

The Bible is not our authority in the sense of legalistically mandating conformity to its every teaching. The Bible is our authority because it “authors” us. In its rich, provocative, empowering diversity, the Bible is the continuing source of our identity as Christians. Reflecting the *exousia* of Jesus, Christian Scripture grants us freedom, grounds our creativity, guides our thinking, challenges our conclusions, inspires our hearts, and thus empowers us to act responsibly today as thinking Christians. The authority of the Bible is its power to “author” what we do and who we are—our very being—as Christians.

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The Progressive Christian Witness

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UNDERSTANDING BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

THE BIBLE IS AUTHORITATIVE FOR CHRISTIANS. It is central to our corporate worship and our private devotion. It is foundational for our thinking about what is true, and what is right and wrong. We know of its authority because of the Bible's unique place in our lives. But we may not always be clear about the nature of the Bible's authority and what it means in daily practice. Sometimes this confusion leads to uses of the Bible that are unfaithful to the Scriptures and destructive in the Christian community.

What is the Bible's authority? The authority of the Bible for Christians is grounded in the authority of Jesus; his uniqueness in our lives makes the Bible authoritative for us. But his special authority also enables us to understand the authority of the Bible for our lives, and thus how the Bible should be employed in our thinking and acting.

Consider what “authority” means in Mark 1:22, Luke 4:32, and Matthew 7:29, as it is applied to Jesus. These passages differ in some details but they agree that Jesus taught and acted as one who had a special kind of authority. His was unlike the legalistic authority of the common religious teachers of the day. Jesus spoke to people as one having *exousia*—that's the Greek word translated as “authority.” *Exousia* connotes the possession of freedom and creativity, as well as the power to instill and inspire freedom and creativity in others. Authority in this sense does not demand conformity or repetition. Authority is the power of

new life and, therefore, the power to instill new life—freedom, creativity—in others.

This understanding of authority is evident throughout the Bible in the practice of biblical writers and figures. In both the Old Testament and the New, they accepted the past as “authoritative” in this same sense, as empowering, as giving life. They were formed, nourished, and inspired by their past—inspired, sometimes, to disagree with it! Differing, even contradictory, interpretations of creation, the Exodus, the prophets, the Law—these are all there in the Bible. As noted evangelical theologian Clark Pinnock writes: “There is a rich diversity in biblical teaching... [even] as regards the person and work of Christ...” Dr. Pinnock goes on to say that it is through this diversity, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in the counsel of the Christian community, that we are taught to think for ourselves as Christians.

There is a “rich diversity” of teachings in the Bible on ethical issues like war, marriage, and the role of government. There is diversity on theological issues like the role of the Law, the relationship of faith and works, the nature of salvation, even on when Jesus became the Christ, the anointed of God. And there is ambiguity or silence on many issues that we urgently confront today, such as homosexuality, abortion, stem cell research, and cloning.

But diversity in the community of biblical writers does not undermine the Bible's authority. On the contrary, it is a means through which the Bible teaches us to think together, to work out our own identities in the community of Christians. It is a means by which the Bible provokes and inspires us, nourishes and forms us. The very diversity of voices in Scripture empowers us to search together, despite our sometimes continuing differences. Therefore, as a community we live continuously in relation to the biblical text because we experience it, with all its richness, as our formative foundation, the continuing source of our dynamic identity as Christians.

Like the writers within the text, we are always taught by our sacred past, and like them we are often chastened and corrected by it. But sometimes, also, like the biblical writers—prayerfully and within the lively mind of the community—we take views that differ from some of the past voices in sacred Scripture. Many of us depart from certain clear biblical teachings by permitting divorce, paying and charging interest, rejecting slavery even when the slave master is kind, and condemning patriarchy as well as absolute monarchy however benevolent. We do so, not despite the Bible, but because of it. We live in relation to our sacred Scripture—always listening, always learning, sometimes reverently “talking back”—because it empowers and, indeed, impels us to do so.