

The Authority of Scripture as the Word of God

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Abstract

The place and influence of Scripture in the contemporary world is marginal and seriously undermined. This article is a plea to rediscover the centrality and authority of the Scriptures for an authentic Christian life in the world. It begins with some clarification questions about the locus of authority, and then presents several key issues regarding the authority of Scripture. It is argued that the concept should be understood in close association with the authority of God, the authority of the true story of the world in Jesus Christ, obedience and transformed lives. Throughout the article, special emphasis is placed on the authority of Scripture as the “living” and “active” word of God for an obedient and transformed Christian living in the world.

Key words: *Scripture, authority, word of God, communication, obedience, Christian life*

Introduction

The Bible has exercised a great and positive influence upon western civilization. For a long period of time, it was seen as the only source of truth and authority, not only for the church, but also for the life of society and culture in general. The authority of Scripture has been assumed throughout most of the history of the Christian church. It was only with the rise of the Enlightenment and the rationalistic, historicist approach to the study of the Bible that the issue of authority was called into question. The Bible came to be treated as any other text, no longer with the assumption that it mediates God's authoritative word. It is indeed a disturbing reality that in the contemporary, increasingly secularized western world, the Christian heritage in general, and the significance of the Bible in particular, are

fading away. Nowadays, a general rejection of any final authority is the trend, a phenomenon that has continued from modernity into post-modernity. It is in this context that, as Scripture-believing Christians, we make conscious efforts to bring back the centrality and authority of the Scriptures for a meaningful and redeemed Christian life in the world. There is a great need to develop and sustain a biblical way of thinking as a solid foundation for a significant Christian impact on contemporary culture and society. To that end, we need, on the one hand, to be constantly engaged in promoting a responsible biblical interpretation, done not simply in an isolationist and abstract scholarship, but in dialogue with, and sensible to, the life of the church and her engagement with the world. On the other hand, we need to bear witness to the lasting power of Scripture to speak afresh to every person in every generation, and especially to its lasting power to transform human lives. One specific aspect of this revitalization of the place of Scripture in the life of the individual Christian and of communities is the issue of the authority of the Scriptures. It is this particular aspect that I would like to explore in this paper.

As Evangelical, Protestant Christians, I do not think we have a problem with accepting the Bible as the Word of God for humankind to which we should give total allegiance. The problem we have is rather with the full meaning of its authority for the everyday life of the believer. What does it really mean for the Bible to have authority? How is it expressed, and how do Christians respond to it? Is the authority restricted to a series of propositional truths, or is it something that goes beyond that? What are the implications of the authority of Scripture for the life of a Christian in the world? These and similar questions will be explored in this paper.

The Continuous Power and Relevance of the Word of God

It is probably right to begin with a serious reminder about the undeniable truth of the continuous power, authority, and relevance of the Bible for every generation, and I do that with the memorable words of Carl Henry:

The Bible remains the most extensively printed, most widely translated, and most frequently read book in the world. Its words have been treasured in the hearts of multitudes like none other. All who have received its gifts of wisdom and promises of new life and power were at first strangers to its redemptive message and many were hostile to its teaching and spiritual demands. In all generations its power to challenge persons of all races and lands has been demonstrated. Those who cherish the Bible because it sustains future hope, brings meaning and power to the present, and correlates a misused past with the forgiving grace of God would not long experience such inner rewards if Scripture were not known to them as the authoritative, divinely revealed truth (1992:26-27).

These powerful, undeniable and unique qualities of Scripture have made it possible for people who read it to give such a prominent position to the Bible in their lives.

The Authority of Scripture

The concept of the authority of Scripture is multifaceted and complex. It is probably necessary to begin with several clarifying questions in terms of what people generally understand is meant by the authority of the Bible. Does the authority of the Bible mean that one has to follow absolutely everything in the Bible, to the letter, without question or reason? Is the appeal to the authority of the Bible validated by the simple appeal of, “because the Bible says so ... end of discussion?!” Or, as John Bright asks, does it suggest that a human being’s deepest questions “have meekly to be suppressed whenever the preacher slams the desk and quotes a verse of Scripture? Do we mean that the Bible’s doctrines and moral and religious directives must command our belief and practice to the last detail? Or do we regard the Bible as authoritative only in the sense that, as the primary witness to our faith, we may expect it to provide us with the broad, general principles that can guide us in our doctrinal and ethical decisions?” (Bright, 1967:20,24). What, exactly, do we mean when we say that the Bible is the ultimate authority for one’s personal life, and for the life of the church in the world? The following question is also important and urgent for the church, for those who minister from the Word of God and for those who listen to it: What does the authority of the Bible mean for the preacher and the believers alike, for the life of faith? What about the authority of the Bible relates to the moral and social challenges that Christians face in society today?

A further legitimate question beyond the level of the Bible’s authority is the question of the scope of biblical authority: “What is it that we need an authoritative Bible *for*?” (Barton, 1997; 1989). Is it only for the *information* it provides, including information about God’s dealings with the world? Though it is for this, the authority of Scripture goes far beyond the information, and it offers a real “formation” towards the Christian life and obedience that God intends for his people to live out. Is it for the *wisdom* it provides? Though the Bible is full of wisdom, it is also more than that.

In the church, the authority of the Bible has been understood to refer to its right to be believed and obeyed, to the power of the Bible to compel one to believe, to give consent to its teachings. In other words, as the inspired Word of God, its witness is trustworthy and ought to be believed. But the question still remains as to what it ultimately is that actually constrains believers to give allegiance to the Bible as the ultimate authority for their faith and lives. What

determines this belief? In answer to this, we can only say that even though there are numerous factors involved in the process of consent and belief, ultimately it is only the persuasive witness of the Holy Spirit to the trustworthiness of biblical revelation that constrains us to grant the Bible the ultimate authority. It is the Holy Spirit who ultimately enables believers to accept Scripture as God's word, and to understand it:

As the Spirit inspires our Christian living and thinking, leading us further into the experience of what the Bible teaches, so we find the Bible making more sense to us – existentially, intellectually, imaginatively. As the Spirit actualizes the Word of God in our lives, so the Word of God authenticates itself to us (Bauckham, 1998).

As already mentioned, the issue of the authority of the Bible is a very complex and multifaceted one. However, whatever else may be said about it, one truth is established, namely that “the Bible provides us with the primary, and thus the normative, documents of the Christian faith; it has, therefore, normative authority over all who claim to be Christians” (Bright, 1967:30).¹

When referring to the Bible as Scripture, Christians express a strong conviction that it is the written Word of God, and they acknowledge a divine origin and normative dimension of the Bible. It is commonly accepted that talk of the authority of Scripture refers to something very precise, namely that the texts of Scripture mediate God's self-revelation and therefore are normative for the faith and practices of the Christian church. John Webster writes,

As the instrument through which divine authority is present and operative in the church, Scripture is primary in the church's governance and fundamental to instruction in the Christian religion as well as to the church's theological self-articulation and its processes of discernment and judgment (2005:724).

This is so because the authority of Scripture is not derived from external evidence, not even from the church, but is “rooted in Spirit-generated persuasion” and addresses the human condition in the most profound way: “Scripture's authority consists in its capacity to outbid and relativize human judgement, and to deliver a normative revelation that overthrows idolatry” (Webster, 2005:724).

The central presupposition of the authority of the Bible is not simply that it contains the revelation of God, but that this divine revelation is intelligible in nature, that is, the will of God is recorded in Scripture in the form of valid truths (Henry, 1992:19). This should not be understood, however, in a rigid or static

1 He rightly concludes that the Bible is the ultimate authority because it is the one reliable source one “may appeal to in determining what the Christian faith actually affirms and teaches” (Bright, 1967:40).

way, but in synergy with the view that the authority of Scripture also makes a claim on the believer, a claim to faith and obedience. There is, indeed, much discussion as to the precise nature of the authority of Scripture, i.e. where the authority “resides”: Is it in the text, in its function to point to God, in its witness to Christ, in its power to engender faith and obedience? John Webster, for example, points to the instrumentality of Scripture in revealing the word of God:

The authority of Scripture lies in its reference to the church’s God and his gospel. Scripture is authoritative because it is instrumental in bringing the word of God to bear upon the thought and practice of the church. In this context, God’s ‘word’ refers to God’s self-communicative presence, through which he establishes the knowledge of himself in the face of defiance and ignorance; Scripture is the creaturely means through which the Word’s activity is extended into the church (725).

The Authority of Scripture and Communication

In order to better understand the complex nature of Scripture and the various ways in which it manifests its authority, it might be helpful to recount the central elements of the use of language in communication: *locution* (the very act of speaking); *illocution* (the use of speech to perform actions); *proposition* (the act of presenting something for consideration); *per locution* (the effect that a statement has on the actions or beliefs of the hearer) (Schnabel, 2000:36). Schnabel points to the complex nature of Scripture and the significance of seeing it as speech acts in which the authority of Scripture is being manifested in various ways: Scripture contains authoritative doctrine, timeless truths and principles, and intellectual beliefs to which a response of assent is expected. However, Scripture also contains directives, and the authority of the Word of God requires categorical obedience or reflective observance. Scripture also contains “commissive speech-acts, in which God commits himself to a specific course of action in the future,” and to which the proper response is trust. Finally, Scripture contains “expressive speech-acts” to which the proper response is “to follow the invitation implicit in these texts to share and participate in their normative response to God’s glory and revelation” (Schnabel, 2000:39-40). In a more comprehensive way, it could be said that the authority of Scripture is found in the story of God and his redemption of the world, and in the capacity of the Scriptures to draw readers into this story, and in this way, to transform them.

To highlight the dynamics between the informative and performative aspects of the Scriptures as the Word of God, Kevin Vanhoozer employs the concept of

“divine discourse” (2005).² He points out that if illocutions (“what one *does* in speaking”) are the key aspects of discourse, then we can understand the Bible as the Word of God, “not simply because of the information it conveys, but also because it is the means by which God promises, commands, warns, guides, and yes, reveals.” He further states:

The word of God is God in creative, communicative and self-communicative action, doing things in and with the word written and the word made flesh. The Bible, as comprised of divinely authorized illocutions, *is* the word of God, and that it *becomes* the word of God if and when the Spirit renders it perlocutionarily efficacious. In its fullest sense the ‘Word of God’ is something that God *says*, something that God *does*, and something that God *is*. The Scripture is the word of God because it is the chosen means through which the triune God presents Christ, ministers and administers the covenant of grace, and makes all things new through the ministry of the Word in the power of the Spirit” (2005:854).

The Bible, of course, points to the ultimate source of all truth and authority, God himself, the very author of the Scriptures, the God whom we worship and to whom we give our ultimate allegiance as the supreme authority. Again, this God is known through Scripture, therefore one has to keep these two aspects together when talking about the authority of Scripture.

The Authority of Scripture and the Authority of God

As has already been pointed out, the specific way in which the authority of the Bible is manifested has long been discussed. What is the exact locus of authority? Is it the timeless principles or truths, its witness to primary events, or is it in the function it performs for its readers? This way of phrasing the question might, in fact, illustrate a very low view of Scripture, of its authority and inspiration, as N. T. Wright argues. He shows that looking for the authority in any of those places implies that,

the real place where God has revealed himself – the real locus of authority and

- 2 He argues that “divine discourse” is a better rubric to talk about the Scripture as the word of God “for several reasons: (1) It overcomes the personal/propositional dichotomy inasmuch as discourse is both a ‘saying’ and a ‘doing.’ (2) It corresponds to the biblical depiction of God as a communicative agent who does many things with words besides transmitting knowledge. (3) It better accounts for the diversity of Scripture itself, especially for the plurality of its literary forms. (4) It enriches the notion of canonical authority by insisting that the church attend not only to propositional content but to all the things God is doing communicatively in Scripture to administer his covenant. (5) It encourages us to view the Bible as a means by which we relate personally to God and commune with God” (2005:853).

revelation—is, in fact, somewhere else; somewhere else in the past in an event that once took place, or somewhere else in a timeless sphere which is not really hooked into our world at all or touches it tangentially, or somewhere in the present in ‘my own experience,’ or somewhere in the future in some great act which is yet to come (Wright, 1991:9).

This view, insists Wright, does not do justice to the narrative nature of Scripture. Someone who holds this view should re-examine their very concept of authority. Following the Bible’s own view of authority, we see that Scripture points to the authority of God himself, and thus to speak about the authority of Scripture is to speak about the authority of God. I suppose no one will dispute the truth that all authority is God’s authority, as the New Testament testifies about Jesus when he declared, after his resurrection, that “all authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth” (Mt 28:18). The remarkable thing about the authority of God, however, is that it is exercised not to control and manipulate, but is manifested in his wise, creative, and redemptive love towards the world, in his decision to judge and remake the world in Christ. The authority of God thus challenges our own authority, the authority of the world, and even the authority of the church! This is, therefore, the authority of Scripture, its purpose and goal, its shape and character – the authority “to liberate human beings, to judge and condemn evil and sin in the world in order to set people free to be fully human” (Wright, 1991:10).

The Authority of Scripture as the Authority on the True Story of the World

The Bible presents us with the covenant story of creation, the fall, and redemption. This is not only our story, but the true story of the world, and that is why the biblical story is authoritative and must be observed and given an appropriate response. It is this authoritative story within the Spirit-inspired book that should confront the world with judgment and mercy, with God’s authority. The way we do this is not on the world’s terms, because “we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Co 4:2). It is only Scripture that can equip and continuously call the church to her task in the world. It is only Scripture that can challenge us repeatedly regarding our thoughts and lives, and is able to correct and judge us, bringing new life to us (Heb 4:12). This is the authority of Scripture. It is the redemptive story of the Bible that is the authoritative story for Christians and, indeed, for the whole world – as it presents the story of Jesus as the only story that challenges all other stories. Here is how Wright captures this wonderful news of the authority of Scripture which constantly challenges us, but also gives us true hope:

In Romans 15 Paul says, “That by patience and encouragement of the scrip-

tures you might have hope'; because scripture brings God's order to God's world. And that order will forever be breaking in as a new word, recognizably in continuity with words heard from God before, but often in discontinuity even with the very traditions by which those older fresh words were preserved and transmitted. Scripture is the book that assures us that we are the people of God when, again and again, we are tempted to doubt. Scripture is the covenant book, not just in order that we can look up our pedigree in it and see where we came from (Abraham and so on), but the book through which the Spirit assures that we are his people and through which he sends us out into the world to tell the Jesus story, that is, the Israel story which has become the Jesus story which together is God's story for the world. And as we do that in the power of the Spirit, the miracle is that it rings true and people out there in the world know, in this or that fashion, that this strange story which we are telling does in fact run deeper than the world's stories. It does in fact tell them truths which they half-knew and had rather hoped to forget. It is the story which confirms the fact that God has redeemed the world in Jesus Christ. It is the story which breaks open all other world-views and, by so doing, invites men and women, young and old, to see *this* story as *their* story. In other words, as we let the Bible be the Bible, God works through us – and it – to do what he intends to do in and for the church and the world (1991:14).

To live by the authority of Scripture means to allow ourselves to be permanently shaped and moulded by the story of the Bible, especially as we are constantly tempted to think and to do as the world is and does! It is only the Scriptures that can judge and redeem our own actions and lives. That is why we should allow Scripture to teach us, to guide us, to bring us back to the biblical view of the purpose and meaning of life. That is why the issue of the authority of Scripture is so important. It is only the Bible that shows the true nature of God and his plans for the world; it is only the Bible that reveals the true authority of the cross, and challenges the world's authority and power of domination and control. It is only the Bible that reveals the true God who can redeem the world. That is why we have to read and tell the world the true story of God. There is no other way for the world to be redeemed than by hearing the true story of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer! Scripture offers the only redemptive story which exists. That is why Scripture has authority – it is the only book which reveals the story of the redemption of the world, a story that has power on its own terms as the only true story of God for the world. We have to tell this story again and again, and let its power work – as it reveals a God who is involved in the world and wants to save it. This is the only authoritative, true story of the world, and that is why Scripture is given ultimate authority.

The church needs to continually resist the temptations and the stories of the world by reading afresh the story and the message of Scripture, and by living a life under the Bible's authority. We should allow the Scriptures to speak to us, to

challenge our own customary readings of specific passages; we should allow it to judge our life in totality, to shape and reshape our thinking and actions. This is how the Bible works out its authority. Wright is again to the point:

God's own authority, exercised not to give true information about wholeness but to give wholeness itself, by judging and remaking the thoughts and intentions, the imaginations and rememberings, of men, women and children. There are worlds to be discovered here of which a good deal of the church remains sadly ignorant. The Bible is the book of personal renewal, the book of tears and laughter, the book through which God resonates with our pain and joy, and enables us to resonate with his pain and joy. This is the really powerful authority of the Bible, to be distinguished from the merely manipulative or the crassly confrontational 'use' of scripture (1991:19).

Scripture, Interpretation, and the Life of the Church

In 2 Timothy 3:16-17, a very clear reason as to why Scripture is authoritative is presented: because it is inspired by God, thus being the work of God, or something that God has done through human agency. As such, it is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the person of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." G. E. Ladd sums up the matter by writing that the Bible is "the Word of God given in human words." There are several important implications of this reality. As the "Word of God," the Bible has eternal relevance as it contains the revelation of the will of God for the world, for human beings, for the meaning of life, for all generations. When we study it, we do so as if listening to a Word of God for humankind. But because it is given in "human words," this means that it can be understood by us, but also that it is historically conditioned and we need the work of interpretation.

There is a very clear sense in which the church represents a sphere of biblical authority as Scripture shapes and sustains the community. Thus, it is very important to think of the authority of Scripture not simply in formal terms, but also in relation to its use and influence in the life of Christian communities, in its "lawfulness with which it may command and elicit patterns of thought and action on the part of the church" (Webster, 2005:726). It is in this respect that the interpretation of the Scriptures is not done simply to derive doctrines and principles, but also to determine a certain way of life. John Webster captures this important truth very well:

The act of interpreting an authoritative text involves the adoption of specific attitudes and virtues, as well as the performance of certain operations, as appropriate to the character of the text and its authoritative claim. Thus, for

example, to interpret an authoritative text is not simply to be an agent acting upon a passive text that we summon before our minds and question; nor is it to handle the text as if it were an inert historical artefact. Because the text has authority, it makes certain claims upon the reader, claims to which the reader must attend if an appropriate response is to be made to the text. An appropriate response will be one of subordination, deference, or compliance as one stands beneath the claim that the text represents. Authority quickens action, directing it in ways that are fitting to the truth that is declared. The authority of Scripture thus includes its capacity to stimulate and direct interpretative action. Interpretative action is, however, rarely an end in itself; it is engaged in order to enable other kinds of action and judgment – intellectual, moral, political. In this way, therefore, the authority of scripture is formative for the life of the Christian community in which it presents the divine claim (2005:727).

It could be said that the articulation of the formal criteria for biblical authority are, in many instances, in tension with the actual practices of those affirming the authority (Brueggemann, 2005:3). What is the benefit of a firm and clear affirmation of the authority of Scripture for a particular community if that authority is not “translated” into its life and practices? However, another question is also valid: How can one live out the authority of the text without first knowing and understanding the authority? A way out of this either/or type of reasoning, Brueggemann suggests, is to think of the question of the authority of the Scriptures in terms of *authorization*, and so the question becomes, “how, in a pluralist world like ours, concrete communities can be authorized to live, act, and hope in a manner that may at times oppose the accepted norm. What will provide energy, courage, and legitimacy for action against the destructive tendencies embedded within our civilization?” (Brueggemann, 2005:6,8).

The authority of Scripture for believers manifests itself not simply in its rules, advice and guidance, but also in the courage it requires to live in obedience to the text and to order our lives in opposition to the values of the dominant world system and in accordance with the central biblical values of mercy, justice, and peace. There is also the promise that “when responded to in trust and love by us, the revelatory, covenant-making act that God performs in and through Scripture can confidently be believed to be sufficient for salvation and for truthful, faithful discipleship of Christ” (Ward, 2005:730). It is because of the authority of the Scriptures that believers have the power and ability to look beyond the present reality of the world and see the new world of God, the new creation that is beginning to take place, and live according to this new reality. Indeed, it is in the community of faith that the authority of the Bible is manifested. Brueggemann concludes, “The book can be received and its authority evidenced only in communities of obedience and praise which act with power, courage, freedom, and energy towards a new world envisioned, imagined, and promised in this text” (2005:19).

Scripture, Jesus and “The Word of God”

Scripture contains the revelation of God as does the person of Jesus Christ, the incarnate “Word of God.” Therefore, there is a close and special relationship between the Scriptures and Jesus Christ. Jesus, as the Word of God, cannot be known and understood apart from the Scriptures, so it could be said that Scripture is the essential witness to Jesus Christ. Scripture ultimately points to Jesus Christ. Moreover, Scripture is a necessary and fitting witness to God’s active intervention in history and to the various responses people gave to Him. Scripture is, therefore, crucial since it is our only means of hearing the Word of God (Barr, 1973:18-22). It is well known how Karl Barth expressed the threefold form of the Word of God: Jesus, the revealed Word of God, Scripture, the written Word of God, and the church’s proclamation, the preached Word of God (Barth, 1956). Indeed, in the New Testament, there are clear references to and connections between the Word of God, the words of Jesus, the gospel, and Jesus as the Word of God. John 1:1-4 is one of the clearest connections of the identity of Jesus with the Word of God as well as between the words of Jesus and the Word of God. In Luke 18:11 and in 1 Th 2:13, for example, the word of God refers to both the words of Jesus and the apostolic proclamation about Jesus: “And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe” (1 Th 2:13). It is important to remark, however, that while Jesus became the definitive way for God to speak to humankind (Heb 1:1-2), and Jesus is clearly identified with the Word of God (Jn 1:1-2), it is also true that the words of Scripture are identified with the word of God (2 Ti 3:16-17; 2 Pe 1:19-21; 3:16-17).

Scripture and Obedience

The Hebrew expression *shema beqol* translated most often as “obey” literally means “hear the voice”, but it connotes these three characteristics: attending to, understanding, and acting on the utterance. Therefore, it is something like “hear-and-obey.” Similarly, the corresponding New Testament word, *hypakouo* (“hear”) means “hear *under*”, that is, “listen from a subordinate position in which compliance with what is said is expected and intended” (Packer, 2000:680). It is thus specific to the understanding of the New Testament that “obedience” means “attentive and hearty compliance with the directives of someone with acknowledged authority” (Packer, 2000:680). Scripture has authority because of its source in God, and the

attention falls not on the human instruments, but on the divine source of the message which is invested with authority by a trustworthy and faithful God. Whatever God says he does, whatever he intends, he accomplishes, and so can be trusted. So, in line with the New Testament understanding of “hearing” and “obeying”, the authority of God’s word means that those who hear the Scriptures are expected to respond with trust, obedience and faith. To do otherwise is to doubt and reject, not simply the Scriptures, but the very God who speaks in and through them. The authority of God’s word commands full obedience and faith as God is at work in and through it.³

The Transformative Power of Scripture as the “Living and Active” Word of God

What about the authority of Scripture as something that addresses us or, even better, as that through which God addresses us? This is indeed an important aspect of the authority of the Scriptures and the reason why Christians read their Bibles regularly. As the text “speaks” to us – either to comfort and give hope, or to confront and challenge – it produces a change in us. When we read the Scriptures, something *happens* with and in us which produces a difference in our lives. It takes hold of us as it reveals the true nature of God and the true nature of humankind. This is a very often neglected aspect of the authority of the Scriptures, that it has the power to challenge and change us. We often speak about “interpreting” the Bible, but forget that the Bible also interprets us, that the word of God is living and active. To illustrate this aspect of what happens when a Christian reads the Bible, John Barton uses the metaphor of the *icon* as it is used in the Eastern Orthodox tradition – not simply as an aid to worship, but as a window into the presence of God. He shows how important perspective is. Barton (150) explains:

Whereas in the normal Western art perspective works with lines converging into the distance and meeting at an imaginary point *behind* the picture, in Orthodox icons the perspective is reversed, and the lines of the picture converge on a point *in front* of the picture, that is, on the person looking at the

3 See, for example, B. M. Fanning (2000:852), who reminds us that because “the gospel is from God, it is powerful and effective as an extension of [God’s] saving work in the world (Ro 1:16; 1 Co 1:18; 1 Th 2:13). “The word of God is living and active” not in and of itself, but because God is at work through it (Heb 4:12-13).

icon. The worshiper does not enter into and go behind the icon, but the icon comes forward to encounter the worshiper. ...when believers allow the Bible to become the vehicle for God's revelation of himself, it is as if the Bible has ceased to be the object being studied and become the subject which is inquiring into them.

In the last part of this article, I would like, with a brief reference to Heb 4:12-13, to illustrate this significant aspect of the authority of Scripture, i.e. its transformative power to act upon its readers. Heb 4:12-13 reads,

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to his eyes.

This is a very important verse which testifies to the power of the Word of God in and over our lives. Its supreme authority is manifested by its ability to expose even the most hidden thoughts and attitudes of the human heart. Indeed, as the prophets of Israel were well aware of long ago, the Word of God does produce fruit and it does accomplish its purpose: "My word that goes out from my mouth will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Is 55:11).

The aforementioned verse is placed in a larger context (Heb 3:7-4:13) that addresses the question of the seriousness and relevance of the Word of God for the lives of individual believers and Christian communities. For the author of Hebrews, the Old Testament is Scripture through which God speaks and is present today. Through a series of scriptural quotations, he is warning the Christians that they should hear and obey the Word of God, that they should strive to enter God's rest and thus avoid the consequences of their ancestors' disobedience and rebelliousness: "Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, 'Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion... Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, that no one fall by the same sort of disobedience.'" (3:7, 8a, 15; 4:11). The entire context makes it clear that to hear the word of God is not merely a formal, intellectual affirmation, but, as the word "*strive*" indicates, it is an "intense concentration of energy necessary to reach a desired goal, it demands everything we have got... a sincere and genuine commitment" (Brown, 1982:90-91). Furthermore, in vv. 12-13, the author seems to go even deeper into his argument showing the uselessness of a mere outward acceptance of and obedience to the Scriptures. The Word of God is "living" and "active", and it searches the deepest thoughts and innermost motivations of those who read it. Indeed, the Word of God is not simply a static letter, "it is not dead speech expressed in empty words; on the contrary it has within itself the dynamism and power associated with life" (Montefiore, 1964:88). The Word of God is performative, "it possesses

the power to effect its own utterance” (Lane, 1991:103); it confronts Christians with the ultimate truth of God’s reality, and scrutinizes the innermost, deepest intentions and motivations of the heart. We are totally exposed to God’s word and there is an utter nakedness before God’s presence as nothing escapes his scrutiny: “No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to his eyes” (v. 13). Exposure to the Scriptures is exposure to God himself.

The Word of God is presented as “alive” and “active” as it addresses us in a very vital and relevant way.⁴ Its power as a “*two-edged sword*” is manifested through the ability to pierce, to enter into the most intimate places of the human being. Indeed, by pointing to the capacity of the Word of God to “penetrate” the most closed off of spaces and to split the most subtle partitions like those of “soul and spirit”, or “joints and marrow,” the author wants to illustrate the spiritual power of the Word of God to affect the entire human nature, making divisions and distinctions that are impossible for human beings to make (Bauchanan, 1972:75). One interesting aspect is the capacity of the Word of God to “judge” human thoughts and hearts. It is customary to think of ourselves as those who “interpret”, or discern, the Word of God for the church, but we very often forget the power and ability of the Word to judge us, to “diagnose the condition of the human heart” (Bruce, 1978:80). This is a very strong reference to the fact that we must place ourselves under the authority and power of the Scriptures.⁵

The context of these verses in Hebrews references the rebelliousness and disobedience of the people of Israel, highlighting the consequences of their misdeeds. Thus these two verses are also a reference to the judging function of the Word of God, of the *two-edged sword*, reminding believers that they will have to face the consequences of their unbelief, disobedience or “hardening” of their hearts.⁶ This is also a warning against the power of self-deception! We should not make ourselves believe in the authority of God’s word, when, in fact, our life is in contradiction to that word! To live under the authority of the Word of God is to allow our minds, hearts, thoughts, actions, principles, indeed all of our lives to be conformed to the will of God, as expressed in the life of Jesus Christ and recorded in the Scriptures.

- 4 See Harold W. Attridge (1989:78) who stated that the quality of the Word of God being “alive” is not because “it brings life in some esoteric or metaphysical sense, but because it is full of vital relevance. It is meaningfully addressed to the author’s own generation, even if spoken long ago.”
- 5 For various aspects of such emphases, see also Donald Guthrie (1983:116-119); G. H. Lang (1951:82-83); Andrew Murray (1896:159-162); William R. Newell (1948:135-140); James Moffatt (1924:54-58).
- 6 See, for example, John Brown (1961:216-218).

Conclusion

This article is an attempt to highlight the need for a continuous preoccupation with promoting the centrality and authority of Scripture for the life of the church. If we want the church to have any significant impact on contemporary culture and society, it needs to rediscover the authority and power of the Scriptures to affect and change lives. Whatever view one holds regarding the different aspects of the authority of Scripture, it is never simply an intellectual and theoretical question. As argued in this article, to acknowledge the authority of Scripture means also to live in obedience to God and under his authority. Thus, the authority of Scripture for believers manifests itself in the courage to live in obedience to the text which has the power to constantly challenge and order our lives in conformity with the central biblical values.

Our study has enabled us to conclude that we should never try to limit, to domesticate, or alleviate the power and authority of Scripture to address us afresh in every generation. Because the Word of God is “living and active,” it maintains the power to challenge some of the very dogmatic doctrinal formulations that can be found in church as well as the ultra-rational, historicist, and rigid formulations of the academy. We should allow the living Word of God to constantly address and challenge our own formulations and interpretations of the text. The power and authority of Scripture repeatedly challenges our personal, ecclesial and/or political agendas! The living Word of God cannot be reduced or domesticated to our own advantages. On the contrary, because Scripture has the ultimate authority, it puts us under the judgment of God and gives us faith to live in faithful obedience to the Word who became flesh and lived among us. It gives us a foundation and a model for a new, authentic, and redeemed way to live in the world.

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