelatory activity of God to what (on that basis) we can say about Scripture. Thus, as Christians, we approach the question of the nature of Scripture taking full account of what we already know of God. There is no need, neither is there any benefit, to bracket these views when considering the sources of authority for theology simply because these views are derived from those sources. Like a mid-meal prayer, the results of our inquiry into the sources of theological knowledge,

its authority is derivative and not final. It is derivative in the sense that tradition is the interpretation of Scripture (as we saw above). It is not final because the particulars of this (or any) doctrinal framework (tradition) could be wrong – they are ultimately to be tested against the teaching of Scripture.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 13.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 5.

long after we have amassed a body of doctrine, are retroactive in effect. This is true whether or not our sources end up being able to justify our theological views. In other words, questions of epistemic warrant (or justification) are distinct from, and independent of, our actual body of knowledge. Webster provides a contemporary example of this general approach, which gives a plausible account of how one might appropriate the central insights of Calvin's account of Scripture within the context of God's saving acts in history.

Webster begins by suggesting that, "'Holy Scripture' [indicates] the place occupied by the biblical texts in the revealing, sanctifying and inspiring acts of the triune God."¹¹⁸ That is, Scripture should be understood within the larger context of the doctrine of God, with particular reference to the concepts of revelation, sanctification, and inspiration. We would do well, then, to say brief word about each of these concepts as they relate to and inform Webster's account of Scripture. First, Scripture refers to the role that the biblical texts play in the revelatory acts of God. For Webster, revelation "is the self-presentation of the triune God, the free work of sovereign mercy in which God wills, establishes and perfects saving fellowship with himself in which humankind comes to know, love and fear him above all things."¹¹⁹ On this view, both the content and the agent of revelation is God. God takes an active role and "addresses creaturely reality," and the substance of that address is nothing other than "God's own proper reality."¹²⁰ This act of divine self-presentation has trinitarian dimensions as well: the Father acting as its

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 8.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 13, italics removed.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 14.

personal will or origin, the Son upholding and establishing it, and the Spirit perfecting it “by making it real and effective to and in the history of humankind.”¹²¹ Furthermore, revelation, “God’s triune being in its active self-presence,”¹²² is purposive. Its goal “is not simply divine self-display, but the overcoming of human opposition, alienation and pride, and their replacement by knowledge, love and fear of God.”¹²³ The role of Scripture on this account of revelation is, as yet, unspecified, except that it will be a medium through which God presents himself for salvation.

Situating Scripture within a broader discussion of revelation (and inspiration) is a fairly common practice. It typically does not, on the other hand, enter into discussions of sanctification. But, for Webster, this is a crucial ingredient in a proper dogmatic account of Scripture. For it governs discussions as to how creatures are set apart for God’s service. In terms of its relation to revelation, Webster sees sanctification as “the act of God the Holy Spirit in hallowing creaturely processes, employing them in the service of the taking form of revelation within the history of the creation.”¹²⁴ There are several things to note here. First, this activity is the work of the Holy Spirit, an idea which resonates with Calvin’s discussion of the role of the Spirit as Testifier in and to Scripture. Second, the Spirit’s activity does not destroy, but presupposes and works through, human processes (a point to which we will have occasion to return presently). Third, this activity sets apart human processes for divine ends – that is, the ends which will be accomplished

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid., 15-16.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 17-18.

by the Spirit's revelatory activity will be accomplished through creaturely processes. As a result, sanctification, inasmuch as it discusses "the way in which the creaturely reality of Scripture serves in the saving economy of God's self-communication,"¹²⁵ is what links Scripture to the concept of revelation discussed above. And, the most straightforward way in which they are linked is through the Spirit's act of inspiring the biblical writings. That is, the "biblical texts are creaturely realities set apart by the triune God to serve his self-presence."¹²⁶ On Webster's view, applying the notion of sanctification to Scripture has at least two important benefits. First, it provides the conceptual means of describing the relationship between the texts as 'natural entities' and the texts as instruments of God's revelation. Secondly, it avoids an unfortunate, but common, tendency in contemporary thought to either naturalize or spiritualize Scripture, that is, to conceive of Scripture as either a purely 'natural,' human entity or a purely 'spiritual' entity lacking all contamination from natural historical processes. This former tendency is, on his view, one of the main problems, from a Christian theological perspective, with modern attempts to study the Bible as a 'natural entity.' The problem is "not the affirmation that the biblical texts have a 'natural history', but the denial that texts with a 'natural history' may function within the communicative divine economy, and that such a function is ontologically definitive of the text."¹²⁷ Not only does the natural history of a text not rule out the Spirit's activity in hallowing it for divine service, but if the Spirit has in fact set apart this text for service in the "communicative divine economy" then this function gets

¹²⁵ Ibid., 17.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 21.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 19.

at the fundamental nature of the text. In other words, this has implications for the ontology of Scripture. As Webster says, “the biblical text *is* Scripture; its being is defined, not simply by its membership of the class of texts, but by the fact that it is *this* text – sanctified, that is, Spirit-generated and preserved – in *this* field of action – the communicative economy of God’s merciful friendship with his lost creatures.”¹²⁸ How one comes to know that Scripture is sanctified for this purpose is not a central concern in his “dogmatic sketch,” which is written from the perspective of dogmatic theology. It does, however, make room for such an account, and we will have occasion later to see one such attempt from the perspective of contemporary analytic epistemology.

Thus far, the discussion of the relationship between sanctification and Scripture has focused narrowly on the nature of Scripture, but on Webster’s view, the application of sanctification is much broader. It involves, not only the inspiration of the biblical texts, but any and all creaturely processes the Spirit sanctifies for the purpose of divine self-revelation, and, as such, its application is quite broad:

Sanctification can thus properly be extended to the processes of the production of the text – not simply authorship (as, so often, in older theories of inspiration) but also the complex histories of pre-literary and literary tradition, redaction and compilation. It will, likewise, be extended to the post-history of the text, most particularly to canonisation (understood as the church’s Spirit-produced acknowledgement of the testimony of Scripture) and to interpretation (understood as Spirit-illuminated repentant and faithful attention to the presence of God).¹²⁹

Many of the details here would, of course, need elaboration and defense, but the basic idea is that to see Scripture as the product of sanctification – that is, as a creature set apart for God’s service in the economy of salvation – involves both the acknowledgement of

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

the creaturely activities and processes involved in the formation, canonization, and interpretation of the biblical texts and the Spirit's work in and through these processes. There is a sort of obviousness that masks the profundity of this claim. It is, of course, possible to regard Scripture as a *merely* human product. But, once one affirms that it plays a God-given role in the economy of salvation, then the Spirit's activity in and through those natural human processes, and for that end, ought to be determinative for our understanding of Scripture. Or, so it seems to me, this realization should rule out conceptions of Scripture which would make God's chosen means unsuitable to his desired end. On Webster's view, then, sanctification allows the biblical texts – and all the processes implied in their formation, reception, and publication – to be creatures, but creatures set apart for God's service in the economy of salvation.¹³⁰

The last overarching concept which Webster brings to bear in situating Scripture dogmatically is inspiration. This is related to sanctification as a narrower application, to the text itself, of the same basic process of setting apart a creature for divine service. As such, whatever we end up saying about the inspiration of Scripture should be “strictly subordinate to and dependent upon the broader concept of revelation,”¹³¹ and clearly connected to its purpose, “which is service to God's self-manifestation.”¹³² In other words, inspiration should be situated within the larger discussion of sanctification's application to revelation. Furthermore, an account of inspiration should avoid objectifying the text, on the one hand, and spiritualizing it, on the other. The text falls

¹³⁰ Ibid., 28.

¹³¹ Ibid., 31.

¹³² Ibid., 35.

prey to the former difficulty if “the inspired *product* is given priority over the revelatory, sanctifying and inspiring activities of the divine agent.”¹³³ To borrow an Augustinian distinction, the text is for *use* in divine service, not to be *enjoyed* as an end in itself.¹³⁴ If objectifying Scripture errs in one direction, spiritualizing the text errs in the opposite extreme. After briefly examining a few prominent treatments which Webster sees as exemplifying this error, he notes, in addition to a couple of other problems, “a certain docetism in such accounts: the danger of objectification is countered by limiting the sphere of the Spirit’s work to the psychic life of the apostles (Martensen), the community (Macquarrie) or the reader (Law) in such a way that the text itself is not touched by the inspiring action of God.”¹³⁵ Both of these difficulties arise from a failure to situate the notion of inspiration within what Webster takes to be its proper dogmatic location. His account, then, resists the temptation to identify inspiration with certain textual properties (i.e., objectification) or with “the experience of author, community or reader” (i.e. spiritualization), but sees it mainly concerned with “the communicative function of texts in the field of God’s spiritual self-presence.”¹³⁶

Having sketched roughly the *via media* between these two extremes, Webster expounds his own account through four brief comments on the *locus classicus* for inspiration: “no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”¹³⁷ First, and foremost, inspiration is “from God.” This element

¹³³ Ibid., 33.

¹³⁴ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9.

¹³⁵ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 35.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ 2 Peter 1:21.

must be “operative” (i.e., not simply a vague background process with no discernible effects) and also “non-convertible” (i.e., not replacing God, with the text, as revelatory agent).¹³⁸ Second, the impulse responsible for generating the texts is not human creativity, not a “self-originating movement,”¹³⁹ but “being moved” by God. Third, this movement is the special work of the Holy Spirit. And, finally, this movement of the Spirit advances the revelatory purposes of God by generating language. That is, “the moving of the Spirit, the direction of the [*from God*], is to human communicative acts. Those moved by the Spirit *spoke*.”¹⁴⁰ Here Webster retrieves what he deems worthy of retrieval from the notion of ‘verbal inspiration.’ In an effort to avoid theories of divine dictation, often associated with verbal inspiration, critics have tended to remove verbal form from discussions of inspiration and to speak instead of authorial illumination. However, as Webster points out, “the result is, again, docetic. The implied distinction between (inspired) content and (creaturely) form is awkward, and very easily makes authorial (or perhaps community) consciousness or experience the real substance of the texts, of which words are external expressions.”¹⁴¹ Vanhoozer concurs that God’s communicative action must be *spoken*, that is take verbal form, for the simple fact that “there is nothing to be believed or obeyed apart from meaningful content.”¹⁴² Understood within the larger context of God’s saving self-disclosure the “relation of the words of Scripture to the

¹³⁸ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 36.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁴² Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 85.

communicative self-presence of God is not merely contingent; what revelation impels is writing.”¹⁴³ The speech is genuinely human speech, but speech which originates in the movement of the Spirit for the purpose of divine self-revelation. As in his discussion of sanctification more generally, Webster affirms that the human “activity was not suppressed by the moving of the Spirit but is lifted up, energized and purged.”¹⁴⁴ As a result, “[w]hat is inspired is not simply the *matter (res)* of Scripture but its verbal *form (forma)*.”¹⁴⁵ For Webster, then, verbal inspiration “simply indicates the inclusion of texts in the sanctifying work of the Spirit so that they become fitting vessels of the treasure of the gospel.”¹⁴⁶

Thus far, Webster has provided a framework for understanding the nature of Scripture which incorporates the basic insights of Calvin on the importance of understanding it in terms of the role it plays in the divine economy of salvation. In particular, he stressed the need to situate Scripture in a discussion of the doctrine of the triune God and his self-revelatory nature and activity, with special reference to the concepts of revelation, sanctification, and inspiration. Scripture is that body of texts set apart by the Spirit for divine service in God’s communicative economy. Now, just as Webster thinks the proper context for discussions of the *nature* of Scripture is the doctrine of God, in like manner the proper context for discussions of the *authority* of Scripture is soteriology. Scripture’s authority, he writes, should not be “abstracted from

¹⁴³ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 38.

¹⁴⁴ Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 102, quoted in Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 38.

¹⁴⁵ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 38.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

its soteriological function, that is, from the content of Scripture as the gospel of salvation and the directedness of Scripture towards the enabling of life in truthful fellowship with God through the ordering of the church's speech and action."¹⁴⁷ Since the content of Scripture concerns salvation, broadly construed, its authority should be understood in terms of the role it plays in God's economy of salvation. Furthermore, Webster sees as the basic aim or goal of Scripture "enabling" life in proper relationship with God and doing so by "ordering" the life (i.e., the words and deed) of the church.¹⁴⁸ In other words, in order to live in proper relationship with God, the church must know how to order its life in such a way as to achieve that goal. As such, Webster defines the authority of Scripture as "its Spirit-bestowed capacity to quicken the church to truthful speech and righteous action."¹⁴⁹ The first thing to note about this definition is what he means by "truthful speech and righteous action." For Webster, these are ways of conforming speech and action, or one's life more generally, to the objective nature of reality. They are "ways of engaging with the world which follow its inherent nature and ends."¹⁵⁰ They are ways of living which do not cut against the moral and spiritual grain of the universe or separate us from God, who is both source and ultimate end of all that is. As such, that "which has authority is that which legitimately directs us to those ends, and so that which both forms and judges action."¹⁵¹ For Webster, then, Scripture has the capacity, through the work of

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 56.

¹⁴⁸ Throughout this discussion, Webster appears to have both individual and corporate reality of the church in mind.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 52.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 53.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

the Spirit, to “quicken the church to truthful speech and righteous action.” And its authority in theological and ethical matters follows from this definition. It is in the Spirit’s service of making known those ways of living which conform to the nature and ends of reality and, as such, enable a life of communion with God. Thus, its authority is very real – “the authority of Scripture is the authority of the church’s Lord and his gospel”¹⁵² – but it is derived, not from an inherent characteristic of Scripture, but from its deployment in the soteriological communication of the triune God. Furthermore, “Scripture’s authority *within* the church is a function of Scripture’s authority *over* the church.”¹⁵³ As the church receives the grace of the gospel message through the Spirit’s work both in and through Scripture, she also submits to the same Spirit’s work in and through Scripture to inculcate a life that is pleasing to God. This, in turn, involves a readiness and openness continually to be judged and formed (or reformed) on the basis of Scripture. “The church’s acknowledgement of Scripture’s authority is,” in this sense, “an exposure to judgment, to a source...of interrogation.”¹⁵⁴

Picking up the line of thought from his previous discussion of the nature of Scripture, Webster emphasizes that the authority of Scripture likewise rests on the work of the Holy Spirit, who “enables recognition of, trust in and glad submission to the claim of Scripture’s gospel content.”¹⁵⁵ That is, just as the Spirit testifies in the content and verbal form of Scripture, so also the Spirit testifies to its divine origin and works for its

¹⁵² Ibid., 56.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 57.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 55.

reception in the believer as a means of grace. And so, we have come full circle in our discussion of the nature and authority of Scripture. Both concepts are best understood within the larger context of God's self-revelation, through the Spirit's sanctifying work, in the economy of salvation.

As we have seen, Webster provides a framework for understanding the nature and authority of Scripture which incorporates the basic insights of Calvin on the primacy of Scripture and the importance of situating it dogmatically. He also describes the Spirit's role – in setting apart biblical texts for divine service and working for their reception and application in the lives of believers – in a way that is reminiscent of Calvin's understanding of the internal testimony of the Spirit, witnessing to and sealing the truths of the gospel on our hearts. Webster closes his account of the authority of Scripture by stating that “[c]onfession of Scripture's authority...is glad affirmation of the force of *sola gratia* and *sola fide* in the realm of the knowledge of the gospel.”¹⁵⁶ He does not, however, elaborate on this point. Fortunately, some light can be cast on this claim by the recent work of Kevin Vanhoozer in this area. The relevant point with respect to these two *solas* is that knowledge of God is a free gift of divine self-revelation (*sola gratia*) appropriated through faith (*sola fide*). Vanhoozer unpacks this idea with respect to the trinitarian communicative activity. “What illumines Scripture,” he says, “is not the light of autonomous reason but the light that originates from the Father, radiates in the Son (Heb. 1:3), and penetrates to hearts and minds through the Spirit.”¹⁵⁷ Here, again, we have the idea that the Spirit plays a central role in the economy of salvation, testifying to

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 56.

¹⁵⁷ Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 71.

our minds and sealing on our hearts the content of God’s self-revelation. If God did not choose to reveal himself, knowledge of his nature and action would be impossible; it depends on the free gift of God. Furthermore, as we saw in our discussion of Calvin, the saving knowledge of God – and all other benefits of Christ’s work – are personally appropriated through faith, which is itself the chief work of the Holy Spirit. Thus, *sola fide* “refers to the way Christians come to know and appropriate the gift of Jesus Christ via the human words of Scripture.”¹⁵⁸ This does not, of course, rule out other legitimate sources of knowledge, but simply stresses the fact that God’s act of saving self-revelation – published and received – is a work of the Spirit in the economy of salvation. It serves knowledge of God by pointing to “the epistemological priority of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁵⁹ This seems to be the general idea behind Webster’s claim that confessing the authority of Scripture is “glad affirmation of the force of *sola gratia* and *sola fide* in the realm of the knowledge of the gospel.”¹⁶⁰ It is an acknowledgement of what Bernard Ramm calls the *internal* and *external* principles of authority. According to Ramm, “the Holy Spirit” (internal principle) “speaking in the Scriptures” (external principle) “is the principle of authority for the Christian church.”¹⁶¹ Knowledge of God, which is founded on God’s act of self-revelation, is published and received by a gift of the Spirit. Thus, Vanhoozer – sounding very much like Webster himself – says, “[t]he authority principle in Christianity

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 74.

¹⁵⁹ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 50, quoted in Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 72.

¹⁶⁰ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 56.

¹⁶¹ Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern of Religious Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 28, quoted in Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 77.

is the Triune God in verbal communicative action: what bears authority is the voice of God communicating the Word of God to the creatures and people of God.”¹⁶²

Furthermore, the authority of this Word is connected with its ability to enable human flourishing in accordance with our God-given nature and end. Thus, Vanhoozer concurs with Webster in connecting Scripture’s authority with its ability to inculcate “truthful speech and righteous action.”¹⁶³ “God knows the end for which we were created,” he says, “and his authoritative words are intended for our good. Far from constraining human freedom, authority is a necessary condition for human flourishing.”¹⁶⁴ That is, human freedom should not be – as it so often is – pitted against authority. Rather, divine authority authorizes actions which lead to human flourishing. It releases the human will from the shackles of autonomy by constraining its activity to those actions which are in accord with the nature and end of humanity. On the other hand, “[t]here is no true freedom in refusing the created order or denying reality. Such is the fruit of autonomy, the attempt to authorize one’s own authority and order.”¹⁶⁵ It is an attempt, in other words, to usurp the authority which is the rightful possession of God alone, for use in the self-authorization of actions conducive to human degradation. One crucial aspect of God’s self-revelatory activity, in this regard, is the communication of his authoritative ordering of life – the authorization of human actions conducive to human flourishing – through his authorized means.

¹⁶² Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 85.

¹⁶³ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 52.

¹⁶⁴ Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 85-86.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

Vanhoozer helpfully traces the process by which God’s authority comes to authorize Scripture within the larger context of God’s economy of salvation. The basic outline of this process is fairly straightforward. First, the Father authorizes Jesus’s authority. Vanhoozer sees this authorization of Jesus’s authority not only expressed in Scripture – e.g. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”¹⁶⁶ – but also as a natural implication of the Son’s unique role in God’s act of self-revelation. He writes, “Jesus alone is thus both able and authorized to reveal the Father: he is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15)... He is the eternal divine communicative activity – the light and life of God – become incarnate (Heb. 1:2)...in and through whom all things have been made (Col. 1:16) *and remade* – that is, made right and rightly ordered.”¹⁶⁷ So, Jesus’s authority is authorized in virtue of the fact that he can uniquely reveal the nature of God and the nature of all things made new and rightly ordered in him. But, this authorized authority would be of no value to – would not serve its salvific purpose for – future generations were it not given a more permanent form. Consequently, Jesus delegates his authority to his apostles as divinely-authorized witnesses. As a result of “all authority” being given to Jesus, he sends the apostles to make disciples, “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”¹⁶⁸ There is a clearly discernible communicative movement from the Father to Jesus and then from Jesus to his apostles. Vanhoozer writes, “Jesus notes the parallel between his own commission from the Father and his commissioning of his apostles: ‘As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending

¹⁶⁶ Matthew 28:18. Cf. also Ephesians 1:20-21.

¹⁶⁷ Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 90.

¹⁶⁸ Matthew 28:20.

you' (John 20:21)."¹⁶⁹ And the apostles are not left simply to their own native abilities in this task, but are promised the assistance of the Holy Spirit who "will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."¹⁷⁰ Thus, Jesus commissions the apostles and delegates his authority to them as they are guided by the Spirit to record those aspects of God's self-revelatory activity which the Spirit will use to guide the church along the path that leads to life and salvation. In this communicative economy, the "apostles are authorized interpreters of Jesus's person and work, inscribers of the meaning of the Christ event whose written discourse is part and parcel of the triune economy of communicative action."¹⁷¹

This is Vanhoozer's skeletal account of the process whereby God's authority is transferred to the apostolic testimony in Scripture. It raises the question as to how one comes to understand and trust this apostolic message and its divine origin. He considers and rejects, as candidates for this role, three broad interpretive communities: the teaching authority of the church, the authority of scholarly experts, and the institutional authority of a particular group (which he refers to as the Vatican, the Society of Biblical Literature, and fundamentalist magnates, respectively). The common problem with appealing to each of these three interpretive communities, he thinks, is not that it would involve trust in an

¹⁶⁹ Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 91.

¹⁷⁰ John 14:26. Andreas Köstenberger notes that the "vast majority of commentators (including R. Brown, Barrett, Borchert, Morris, Carson, and Ridderbos) believe that teaching and reminding are in synonymous parallelism," *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 442, n. 91. In other words, the "Spirit will not provide qualitatively new or independent revelation...but will bring to light the true meaning and significance of the revelation imparted by Jesus," *ibid.*, 442.

¹⁷¹ Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 91.

authority. This he takes to be, not only a generally rational policy,¹⁷² but ultimately unavoidable. That is, the only alternative – to refuse to take anything on authority, but rely completely on one’s own resources – simply relocates the authority from others to oneself.¹⁷³ Rather, the common problem is that each one “in different ways appropriates for itself the authority that attaches to the biblical text.”¹⁷⁴ It is probably no surprise that Vanhoozer is ultimately going to look to Scripture itself as both interpretive framework and means of authorizing trust in its apostolic testimony. In order to do so, however, he draws heavily on the work of contemporary analytic philosopher, Alvin Plantinga, in the area of religious epistemology.

The Primacy of Scripture in Contemporary Religious Epistemology

Plantinga offers a thorough and sophisticated account of the rationality of Christian belief in general and, in the process, discusses the rationality of a Christian’s trust in the apostolic testimony of Scripture. Even more significantly for our purposes, he incorporates and expands upon, using the concepts of contemporary analytic epistemology, the key insights of Calvin with respect to the self-authentication of Scripture. In other words, he offers a contemporary account of how this idea might be fleshed out more rigorously in the categories of analytic philosophy. Furthermore, like Calvin and Webster, Plantinga’s epistemological project is distinctive in that it does not continue the Enlightenment fantasy of constructing a system of human knowledge *ex*

¹⁷² Here Vanhoozer relies on the general lines of argument in Linda Zagzebski’s *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁷³ Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 95.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

nihilo, but situates his model squarely within the larger framework of a Christian worldview – that is, dogmatically.

The aspects of particular relevance for our discussion find their place within Plantinga’s more general account of rational warrant.¹⁷⁵ For Plantinga, a belief is warranted if it is “produced by cognitive processes functioning properly in an appropriate environment according to a design plan successfully aimed at the production of true belief.”¹⁷⁶ The basic idea¹⁷⁷ is that when our God-given cognitive processes are functioning the way God intended them to function, i.e. to produce true beliefs, and they do in fact produce true beliefs, those beliefs have warrant, i.e. they are instances of knowledge. Now, Plantinga offers a model for how theistic belief might have warrant, and then extends the model for Christian belief specifically. The former he calls the “A/C model”¹⁷⁸ and the latter the “extended A/C model.” He claims, further, that if Christianity is true, then something like the extended A/C model is very likely true.¹⁷⁹ The more general model begins by noting that God created humans with a variety of generally reliable belief-producing mechanisms, such as reason, perception, and memory. Now, both Aquinas and Calvin thought that there is a sort of natural knowledge of God.

¹⁷⁵ ‘Warrant’ is Plantinga’s term for that which distinguishes knowledge from true belief. For a fuller summary of what can only be treated cursorily here, see his *Warranted Christian Belief*, 153ff. For a much fuller account, see the two books which preceded this one in the series: *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) and *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹⁷⁶ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 584.

¹⁷⁷ I left out the notion of environment for simplicity’s sake. See the fuller treatments noted above.

¹⁷⁸ “A/C” because he sees its central insight in the writings of both Aquinas and Calvin, among several other major theologians (e.g. Bonaventure and Edwards) and in the New Testament as well.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 170.

Aquinas says, “[t]o know in a general and confused way that God exists is implanted in us by nature.”¹⁸⁰ Calvin concurs: “[t]here is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity”¹⁸¹ and adds that it is occasioned by looking on the natural world and being “led up to the Author himself.”¹⁸² In other words, the idea is that “there is a sort of instinct, a natural human tendency, a disposition, a *nisus* to form beliefs about God under a variety of conditions and in a variety of situations.”¹⁸³ Under the right circumstances, we find that theistic beliefs are formed in us – just as we find ourselves with certain perceptual beliefs. Following Aquinas and Calvin, Plantinga suggests that something like the *sensus divinitatis* is among those belief-producing mechanisms with which humans are equipped. Since beliefs resulting from the operation of this mechanism are produced by a properly functioning cognitive process aimed at the production of true belief, they have warrant. But, they are not the result of rational argumentation or evidence. Rather, they are *properly basic*. That is, they are warranted beliefs which are not accepted on the basis of evidence.¹⁸⁴ This process is not a special intervention of God, interrupting our normal cognitive functions, but results from the normal operation of our natural God-given endowments. However, there is a complicating factor. On the “A/C model this natural knowledge of God has been compromised, weakened, reduced, smothered, overlaid, or impeded by sin and its

¹⁸⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1q2a1, ad 1.

¹⁸¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 44.

¹⁸² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 70, quoted in Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 171.

¹⁸³ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 171.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 175-79.

consequences.”¹⁸⁵ Plantinga devotes a whole chapter to the cognitive consequences of sin,¹⁸⁶ noting in passing that there are affectional and volitional consequences as well, but for our purposes we need only note the most basic consequence. The belief-producing mechanism which, when properly functioning, generates properly basic belief in God (i.e. the *sensus divinitatis*), is, as a result of human sin, no longer functioning properly.

Now, in order to rescue us from this condition (and all its consequences), God “instituted a plan of salvation: the life, atoning suffering and death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the incarnate second person of the trinity.”¹⁸⁷ The possibility of rescue from our condition and life in fellowship with God having been established in Christ, God needed to communicate this salvific plan to those in need of it. “No doubt he could have done this in many different ways,” Plantinga notes, “in fact he chose to do so by way of a three-tiered cognitive process.”¹⁸⁸ First, God worked to produce Scripture, a collection of texts of which God is the principal author and whose central theme is, “the stunning good news of the way of salvation God has graciously offered.”¹⁸⁹ Second, “correlative with Scripture and necessary to its properly serving its purpose,”¹⁹⁰ the Holy Spirit is active in the hearts of those to whom faith is given in order to repair the consequences of sin and witness to Scripture. This inner testimony is vitally important, for “it is by virtue of the

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 184.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 199-240.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 243.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

activity of the Holy Spirit that Christians come to grasp, believe, accept, endorse, and rejoice in the truth of the great things of the gospel.”¹⁹¹ The result of this combination of Scripture and the internal witness of the Spirit is the production of faith, the third element in this model, which is “given to anyone who is willing to accept it.”¹⁹² The three-tiered cognitive process, then, is the Spirit’s internal testimony to the Spirit’s external testimony in Scripture, which overcomes the obstacles wrought by sin to produce faith. And this process, which should sound familiar to some of the other treatments we have already had a chance to discuss, plays a parallel role in the extended A/C model as the *sensus divinitatis* did in the A/C model. On this account, “the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit working in concord with God’s teaching in Scripture is a cognitive process or belief-producing mechanism that produces in us the beliefs constituting faith.”¹⁹³ Now, since beliefs resulting from the operation of this mechanism are produced by a properly functioning cognitive process aimed at the production of true belief, they have warrant. And, since they are warranted beliefs which are not accepted on the basis of evidence, they are *properly basic*.

Now, this is all well and good in theory, but what does it look like in practice? On the extended A/C model, we hear or read Scripture and we find what is said there compelling. That is, it “seems clearly and obviously true and (at any rate in paradigm cases) seems also to be something the Lord is intending to teach.”¹⁹⁴ This state of being

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 244.

¹⁹² Ibid. Here is an example of someone in the Reformed tradition who, with respect to at least some aspects of strict Calvinism, would rather “leave it.”

¹⁹³ Ibid., 284. Plantinga tends to prefer Aquinas’ term “instigation” to Calvin’s “witness” or “testimony,” but uses them interchangeably.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 250.

struck by the verisimilitude of Scripture, or a particular teaching in Scripture, can come in varying degrees, but the basic experience is akin to the way we are struck by (or simply find ourselves assenting to) beliefs formed by perception or memory. They are not the conclusions of logical inference or probability. It is more like a concept that finally clicks in your mind – the light bulb turns on – so that you come to think: “‘Right; that’s true; God really was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself!’ And [you] may also think something a bit different, something *about* that proposition: that it is a divine teaching or revelation, that in Calvin’s words it is ‘from God.’”¹⁹⁵ The conviction that arises can come about in any number of ways, but seems always to be marked by an awareness of belief having been formed in response to an encounter with Scripture:

So faith may have the phenomenology that goes with suddenly seeing something to be true: ‘Right! Now I see that this is indeed true and what the Lord is teaching!’ Or perhaps the conviction arises slowly, and only after long and hard study, thought, discussion, prayer. Or perhaps it is a matter of a belief’s having been there all along (from childhood, perhaps), but now being transformed, renewed, intensified, made vivid and alive. This process can go on in a thousand ways; in each case there is a presentation or proposal of central Christian teaching and, by way of response, the phenomenon of being convinced, coming to see, forming of a conviction.¹⁹⁶

This may initially seem woefully inadequate as an account of the rationality of Christian belief. It would seem, at least on first glance, like a better approach would be to conduct a rational investigation and follow the evidence where it leads. One of the more refreshing aspects of Plantinga’s model, however, is that the phenomenology of belief formation seems so true to life. Consider the analogy with sense perception. Every day we form countless beliefs on the basis of perception. Suppose, for example, I look out the window

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 251.

and see a beech tree and form the belief that *there is a beech tree outside my window*. If we reflect on the internal experience of this belief-formation, however, it is not formed on the basis of an argument, even an argument that applies the general reliability of sense perception to this particular case. Rather, upon being appeared to in a beech-tree-like manner, I simply find myself being convinced – forming the belief – that *there is a beech tree outside my window*. In a similar way, the formation of beliefs based on the teaching of Scripture seems, phenomenologically, to be more like the formation of perceptual beliefs than weighing arguments and evidence.¹⁹⁷

Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that on Plantinga’s model, this belief-production is not accidental or random, as it may appear at the phenomenological level, but the result of a properly functioning belief-forming mechanism (much like perception). In this case, the mechanism is the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit operating through the teaching of Scripture. Now, Plantinga understands this mechanism to be simply “a special case of the pervasive process of testimony, by which, as a matter of fact, we learn most of what we know.”¹⁹⁸ What makes it a special case of testimony is its divine origin and the divine aid in confirming the written testimony, both of which are lacking in typical cases of human testimony. So, on the one hand, “Scripture is as much a matter of testimony as is a letter you receive from a friend. What is proposed for our belief in

¹⁹⁷ Now, there are also good reasons why this type of belief-forming mechanism might be preferable when it comes to belief in the message of Christianity, which we will discuss briefly below. The point here is simply that the model seems to accord better with the internal experience of faith. This does not, however, mean that experience is now the ultimate judge. As we have seen, what one experiences is simply becoming convinced – the ultimate warrant is a properly-functioning belief-producing mechanism (i.e., the internal witness of the Spirit). For more about how this account differs from one in which religious experience becomes central, see Plantinga’s comments on how his work compares with William Alston’s *Perceiving God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), *ibid.*, 286-89.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.* Cf. Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 77ff.

Scripture, therefore, just *is* testimony – divine testimony.”¹⁹⁹ On the other hand, we are not left to our own native capacities to assess this testimony’s divine origin or reliability. That is, “there is also the special work of the Holy Spirit in getting us to believe, enabling us to see the truth of what is proposed.”²⁰⁰ It is, therefore, a special case of testimony in which the written testimony is divine testimony, and belief in the written witness is the result of the internal testimony of the Spirit. On this model, then, “faith is belief in the great things of the gospel that results from the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit.”²⁰¹

Having examined this basic notion of the role of the internal witness of the Holy Spirit in the production of faith – which Plantinga retrieves from the works of Aquinas and Calvin, among others – in the conceptual categories of contemporary analytic epistemology, we should be in a position to add some precision to the way in which Scripture might be seen as self-authenticating. For Plantinga affirms that on this model, “Scripture (through the work of the Holy Spirit) carries its own evidence with it; as Calvin says, it is ‘self-authenticating.’”²⁰² But, what exactly does it mean to say that Scripture is self-authenticating? Well, first off, Plantinga denies that self-authentication means that the truths of the gospel are self-evident. Although these beliefs share a common feature with self-evident truths (i.e. they are not believed on the basis of other propositions), they are, unlike self-evident truths, not necessarily true. It is, in other words, possible to grasp the meaning of these claims (e.g. *in Christ God was reconciling*

¹⁹⁹ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 251.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 252.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 259.

the world to himself) and still think it possible that they are false in a way that one cannot with respect to self-evident truths (e.g. *all triangles have three sides*). So, the claim is not that the teaching of Scripture is self-evident. Neither, “does Calvin mean to say (nor is it any part of the model to assert) that Scripture is self-authenticating in the sense that it offers evidence for *itself* or somehow *proves* itself to be accurate or reliable.”²⁰³ Here Plantinga identifies the sort of vicious circularity which we have seen surface whenever an ultimate source of authority is queried for credentials. Suppose the reliability of Scripture as a source or the truth of a particular teaching of Scripture were in doubt. “Neither the source,” he says, “nor the particular teaching can, by itself, give an answer that (rationally) allays that doubt.”²⁰⁴ It is just as viciously circular to appeal to the testimony of Scripture as a means of determining Scripture’s reliability as it would be to appeal to rational argument as a means of determining reason’s reliability. This is because the kind of self-authentication Scripture provides is not evidence for itself.

Rather, what Plantinga’s model endorses is that:

...we don’t require argument from, for example, historically established premises about the authorship and reliability of the bit of Scripture in question to the conclusion that the bit in question is in fact true; that whole process gets short-circuited by way of the tripartite process producing faith. Scripture is self-authenticating in the sense that for belief in the great things of the gospel to be justified, rational, and warranted, no historical evidence and argument for the teaching in question, or for the veracity or reliability or divine character of Scripture (or the part of Scripture in which it is taught) are necessary. The process by which these beliefs have warrant for the believer swings free of those historical and other considerations; these beliefs have warrant in the basic way.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Ibid., 261.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 262.

Scripture's self-authentication is a function of the Spirit's internal testimony in the heart to the Spirit's external testimony in Scripture. The faith which this dual-testimony produces is both internally (in terms of phenomenology) and externally (in terms of warrant) quite different from taking a 'blind leap of faith.' Internally, because the propositions of faith "seem clearly true, obvious, compelling" to the believer, and, externally, because the beliefs meet the more general "conditions of rationality and warrant."²⁰⁶ They are not based on argument or evidence, but they are not therefore groundless or irrational. Rather, they arise from a divinely-instituted, properly functioning belief-forming mechanism aimed at the production of true belief.

Now, some may wonder why appeal must be made to such an elaborate and frankly supernatural scheme involving the divine inspiration of Scripture and the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. "Couldn't this information come to us just as well by way of ordinary *human* testimony, for example?"²⁰⁷ Plantinga proceeds to offer several reasons for preferring something along the lines of the extended A/C model. First of all,²⁰⁸ he concurs with both Aquinas²⁰⁹ and Calvin who, for different reasons, hold that belief in the articles of the faith requires supernatural grace. On Plantinga's model, as we have already

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 264.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 268. He continues, "Perhaps (as Locke thought) God could have revealed the great truths of the gospel in some direct way only to certain human beings. They could then write them down for the benefit of the rest of us, who are then supposed to be able to see in the ordinary way that these writings do, indeed, constitute divine revelation (and are accordingly both true and to be believed)."

²⁰⁸ Actually, the first (playful) reason he offers is that "we have no reason to think God...specially dislikes supernatural processes." He goes on to say (he must have been in a particularly playful mood when he wrote this page) that "the main problem with Locke's appealingly simply device is that it wouldn't work." Ibid.

²⁰⁹ E.g. "for since, by assenting to what belongs to faith, man is raised above his nature, this must needs come to him from some supernatural principle moving him inwardly; and this is God," *Summa Theologica*, II-II q6a1, *respondeo*.

seen, this is largely due to the cognitive consequences of sin. However, there are other consequences which also need to be addressed and healed. For instance, God's self-communication in the economy of salvation is not intended to issue merely in intellectual assent. Rather, it requires a "change of heart, a change in *affection*, in what one loves and hates, approves and disdains, seeks and avoids. According to the present model, faith is, indeed, a belief-producing process; it is also an affection-producing process,"²¹⁰ in which the great truths of the gospel are sealed on our hearts by the Spirit. Lastly,²¹¹ he follows Aquinas in noting that if the articles of the faith depended exclusively on the exercise of our ordinary cognitive processes, then even those which do not exceed reason's competence would be discovered only "by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors."²¹² Furthermore, reason and argumentation can be used in any number of ways to aid in understanding and interpreting Scripture, but seem like the wrong sort of tools in assessing a claim like *in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself*. Even if one were rationally convinced of all the relevant historical details and events, the claim being made primarily concerns the intentions of God, which, to my mind at least, are unknowable unless revealed.

Scripture as Apostolic Deposit and Norm of Doctrine

Both Webster and Plantinga provide helpful frameworks from which to make sense of the primacy of Scripture and the notion of self-authentication. The analysis and

²¹⁰ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 270.

²¹¹ Last for our purposes. He actually goes on (271ff) to treat, in some detail, an extended argument against the utilization of historical arguments as the primary means of providing warrant for the main lines of Christian belief, i.e. what he calls the "principle of dwindling probabilities."

²¹² Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1q1a1, *respondeo*.

the concepts they employ help add depth and precision to the issues involved. The purpose of their theological and philosophical accounts is, of course, not to provide a solution to the problem of the criterion, but to offer an accurate account – of Scripture and of the warrant of faith, respectively – from the larger perspective of Christian truth. However, it just so happens that, on these accounts, Scripture fares considerably better than other sources of authority with respect to this problem. Another side benefit is that Plantinga has provided a powerful and rigorous defense of the rationality of Christian belief – no small feat – which relies at essential points on central features of our account (i.e., Scripture and the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit as the foundational source of Christian belief). Having, thus, provided a developed account of Scripture in which the notions of final authority and self-authentication fit comfortably, it will now make sense to articulate briefly, first, the ways in which Scripture functions as apostolic deposit and norm of Christian doctrine and, second, the implications of the primacy of Scripture on its relation to the other three sources of authority.

First, then, let us consider the ways in which Scripture functions as apostolic deposit and, consequently, norm of Christian doctrine. Creedal Christians are committed to apostolicity as one of the four marks of the Church.²¹³ It is my contention that the apostolic testimony is what makes the church apostolic. There are broadly two aspects invoked in discussions of apostolicity: teaching and succession. Stated succinctly, the former appears the more fundamental, the latter a means for ensuring proper adherence to the former. So, for instance, the early church devoted themselves to “the apostles’

²¹³ Thus, the Nicene Creed: “We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.”

teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”²¹⁴ This was in accord with our Lord’s instructions in the Great Commission to make disciples, “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”²¹⁵ In passages such as these we see the implementation of God’s chosen means of communication in the economy of salvation through Jesus to the apostles and through the apostles to the world. This teaching deposit was, of course, first orally transmitted but eventually given fixed expression in Scripture.

T. F. Torrance beautifully articulates the basic point:

[I]n the apostles as the receiving end of His revealing and reconciling activity, Jesus Christ laid the foundation of the Church which He incorporated into Himself as His own Body, and permitted the Word which he put into their mouth to take the form of proclamation answering to and extending His own in such a way that it became the controlled unfolding of His own revelation within the mind and language of the apostolic foundation.²¹⁶

Even the Roman Catholic Church, which gives apostolic succession a major role in the teaching of the church, understands this as a means of preserving apostolic teaching (through proper interpretation). It affirms that “apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, was to be preserved in a continuous line of succession until the end of time,”²¹⁷ and further that this teaching authority “is not superior to the Word of God, but its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it.”²¹⁸ Therefore, the issue is not whether apostolicity refers to teaching or succession – it

²¹⁴ Acts 2:42.

²¹⁵ Matthew 28:20.

²¹⁶ *God and Rationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 152, quoted in Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 59.

²¹⁷ United States Catholic Conference, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1994), 25.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

can refer to both – but rather which one plays the primary role as a mark of the Church. Whether or not one thinks the magisterium’s teaching is a faithful interpretation of the teaching of the apostles, its stated aim is to teach only what it has received from the teaching of the apostles. It is fidelity to the apostolic testimony, preserved in Scripture, which has, thus, served to mark the apostolic Church.

Not only is there general agreement on this front,²¹⁹ but it makes good sense. It is sometimes easy to overlook the rather obvious fact that the written testimony of the apostles is quite literally the only access we have to God’s saving events in history. I would argue, with Webster and Vanhoozer, that if we situate Scripture properly within God’s communicative activity in the economy of salvation then the apostolic interpretation of those foundational salvific events is an essential part of that communicative process. But, even if that claim is challenged – and one tries to pull back the layers of theological interpretation to arrive at the ‘raw historical data,’²²⁰ for example – still the only place to look for any data on these events is Scripture. These events, transmitted through the written apostolic testimony, form the basis for what it is for something or someone to be Christian. As John Bright notes, “[t]he Bible provides us with the primary, and thus normative, documents of the Christian faith. To ask as we continually do, is this teaching truly Christian?...is to be driven initially back to the Bible.”²²¹ This is not so much an argument for the reliability or accuracy of Scripture, but

²¹⁹ Thus, Oden, “Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox traditions have all agreed on the central premise that Scripture is the primary source and guideline for Christian teaching,” *The Living God*, 336.

²²⁰ And I am very skeptical about the possibility of arriving at anything resembling Christian doctrine along these lines. See, e.g., Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 271-80.

²²¹ *The Authority of the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 30, quoted in Anthony Thiselton, *Thiselton Companion to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 103-04.

rather for its status as that in conformity to which something is characterized as Christian. Christian doctrine, in turn, is specifically *Christian* doctrine to the extent that it conforms to the teaching of the apostolic deposit in Scripture. “Precisely what gives the church its identity and its unique standing,” Christopher Seitz suggests, “is that it orders its life according to a canon of biblical writings.”²²² Or, as Webster points out, the church’s speech, “when it is properly apostolic, is always contingent upon and indicative of a prior speech-act. Its speech is generated and controlled by Christ’s self-utterance.”²²³

If, then, we acknowledge the primacy of Scripture – i.e., take it as the final authority in matters of doctrine – what are the implications for its relation to the other three sources of authority we have considered? First of all, as we have already seen, the other three authorities “remain essentially dependent upon and responsive to Scripture, since they must appeal to Scripture for the very events, interpretations, and data they are remembering, upon which they reflect, and out of which their expression becomes transformed.”²²⁴ As a result, while it is perfectly proper to make use of tradition, reason, and experience as aids in understanding, interpreting, and drawing out the implications of Scripture, that use, if it is to remain faithful to the apostolic deposit, must remain subject to the teaching of Scripture. In other words, in any genuine conflict between the teaching of Scripture and the deliverance of another authority, “the Bible must prevail.”²²⁵ The room, therefore, for theological speculation and “private opinion among Christians is

²²² Seitz, *World Without End*, 90, n. 11.

²²³ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 59-60.

²²⁴ Oden, *The Living God*, 336.

²²⁵ Owen Thomas and Ellen Wondra, *Introduction to Theology*, Third Edition (New York: Morehouse, 2002), 60.

vast, provided those opinions are not repugnant to articles of faith.”²²⁶ Secondly, Scripture should also arbitrate between different deliverances within the same authority. As we had occasion to see in our discussion of some of the problems with tradition, reason, and experience, they all face a similar difficulty: on any given issue, how does one decide which deliverance of tradition (or reason or experience) to accept? At this point, appeal must either be made to the same source (circularity) or to another source (infinite regress). Given our discussion of Scripture, however, there are two main reasons why it makes sense to use it as arbiter here. First of all, and for the same reason mentioned above, the other sources remain essentially dependent on Scripture for the norm of apostolicity. As such, it only seems fitting that in the case where the tradition, for instance, does not speak with one voice, the standard by which the controversy should be decided is conformity to the teaching of Scripture. This is why, though Protestants denied the church’s binding authority to interpret Scripture, and Roman Catholics and Orthodox affirmed it, “everyone agreed that any purported new revelation was to be measured against the authority of the revealed word of God, which it dared not contradict.”²²⁷ Secondly, if something like the account of self-authentication from Calvin, elaborated and fleshed out by Webster and Plantinga, is correct, then an appeal to Scripture to arbitrate between divergent deliverances of another authority would not run into the difficulties of circularity²²⁸ or infinite regress.

²²⁶ Oden, *The Living God*, 344.

²²⁷ Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 5, 170.

²²⁸ Or, more precisely, the circularity involved would be of an acceptable, not vicious, sort.

Another way at the same basic point can be seen in Vanhoozer's suggestion that Scripture be regarded as a "Christian's default fiduciary framework."²²⁹ Drawing on the work of Michael Polanyi, he notes that all knowledge begins with a fiduciary framework, "an interpretive framework that one takes initially on faith until it proves itself by yielding a harvest of understanding."²³⁰ As the source and norm of theological knowledge, Scripture should be the primary fiduciary framework, through which the Spirit testifies to the truths of the gospel. This leaves room for secondary fiduciary frameworks, like the interpretive community of the church, "that exists not to have its way with the text but to let the Word have its way with the interpreters."²³¹ This secondary framework can be of enormous help in interpretation and a means utilized by the Spirit to bring about knowledge. What it cannot do, on this reading, is subject the primary framework to correction by means of the secondary framework. On this view, the church, making use of a variety of sources, is "an interpretive community whose mandate is to profess and perform a word that it indwells yet that also stands over against it, a word to which the church must measure up."²³²

It should also be noted that the acknowledgement of the final authority of Scripture is consistent with a wide range of views regarding the relation between Scripture and other sources. The issue is simply priority of authority; many fruitful

²²⁹ Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 100.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 102. Vanhoozer approvingly quotes Webster in this regard, "The reading of Holy Scripture is thus a field of divine activity; it is not simply human handling of a textual object. And that divine activity is God's speech to which we are, quite simply, to attend," *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 93.

²³² Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 103.

combinations are possible or desirable. So, for example, it is consistent with the view that tradition is necessary to determine the canon²³³ or to properly interpret Scripture, so long as it is Scripture, properly defined and interpreted, which authorizes theological judgment. Likewise, it is consistent with the view that reason is necessary to understand Scripture and to determine that it is a genuine revelation from God. In the former case, it is true of all claims of authority that the exercise of reason is necessary in order to understand what is being authorized. But, that hardly means that reason is really the authority authorizing it.²³⁴ This would have the absurd consequence that reason is the only authority. In the latter case, even when reason acts as judge of the authenticity of a divine revelation, the objective authority of a source (a metaphysical claim) is independent of our assessment of that authority (an epistemological claim). Thus, this may have epistemological ramifications for a particular human knower,²³⁵ but would not affect the fact that the authority funding theological pronouncements is Scripture, not reason. In other words, by acknowledging the primacy of Scripture, one is not committed to a particular view on any of these or related areas. It is, thus, my contention that once “the word becomes written, we appropriate it amid changing cultural experiences, reflect on it by reason, and personally rediscover it in our own experience. The study of God

²³³ More on this, understood as an objection to the primacy of Scripture, below.

²³⁴ Reason is necessary to understand Tennessee State laws, but it is the authority of the State, not the authority of reason, which authorizes them.

²³⁵ If they are confident to a probability of .8 that Scripture is a revelation from God, they may find that they can only affirm that it is very probable that the teaching of Scripture is reliable. Though, again, I tend to think this does not square with the phenomenology of belief (see the discussion of Plantinga above).

best proceeds with the fitting equilibrium of these four sources, one primary and three secondary.”²³⁶

Objection to the Primacy of Scripture

The foregoing discussion has, very likely, raised a number of questions or objections. Although it would be impossible to address every objection, it would be a good idea to consider some of the most likely ones and at least make a first attempt at addressing them. One common objection is that Scripture cannot be the final authority since the determination of the canon of Scripture depends on the authority of the Church or tradition, more generally. Robert Jenson, for example, notes that the canon “is a dogmatic decision of the church. If we will allow no final authority to churchly dogma, or to the organs by which the church can enunciate dogma, there can be no canon of Scripture.”²³⁷ That is, since we would not have the canon of Scripture that we have without the decision of the church, this must confer authority on Scripture or render the authority of Scripture dependent upon the tradition of the Church. This does not, however, seem to follow from the role of tradition in fixing the canon. It assumes that the character of that decision was an act of authority and not an act of confession and submission. But, it is certainly possible to understand the decision in the latter way. Webster, for instance, argues that “the church’s judgement is an act of confession of that

²³⁶ Oden, *The Living God*, 341.

²³⁷ *Systematic Theology, vol. 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 27-28.

which precedes and imposes itself on the church (that is, the *viva vox Jesu Christi* mediated through the apostolic testimony) and which evokes a Spirit-guided assent.”²³⁸

Another cluster of objections concerns the propriety of construing a canon (e.g. Scripture) as a criterion for knowledge. William Abraham thinks this is a profound, but common and easily made, mistake. He advances several lines of argument in support of this contention, and although this is not the place for a full-scale response to every point, it would make sense to touch on the major issues related to our topic. First of all, Abraham draws a fairly sharp divide between the concepts of *canon* on the one hand, which simply refers to a list of materials, persons, and practices set apart as a means of grace, and *criterion* on the other, which refers to an epistemic norm of judgment or rationality.²³⁹ Having set up this contrast, he asserts that “to construe an ecclesial canon, like Holy Scripture, as an epistemic norm is odd in the extreme. It is straightforwardly wrong. A list of religious documents drawn up by a Church is simply not a candidate for a criterion of rationality, justified belief, or knowledge.”²⁴⁰ The first thing to point out is that at times in his discussion there seems to be some ambiguity, or even equivocation, in his use of the concepts of canon and criterion. With respect to canon, the view he is attacking does not take the *list* of texts as a normative authority, of course, but the

²³⁸ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 62-63. Or again, we often fail to see that the “wider ecclesiological point – so easily obscured in ecclesiologies which take their cues from socio-historical depictions of the immanent dynamics of communities – is that the church and all its acts are *ostensive*, pointing beyond and behind themselves to that which transcends and precedes them.” Rather than conferring authority, “as an act of confession, submission and retrospection, the church’s judgement with respect to the canon is its pledging of itself to be carried by this norm in all its actions. Canonisation is commitment to operate by a given norm, and thereby to have speech and action mastered by that norm,” 64-65.

²³⁹William Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 1-2.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

contents or teaching of Scripture. With respect to criterion, the claim is that Scripture acts as a criterion (authority) for theological claims, not a criterion for knowledge in general.²⁴¹ Sometimes this ambiguity of expression seems to play to his rhetorical advantage. If all he is suggesting is that Scripture will not help us with Gettier problems, then I would imagine most would see no problem admitting the point. If, however, he is suggesting that it cannot act as a norm of theological judgment, then it no longer seems “odd in the extreme,” at least not obviously so. He also emphasizes that the early church used the word “canon” to refer, with respect to Scripture, to the list of books read in church. Thus, canon cannot (or should not) be understood as a criterion, but a means of grace and progress in the spiritual life. I am not quite sure what to make of this appeal to early church practice, however. First of all, it seems to commit the word-thing fallacy. That is, since the word/concept “canon-as-criterion” was not used in the early church, then the canon was not used as a criterion for theological truth. Word usage, however, seems tangential at best. If the canon of Scripture was, in fact, used as a criterion for theological truth in the early church, it matters little if they did not use the word “canon” to describe that reality. And, Abraham concedes that in the early church Scripture was, in fact, used as a norm and they made explicit statements about its normative role.²⁴² Furthermore, his stated concern is against those who construe Scripture *primarily* or *exclusively* as a criterion. Why? Because one thereby neglects its other functions as a

²⁴¹ I was surprised, for example, to see Scripture’s inability to speak to some basic (contemporary) epistemological questions (e.g. is justified true belief knowledge?) marshalled as evidence that it is not a criterion, *ibid.*, 13.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 15-16, cf. also 140.

means of grace.²⁴³ This seems fair enough. But, regarding Scripture as the final authority in theological matters does not mean that one must regard Scripture as a criterion essentially.²⁴⁴ Abraham, while conceding this point in some places, seems hesitant to affirm it in others.²⁴⁵ However, as Webster points out, “it is not impossible to envisage an account of these canonical materials which identifies one or more of them (Scripture, creed, magisterium) as functioning normatively – not necessarily epistemically, not necessarily in abstraction from the processes of nurture, but nevertheless relativising and warranting claims about the church’s life.”²⁴⁶

Later, in his discussion of the notion of *sola Scriptura*, Abraham identifies six difficulties with this view,²⁴⁷ four of which are relevant to the position advanced here. First, Abraham claims that this view puts basic doctrines (e.g. Incarnation and Trinity) and practices (e.g. sacraments) in a constant state of doubt, and requires that they must be repeatedly re-established. There is, however, no reason why one cannot affirm both the

²⁴³ Ibid., 6-7. In fact, he explicitly affirms that Scripture can properly be used as a criterion (to the extent that it is an appeal to revelation): 6. In this regard, Abraham suggests that while divine revelation is intrinsically (even tautologically) normative, putative claims to revelation are not. Thus, one must find a criterion to sort out genuine from spurious cases of revelation. Despite his claim that “any move to make God a central category in epistemology becomes implausible,” *ibid.*, 17, this seems neither implausible nor unlikely, since the communication of the good news is at root a matter of divine self-revelation and this seems to me to be how God has, in fact, chosen to communicate his good news.

²⁴⁴ Webster, for instance, who does regard Scripture as the final authority, references Abraham’s description “means of grace” approvingly, but for a variety of reasons prefers to use “sanctification” to play a similar role in his account. See *Holy Scripture*, 24-25.

²⁴⁵ Notably in the concluding chapter, Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*, 466-80.

²⁴⁶ John Webster, “Canon and Criterion: Some Reflections on a Recent Proposal,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52, no. 2 (2001): 235-36.

²⁴⁷ They are, that *sola Scriptura* (1) reduces the canon to Scripture, which impoverishes the Church, (2) puts in doubt basic doctrines and practices, (3) leads to a thoroughly profane vision of the life of the Church, (4) makes the individual the locus of interpretive authority, (5) requires the clarity of Scripture, and (6) involves the Reformers in a deeply incoherent rationale for the authority of Scripture. Of these the first and third are not relevant to our discussion. See Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*, 148ff.

finality of Scripture and the usefulness, or secondary authority, of other sources. For instance, creeds could be understood as authoritative statements of doctrine, summarizing the teaching of Scripture on certain points.²⁴⁸ Furthermore, the Church can be guided by the Holy Spirit in formation of doctrines, creeds, and practices. Second, he argues that this view makes the individual the locus of interpretive authority. This will be treated separately below, but suffice it to say at this point that the finality of Scripture neither confers that authority on an individual's (or community's) interpretive abilities nor rules out the use of interpretive aids. Third, Abraham says that this view commits one to the clarity of Scripture, which he sees as incompatible with the use of any interpretive aids (e.g. the rule of faith). However, this seems to misconstrue what is typically meant by proponents of Scripture's perspicuity.²⁴⁹ They neither deny the helpfulness of aids nor affirm that every part of Scripture is perfectly clear (or does not need interpretation). Lastly, Abraham argues that this position involves the Reformers in a deeply incoherent rationale for the authority of Scripture,²⁵⁰ and this for two main reasons: the view is not taught in Scripture and it is either circular or self-refuting (i.e., makes experience the final norm). The fact that the view is not (explicitly) taught in Scripture is no great difficulty for someone like Calvin,²⁵¹ since he is not opposed to the use of reason and tradition as a

²⁴⁸ As we have seen, for example, in the case of Basil on the Holy Spirit.

²⁴⁹ See, e.g., a contemporary articulation and defense in Mark Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006). Cf. also Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 315-17.

²⁵⁰ The first thing to note is that this is not exactly a problem with sola Scriptura, but with the rationale the Reformers use to justify it.

²⁵¹ Though, Calvin certainly thought he was providing an account which squared with the teaching of Scripture, as his discussion of these issues, referenced above, makes clear.

means of interpreting and drawing out the implications of scriptural teaching. His claim that this view is either circular or makes experience the final norm should, at this point, sound familiar! Both Calvin and Plantinga would deny that an appeal to the inner witness of the Holy Spirit makes experience the ultimate norm (for reasons we discussed above). The operation of the Holy Spirit through the words of Scripture produces faith, not a religious experience which grounds faith. Now, there is a qualified sense in which one might describe this position as circular, but not in the sense which Abraham has in mind. It is not as if we appeal to an inner revelation of the Spirit to justify the Spirit's revelation in Scripture. Rather, Scripture is self-authenticated in the sense that the Spirit works in concert with the reading of Scripture to produce faith. So, while the Spirit is, on this model, guaranteeing the Spirit's witness (which is non-viciously circular), we do not need to know this in order for faith to be generated.

Another common objection concerns the practical implications of regarding Scripture as the primary authority. Doesn't prioritizing Scripture in this way deny interpretive helps and result in private-interpretation-induced hyper-pluralism? With respect to the first part of this question, the primacy of Scripture does not rule out the use of other sources as interpretive aids. Irenaeus, for instance, said that the rule of faith was necessary to properly interpret Scripture, but "only because it states succinctly and summarizes what Scripture is about."²⁵² Secondly, and as a result, the primacy of Scripture does not imply that everyone must interpret simply as she sees fit. It is

²⁵² Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 128. The use of the rule of faith as an interpretive key was consistent with regarding Scripture as the primary authority: "We have learned from none others the plan of our salvation, than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith," Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 414.

consistent with the use of aids and resources, and a stress on the importance of the context of the church community, in the interpretive process, but simply affirms that “all factors, except Scripture alone, are subject to a hermeneutic of suspicion, including one’s own interpretation.”²⁵³ Indeed, this position implies a deep epistemic humility, acknowledging that individuals and communities can and do make interpretive mistakes,²⁵⁴ and committing one’s interpretations to the scrutiny and correction of Scripture. All positions share the problem of interpretive plurality; the difference is the means through which those different interpretations will be judged and corrected.

Another worry often generated by a stress on the priority of Scripture is that it turns the Bible into a “paper Pope.” When this happens, “the scriptural word...becomes the Word, the Word made text, formalised, decontextualised and so dogmatically displaced.”²⁵⁵ Although this is a very real danger,²⁵⁶ it is a posture which is in no way implied by the position we espouse. As we have seen, Scripture should be viewed within its larger soteriological context and related to the self-revelation of God through the work of the Holy Spirit. This does give Scripture a place of priority in relation to other sources of authority, but still understood as a creaturely reality set apart by the Spirit for divine service in the economy of salvation.

Finally, if Scripture is our primary authority, how do we address the question of conflicts within Scripture itself? Is it a matter of some texts controlling the interpretation

²⁵³ John Peckham, “Sola Scriptura: Reductio ad Absurdum?” *Trinity Journal* 35 (2014): 203.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 222.

²⁵⁵ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 35-36.

²⁵⁶ A former professor used to joke that many Christians believe in the trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Book!

of others or does the internal witness of the Spirit help in some way? The first thing to say is that both the assessment and resolution of conflicts within Scripture are primarily a matter of interpretation, not authority. For example, Luther's assessment that there is a conflict between James and Paul on justification is just as much a matter of interpretation as his means of resolving the conflict. That said, when the question of conflicts arises, there are many interpretive options which appear to be consistent with the final authority of Scripture in matters of doctrine. One might deny that there is a genuine conflict. One might maintain a hermeneutical humility which admits ignorance – final authority does not, of course, mean that we are perfect exegetes. Other sources could be brought in to aid in interpretation. One might practice the analogy of Scripture, interpreting less clear passages of Scripture by means of more clear ones. Or, one might allow some texts (or concepts) to control the interpretation of the rest. The identification of these concepts would be a project for biblical theology, subject to correction against the whole counsel of Scripture. There are probably many more options as well,²⁵⁷ but the point is that they are ultimately questions of interpretation, which are independent of the question of authority.²⁵⁸

The Primacy of Scripture in the Anglican Tradition

So far, our concern has been to articulate and defend a view of the primacy of Scripture, which takes into account along the way the relevance of the problem of the

²⁵⁷ I don't see how the internal witness of the Spirit might help with the question of conflicts, but perhaps that is another option.

²⁵⁸ There is a related question which concerns the doubt that modern biblical scholarship seems, to many, to have cast on the claim that Scripture is inspired by God. On Plantinga's model, this would constitute a defeater for Christian belief and, thus, is treated in detail in chapter 12 of *Warranted Christian Belief*, 374-421.

criterion to this theological issue. Now it might be helpful to take a quick look at where and how this view crops up within the Anglican tradition. It would, of course, take us far beyond the scope of our topic to provide a detailed history of this view within Anglicanism, so we will have to be content with a selective view which focuses on a handful of examples. We will not be looking for examples of Anglican thinkers who appeal to the self-authentication of Scripture in relation to the problem of the criterion, but rather of those who understand Scripture to be the primary source of authority for Christian doctrine, and regard all other sources as secondary. Perhaps the easiest way to make this determination, in the absence of an explicitly stated position, is to consider how the thinker would resolve a conflict between Scripture and another source. This, then, will be our guiding consideration as we interact with each thinker. It is my contention that, although there are a wide variety of views taken by prominent Anglicans on this topic, the primacy of Scripture has had proponents throughout the history of Anglican thought down to the present day.

Early Anglicanism seems to show evidence of thinkers committed to the primacy of Scripture. Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556) and John Jewel (1522-1571), for instance, place a strong emphasis on the unique authority of Scripture. The preface to the Book of Homilies begins with the rationale for providing this collection of sermons, “[c]onsidering how necessary it is, that the word of God, which is the only food of the soul...should at all convenient times be preached unto the people, [that they may learn their duty to God, prince, and neighbors], according to the mind of the Holy Ghost, expressed in the scripture.”²⁵⁹ Not only is Scripture the only food for the soul, which

²⁵⁹ Church of England, *Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed to be Read in Churches in the Time of Queen Elizabeth* (Philadelphia: Edward C. Biddle, 1844), xiii.

expresses the mind of the Spirit, it “is the principal guide and leader unto all godliness and virtue, to expel and drive away as well all corrupt, vicious, and ungodly living, as also erroneous and poisoned doctrines.”²⁶⁰ The rationale for this collection, then, is rooted in the unique authority of Scripture for life and doctrine. And, this is also stated in many of the sermons themselves, in particular, those attributed to Cranmer and Jewel. The first, for instance, says that “there is no truth nor doctrine necessary for our justification and everlasting salvation, but that it is or may be drawn out of that fountain and well of truth [i.e. Scripture]...without the which, they can neither sufficiently know God and his will, neither their office and duty.”²⁶¹ And a little further on, we are urged to look to Scripture, not to “the corrupt judgment of fleshly men” and “the stinking puddles of men’s traditions...For in holy scripture is fully contained what we ought to do and what to eschew, what to believe, what to love, and what to look for at God’s hands at length.”²⁶² In another sermon it is stated that reason must defer to the superior authority of Scripture. In approaching Scripture with an attitude of self-denial, “reason must give place to God’s Holy Spirit; you must submit your worldly wisdom and judgment unto his divine wisdom and judgment. Consider that the Scripture, in what strange form soever it be pronounced, is the word of the living God.”²⁶³ In the preface to the 1540 publication of Cranmer’s Bible, Cranmer commended Scripture in light of its sufficiency in instruction for the Christian life: “If any thing be necessary to be learned...If falsehood shall be

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 1.

²⁶² Ibid., 2.

²⁶³ Ibid., 334. Cf. also *ibid.*, 174 where a thinker’s claim must be tested by its fidelity to Scripture.

reproved...If any thing be to be corrected and amended, if there need any exhortation or consolation, of the Scripture we may well learn.” And again, “Here may all manner of persons...learn all things what they ought to believe, what they ought to do, and what they should not do, as well concerning Almighty God, as also concerning themselves and all other.”²⁶⁴ Thus, there are thinkers in the Anglicanism of the early- to mid-sixteenth century who advocate the unique and primary authority of Scripture.

In the second half of the sixteenth century, Richard Hooker (1554-1600) represents a classic affirmation of the priority of Scripture for matters of doctrine. He presents a clearly ordered hierarchy of authorities in which Scripture is followed by reason and then tradition. He writes, “what Scripture doth plainly deliver, to that the first place both of credit and obedience is due; the next whereunto is whatsoever any man can necessarily conclude by force of reason; after these the voice of the Church succeedeth.”²⁶⁵ Now, there are some nuances to Hooker’s thought which we should mention. First of all, for Hooker, Scripture does not prove its divine origin,²⁶⁶ contain a list of canonical books, or include absolutely everything necessary (in an overly technical sense), for example, it does not teach the grammar necessary to read it.²⁶⁷ For these, appeal to reason and tradition are acceptable, and, once the canonical books are established as God’s Word, which Hooker clearly affirms, Scripture takes its place as

²⁶⁴ Thomas Cranmer, *The Works of Thomas Cranmer*, ed. G. E. Duffield (Appleford: Sutton Courtenay, 1964), 37.

²⁶⁵ Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Piety*, vol. 2 (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1963), V.viii.2, 31.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 242, II.iv.2.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 215, I.xiv.1

principal authority. “Being therefore persuaded by other means that these Scriptures are the oracles of God,” Hooker writes, “themselves do then teach us the rest, and lay before us all the duties which God requireth at our hands as necessary unto salvation.”²⁶⁸ Now, there are many things concerning which Scripture does not directly speak. Here Hooker’s concern is to avoid, on the one hand, the Puritans who would only affirm church practices which are found explicitly in Scripture and, on the other, the Catholics who rely on a separate oral tradition of equal authority.²⁶⁹ His contention is that, concerning *ecclesiastical* laws whose content is not determined by Scripture’s express declaration (e.g. whether ministers should wear chasubles), the Church may rightly determine them through the application of reason and, to a lesser extent, tradition. This, however, in no way undermines his commitment to the primacy of Scripture, to which the first place should be given in that which it plainly delivers.

Moving on to the beginning of the seventeenth century, we can see another prominent proponent of the unique priority of Scripture in George Herbert (1593-1633). In the course of his treatment of pastoral ministry, Herbert delineates three main aspects of the pastor’s overall duty: “the one, to infuse a competent *knowledge* of salvation in every one of his Flock; the other, to multiply and build up this *knowledge*, to a spiritual Temple; the third, to inflame this *knowledge*, to press, and drive it to practice, turning it to reformation of life.”²⁷⁰ So, Herbert understands the overall duty of the pastor to be one of teaching a core body of knowledge, nurturing his flock to maturity by means of this

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 216, I.xiv.1.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 278-80, II.viii.5.

²⁷⁰ George Herbert, *The Country Parson; The Temple*, ed. John N. Wall, Jr. (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 82-83, emphasis mine.

same knowledge, and applying this knowledge to the particular circumstances of his parishioners' daily lives. It is clear from his discussion of these various aspects of ministry throughout *The Country Parson*, that the knowledge of salvation which it is his task to preach, teach, and apply to the congregation is derived from Scripture. This is why he insists that, for priests, "the chief and top of his knowledge consists in the book of books, the storehouse and magazine of life and comfort, the holy Scriptures. There he sucks, and lives."²⁷¹ Likewise, Francis White (1564-1638), a contemporary of Herbert's:

The Church of England in her public and authorized Doctrine and Religion proceedeth in manner following. It buildeth her faith and religion upon the Sacred Canonical Scriptures....[But] next to the Holy Scripture, it relieth upon the consentient testimony and authority of the bishops and pastors of the true and ancient Catholic Church; and it preferreth the sentence thereof before all other curious and profane novelties. [Thus] the Holy Scripture is the fountain and lively spring, containing in all sufficiency the pure water of life....The consentient and unanimous testimony of the true church of Christ in the primitive ages...is *canalis*, a conduit pipe, to derive and convey to succeeding generations the celestial water contained in Holy Scripture. The first of these, namely Scripture, is the sovereign authority....The latter is a ministerial and subordinant rule and guide to preserve and direct us to the right understanding of the Scriptures.²⁷²

Here White clearly affirms the unique and magisterial authority of Scripture *vis a vis* the important, but secondary authority of tradition.

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, William Wake (1657-1737) expresses his commitment to the priority of Scripture in conversation with the Roman Catholic Church. He affirms "the holy scriptures, and whatsoever they teach or command, we receive and submit to, as to the Word of God."²⁷³ He goes on to affirm the

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁷² Francis White, *A Treatise of the Sabbath Day*, quoted in Michael Ramsey, *The Anglican Spirit* (New York: Seabury Press, 2004), 16-17.

²⁷³ Norman Sykes, *William Wake: Archbishop of Canterbury, 1657-1737*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 31.

ancient creeds and the tradition of the primitive church. But, if they should be in conflict, one must side with Scripture. As God “has subjected us to the government and direction of his church for our peace and welfare, so to secure our faith He has given us his holy word to be the last resort, the final, infallible rule, by which both we and the church itself must be directed.”²⁷⁴ He was willing to grant the Church a genuine authority, but one that is dependent upon and secondary to the authority of Scripture. He writes, “we shew whatever submission we can to [the Church’s] authority without violating that of God, declared to us in his holy scriptures.”²⁷⁵ Thus, while acknowledging several legitimate sources of authority, he clearly affirms the priority of Scripture.

Another proponent of the priority of Scripture, this time from the late eighteenth century, is Charles Simeon (1759-1836). “There is no doubt,” writes Robert Dell, “that he himself placed the Bible first as his authority in theological and ethical matters.”²⁷⁶ Dell notes that one of his familiar expressions was, “[t]he Bible first, the Prayer Book next, and all other books and doings in subordination to both.”²⁷⁷ Not only was a clear priority placed on the authority of Scripture, but Simeon understood himself to be focusing his entire ministry almost single-mindedly on the Bible. His aim and ambition was to be “loyal altogether to the revelation of Scripture, so as to take from it not only his premises but the deductions from them; correcting every inference by that test.”²⁷⁸ Furthermore,

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 30.

²⁷⁵ Ibid. It is in this context that he commends St. Athanasius, who “stood up alone against the whole world in defense of Christ’s divinity, when the pope, the councils, the whole church fell away.”

²⁷⁶ Robert S. Dell, “Simeon and the Bible,” *Charles Simeon (1759-1836)*, ed. Arthur Pollard and Michael Hennell, (London: SPCK, 1959), 29.

²⁷⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*

²⁷⁸ Handley C. G. Moule, *Charles Simeon* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1956), 76.

Simeon preferred the teaching of Scripture to systems of thought which end up distorting the Bible's message in order to conform it to their teaching.²⁷⁹ "I love the simplicity of the Scriptures," he writes, "and I wish to receive and inculcate every truth precisely in the way, and to the extent, that it is set forth in the inspired Volume. Were this the habit of all divines, there would soon be an end of most of the controversies that have agitated and divided the Church of Christ."²⁸⁰ Whether or not one agrees with Simeon on this point, he clearly understood Scripture to be both the primary source of authority and the ultimate arbiter in theological controversies.

The Tractarians, in the first half of the nineteenth century, held Scripture in high regard. For instance, both²⁸¹ John Keble (1792-1866) and John Henry Newman (1801-1890) – or at least early Newman – held views consistent with the priority of Scripture. They held that every doctrine had to be derived from Scripture, though they thought Church rites and practices could be established by appeal to tradition,²⁸² and Scripture should be interpreted according to the methods of patristic exegesis rather than according to private judgment. John Keble, for instance insists that Scripture is "sole and paramount as a rule of faith" and that "every fundamental point of doctrine is contained in the unquestioned books of [the canon. As a result]...nothing is to be insisted on as a point of faith necessary to salvation, but what is contained in, or may be proved by, canonical

²⁷⁹ Dell, "Simeon and the Bible," 34.

²⁸⁰ Quoted in Moule, *Charles Simeon*, 77.

²⁸¹ Not to mention Pusey, who probably had both beat in this regard. See Timothy Larsen, "Scripture and Biblical Interpretation," *Oxford Handbook to the Oxford Movement*, eds. Stewart J. Brown, Peter B. Nockles, and James Pereiro (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 233.

²⁸² *Ibid.*

Scripture.”²⁸³ He goes on to defend the use of tradition as a distinct source of authority, of secondary weight, and also as an invaluable interpretive aid, but these considerations complement his commitment to the “sole and paramount” authority of Scripture.

Newman presents a difficulty to the extent that his views changed over time. That said, one could make the case that early Newman was committed to the priority of Scripture, even if later (Catholic) Newman compromised on this point. In *Tract 73*, for instance, Newman distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate uses of reason. It is legitimate for reason to inquire into theological claims upon which Scripture does not speak, to determine what proofs are necessary in order to accept the divine origin of a revelation,²⁸⁴ and to investigate the meaning of Scripture.²⁸⁵ It is not, however, a legitimate use of reason “to accept the Revelation, and then to explain it away...to accept one half of what has been told us, and not the other half...to frame some gratuitous hypothesis about them, and then to garble, gloss, and colour them, to trim, clip, pare away, and twist them, in order to bring them into conformity with the idea to which we have subjected them.”²⁸⁶ In other words, having established Scripture as a genuine revelation – which Newman, of course, grants – reason’s proper role is to aid in interpreting Scripture and to “let it speak for itself.”²⁸⁷ Should a conflict arise between

²⁸³ Eugene Fairweather, ed., *The Oxford Movement* (New York: Oxford University, 1964), 76.

²⁸⁴ Abraham notes that, on Newman’s view, once we come to believe that Scripture is divine revelation (which is a matter of probability), “our commitment to the revelation is unconditional and certain,” *Canon and Criterion*, 341.

²⁸⁵ John Henry Newman, *Tract No. 73*, 32, accessed February 20, 2018.
<http://www.newmanreader.org/works/essays/volume1/rationalism/section1.html>.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

Scripture and reason, “instead of measuring a divine revelation by human standards, or systematizing, except so far as it does so itself,” we should, “take what is given as we find it.”²⁸⁸ In his *University Sermons*, Newman further develops the respective roles of reason and faith. For Newman, reason is a critical, not a creative, power. That is, although reason must approve doctrines which faith believes on the testimony of Scripture (i.e. they cannot be contrary to reason), “it does not therefore follow that Faith is actually grounded on Reason in the believing mind itself.”²⁸⁹ Reason is like a judge who “does not make men honest, but acquits and vindicates them.”²⁹⁰ He even suggests, in a passage reminiscent of Plantinga’s discussion of the phenomenology of belief, that “the act of Faith is sole and elementary, and complete in itself, and depends on no process of mind previous to it.”²⁹¹ When the message of Scripture is offered, the person of faith finds that he believes the message. When Newman considers why the person of faith judges the message probable, he says it is “[b]ecause he has a love for it, his love being strong, though the testimony is weak.”²⁹² This love is a gift of divine grace,²⁹³ and the faith which it produces is “the reasoning of a divinely enlightened [mind].”²⁹⁴ After his conversion to Catholicism, Newman placed more weight on the authority of the Church

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁸⁹ John Henry Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford between A.D. 1826 and 1843*, eds. James D. Earnest and Gerard Tracey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 131.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

²⁹² *Ibid.*

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 153.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

as infallible interpreter of Scripture. This probably amounts, for Catholic Newman, to a denial of the primacy of Scripture, though Abraham thinks Newman's appeal to papal infallibility is a last-ditch attempt to salvage *sola Scriptura*, where the function of this one infallible interpretation is to safeguard the revelation contained in Scripture.²⁹⁵

A contemporary of Newman's, from outside the ranks of the Oxford Movement, who in his own way stressed the priority of Scripture was F. D. Maurice (1805-1872). In his *Kingdom of Christ*, Maurice seeks to recover and defend the authority of Scripture as one of four fundamental principles of the Reformation.²⁹⁶ He concedes the Church's authority to set the canon and then asks himself why he admits the Church's authority on this point but not in all matters. His answer is that "[b]y the care of God's providence through his Church, these records of its Lord and Head have been preserved. They have been preserved, no doubt, for many great and solemn purposes, but for this especially, that there may be a standard in the world, by which all other acts and lives may be tried."²⁹⁷ Throughout his discussion he argues that Scripture is the norm against which the life of the Church is to be measured. His understanding of how Scripture operates as the ultimate norm is, however, in many respects unique. He says, "the more I study the original under such guidance as is given to me, the more I must believe and hope that the faculty will be cultivated in me, whereby I may discern the true from the counterfeit...to observe the traces of the divine model in the human imitation."²⁹⁸ Familiarity with the

²⁹⁵ Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*, 350-51.

²⁹⁶ F. D. Maurice, *The Kingdom of Christ, or Hints to a Quaker Respecting the Principles, Constitution and Ordinances of the Catholic Church*, vol. 1 (London: SCM, 1958), 75-77 and 98-102.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 182.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 183.

divine model – the original – nurtures in the Christian a growing sense of what is true and good and beautiful which she then can apply to measure to worth of human imitations. Furthermore, Maurice thinks that, contrary to the common objection, the priority of Scripture as a word from God actually creates a space in which humans can reject the tyranny of private judgment. “If there be a book,” he says, “of which we can say, Herein God is speaking to you; be silent and listen... We have the power of cultivating our judgment, because we have the power of making it *not* a private judgment.”²⁹⁹ In a rhetorically rich section, Maurice admits that a man may choose to exercise private judgment, to be a savage, to not be educated, to not be reasonable, to not be a human. Maurice writes, “[h]e may do this; I say also he may do something else if he will. He may be taken under training and discipline, the training and discipline of God himself, for the purpose of being led out of his private judgment into a knowledge of the judgment and mind of him who ‘weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance.’”³⁰⁰ By placing himself under the authority of Scripture, he is choosing to allow God to train, instruct, and mold him which, in turn, will enable him to see at least a glimmer of truth in all other books and speeches, to see “something which could not have been spoken if there were not a Bible in the world.”³⁰¹

Moving into the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, we can see another proponent of the priority of Scripture in Charles Gore (1853-1932). In the context of his discussion of the Holy Spirit and inspiration in *Lux Mundi*, Gore claims

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 168-69.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 169.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

that “[t]he Church has in Holy Scripture the highest expression of the mind of Christ. The familiarity of all its members with this flawless and catholic image is to ward off in each generation that tendency to deteriorate and to become materialized which belongs to all ‘traditions.’”³⁰² The individual Christian uses his familiarity with Scripture in ‘testing all things, and holding fast that which is good,’ and through this process “[h]e reforms; he does not innovate. His note is to restore; not to reject.”³⁰³ After stressing the importance of situating the inspiration of Scripture within a larger theological framework,³⁰⁴ he goes on to state explicitly that Scripture is the norm which evaluates and affirms or denies the Church’s teaching by affirming the teaching of the early church towards Scripture: “Scripture was regarded as the highest utterance of the Spirit, the unique and constant test of the Church’s life and teaching. But the Spirit in the Church interpreted the meaning of Scripture. Thus the Church taught and the Scripture tested and verified or corrected her teaching.”³⁰⁵ For Gore, then, Scripture is the final authority through which the teaching of the Church is verified or corrected.³⁰⁶

³⁰² Charles Gore, “The Holy Spirit and Inspiration,” *Lux Mundi*, ed. Charles Gore (New York: U.S. Book Company, 1890), 272.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 272-73.

³⁰⁴ He is reminiscent of Newman here, arguing that a whole set of presuppositions are necessary to assent to the message of Scripture, and that it is “the work of the Spirit in the Church...to keep alive and real these presupposition, this frame of mind,” *ibid.*, 282.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 284.

³⁰⁶ Gore’s confidence in Scripture’s role as God-given norm of doctrine and practice is apparent: “Nor can it be denied that the more Holy Scripture is read from this point of view, the more confidently it is treated as the inspired guide of faith and conduct...Indeed what has been said under this head will probably appear to those practised [*sic*] in the spiritual use of Holy Scripture as an under-statement, perhaps not easy to justify, of the sense in which the Scripture is the word of God and the spiritual food of the soul,” *ibid.* 293.

In the middle of the twentieth century, Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey (1904-1988) is a good example of an Anglican who affirms the priority of Scripture in relation to tradition and reason. He drafted the report, “The Holy Bible: Its authority and message” for at the 1958 Lambeth Conference, though, of course, its contents were affirmed by all forty-three members of the Committee from all over the Anglican Communion. The report states that Scripture has authority over the Church, which recognized, but did not confer, authority on Scripture. It states, “the Church is not ‘over’ the Holy Scriptures, but ‘under’ them, in the sense that the process of canonization was not one whereby the Church conferred authority on the books but one whereby the Church acknowledged them to possess authority...To that apostolic authority the Church must ever bow.”³⁰⁷ Furthermore, the claim is made that Christian doctrine is fundamentally and irreducibly derived from Scripture. “The great Christian doctrines,” they state, “are no more and no less than interpretations of the Biblical drama which the Church made under the guidance of the Holy Spirit...The Creeds summarize it. The Church expounds it in systematic form. But it is from the Bible that every right exposition of it derives.”³⁰⁸ On this view, then, while there is an important place for tradition and reason, it is secondary to that of Scripture. Thus, Ramsey can affirm in another place, that the “Anglican Church has always regarded and still regards Holy Scripture as the supreme authority for the doctrine of the Christian church.”³⁰⁹

³⁰⁷ The Lambeth Conference 1958. *The Encyclical Letter from the Bishops together with the Resolutions and Reports* (London: SPCK, 1958), 2.5.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.12-13.

³⁰⁹ Ramsey, *The Anglican Spirit*, 13.

Lastly, in this selective historical survey, it would make sense to take a quick look at a few contemporary Anglican thinkers who likewise affirm the priority of Scripture. In addition to John Webster and Richard Bauckham, with whose work we have already engaged, we might consider, very briefly, Alister McGrath, N. T. Wright, Oliver O'Donovan, and John Goldingay. McGrath understands our acknowledgement of the authority of Scripture as a consequence of our acknowledgement of the authority of Jesus. "We honour Christ," he says, "by receiving both the Scriptures that he received, and those that the church has handed down to us as a divinely inspired witness to Christ."³¹⁰ Furthermore, he maintains that theology which is distinctively Christian is found in, or derived from, Scripture alone. McGrath writes, "it is through Jesus Christ that the distinctively Christian knowledge of God comes about, and this knowledge of Jesus is given only in Scripture."³¹¹ Our theological thinking should be controlled not by private judgment or the prevailing cultural fads, but by the divinely inspired revelation in Scripture. As a result, "[t]o allow our ideas and values to become controlled by anything or anyone other than the self-revelation of God in Scripture is to adopt an ideology rather than a theology; it is to become controlled by ideas and values whose origins lie outside the Christian tradition."³¹²

N. T. Wright similarly affirms the priority of Scripture using both straightforward affirmations and new, creative ways of conceiving of how the Church should make use of

³¹⁰ Alister McGrath, "Reclaiming our Roots and Vision: Scripture and the Stability of the Christian Church," *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, eds. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 66.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 72.

this primary authority in its life and action. In the context of a report by the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, Wright notes that Anglican doctrine takes place in a nexus of interrelated aspects of the Church's history and ongoing life together, including its liturgy and worship, Articles and Ordinal, Homilies and catechism, etc. "All these," he says, "form a sort of pyramid, with the Bible at the top, then the creeds, then the Articles, and the rest in a less definite order underneath."³¹³ Thus, he takes Scripture to be the primary authority in matters of doctrine, which he regards as "more (though not, I believe, less) than a set of (true) doctrinal propositions."³¹⁴ His most novel contribution, however, is in his conception of how this authority is exercised over the life of the Church. The basic idea is that redemptive history is a sort of story in which we play an active role. Wright thinks of the biblical story as the first four acts (Creation, Fall, Israel, Jesus) of a five-act play – and the writing of the New Testament as the first scene of the final act. The role of the Church is to step on the stage, so to speak, and take up our parts in this divine drama in a way that is consistent with, and constrained by, what we know of the story so far and its anticipated ending. For this task, "the first four acts, existing as they did, would be the undoubted 'authority.'"³¹⁵ Furthermore, in a good fifth act "there will be a rightness, a fittingness, about certain actions and speeches, about certain final moves in the drama, which...gain authentication from their coherence with, their making sense of, the 'authoritative' previous text."³¹⁶ This is a novel way of understanding how

³¹³ N. T. Wright, "Doctrine Declared," *Believing in the Church: A Report by the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1981), 112.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

³¹⁵ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 140.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

the authority of Scripture acts on the Church's life and vocation, but one that still affords primary place to the authority of Scripture for that purpose.

Another proponent of the primacy of Scripture is Oliver O'Donovan, who roots the authority of Scripture in the authority of Christ. Once this is acknowledged, "we are bound to speak of the authorities that his authority authorizes... They are, it is clear, the authors of the New and Old Testaments."³¹⁷ Here, again, we see the consideration of God's self-revelatory activity in the economy of salvation playing a role in how we conceive of Scripture in the life of the Church. Echoing Webster, O'Donovan sees the canonization as the Church's recognition of authority in virtue of its sanctification by God and for divine service. The faith demanded of a reader of Scripture is (in addition to faith in the saving work of God) a faith in Scripture too. "It implies," he says, "willingness to accept the testimony of Scripture without presuming to improve upon it—by excision, by correction, or by privileging a canon within the canon—but simply seeking to understand it in fidelity and obedience, without presuppositions or conditions."³¹⁸

In a similar vein, John Goldingay offers a fairly straightforward account of the primacy of Scripture. He maintains the "foundational and final role" of Scripture in light of the scriptural witness to the gospel, to God's saving deeds in history. This recognition of Scripture "as the church's authoritative resource and norm is in keeping with the nature of Christianity and with the attitude of Jesus."³¹⁹ For Goldingay, tradition, reason, and experience cannot have the same weight as Scripture largely because "they cannot

³¹⁷ Oliver O'Donovan, "The Moral Authority of Scripture," *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible*, eds. Markus Bockmuehl and Alan Torrance (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 166.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 167.

³¹⁹ John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 196.

inform us of the gospel” or provide a divinely inspired “interpretation of their significance.”³²⁰ Furthermore, although these other sources can help us understand Scripture, they can also “obscure its meaning, impose meanings on it, or can come into conflict with it. For scripture to be the church’s canon is for it to be the measure of tradition, reason, commitment, and experience rather than vice versa.”³²¹

Now, it is true that at each of these same points in Anglican history, one could probably find other thinkers who denied or seriously qualified the priority of Scripture. Furthermore, there is much diversity in the particulars even among the thinkers we have considered. The point of the foregoing selective history, however, is not to establish a uniform Anglican position, but simply to note that this view has had proponents at each stage in Anglican history from its inception down to the present day.

Conclusion

In conclusion, determining the ultimate authority for Christian doctrine is both an issue of fundamental importance and can be seen as a particular manifestation, in the field of theological inquiry, of a more general epistemological problem, namely the problem of the criterion. As a result, we took a look at the philosophical problem and came to the conclusion that circularity at the most fundamental level of human thought is universal, and that a good solution to the problem would provide a self-authenticating criterion to dull the force of the circularity. We then articulated this philosophical argument in theological terms and considered a historical incident in which it was at play.

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Ibid.

As with the philosophical problem we saw that when it comes to justifying an ultimate source of authority in theological matters, the justification will inevitably be circular since, on the assumption that it is the ultimate source, there is no higher source of authority to which one could appeal. We also saw that some sort of resolution to the problem is a prerequisite to the resolution of any doctrinal controversy.

As a result, we briefly examined the four main candidates which have typically be presented as an ultimate authority for Christian doctrine: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. We noted, in passing, that all are ultimately dependent upon, and derived from, the absolute authority of God in his activity of self-revelation. Scripture is the written testimony, inspired by the Spirit, to the saving words and deeds of God in history. Tradition is the teaching and reflections of the Church throughout history, focused especially on the interpretation of Scripture. Reason is principally an intellectual capacity, not an independent source of knowledge, but can be understood, in an extended sense, as a contributory source of natural theology or tradition, depending on the object of reflection and judgment. Experience is the means by which an individual appropriates a theological truth for herself and can act as a source of authority by providing testimonial evidence for a theological truth in the lived experience of one individual. Thus, theological knowledge comes to each individual from God's self-revelation in nature and Scripture through the rational reflection of previous generations, as well as one's own, and is appropriated through personal experience.

We next considered some problems with taking tradition, reason, or experience as the primary source of authority. We pointed out, first, that all three are legitimate and helpful sources of authority for Christian doctrine. That is, problems arise, not in

connection with their use as sources of authority in Christian theology, but when they are treated as final authorities. In the case of each of the three sources, we saw that its authority is derivative to the authority of Scripture and that it cannot provide an account of its presumed status as a final authority which is not ultimately circular or self-refuting.

When we turned to Scripture, we noticed that its unique role in God's revelatory economy had suggested to some theologians that there might be a way to connect God's absolute authority with God's testimony in Scripture in such a way that it could be regarded as a self-authenticating authority. We considered, first, Calvin's general account of the human reception of divine grace and, in particular, the role of the internal witness of the Holy Spirit in authenticating the Spirit's testimony in Scripture. Then, we discovered, in the recent work of John Webster, a framework for understanding the nature and authority of Scripture which incorporated the basic insights of Calvin on the primacy of Scripture and the importance of understanding it in terms of the role it plays in the divine economy of salvation, and which also furnished the conceptual resources to respond to some contemporary challenges. In particular, he showed how the notion of sanctification allows the biblical texts – and all the processes implied in their formation, reception, and publication – to be creatures, but creatures set apart for God's service in the economy of salvation. Furthermore, situating Scripture within its soteriological context had the implication that as the church receives the grace of the gospel message through the Spirit's work both in and through Scripture, she also submits to the Spirit's work in and through Scripture to inculcate a life that is pleasing to God. We then drew on the work of Alvin Plantinga who offered a contemporary account of how the idea of Scripture's self-authenticating witness might be fleshed out more rigorously in the

categories of analytic philosophy and within the context of the rationality of Christian belief, more generally. On his model, Scripture together with the Spirit's internal testimony overcomes the obstacles wrought by sin to produce faith. Furthermore, the production of faith is not accidental or random, as it may appear at the phenomenological level, but the result of a properly functioning God-given belief-forming mechanism, namely the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit. We also examined several reasons to prefer something like this frankly supernatural model to more 'natural' models.

Then, we considered how fidelity to the apostolic testimony, preserved in Scripture, is what makes the Church properly apostolic. Christian doctrine, in turn, is specifically Christian doctrine to the extent that it conforms to the teaching of the apostolic deposit in Scripture. And, this has implications for the relationship between Scripture and the other sources of authority. While it is perfectly proper to make use of tradition, reason, and experience as aids in understanding, interpreting, and drawing out the implications of Scripture, that use, if it is to remain faithful to the apostolic deposit, must remain subject to the teaching of Scripture. Moreover, we pointed out that this appeal to Scripture to arbitrate in theological matters would not run into the vicious circularity to which the other authorities are susceptible.

Finally, after voicing and responding to some of the more common objections to the primacy of Scripture, we looked at a selection of Anglican thinkers, past and present, who were committed to some variation of this position. From this selective historical sketch, it became clear that, although there are a wide variety of views taken by Anglicans on this topic, the primacy of Scripture has had proponents throughout the history of Anglican thought down to the present day. In light of the foregoing analysis,

then, Scripture seems uniquely suited to act as a final authority for Christian theology in that, through the work of the Spirit, it brings its own evidence with it, avoids the serious philosophical and theological problems that result from taking another source as final, and fits seamlessly within the larger theological framework of God's self-revelation in the economy of salvation. As such, it remains my contention that Scripture should be regarded as the ultimate source of authority for Christian doctrine.

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