

ST2B

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Lecture 3 Scripture

Appendix

Scripture's Witness to Itself

One of the arguments in support of inerrancy concerns the testimony of the scriptures.

I have already explained that this kind of appeal does not work well as a piece of apologetic:

- 'why should I accept the bible authoritative?'
- 'because the bible says so!'

When pushed this becomes not merely arbitrary but also ideological, an assertion of power on which there can be no argument – 'because I/the bible/the government/the tribe, etc. say so...!'

But as a theological supposition it has some weight, making a theological claim about itself that can be recognised for what it is, and therefore accepted, by the communities that live in and through the authority of the scriptures. B.B. Warfield claims,

Let it be observed that the proof of the authority of the Scriptures does not rest on a previous proof of their inspiration. Even an uninspired law is law. But when inspiration has once been shown to be fact, it comes mightily to the reinforcement of their authority.¹

Yet there is another problem. Is this what the bible says about itself. According to N.T. Wright it is not, or at least not in the way usually claimed by inerrantists.

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

¹ B.B. Warfield, 'The Authority and Inspiration of the Scriptures'.

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. And often, when there ARE lists of rules or of creedal statements, they seem to be somewhat incidental to the purpose of the writing in question. One might even say, in one (admittedly limited) sense, that there is no biblical doctrine of the authority of the Bible. For the most part the Bible itself is much more concerned with doing a whole range of other things rather than talking about itself. There are, of course, key passages, especially at transition moments like 2 Timothy or 2 Peter, where the writers are concerned that the church of the next generation should be properly founded and based. At precisely such points we find statements emerging about the place of scripture within the life of the church. But such a doctrine usually has to be inferred. It may well be possible to infer it, but it is not (for instance) what Isaiah or Paul are talking about. Nor is it, for the most part, what Jesus is talking about in the gospels. He isn’t constantly saying, ‘What about scripture? What about scripture?’ It is there sometimes, but it is not the central thing that we have sometimes made it. ... As we shall see, in the Bible all authority lies with God himself.²

Wright is making several claims here and it is worth unpacking them.

- The bible does not have the kind of authority a rule-book has – we have already made such a claim when recognising the diversity of literatures within the bible, and the inability of the concept of ‘inerrancy’ to cope appropriately with that.³
- The bible does not have the kind of authority of self-assertion – it does not tend to talk about itself.
- In fact, the bible points away from itself to God – thus any authority it may have is a derived authority, predicated on that.

² N.T. Wright, ‘How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?’, *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991), 7-32, available http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Bible_Authoritative.htm, accessed 18-01-07.

³ Wright: “much of what we call the Bible—the Old and New Testaments—is not a rule book; it is narrative.”