

Biblical Authority and the Episcopal Church

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St. Mark's Episcopal Church

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"The Anglican Communion has always declared that its supreme authority is scripture."

The Windsor Report (2004)

Many critics of the Episcopal Church argue that we have turned away from, or that we deny, biblical authority. In our church's General convention in 2003 Bishop Ackerman of Quincy, Illinois proposed a Resolution, B001. In the words of the resolution, " The resolution: re-affirms Holy Scripture as the foundation of authority in our Church."

"Resolved, the House of \_\_\_\_\_ concurring, That this 74th General Convention affirms that "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation," as set forth in Article VI of the Articles of Religion established by the General Convention on September 12, 1801"

Defeated 84 to 66, with 8 abstaining. Our bishops voted against it.

How can you reject such a seemingly uncontroversial claim? On the other hand, why even bring something up as a resolution when it's been part of our founding documents from the beginning? In all due respect, Bishop Ackerman's move was something of a "stunt." It was bound to be a win-win for the side of conservatives in the current struggles over sexuality in the church. If we affirmed this resolution, we would seem to have to reject recent developments in the church that conservatives feel go against scripture. If we rejected it, as we did, conservatives could gloat that our leadership is so far gone that they can't even agree on the authority of the Bible! Incidentally, there was a similar move on our vestry led by our rector at that time. St. Mark's vestry approved a resolution that the Bible is the word of God.

Those who have broken with the Episcopal Church and have tried to realign with other overseas churches claim that the reason is not sexuality, which might seem to be an overreaction. Rather, they claim that it's about *the authority of scripture* and Biblical authority.

What is meant by "biblical authority?" Authority has a number of meanings: it is an answer to the question, "Who's in charge here?" In work situations, authority is usually clearly specified, in terms of who is the boss and who are the subordinates. At St. Mark's, the Bishop has authority, delegated to his clergy; also, the vestry has authority that it gets from the congregation. If conflicts or disagreements arise within such organizations, we usually know who is in charge and who gets to have the final say.

To say the Bible has authority in the church is to say that in some way it regulates us, that all of our doctrines and practices need to be governed by it, but more than that. The authoritative Bible is fulfilling its role when it motivates, inspires, rebukes, and encourages us. It shapes the way we think about God and the way we think about God's church.

"The Bible has always been at the centre of Anglican belief and life, embodied and exemplified by the fact that the reading and singing of scripture has always been at the centre of Anglican worship."

The Windsor Report (2004)

Let's look at what the Episcopal Church says about the authority and the role of the Bible in the life of the church. We will look at several places: 1. The Catechism, 2. Holy Eucharist, 3. The Ordination Service, and 4. The Articles of Religion. All of them affirm the central role that the Bible has in our worship, doctrine, and practice as Episcopalians.

#### 1. The Catechism

"Q. Why do we call the Holy Scriptures the Word of God?  
A. We call them the Word of God because God inspired their human authors and because God still speaks to us through the Bible.

Q. How do we understand the meaning of the Bible?

A. We understand the meaning of the Bible by the help of the Holy Spirit, who guides the Church in the true interpretation of the Scriptures."

## 2. The Holy Eucharist

In our weekly celebration of the Eucharist, what do we say about the Bible?

a. We *read* the Bible, a lot: all services, from Morning and Evening Prayer through the services for Holy Matrimony and for funerals, must have readings from scripture, typically including the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Psalms and Gospels.

b. We quote Scripture in the words of Institution at the Eucharist (362-3)

c. We claim that "On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures."

d. We sometimes use this collect: "Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ."

## 3. The Ordination of Deacons, Priests, and bishops

All have the same declaration by the person being ordained that he or she believes in the Bible. For example, in the ordination of the priest, the priest declares:

"I am willing and ready to do so; and I solemnly declare that I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation; and I do solemnly engage to conform to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of The Episcopal Church."

The bishop also asks "Will you be faithful in prayer, and in the reading and study of the Holy Scriptures?," to which the priest answers "I will."

Later in the service, "The Bishop then gives a Bible to the newly ordained, saying, Receive this Bible as a sign of the authority given you to preach the Word of God and to administer his holy Sacraments. Do not forget the trust committed to you as a priest of the Church of God.

4. In the Articles of Religion, adopted by the Episcopal Church in 1801 and taken from the English version of 1571 and 1662, we read: "Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation. Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. In the name of the Holy Scripture we do understand those canonical Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church."

What do we mean by Biblical Authority?

Bishop N. T. Wright of Durham, England, is one of the leaders of Anglican evangelicalism and of the evangelical movement outside of Anglicanism. Bishop Wright has said some interesting things about Biblical authority. In his 1989 Laing Lecture, Bishop Wright says some interesting things ([http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright\\_Bible\\_Authoritative.htm](http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Bible_Authoritative.htm)). I'd like us to spend some time in groups responding to the following statements:

I. "When people in the church talk about authority they are very often talking about *controlling* people or situations. They want to make sure that everything is regulated properly, that the church does not go off the rails doctrinally or ethically, that correct ideas and practices are upheld and transmitted to the next generation. 'Authority' is the place where we go to find out the correct answers to key questions such as these. This notion, however, runs into all kinds of problems when we apply it to the Bible. Is that really what the Bible is for? Is it there to control the church? Is it there simply to look up the correct answers to questions that we, for some reason, already know? As we read the Bible we discover that the answer to these questions seems in fact to be 'no'. Most of

the Bible does not consist of rules and regulations—lists of commands to be obeyed. Nor does it consist of creeds—lists of things to be believed.”

**How have Christians used the Bible to control people and situations? What is right, and wrong, with doing so?**

II. “The question of biblical authority, of how there can be such a thing as an authoritative Bible, is not, then, as simple as it might look. In order to raise it at all, we have to appreciate that it is a sub-question of some much more general questions.

(1) How can *any* text function as authoritative? Once one gets away from the idea of a rule book such as might function as authoritative in, say, a golf club, this question gets progressively harder.

(2) How can any *ancient* text function as authoritative? If you were a Jew, wanting to obey the Torah (or, perhaps, obey the Talmud) you would find that there were all sorts of difficult questions about how a text, written so many years ago, can function as authoritative today. Actually, it is easier with the Talmud than with the Bible because the Talmud is designed very specifically to be a rule book for human beings engaged in life in a particular sort of community. But much of what we call the Bible—the Old and New Testaments—is not a rule book; it is narrative. That raises a further question:

(3) How can an ancient *narrative* text be authoritative? How, for instance, can the book of Judges, or the book of Acts, be authoritative? It is one thing to go to your commanding officer first thing in the morning and have a string of commands barked at you. But what would you do if, instead, he began ‘Once upon a time . . .’?”

**What do you think the problems are when you think of an ancient, narrative text as being authoritative for us today?**

3. “I have argued that the notion of the ‘authority of scripture’ is a shorthand expression for God’s authority, exercised somehow through scripture; that scripture must be allowed to be itself in exercising its authority, and not be turned into something else which might fit better into what the church, or the world, might have thought its ‘authority’ should look like; that it is therefore the

meaning of 'authority' itself, not that of scripture, that is the unknown in the equation, and that when this unknown is discovered it challenges head on the various notions and practices of authority endemic in the world and, alas, in the church also. ... All of this has been designed as a plea to the church to let the Bible be the Bible, and so to let God be God—and so to enable the people of God to be the people of God, his special people, living under his authority, bringing his light to his world. The Bible is not an end in itself. It is there so that, by its proper use, the creator may be glorified and the creation may be healed. It is our task to be the people through whom this extraordinary vision comes to pass. We are thus entrusted with a privilege too great for casual handling, too vital to remain a mere matter of debate."

**In a recent book, Wright points out that Jesus didn't say, "All authority in heaven and earth is given to the books you are going to write," but "All authority in heaven and earth is given to me."**

**How does it change our thinking if we move from thinking that the Bible is our authority to God is our authority." Is it somehow more comfortable to think of a written book as our authority rather than the spirit of God?**