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Biblical Authority and the Scientific Enterprise

by Gordon J. Spykman



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The following was delivered as a speech to a ministers' conference held at Dordt on April 20 and 21, 1976.

Some issues come and go. Others are always with us. Among those issues which are ever present, none is more central and crucial than the question of authority. No thinking person can escape it. Every community of Christian scholarship is obliged again and again to confess where it seeks the authoritative basis for all its studies, and then to translate that confession into meaningful theoretical insights. Those who anchor their confessional reference-points deeply in the Scriptures demonstrate their academic discipleship most profoundly by facing up persistently and eagerly to the question, How is the authority of Scripture to shape our scientific pursuits? The following reflections are offered as an invitation to re-think communally the relationship of Biblical authority to our scientific endeavors in the hope of thereby fostering a better understanding of our Christian academic calling in the various disciplines. I propose to discuss this basic theme under the following

four headings:

- I. Biblical Authority and Scientific Authority.
- II. The Role of Scientific Findings in Biblical Interpretation.
- III. The Normativity of General Revelation for Science.
- IV. The Self-Interpreting Character of Scripture.

Scientific Authority

First of all, I want to explore how Biblical authority relates to the question of "scientific authority." We must therefore consider the relationship between Biblical authority and scientific authority. When the question is put in these terms, we have a mis-match on our hands. Biblical authority? Yes. That, I take it, is our confession. But what about scientific authority, the authority of science? That is something else again. In our western world some pretty extravagant claims are

often made for the authority of science, the scientific method, and its technological achievements. In the popular mind, if it can be said of a new article that it is "scientifically tested and approved," it just has to be a winner. There is evidence that in the past couple of decades the American government has come increasingly under the control of so-called "scientific experts." Once theology reigned as "queen of the sciences." Nowadays other sciences threaten to ascend this throne.

Those who take the Scripture seriously, however, may never indulge in such idolatry. No science, whether biology, or geology, or theology, can hold a candle to the authority of Scripture. Scripture and science are simply not in the same league. Scripture comes from God's side, science is from our side. Scripture is Wort, science is Antwort. Scripture is divine revelation; science is one manifestation of human response to revelation. We may therefore never seek to play Biblical authority and scientific authority off against each other. They simply are not comparable. In fact, we must be cautious in ascribing "authority" to science at all. We may indeed speak of scientific "discoveries," "findings," "evidences," "knowledge," "research," etc. But science itself is never per se authoritative. It carries no intrinsic, independent, automatic authority—any more than a given governmental edict or newspaper editorial or social manifesto does. The only claim of science to authority lies in the faithfulness of its response to revelation, in the persuasive power of its obedient insights into the meaning of our life in the creation. Whatever authority any human agency exercises within the Christian community depends upon how authentically it opens up meaningful insights into the structures and functions of created reality. In our Christian scholarship this obligates us all to engage in our theoretical work "directed and illumined by the Word of God." Only a Biblically faithful science can speak with authority among us, and that only in the measure that it operates in faith-

fulness to Scripture. A disobedient science can make no such claim to authority.

This is not a "put down" for science. I take it that what I have said for science holds for life as a whole. This is the meaning of the Reformational confession of sola fide—by faith alone we can speak with a responding kind of authority. Even our confessions have no independent, intrinsic authority. Their authority too is derived, secondary, appellative, dependent upon their being faithful restatements of the Biblical message. Similarly, in its own unique way, the sciences exercise a subservient kind of authority, that is, an authority which stands under and is dependent upon the authority of Scripture. Let me put it this way: Scripture has Authority (with a capital A); Christian science has authority (with a small a). Thus, scientists take their place alongside other "authorities" within the Christian community—all under the Authority of God's Word, as is the case, for example, with parents in the home, preachers in the church, teachers in the school, and magistrates in civil government. All of these office-holders exercise a subservient kind of authority (if you will, a subservient kind of sovereignty, stewardship, responsibility) in their respective spheres of activity. So it is with scientists too—and all under the supreme Authority of the Word.

This view finds support in a recent report on Biblical authority adopted by the Christian Reformed Church: "The church must seek to develop a Christian community within which all scholarly work is carried on in faithfulness to the authoritative Scriptures." Accordingly, "the church must encourage its members to pursue their scientific work in loyalty to the authoritative Scriptures," urging its scholars "to act, speak, and write in such a way as to demonstrate that their scholarship is being carried on in faithfulness to the authority of Scripture."¹

The position here taken quite clearly contradicts the triumphalistic claims often made in the past for the so-called "assured

results of the scientific method." It accents the servant-role of the various sciences. Where Christ is King and His Word the supreme authority, there is no room for scientific "queens." But perhaps the day of scientific ultra-certainty is past, temporarily at least. At any rate, it strikes me that colleagues in the "hard sciences" are often guilty nowadays of erring on the other side, namely, of claiming too little for what they are doing. They seem to me to reduce their work to constructing "models" for which they claim no more than a certain predictability value, and that only for the time being. They therefore appear overly reticent about advancing, even tentatively, any truth-claims for their findings. Rejecting notions of the Authority of science, and quite rightly so, many of my good Christian colleagues in the "hard" and "soft sciences" appear to me also to disavow even the legitimate claim to authority which comes with faithful scientific insights into the nature of created reality, thus fostering a spirit of relativism and skepticism. Any scientific enterprise worth its salt must lend a helping hand to those in the Christian community who are trying to account for the data of their daily life-experience in the light of Scripture. This is its office, its task, its authority, its service. Failing in this, we as Christian scientists forfeit our right-of-existence and reason-for-existence and no longer deserve the leadership roles entrusted to our care.

Science and Biblical Interpretation

This way of viewing Biblical Authority and scientific authority clearly involves the rejection of any idea of some scientific canon of interpretation (whether it comes from anthropology, archeology, hermeneutics, biology, or any other science) standing above the Biblical Canon for Christian learning and living. In so doing it reflects the Reformation heritage which refused to allow the church, or Christian tradition, or the ecumenical creeds, or

spiritual experience, or anything else, no matter how holy or sacred, to stand in judgment upon the Scriptures. Sola scriptura is a watershed confession of Reformed orthodoxy: "by Scripture alone" all things are to be judged, including science. The modern mind has reversed this stand, judging Scripture by the pretended autonomy of human reason. Perhaps the clearest example of this is to be found in classic liberalism, which, in viewing the world as a closed system of natural cause-and-effect relationship, repudiated the authority of the Biblical message and reduced it to a religious anthology.

We must therefore be on guard against the ever-present tendency to allow the sciences, or scientific methods, or scientific theories to impose upon Scripture an interpretation of its message not in harmony with its own clearly stated intent and purpose, or to ascribe to it authority at variance with the nature of its own claim to redemptive authority, or to reduce the extent of its authority to some aspects or areas of life in contradiction with its own claim to all-embracing authority.

If one asserts, for example, that science makes it impossible to believe any longer that there was historically an original man and woman who were ancestors of the human race, then the principle that Scripture is its own interpreter is no longer being maintained.²

We may not allow the Biblical message to be made dependent upon scientific findings. Nor may we allow scientific findings to dictate our view of Biblical authority or to control our interpretation of its message or to determine what is believable and what is not believable in the Biblical narratives. The sciences have a limited and subservient role to play in the life of God's people.

Therefore the Christian community senses intuitively the anti-Biblical thrust of modern evolutionism. For evolutionism

dictates a view of reality, and exercises a tyrannizing control over the teachings of Scripture, and pre-determines what is believable and unbelievable about human life in such a way as to prejudice people against Scripture's own claim to authority and to undercut the Biblical view of God, man, and the world. In it, all reality is reduced to raw process. It represents life as the product of pure functionalism. It allows no room for the Biblical view of the creation as "cosmos." It assumes a strictly phenomenological approach to reality. In so doing, it defies the authority of Scripture to speak meaningfully to the nature of the world in which we live. It rejects every notion of creation ordinances. Whatever order and structure there may be is viewed pervasively as the product of an almost infinite series of arbitrary functional interactions. Function defines structure, rather than divinely ordained tasks and structures defining function. Science can then be defined only as "whatever scientists do," rather than as theoretical study of the various aspects of created reality arranged into academic disciplines which engage in scholarly inquiries into the various structures and functions of created reality. Evolutionism seems to me to project a world-and-life view wholly at odds with that of Scripture, and to imply a view of science quite contrary to a Reformed perspective, despite the aura of spirituality and pretense to piety with which its "gospel" is sometimes shrouded.

A Reformed view of Biblical authority, therefore, cannot tolerate a view of Genesis which permits or compels one to treat its narratives merely as religious symbols and myths, or as a "teaching model." Scientific views which make it impossible for one to accept as historical reality the events therein recorded, even while allowing for a measure of figurative recording, stand guilty of dictating an interpretation of Scripture which undercuts its authority by violating the principle that Scripture is basically its own interpreter. The Bible presupposes throughout that what we have in Genesis is a basic core of

historically real events which constitute the prologue to the entire Biblical message, selectively presented, and redemptively—kerygmatically—confessionally, recorded, that is, events together with their revelational meaning. No scientist among us may advocate theories which call the basic historical reality of those Genesis narratives into question—and no theologian either, as, for example, sometimes happens with an appeal to rabbinic interpretation. For there is no evidence that the rabbis ever raised doubts on this point.

As a "test case," let me put it in the following quite concrete and positive form. Biblical revelation revolves around three decisive focal points: creation, fall, and redemption. Any view of Genesis which cannot honor this historical-redemptive sequence of events in Biblical revelation must assume the burden of proof in convincing the Christian community of its confessional and scientific orthodoxy.

Normativity of General Revelation

We may not rest content, however, with cautioning academicians against un-Biblical science. We must also affirm the scientific enterprise, rightly understood, as a legitimate Christian calling. We must even recognize that science has made some important contributions to a better understanding of Scripture, e.g., archeology. As Christian scientists go about their work in submission to the authority of the Scriptures, they discover a firm basis for their various fields of investigation in God's fundamental revelation in the creation. In it are embedded a richly diversified, yet integrally unified set of norms which govern their research and teaching. We may say that what holds for Scripture also holds in its own way for creation. In both revelations God speaks with full authority. It is therefore proper to speak of the divine, plenary authority of general revelation as well as of Biblical revelation. All the marks which we traditionally ascribe to Scripture can also, in their own way, be attributed to creational revelation:

it too is perspicuous, sufficient, necessary, and authoritative. Christian theory and practice of science is therefore rooted in a recognition of the normativity of general revelation. In creation God exercises His claim upon us no less than in Scripture. They differ, not in authority, but in content. They differ only in their respective messages. The difference between them comes to clarity when seen within the Biblically illumined flow of history from creation, through the fall, to redemption. Accordingly, general revelation is, from our present point of view, non-redemptive, whereas Scripture is the redemptive, saving revelation of God in Jesus Christ, republishing and reinterpreting

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to us as fallen creatures the meaning of our life in a fallen creation, reopening our eyes (cf. Calvin’s “spectacles”) to the divinely ordained structures and functions of created reality which undergird the scientific enterprise. Redemptive revelation in Scripture is given in order to renew and restore our understanding of general revelation.

There is therefore no inherent conflict between Biblical authority and scientific activity. This is evident from Calvin’s positive reaction to the Copernican world-view. The real conflict, as Kuyper puts it in his Stone lectures, is not between Biblical faith and science, but between true faith and false faith, and consequently between true science and false science. For

every science is anchored in some faith commitment as a presuppositional point-of-departure. The interrelated wholeness of God’s “two books” is so real, and the authority and normativity of general revelation so firm in its claim upon our allegiance, that the findings of a confessionally faithful science may even occasion the re-evaluation and re-examination and revision and perhaps even rejection of some long-standing, deeply entrenched, and widely held interpretations of Scripture. Recall the abandonment of older, racially motivated interpretations of the Hamitic curse, or the replacement of older Bible versions with newer ones based upon more recent scientific insights.

Scripture speaks with full authority to all of life, including science. This is basic to our confession concerning the extent of Biblical authority. That it speaks to all of life must be clearly affirmed. But how does it speak to life as a whole? This involves the question of the nature of Biblical authority, which calls for this response: it speaks redemptively, kerygmatically, prophetically, confessionally. It speaks to mathematics, to physics, to chemistry, to biology, and to all the other sciences as well. But it does not speak mathematically, nor physically, nor chemically, nor biologically. To have done so would have been redundant in view of the established reality of general revelation. Scripture does not employ the language and vocabulary of the sciences. Rather, it speaks to fallen man, confronted with the realities of general revelation, in the language of redemption, proclamation, confession.

Thus understood, taking Biblical authority seriously leads us also to take seriously not only the “formal authority” of general revelation, but also its “material authority,” that is, its content, its message, its built-in norms and structures and functions. As men of science we cannot disobey the norms of creation with impunity. God will not let us get away with such malpractice. He holds us to the

norms of his creational revelation, and those who betray its message are, as Paul says in Romans 1, "without excuse." Misconstruing general revelation, like misconstruing Scripture, is a serious thing, as is apparent from the following statement:

When scientists today refuse to accept the God of creation, they have also failed to submit to the authority of creation. And when Christian scientists, although confessing the full authority of general revelation and believing in Jesus Christ, derive from creation teachings which do not reflect the intended meaning of creation, then they are not submitting to the authentic authority of general revelation. And when data and phenomena and molecules and atoms are isolated from their creational meaning and intent, they do not express the divine authority of creational revelation.³

Sometimes the norms, structures, and functions, the unified interlacement of the various aspects of created reality, strike one with great force and clarity. This happened to me several years ago while serving on the Curriculum Revision Committee at Calvin College. The committee called in representatives of every department in the college to discuss three basic questions. First, what do you see as the nature of your discipline? Second, how do you see your discipline as related to other disciplines? Third, how do you go about working at a Christian perspective in your discipline? As the departmental representatives spoke one by one to that second question, this is what I heard them saying: Mathematics is prerequisite to physics, physics is prerequisite to chemistry, chemistry is prerequisite to biology, biology is prerequisite to psychology, etc. That rang a bell with me. I recalled that I had come across something very much like that in what is called the

"modal scale." It was a real eye-opener. I found my colleagues, speaking out of the context of daily experience in their various disciplines, actually climbing this philosophical "ladder"—which impressed itself upon me as supporting evidence in moving me along toward a clearer recognition of the authority and normativity of general revelation.

Scripture as Self-Interpreting

While developing the first three points of this paper, there was a fourth point which kept crossing my mind. At this juncture I would like to develop that point in the form of a post-script. It concerns the often-repeated assertion that "Scripture is basically its own interpreter."

I think the basic intent of this thesis must be honored, which is, as I see it, that Scripture as Word of God disallows setting any other canon above this Canon. Scripture is itself the Canon which judges every other canon—and this order may not be reversed. The idea of "self-interpreting" as defining Biblical authority has a ring of canonicity about it and rests upon the principle of the *analogia Scripturae*. It is a hermeneutic concomitant to Calvin's statement that Scripture is "self-authenticating."

But there is more that needs to be said. Standing alone, in unqualified isolation, this thesis ("self-interpreting") is somewhat simplistic and unconvincing. It leaves too many questions unanswered. For example, how does Scripture interpret itself? Does this happen automatically, independently, "objectively," apart from human agency and instrumentality? Is Scripture's meaning immediately and obviously clear to everyone? If so, why all the different interpretations of the Bible? Or does interpretation inescapably involve the active role of an interpreter? Is not human subjectivity always involved? I think these latter questions demand an affirmative answer. Therefore, the thesis, "Scripture is basically its own interpreter,"

must be further qualified and explicated by taking into account the following two related ideas.

1. Pre-understanding of Scripture. Every serious Bible scholar operates with a certain hermeneutic in his interpretation of Scripture, whether he does so self-consciously or not, deliberately or not. Whether he recognizes it or not, he makes use of a certain set of hermeneutic principles and methods. He cannot help bringing a certain pre-understanding of Scripture to bear upon his exegesis.

We sometimes hear people defend as ideal the notion that in coming to Scripture we must first empty ourselves of all pre-understandings of Scripture in order to allow the Scriptures to impress themselves upon our open and empty minds. This is an illusion. We cannot escape ourselves. It is always we who are involved in Biblical interpretation. The subjectivity of the interpreter always enters into this activity. Interpretation is a human response. An authentic pre-understanding of Scripture involves at bottom a believing acceptance of the Bible as Word of God. But even beyond this, it must be recognized that believing interpreters too wear different kinds of glasses in reading the Scripture—for example, moralistic glasses, allegorical glasses, historical-critical glasses, etc. Calvin already recognized the need for proper spectacles in reading aright the Scriptures, and, therefore, he states in the Introduction to the Institutes that this “little book” of his was intended as a guide to a right understanding of the Bible. Biblical interpreters themselves are subject to religio-cultural “conditioning.” Our pre-understandings of Scripture, even after their renewal by the re-directing work of the Spirit, must always be open, in confrontation with the data of the Scriptures, to ongoing reformation with a view to bringing them into closer conformity with the meaning of the Biblical message. Of hermeneutic pre-understanding, too, it must be said, Reformata semper reformanda est. The crucial question is whether the glasses we wear have been borrowed

from Scripture itself or from some other canon, whether they have been ground and polished by Scripture itself, whether they are true to Scripture, whether they can stand the test of the Scriptures. I submit that one of the most crucial components of such a pre-understanding is a right view of of the relationship between God’s revelation in creation and in Scripture, between creation and (via the fall) redemption, namely that redemption is the restoration of creation.

2. The Hermeneutic Circle. To all of this someone will say: But then we are caught in a hermeneutic circle. If every interpreter of Scripture comes to Scripture with a certain pre-understanding, and if an authentic pre-understanding must be true to the intent and purpose of Scripture itself, is this not a case of circular reasoning? To this the answer must be Yes. This is inescapable. This is the human “predicament.” But is this not a vicious cycle? No, except for those who wish to insist on human autonomy, that is, man’s ability to “get on top of things.” For acknowledgment of our being implicated in a hermeneutic circle is simply a very profound recognition of our state of creaturely dependence upon the Sovereign God, of our complete subservience to the over-arching authority of God’s Word. We can only stand under it, even as we appeal to it in seeking to come to an understanding of it. Are we as Christians then “of all men most pitiable?” Worse off than non-Christians? Trapped, while others are free? No, for the question for us and all men (precisely because we are men) is not whether or not we wish to stand in a hermeneutic circle, but only this: In which hermeneutic circle do we wish to stand and work? A Biblical one or some other?

Footnotes

1. “The Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority,” pp. 53, 54, 55.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 23 (paraphrased).