

To What Authority Must Church Officers Submit?

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JESUS, AFTER CALLING PETER to shepherd the sheep of his pasture, explains the kind of death awaiting Peter at the end of his ministry. Not metaphor, but reality—Peter will be crucified. Perhaps out of fear or jealousy Peter attempts to lay the charge on someone else. Seeing John the beloved disciple, he asks Jesus, “What about him, Lord?” And Jesus answers, “*If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me*” (John 21:22, NASB). From the beginning of the New Testament church, questions regarding authority have been important to discipleship. Jesus clearly demands our obedience, but what about obedience to Scripture? Whom or what must the Christian obey? What does submission look like? What is its foundation? This paper will explore obedience to Scripture versus obedience to Jesus Christ for the Presbyterian elder.

For too many in the postmodern church, Jesus Christ is held up as the singular authority minus much of Scripture. But when Jesus called Peter to obedience, was Scripture divorced from that demand? A proper understanding of the Bible, its authority, and how that fits with obedience to Christ and his authority is necessary.

The first question to ask is “What is the Bible?” The Westminster Confession (WC) states:

The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself). The author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the word of God.

Among the Scripture references given for this section of the WC is 2 Timothy 3:16. The text is extremely clear: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.” New Testament Greek scholar William D. Mounce in his *Word Biblical Commentary: Pastoral Epistles* makes the point that both the pronouncement of the inspiration of Scripture and its use work together in this passage. He writes, “. . . utility of Scripture flows out of its inspiration. The entirety of Scripture comes from the mouth of God. To read it is to hear him speak. It is therefore true, and it can therefore be trusted.”

The WC goes on to insist that the believer’s ultimate understanding of Scripture as “infallible truth” with “divine authority” occurs because of the work of the Holy Spirit “bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.” Additionally,

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is

either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequences may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at anytime is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.

Other confessions in the *Book of Confessions (BOC)* speak to what the Bible is and to its authority. Questions and Answers 39 and 40 of the Shorter Catechism explain the duty of humanity to God as “obedience to his revealed will.” And the rule that God first revealed for humanity’s obedience is the moral law, which “is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments.”

The Second Helvetic Confession begins with this:

We believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of men. For God himself spoke to the fathers, prophets, apostles, and still speaks through the Holy Scriptures.

And in this Holy Scripture, the universal Church of Christ has the most complete exposition of all that pertains to a saving faith, and also to the framing of a life acceptable to God; and in this respect it is expressly commanded by God that nothing be either added to or taken from the same.

Some have suggested that with the inclusion of the Confession of 1967 in the *BOC* the authority of Scripture is lost and now simply rests on Jesus Christ as God’s final revelation. But this is not true for several reasons. The text at the beginning of this confession states, “Confessions and declarations are subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him.” Later, under the subtitle “The Bible,” it states:

The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the Word of God written. The Scriptures are not a witness among others, but the witness without parallel. The Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as prophetic and apostolic testimony in which it hears the Word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated.

To receive and obey the Bible as the written word of God, no matter what else may be said, defines the Bible as the Word of God. And indeed one must understand the Confession of 1967

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by applying all of the other confessions in the PCUSA's *BOC* to its text. Adding one confession to the book does not correct the others; there is no hierarchy of confessions. It is not possible to choose the authority of Christ over the authority of Scripture, and the reason is both biblical and confessional. The reason is lodged in the person of Jesus Christ.

So, who is Jesus Christ? According to the confessions, Jesus is God. The Nicene Creed states he is "the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God . . ." According to the Bible, Jesus Christ is God. In Colossians the believer reads that Jesus, "the image of the invisible God," created all things, holds all things together and all things were created for him" (Colossians 1:15-17). Also, "For in him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form" (Colossians 2:9).

The prologue to the Gospel of John is plain: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1&14). These two verses are further enforced by verse 18, "No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, he has explained him."

Having established the divinity of Jesus, the next step is to connect him to his word, the Holy Scriptures. This includes a clarification of what it means to say that Jesus Christ is the one sufficient revelation of God. Since the Helvetic Confession states that the

Scriptures have sufficient authority of themselves, do these two sufficient entities cancel each other out? Never!

The Bible's authority is sufficient because it is the word of God, belonging to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, not certain parts of the word, not a word within the texts, but all of Scripture is the word of God. Scripture is the written words of Christ. To defame, deny, or even ignore any part of Scripture is to defame, deny, or ignore the sufficiency of Christ. For as long as the Church embraces the Nicene Creed and the Apostle's Creed, she must also embrace both the authority of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible.

The Church's understanding that the authority of the word resides in the authority of Christ can be applied to one of the more pressing issues in the PC(USA). That is the question of the ordination of self-affirming homosexuals. Here some have suggested that G-1.0100b in the *Book of Order* trumps G-6.0106b. That is, Christ "exercising his authority" in the calling of men and women to ministry overrides the requirement that those called to office lead "a life in obedience to Scripture" which includes living "either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman" or living in "chastity in singleness."

The authority of Jesus Christ, the authority of the Bible, they are the same. Jesus Christ with his word, the Holy Scriptures, demands obedience. None may look past the words of Christ's call to obedience unto death, which includes laying aside anything the Scripture calls sin. To clasp anything that the word of God calls sin is to hear, as Peter did, the words of Jesus, "What is that to you? You follow me."

Notes on "Authority"

1. All Bible passages are from the *New American Standard Bible*, Reference Edition, (Foundation Publications, Inc.).

2. PC(USA), *Book of Confessions 2007*, 6.004. Italics mine.

3. William D. Mounce, *Word Biblical Commentary: Pastoral Epistles*, general eds., Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, New Testament ed. Ralph P. Martin, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000) 570.

4. *Book of Confessions*, 6.006a.

5. *Ibid.*, 7.040-7.041.

6. *Ibid.*, 5.001-5.002.

7. *Ibid.*, 9.03. d

8. *Ibid.*, 9.27.

9. Although some translations interpret "begotten God" as "begotten Son," the most ancient manuscripts assume the former. "There is a question as to whether the original reading here is . . . (*monogenēs huios*, one-of-a-kind Son) or . . . (*monogenēs Theos*, one-of-a kind [Son, himself] God). . . . The preponderance of the evidence now leans in the direction of the latter reading." (Andreas J. Köstenberger, "Additional Note," *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: John*, Robert Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein, eds., [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004], 50.) See also William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: The Gospel of John*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953), 90.

10. PC(USA), *Book of Order 2009/2011*, G-6.0100b and -6.0106b.