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# BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

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## Focus

**M**any statements of Christian belief begin by addressing the question of authority. Before it is possible to say anything about God or faith, we must know where it comes from, and how we know it to be true.

There is a history behind all of this. Some Christian traditions have seen ultimate authority residing in the church - its creeds, councils and bishops. By the late Middle Ages, this power had become absolute, highly concentrated, and corrupt.

At the time of the Reformation, the authority of the church was powerfully challenged by various groups claiming that scripture alone, the individual conscience, human reason, or the inner witness of the Holy Spirit was the final source of authority.

In a church like MCC, where so many of us have experienced the worst of church and/or biblical authority being used against us, the question of how we relate to this biblical authority is one which challenges us. Can we be liberated from biblical tyranny without losing what is precious about our relationship to this book?

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## Some Centering Quotes about Biblical Authority

“The question of “where now is our authority?” is the fundamental or foundational question of all human existence and/or endeavor, be it individual or that of a larger, social unit. Without an answer to it, the individual personality or the personality of the group at large alike fall into disarray and ultimate chaos. It is Hell where there is no answer to that question.”

(Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, p. 72)

"Paradoxically, the gospel is unchanging, yet it is deepened by embracing and encompassing new human experiences."

(Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, p.110)

“You Christians look after a document containing enough dynamite to blow all civilization to pieces, turn the world upside down and bring peace to a battle-torn planet. But you treat it as though it is nothing more than a piece of literature.”

(Mahatma Gandhi)

“When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land.”

(Desmond Tutu)

## BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

“If you believe what you like in the Gospel, and reject what you don't like, it is not the Gospel you believe, but yourself.”

(Augustine of Hippo)

“My interpretation can only be as inerrant as I am, and that's good to keep in mind.”

(Rachel Held Evans, *Evolving in Monkey Town: How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask the Questions*)

“It ain't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it's the parts that I do understand.”

(Mark Twain)

“In the bible it says you have to forgive seventy times seven. I want you all to know, I'm keeping a chart.”

(Hillary Rodham Clinton)

“[As a child] I was always familiar with what the Bible said [about homosexuality]. Anyone who was “that way” was an abomination before God. I think my church was pretty explicit about that; the culture certainly was.”

(Gene Robinson)

“No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.”

(Deuteronomy 30:14)

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

(Matthew 24:35)

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## A Personal Testimony About Biblical Authority

### From the Confessions of St. Augustine (Book Eight, Chapter 12, Paragraphs 28-29)

I flung myself down somehow under a fig-tree and gave free rein to the tears that burst from my eyes like rivers, as an acceptable sacrifice to you. Many things I had to say to you, and the gist of them, though not the precise words, was: “O Lord, how long? How Long? Will you be angry for ever? Do not remember our age-old sins.” For by these I was conscious of being held prisoner. I uttered cries of misery: “Why must I go on saying, ‘Tomorrow...tomorrow?’ Why not now? Why not put an end to my depravity this very hour?”

I went on talking like this and weeping in the intense bitterness of my broken heart. Suddenly I heard a voice from a house nearby – perhaps a voice of some boy or girl, I do not know – singing over and over again, “Pick it up and read, pick it up and read.” My expression immediately altered and I began to think hard whether children ordinarily repeated a ditty like this in any sort of game, but I could not recall ever having heard it anywhere else. I stemmed the flood of tears and rose to my feet, believing that his could be nothing other than a divine command to open the Book and read the first passage I chanced upon; for I had heard the story of how Antony had been instructed by a gospel text. He happened to arrive while the gospel was being read, and took the words to be addressed too himself when he heard, Go and sell all you possess and give the money to the poor: you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me. So he was promptly converted to you by this plainly divine message. Stung into action, I returned to the place where Alypius was sitting, for on leaving it I had put down there the book of the apostle's letters. I snatched it up,

opened it and read in silence the passage on which my eyes first lighted: Not in dissipation and drunkenness, nor in debauchery and lewdness, nor in arguing and jealousy; but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh or the gratification of your desires. I had not wish to read further, nor was there need. No sooner had I reached the end of the verse than the light of certainty flooded my heart and all dark shades of doubt fled away.

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## **Additional Thoughts**

### **Traditional Ways of Thinking**

It's difficult for us to think about the question of Biblical Authority outside of the framework set by the controversy in the early 20th C., between Modernism (or Liberal Protestantism) and Fundamentalism. In this debate, the lines were drawn on the question of Darwinism vs. Creationism.

These discussions were about whether the Bible was:

- Inerrant

Or “free from error”, belief in inerrancy is often seen as being the test of a “bible-believing Christian.” It required that the Bible be understood as factual in every detail.

- Infallible

A more moderate version of inerrancy is the claim of infallibility. This view concedes that Biblical authors wrote with ancient assumptions about science, mathematics, history, or other issues which have since been corrected. However, it maintains that the Bible is true in the matters which it is intended to address, matters of faith, church discipline, and morality.

- Indestructible

This doctrine is held by some who believe that the King James Bible is the only true version of scripture. They claimed that the Bible had been preserved in its original form, and that a certain translation (or perhaps a certain ancient manuscript) was exactly the same as the text written by the original author.

- Authoritative

An authoritative Bible is the ‘final court of appeal’ in the church. Those who hold the Bible to be the final authority will constantly be reforming their traditions, theology, ethics, church structures etc. in accordance with the Bible.

All of these descriptions were ‘up for grabs’ in the debate between Fundamentalists and Modernists in the early 20th century. At a popular level, the Liberal side of this discussion amassed contradictions, historical discrepancies, poorly transmitted manuscripts and theological tensions within the pages of the Bible.

Fundamentalists pointed to fulfilled prophecies and historical or archaeological evidence for biblical events, and found ways to harmonize the discrepancies. Mainstream and Evangelical Christians found more moderate positions on the spectrum between Liberalism and Fundamentalism.

## BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

Ultimately, by the end of the twentieth century, we were more aware of the humanity and the historical limitations of the biblical authors, and their culturally specific perspective on their experiences than ever before.

At the heart of the Modernist/Fundamentalist controversy was an assumption: that truth can be reduced to simple formulas that are either true or false, and that anything we cannot explain must be explained away. This Rationalism, shared by both Modernists and Fundamentalists alike, would be foreign to the authors of the Bible, who wrote in story, poem and parable (not in testable hypotheses or absolute dogma) and for whom Truth was a deeply personal experience, an encounter with the divine and with the Word of God who was Jesus Christ, who showed he was “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14) by coming into the world, and by dying on the cross.

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## Holy Conversations: Exploring My and Our Understanding of Biblical Authority

*Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion):* Share an early memory of encountering a moment when you questioned the text or interpretation of a Biblical story.

How were you raised to think about the Truth of scripture?

*Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion):* How has your sexual and/or gender identity impacted your understanding of Biblical authority? Was there a transformative moment for you?

What Biblical passages or messages are authoritative in your faith life?

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## Additional Thoughts

### MCC Ways of Thinking

Metropolitan Community Church has had members from the whole spectrum in this debate. In our years of ministry, Fundamentalists and Modernists have come to MCC for community, care and acceptance, and we have never turned them away.

But for many of us, the most pressing question was never whether the Bible was verifiably accurate, but whether or not the Bible would be used as a weapon to harm us, or whether we could make peace with the Bible. Because of this, I would like to suggest that we have actually framed the question differently from Modernists and Fundamentalists.

When we say the Bible is “true”, what we are really confessing is that the Bible has been faithful to us as God’s people. For MCC, I suggest a view of Biblical authority that includes the following elements:

#### 1. It’s our story.

The narrative that begins when God separated the light from the darkness, and reaches its climax in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, is the most faithful story we know.

## BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

Our society bombards us with different stories to this. The stories of finding fulfillment through the dream of middle-class prosperity, security through global military conquest, industrialization, and the globalization of our economy teach us that tell us that the purpose of life is to be entertained, to have the best technology, to acquire property, or for our country to win wars. But these stories are not faithful or true.

The Bible is not just a different story. It is a counter-narrative to the dominant narratives of our world. It tells of a God who:

- has created this world by bringing order to chaos.
- built a relationship with a community of people by calling Abraham to leave his home and start a great family.
- set Abraham's descendents free from the Land of Egypt so they could enjoy that creation and that relationship with God and flourish in freedom.
- Jesus Christ into the world so that God and humanity could be forever reconciled in his person, in his death and resurrection - in a community called the church.

The Bible offers a different 'script'. Just as Moses used the vision of justice expressed in the Ten Commandments to break the script of Pharaoh's power in Egypt, and Jesus used the Sermon on the Mount to call his disciples to a different vision of community that that which imperial Roman occupation offered – we can use the Bible as a liberating script in our society.

The vision of human thriving and liberation offered by the prophets and by Jesus has been taken up by many as a vision of human liberation, and has been used to speak truth to power by voices like Sojourner Truth, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero and Martin Luther King Jr.

It's our story too, and we must not remain silent!

**2. It's a record of Jesus Christ** who is the image of the invisible God.

We call the Bible the "Word of God," but the Bible calls Jesus the Word of God the: *logos*.

In other words when we look at Jesus Christ – that is who God is.

- By preaching a message of love for God, self, each other, our neighbor and our enemy, and calling us to be a community, he showed us that God was love.
- By connecting with humanity at its lowest point, a landless peasant who was so completely expendable that his life could be disposed of to an angry mob, he showed us that God is present not among the great ones, but that God dwells with the lowly and the poor.
- Through the forgiveness Jesus offered to those who crucified him, Jesus revealed that God embraces us in all of our evil; through Jesus' suffering in death, God revealed God's oneness with our suffering, our loneliness and our despair.
- Finally, resurrected, Jesus shows us that good triumphs over evil and love triumphs over hate – and that the way of God ultimately succeeds over the way of the world.

If you want to know what God looks like, look no further than Jesus Christ, the revealed and incarnated Word of God.

## **BIBLICAL AUTHORITY**

### **3. It's a meeting place with the Holy Spirit**

God did not stop speaking after Jesus came. Jesus is still present with us through the Holy Spirit, and when we read the Bible, the Holy Spirit can speak to us.

When we have Bible studies and we sit around the table and open our minds to what the Spirit says – we're not just learning information, we're being changed and transformed – God is speaking to us now.

### **4. It models liberation for us**

Because the Bible is all the above things – offers a different story to the dominant ideologies that keep us oppressed, and allows us to testify to our liberation by the God whom Jesus reveals, we can use it not just to 'rewrite' our own scripts, the scripts of our communities and society. In other words, the Bible changes us.

That's what the Bible is all about. The Bible invites us into a relationship with God which transforms us to thrive and live abundantly, and to become better people.

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## **Holy Conversations: Seeking, Sharing and Stretching**

*Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion):* How does the Gospel story give you strength in your everyday life?

*Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion):* What does the gospel story offer the LGBTQ liberation movement?

*Point of Reflection (Small Group Discussion):* Sometimes, our lives are the only Bible that people ever read. What kind of God are we revealing to them?

Why do you remain connected to Christianity even though Biblical authority has been used against the LGBTQ community?

## **Pulling it All Together: Centering Prayer w/ Bible Verse**

*Needed: A collection of pictures that contain bibles, scrolls, obvious reading of scripture, verses printed in various contexts (inscriptions, t-shirts, etc.)*

Place the pictures in the middle of the group.

Slowly read Psalm 119:105 aloud from one or two different versions.

Participants are invited then to take a few moments to look at the pictures and pick one that stands out for whatever reason and take it back to their seat.

Slowly read Psalm 119:105 aloud again from one of the previous versions and another translation.

Then each in turn can share a few words about what makes the chosen picture special.

Read Psalm 119:105 aloud again from one or two versions. After a short period of silence, call the session to an end.

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### **Additional Resources**

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