

# Scripture and the Authority of God in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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This is a research paper exploring the subject of “Scripture and the Authority of God in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” Research will be presented utilizing scholarly articles, books, and book reviews related to this topic. Part one will discuss the authority of God understood within Christian theism generally and historically. Part two will discuss the authority of God historically within American culture. Part three will consider God’s authority within 21<sup>st</sup> century postmodern America as that philosophical system increasingly dominates most scholarly activities today. Part four will be a Christian theistic response to the conditions discussed in part three.

## The Authority of God Stated Biblically and Historically

*“Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind.”* 1 Samuel 15:29

*“For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed.”*  
Malachi 3:6

*“Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.”* James 1:17

*“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”<sup>1</sup>* Hebrews 13:8

The Bible consistently presents God as unchangeable. Theologically this characteristic of constancy is referred to as His immutability. The benefit to the creation is immeasurable. God being unwavering in His faithfulness means that He will fulfill all His promises to His creation. What a magnificent doctrine this is and one that is a central theme of the Christian faith.

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<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise noted all Scripture references are from *The New American Standard Bible*, The Lockman Foundation (Chicago, IL: Moody press, 1995).

Historically the Church has relied on and taught that God does not change because He has established with mankind a series of covenants of grace and mercy culminating in the offering of His Son Jesus Christ as a propitiation for the sin of mankind. This is true within Christian theism regardless of the theme or subject matter. In matters of sovereignty, soteriology, and sanctification God is said to be true and just, never demonstrating arbitrariness or fluctuation. Places where God is said to change His mind<sup>2</sup> refer to God changing his course of action and thus are related to His choices and not His character.<sup>3</sup>

As a doctrine of the Christian Church the authority of God means that God has spoken to the creation and it is the responsibility of the creation to hear and obey those words. The Scriptures are replete with examples of this understanding. For instance the prophet Micah opens his book with these words, “The word of the Lord which came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem.”<sup>4</sup> In this verse we see Micah asserting that God had spoken His word to him at a specific time, addressed to specific people, and with a specific message. Likewise, Jeremiah said, “The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord; saying, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, write all the words which I have spoken to you in a book.’”<sup>5</sup>

God spoke directly to Adam and Eve in Eden.<sup>6</sup> He spoke directly to Moses through the burning bush, on Mt. Sinai when He gave Moses His Law, and most wonderfully when He told Moses that He would raise up for His people a prophet like him and would put His words in his

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<sup>2</sup>Exodus 32:14 for instance says that God changed His mind concerning the judgment He previously stated He would bring upon the Hebrews for their disobedience.

<sup>3</sup>Robert B. Chisholm, “Does God Change His Mind?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:608 (October-December 1995): 387-399.

<sup>4</sup>Micah 1:1.

<sup>5</sup>Jeremiah 30:1-2.

<sup>6</sup>Genesis 2:16, 3:13.

mouth.<sup>7</sup> The Jewish people believe this to be Messianic and Christians affirm this as well by the testimony of the New Testament, finding fulfillment in Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup>

Addressing the authority of God from this perspective speaks strongly of the doctrine of revelation. Revelation is the act whereby God makes Himself known to His creation. God's revelation appears in two distinct ways. First there is the general revelation of God. This is the revelation of Himself through His creation. Paul discusses this in his letter to the Romans. Second, there is the special revelation of God. This is the revelation whereby God makes Himself known to His creation in a saving way. Pinnock states that, "The glory of revelation in the Bible is that it presents an infinite, personal God making Himself known as the saving Lord who desires a covenant relationship with all human creatures."<sup>9</sup> The Bible states it this way: "He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him."<sup>10</sup> Bloesch adds that, "We do not grasp the theological significance of the Bible until we see it in its paradoxical relationship to the Holy Spirit, who brings to us "the mind of Christ" by which we can apprehend the revelational meaning of any particular biblical text."<sup>11</sup>

Mankind is made in the image of God.<sup>12</sup> What that means within the context of His revelation is that all of creation is exposed to God as creator. Some make the argument that mankind can see from the beauty, order, and even complexity of the universe that God is Creator. The New Testament states the same principle.<sup>13</sup>

Is this enough revelation to actually allow mankind to be saved? The Roman Catholic Church says it is not as general revelation can lead to an understanding that God is but cannot lead

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<sup>7</sup>Exodus 3, Exodus 19-20, Deuteronomy 18:18-20.

<sup>8</sup>John 6:14, Acts 7:37, 52.

<sup>9</sup>Clark H. Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2006), 32.

<sup>10</sup>Ephesians 1:9.

<sup>11</sup>Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration, and Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 11-12.

<sup>12</sup>Genesis 1:27.

<sup>13</sup>John 1:1-4.

mankind to an understanding of their sinful condition before God. The reformers, especially Luther and Calvin saw the depravity of man as an insurmountable obstacle to general revelation leading to salvation.

Special revelation goes beyond general revelation in that it encompasses the work of the Holy Spirit of God and in that sense makes special revelation effectual for knowing Him beyond seeing His works and for salvation. There are differing opinions in this area as well. The Roman Catholic Church sees special revelation as effectual but only when apprehended. Some of the reformers believed that special revelation could not ultimately be resisted.

It is by special revelation that mankind comes to know God relationally as “Father,” sustainer, deliver, redeemer, and in a plethora of other ways. It is by special revelation therefore that mankind knows that God is a personal being, that He is omnipresent, omniscient, and loving.

Historically the Church has defined the scope of authority in a number of ways. While there may be more definitions in the mind of some, it is consistent with a majority of scholars to limit the discussion of the authority of God to five categories. They are: 1) *Sola Ecclesia* – the view that tradition is equally infallible with the Scriptures and serves as a basis for the development of Church faith and practice since it serves to define and interpret Scripture; 2) *Prima Scriptura* – the view that God has provided the Church the Bible and its traditions with the latter serving to supplement the former; 3) *Regula Fidei* – the view that tradition as passed on generation to generation in an unbroken chain of apostolic teachings and is a co-equal source of authority; 4) *Sola Scriptura* – as the name implies this view asserts that Scripture alone is the infallible source of God’s authority; and 5) *Solo Scriptura* – the view that tradition is useless and in fact confuses the clear teaching of the only infallible source of authority, the Bible.

It may be obvious to some readers but worth stating here that lost in some of the definitions above is the idea that all of Scripture combined forms the canon. The canon has historically been defined as the rule of faith and standard by which we evaluate every creed, confession, tradition, doctrine, or dogma in order to determine whether or not it is consistent with the revealed Word of God. In the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, the Scriptures were given to teach us “what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Views of Authority Determine Views of Scripture**

It is necessary to state clearly early in this paper that one’s view of the Bible will have a direct and consequential effect upon their view of the doctrine of the authority of God. It is not unreasonable to assert that without a vigorous view of the doctrine of authority “non-evangelical scholars cannot hope to be regarded as authentically Christian theologians while they are perceived as hostile to Scriptural authority.”<sup>15</sup> It must also be noted that some see within the scope of this type of discussion the need to clarify authority over and against infallibility, seeing differences between evangelicals and fundamentalists at this point. Many attribute these differences to presuppositions that influence the hermeneutic task.<sup>16</sup> An interesting example of one’s presuppositions influencing their view of Scripture is shown in the following comments by David E. Frederickson, a critic of the evangelical Christian belief that the Scriptures are

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<sup>14</sup>F.F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1984), 86.

<sup>15</sup>Carl F H. Henry, “Theology and biblical authority,” A review article of the uses of scripture in recent theology by D H Kelsey. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 19 no 4 (Fall 1976): 315-323.

<sup>16</sup>John P. Bartkowski, “Beyond Biblical Literalism and Inerrancy : Conservative Protestants and the Hermeneutic Interpretation of Scripture.” *Sociology of Religion*, 57 no 3 (Fall 1996): 259-272. Bartkowski presents a hermeneutic model based on evaluation of two areas of Christian concern – the relationship between husband and wife and child discipline in the home. He sets forth his research as one way to demonstrate that evangelicals and fundamentalists view the authority of the Scriptures differently depending on the presuppositions they bring into their interpretation. While it cannot be argued that people do bring their presuppositions into the interpretative task it does not follow that holding a view of Scripture as authoritative for faith and practice must somehow be the result of circular reasoning. Logic demands that while various interpretations can all be wrong at the same time on the same subject they cannot all be right at the same time and on the same subject. Thus one can hold a correct view of the authority of the Scriptures personal presuppositions notwithstanding.

authoritative for faith and practice. He opines, “. . . the nature and authority of Scripture, (is) a hot topic because of the unrealistic but broadly shared expectation that the Bible can settle, with certainty, contentious moral issues. Unfortunately, the fiery prose of those championing the Bible's moral clarity has not brought light.”<sup>17</sup> Obvious to readers of this paper will be the assumption on Frederickson's part that the Bible does not speak with moral clarity on the issues facing mankind in the twenty-first century. Demonstrating the same dependence on presupposition that he views unfavorably in others, Frederickson ends up looking naïve or hypocritical. It is both best and correct to admit from the onset that all people bring a particular view or understanding into any inquiry by which they interpret information.<sup>18</sup>

Still others question the validity of speaking in terms of normative versus incidental authority.<sup>19</sup> They see the current discussions of authority both anachronistic and unnecessary given the effects of postmodernist thinking and the indifference toward authority attributed to a modern secular ethos dominated by contingency, relativism, temporality, and autonomy. Westhelle rightly reminds us that the Enlightenment has severe consequences for biblical authority:

Much of the current debate over the authority of the scriptures, particularly in the United States of America, is a debate over these two options, not realizing that the responses offered still leave the basic question unchallenged. Both foundationalism *and* fundamentalism are, in fact, celebrations of the Enlightenment's biblical criticism. Both are a concession to Lessing's thesis that “accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.” Fundamentalism opted for the truths of history without the aid of reason where as foundationalism went with the truths of reason without historical claims of the Bible. It was

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<sup>17</sup>David E. Fredrickson, “A piece of Scripture on part of the Bible: listening to Romans 15:1-6,” *Word & World*, 26 no 4 (Aut 2006): 412-418.

<sup>18</sup>Brueggemann for example defines presupposition as *script*, and suggests that “People live their lives by a script that is sometimes explicit but often implicit. That script may be one of the great meta-narratives created by Karl Marx or Adam Smith or it may be an unrecognized tribal mantra like, “My dad always said . . .” The practice of the script evokes a self, yields a sense of purpose and provides security.” See Walter Brueggemann, “Counterscript.” Available from <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3307> Accessed January 22, 2009.

<sup>19</sup>J. Christiaan Beker, “The authority of Scripture: normative or incidental?” *Theology Today* 49 no 3 (Oct. 1992): 376-382.

an affirmation of Lessing's thesis but validated through the different truths Lessing proposed as exclusive and exclusionary options.<sup>20</sup>

The Roman Catholic Church as well as Eastern Orthodox believers would subjugate Scripture to the traditions developed by the Church throughout its history. Forestell explains that position well when he states, “Thus it becomes apparent that the Scriptures, inspired though they be, and enjoying, as they do, the privilege of inerrancy, are not an immediate rule of faith nor source of certitude apart from the living teaching authority of the Church. This is due to the historical and human manner in which God chose to reveal Himself, conditioning His Scriptures to the lives and times of the sacred author, and leaving them to a living organ of interpretation, capable at all times of nourishing the faithful from this source, according to their needs.”<sup>21</sup>

McGowan would reply to the Roman position by reminding his readers that every creed, confession, and dogma adopted by the church must pass muster at the bar of Scripture and absent a positive affirmation from Scripture of such traditions they must be rejected.<sup>22</sup>

Martin Luther also disagreed with this Roman Catholic view and did so with the strongest of words. He wrote, “All articles are sufficiently established in the Holy Scriptures, so that it is not necessary to establish any beyond these. All commandments of good works are sufficiently stated in the sacred Scripture so that it is not necessary to formulate any beyond these. Nothing in respect of either faith or morals can be established as necessary to salvation beyond what is taught in Scripture. No one is bound to believe more than what is based in Scripture.”<sup>23</sup>

Modern Evangelicals would take exception to this Roman Catholic proposition seeing a usurpation of the central issue of this paper, namely the authority of God as understood in His Holy Word. Wachler points out that people will only follow the Word of God when it is seen as

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<sup>20</sup>Vítor Westhelle, “Luther on the authority of Scripture,” *Lutheran Quarterly* ns 19 no 4 (Wint 2005): 373-391.

<sup>21</sup>J. Terence Forestell, “Limitation of inerrancy,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*. 20 (Jan 1958): 9-18.

<sup>22</sup>A.T.B. McGowan, *The Divine Authenticity of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 209.

<sup>23</sup>Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 5.

the supreme authority for faith and life. Absent this view God's people become aimlessly wondering sheep. "If the church must depend on the diffuse opinions of learned theologians and historical-critical scholars to determine what in Scripture is presumably genuine or spurious, reliable report or legendary distortion, Spirit-wrought witness or the influence of pagan religions and philosophies, etc., then the Word of its God and Savior no longer possesses ultimate authority. It has passed over to men who, however, can never have ultimate authority, since historical research can never go beyond a "presumably.""<sup>24</sup> Pinnock suggests that just such a state of wandering exists today among many Christian theologians and scholars. He states, "Now however there is a strong emphasis on the diversity of Scripture. With the increased stress on the human character of the text has come a vision of it as a developing human witness full of complex and even competing ideas. The Bible, therefore, cannot be appealed to with hope of achieving a coherent picture in a conceptual sense."<sup>25</sup>

These are divergent views on the topic of the authority of God and what he has spoken. It appears that these different views are becoming more sharply contrasted not increasingly congealed. Has this had any effect on American culture? We now turn to that question.

### **The Authority of God Historically in American Culture**

As late as 1873 God's authority and the supremacy of the Bible was raised as an unassailable tower of strength. In that year retired President of Yale, Reverend Theodore Woosley, in a speech to the Evangelical Alliance proclaimed, "In what sense can this country be called a Christian country? In this sense certainly, that the vast majority of the people believe in Christ and the Gospel, that Christian influences are universal, that our civilization and intellectual

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<sup>24</sup>Gottfried Wachler, "The Authority of Holy Scripture," *Concordia Journal* 10 no 5 (S 1984): 171-180.

<sup>25</sup>Pinnock, 96. Pinnock attributes this development to Walter Bauer who wrote in *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* that the early church tolerated diverse and mutually exclusive beliefs.

culture are built on that foundation . . .”<sup>26</sup> John Warrick Montgomery paints a very accurate picture of the influence of Christianity on life in America that supports Woosley’s contention.<sup>27</sup> He suggests that because American culture was influenced from its very inception by Christian theism there existed a depository of values from which Americans drew. Through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century America utilized this “inherited capital” of Christianity as a vanguard of sorts to draw upon when answering the questions of life that resulted from societal turmoil. Eventually however, the forces unleashed in the Enlightenment, most notably empiricism coupled with scientific inquiry informed by naturalism managed to shake off what was viewed as religious constraints.

Is Montgomery the victim of wishful thinking? In spite of the blatant rewriting of American history that has been ongoing for the last 40 years<sup>28</sup> Montgomery is on solid footing in making the claim that America has a long history of expressing Christian theistic beliefs and acting upon those beliefs in everyday life. Take for example the following quotes from a collection of Presidents, Vice Presidents, Senators, Congressmen, Supreme Court Justices, and signers of the Declaration of Independence. It is difficult bordering on impossible to mount a serious argument against the influence of Christian theism both in the founding of America and in developing its governing principles.

The Holy Ghost carries on the whole Christian system in this earth. Not a baptism, not a marriage, not a sacrament can be administered but by the Holy Ghost. . . . There is no authority, civil or religious – there can be no legitimate government but what is administered by this Holy Ghost. There can be no salvation without it. All without it is rebellion and perdition, or in more orthodox words damnation.

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<sup>26</sup>Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 393.

<sup>27</sup>John Warwick Montgomery, ed., *Christianity for the Tough Minded* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1982), 21-34.

<sup>28</sup>See especially Catherine Millard, *The Rewriting of American History* (Camp Hill, PA: Horizon Books, 1991). Millard presents a thorough examination of the reconstructive exercise undertaken since the late 1960’s that has resulted in a marginalizing of all things Western and the exaltation of all things from a multicultural position.

The general principles on which the fathers achieved independence were the general principles of Christianity. I will avow that I then believed, and now believe, that those general principles of Christianity are as eternal and immutable as the existence and attributes of God. *John Adams, Signer of the Declaration of Independence; Judge; Diplomat; One of two signers of the Bill of Rights; Second President of the United States.*

I conceive we cannot better express ourselves than by humbly supplicating the Supreme Ruler of the world . . . that the confusions that are and have been among the nations may be overruled by the promoting and speedily bringing in the holy and happy period when the kingdoms of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ may be everywhere established, and the people willingly bow to the scepter of Him who is the Prince of Peace. *Samuel Adams, Signer of the Declaration of Independence; "Father of the American Revolution"; Ratifier of the U.S. Constitution; Governor of Massachusetts.*

Public utility pleads most forcibly for the general distribution of the Holy Scriptures. Without the Bible, in vain do we increase penal laws and draw entrenchments around our institutions. *James McHenry, Revolutionary Officer; Signer of the Constitution; Ratifier of the U. S. Constitution; Secretary of War under Presidents George Washington and John Adams.*

Has government any solid foundation? Any chief cornerstone? . . . I think it has an everlasting foundation in the unchangeable will of God . . . The sum of my argument is that civil government is of God. *James Otis, Leader of the Sons of Liberty; Attorney and Jurist; Mentor of John Hancock and Samuel Adams.*<sup>29</sup>

On the heels of the founding of the United States came the Great Awakening and sweeping revivals led by George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and the Wesley's. The Age of Reason characterized by the attacks on Christianity by Voltaire and Diderot was met by the reason of the Scriptures and a call to Americans to renew their relationship with the sovereign God who had secured their freedom against magnificent odds.

The church gained unparalleled strength and was soon sending missionaries to all parts of the world as well as pushing the western frontier of America. The authority of God was a prominent and unquestioned feature in the teaching and evangelism efforts of missionaries and circuit preachers alike. Americans did not question this doctrine or the Scriptures from which it came.

In the mid to late 1800's came three successive challenges to the teaching of the authority of God. The first challenge was the publishing of Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species*.

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<sup>29</sup>These quotes from the Founding Fathers of America are available from Wallbuilders at <http://www.wallbuilders.com/LIBissuesArticles.asp?id=8755> Accessed March 5, 2009.

Americans were left to ponder the possibility that the Bible was wrong in its teaching of God as Creator. The second challenge came in the form of industrialization. America was booming and immigrants from all over the world were flowing into the cities bringing their religious views with them. American Christianity faced a huge obstacle in understanding and answering these new views. The third challenge came from Europe in the form of higher criticism. This new way of looking at the Scriptures challenged and in the minds of many destroyed biblical authority. In reality this new way of interpreting Scripture was nothing more than the rationalism of the times applied to the fields of biblical inquiry.

In spite of the myriad problems facing Americans throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was an expectation that the Judeo-Christian ethic could and would provide a reasonable answer to the questions of life. The prevailing attitude among Americans as late as the 1950's and early 1960's was that society was best ordered when the principles of Christianity were observed. This is not to say or even suggest that the majority of Americans were born-again Christians. The point that is being made here is that Christianity was the single greatest influence in American culture until recently. What happened to change this view of Christianity?

### **The Current Cultural Climate and Authority – A Postmodern View**

The seeds of the aforementioned Enlightenment period eventually gave birth to philosophies that questioned among other things the right of any one individual or nation to define such notions as truth and morality. Some recent philosophical systems aggressively attack the notion of authority. Postmodernists for instance teach that objective standards, morals, and truth cannot exist beyond cultures since they are culturally derived, and are doubtful that they can exist beyond any individually held truth.

Derida, Sartre, Camus, and others have led a legion of followers into this existential darkness of nihilism. By supposing that all information conveyed as truth claims are attempts to maintain the status quo by those in power, modern man has been programmed to view all truth claims as needing reinterpreted or in the language of the times, deconstructed. What this means is that modern man views Christianity not through the lens of historical, grammatical, and linguistic interpretations of what the authors had to say but through the subjective, personal lens of what the modern reader wants to believe was said based on how the individual feels about or thinks about Christianity. Obviously this presents many problems for speaking about the authority of God to modern man.

There are several “veins” of postmodernist deconstructive thought that impact Christian theism. They are: 1) *deconstructive postmodernism* which denies objective truth and foundationalism along with internal consistency and coherence; 2) *liberationist postmodernism* focuses on social and political structures seeking to transform cultures by destroying the status quo. Within this strand are the singularly focused feminist, black, and gay liberation theologies; 3) *constructive postmodernism* that attempts to revise or reconstruct the modern worldview while simultaneously denying the metaphysical; and, 4) *conservative or restorationist postmodernism* that rejects most of modernism but not all of that system.<sup>30</sup>

The initial casualty of the postmodern attack is the belief in the perspicuity of Scripture. Postmodernism represents a “vociferous antagonism toward biblical authority.”<sup>31</sup> Callahan explains what is meant and what is at stake:

Scripture can be and is read with profit, with appreciation and with transformative results. It is open and transparent to earnest readers; it is intelligible and comprehensible to attentive

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<sup>30</sup>David S. Dockery, ed., *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1997), 16-17.

<sup>31</sup>Larry Dean Pettegrew, “The perspicuity of Scripture,” *Master's Seminary Journal* 15 no 2 (Fall 2004): 209-225.

readers. Scripture itself is coherent and obvious. It is direct and unambiguous as written; what is written is sufficient. Scripture's concern or focal point is readily presented as the redemptive story of God. It displays a progressively more specific identification of that story, culminating in the gospel of Jesus Christ. All this is to say: Scripture is clear about what it is about.<sup>32</sup>

While most Americans would not define themselves as postmodern, they are in fact subscribers to this philosophic belief system through their practice of relativism. James Patterson and Peter Kim revealed some very startling facts about America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when they reported recently that only 13% of survey respondents believed in the validity of all Ten Commandments; 93% stated that they determined right and wrong for themselves; and 81% believed it was morally permissible to violate known laws if they believed those laws were wrong.<sup>33</sup> These statistics are important to the current discussion because this data suggests the concept of authority in America has become almost entirely subjective in nature. This is the niche that postmodernism has carved out for itself in modern American culture.

One of the foundational principles of postmodernist thinking is there are no objective reference points from which man can begin a defense of transcendent truth. Thus modern man is afloat in a sea of competing and conflicting values where the best that can be hoped for is that everyone will adopt a live and let live attitude. This renders Americans unable to articulate what they believe because they've never thought through their belief system in any detail. That exercise is not necessary because people do not see any need to defend their beliefs since individual belief systems don't require justification. Critics of the American public education system have decried the "dumbing-down" of students for decades. Unfortunately the same

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<sup>32</sup>James Patrick Callahan, "Claritas Scripturae: The Role of Perspicuity in Protestant Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (39/3 (September 1996): 362.

<sup>33</sup>James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth: What People Believe About Everything That Really Matters* (New York, NY: Plume, 1991). Cited in William D. Watkins, *The New Absolutes* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), 28-29.

critical analysis has not been extended to the philosophical belief systems gaining ubiquitous influence. Surely the same dumbing-down of the American intelligence is omnipresent.

This begs the questions of whether or not Americas are truly relativists because they believe that relativism and the broader philosophical system of postmodernism is tenable or do they verbally subscribe to postmodern relativism for some other reason? Convincing arguments can be made that Americans who assert a morally relativistic life view do so because they wish to justify their moral behavior in the face of judgment, criticism, and perhaps more important for our discussion, conscience.

Weaver for instance suggests that modern Americans are moral idiots because they are eager to adopt any belief system that will assuage their conscience.<sup>34</sup> The unbridled rush to embrace a “rugged individualism” has led to an unraveling of perceptions and actions necessary to maintaining civic responsibility and cultural morality. This in turn leads to increasing moral and cultural chaos and the fulfillment of what many Christian theists point to as an illustration of “every man doing what is right in their own eyes.” Indeed when authority is overthrown in any context the rebels establish their own rules.

Political response to this development is predictable – a deliberate maneuvering toward a decrease in civil rights while insisting upon the necessity of the new paradigm as important to maintain public safety, peace, and freedom. For a political state to survive, which is the supreme motivation of those steering the ship, there must be in the least a minimum consensus of values. This is achieved by deliberate political action. Those groups deemed to be extreme on the “values scale” are purposely marginalized and disenfranchised through repeated and arbitrary legislative and judicial activism. The goal of this behavior is to provide a clear path for an enlightened and progressive belief system to ascend to a position of social acceptability and thus

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<sup>34</sup>Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 1.

become the voice of social conscience. What this amounts to in our present context is the construction and management of a set of replacement values for Christian theism that are the political equivalent of police crowd control techniques. They are rooted in humanistic concepts and values at odds with Christianity. The so-called culture wars that America is in the throes of currently are nothing more than a conflict between Christian theism based on the authority of God's Word and government mandated morals based on humanistic concepts.

Christian theists see in this continued interference by government in the shaping of values an action equivalent to cultural suicide. When the high moral standards that Christianity inculcates are dismissed the vacuum will be filled by lesser standards of behavior. Turning away from the highest good to the least common behavioral denominator does not condition responsibility in citizens. It has the opposite consequentially negative effect. Americans are being led into more debased lifestyles and looking for sanction for such from any source available. The government of the United States instead of providing for an environment where Christian theism can flourish and inform appears to be working directly against such a condition.

This constant secular drum beat of postmodern thinking is having an impact on more than just secular culture. An unfortunate but clearly observable consequence of postmodernism is that the same secular attitudes of individualism and anti-traditionalism prevalent in the culture are now being carried into the church by unsuspecting believers. Wade points out that "modernistic individualism (has) take(n) root in our psyches to the extent that we believe we are individually the final arbiters of truth."<sup>35</sup> The authority of God and His Word is increasingly viewed as an individual matter. This provides for a "cherry-picking" approach to authority where believers act as consumers, deciding what to purchase and utilize for the moment. Thus Christian theists are

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<sup>35</sup>Rick Wade, "Scripture and Tradition in the early Church," Available from Probe Ministries at [http://www.probe.org/site/c.fdKEIMNsEoG/b.4226045/k.32E/Scripture\\_and\\_Tradition\\_in\\_the\\_Early\\_Church.htm](http://www.probe.org/site/c.fdKEIMNsEoG/b.4226045/k.32E/Scripture_and_Tradition_in_the_Early_Church.htm) Accessed February 18, 2009.

now facing the formidable foe of postmodernism on two fronts – in secular culture and in the church.

### **Christian Theism and the Authority of God in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – A Response<sup>36</sup>**

In part one of this paper the authority of God biblically and historically was discussed. Part two looked at the authority of God in American culture from a historical perspective. Postmodernism and the implications for Christianity generally and the authority question specifically were addressed in part three. In this section the question of how Christian theism must respond to the attack upon the authority of God by 21<sup>st</sup> century mankind is taken up.

Gene Veith is one Christian theist on-point in the debate between secular mindsets and Christianity. Calling on Christians to understand that they are “freed from the credulities of secular humanism, the mind-deadening cynicism of postmodernism, and the stifling limitations of scientific materialism,”<sup>37</sup> he insists that the current secular attacks upon Christianity are grounded more in hyperbole than fact and reason.

This does not diminish the extent or ferocity of the secular assault upon Christianity. A key issue for this writer is that the secular assault is often sublime. This may appear to be contradictory to some as postmodernism has been portrayed as a ferocious adversary. What this reveals is the intellectual mindset of those given to a secular worldview, including those who consider themselves Christians. The pivotal point in understanding this issue can be located in the approach taken to the authority of Scripture. Christians generally fall into three camps. One

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<sup>36</sup>Some of the material appearing in this section is from this author’s critique of postmodernism as a worldview. See particularly my book review of Gene Edward Veith, *Loving God With All Your Mind*. Available at [www.cclohio.org](http://www.cclohio.org)

<sup>37</sup>Gene Edward Veith Jr., *Loving God With All Your Mind: Thinking as a Christian in a Postmodern World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 37.

perspective understands the authority of the Bible to inform and teach and accepts that authority as the rule for living. Thus life is viewed through the prism of Scripture. A second group consists of those who may have understood and accepted the Bible as a rule or authority but for various reasons no longer does. A third group places their confessional traditions on par with or higher than Scripture. The latter two groups have adopted a view at odds with God's authority. In the final analysis, at least in practice, these groups have succumbed to the pervasiveness of a belief system that sees no need for God's authority. In a world where God's authority is seen as unnecessary for faith and life it follows that any authority models derived from God would be equally unnecessary. Values and morals die quickly when removed from their source. This would explain in part the wide chasms within Christendom related to the issues of abortion, homosexuality, and even support of the nation of Israel. Readers will note that those who hold to a high view of the authority of God and His Word oppose abortion and homosexual behavior while supporting Israel's right to exist and defend herself. Values and ethics are transcendental or they are left to majority values, cultural totalitarianism, or sheer authoritarianism. This writer does not believe this to be mere coincidence but will leave it to the reader to contemplate those connections.

Postmodernism presents its most menacing challenge in the area of knowledge or epistemology. Postmodernism agrees with existentialism by stating matter-of-factly that we cannot know anything with certainty. Of course this statement itself is nonsensical because if it is true it is false as we would know at least that one thing and thus the statement becomes self-refuting.

The weight of the postmodern argument in the area of epistemology has been thrust against the notion of objective truth. Truth to the postmodernist is not objective and cannot be

discovered. Instead truth is a construction of the individual based on personal likes, dislikes, cultural operators that influence an individual, and in the end is unknowable.<sup>38</sup> In support of their theories most postmodernists turn to the differences evident across cultures. These differences according to postmodernism are the result of different cultural norms and values. Postmodernists conclude that because there are differences across cultures there are different truths and because there are difference truths, truth must be relative. Christians would agree with the initial observation but would disagree with the conclusion.

Christians would counter by saying that one way to account for the differences seen across cultures is to see cultures that exclude God as deliberate God-evading social constructions. This is an effective method of restating the postmodern position in a way that turns it on itself. Truth cannot be apprehended nor denied by choosing to deliberately avoid it. Modern man seeks to escape the authority of God by denying that He or it exists or has any bearing on their life. We shall see that this is a fruitless effort.

### **The Real Issue is the Rejection of the Notion of Authority**

Christian theists have maintained for some time that the challenges faced by adherents of Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are unique and unparalleled. Montgomery suggests several reasons for this current environment.<sup>39</sup> He cites the pervasiveness of global communications that have removed any buffer between secular man and Christians, the exponential growth of pluralism that has fostered a plethora of individualism and worldviews, and increasing

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<sup>38</sup>This postmodern view of truth is the intellectual basis for the unflinching and unashamed positions of pro-abortion, pro-homosexual, pro-euthanasia, and pro-drug usage as well as almost everything else many Christians stand opposed to on Scriptural grounds. The postmodernist ethical insistence on individual choice as an unassailable right effectively negates any consideration of the substance or consequence of their choice.

<sup>39</sup>John Warrick Montgomery, *Defending the Hope That is in Us: Apologetics for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Available at [http://www.jwm.christendom.co.uk/unpublished\\_essay.html](http://www.jwm.christendom.co.uk/unpublished_essay.html) Accessed March 5, 2009.

sophistication of the arguments forwarded by global religionists designed primarily to discourage criticism. The net effect of all these variables is a disconnection with the transcendent and from a Christian theistic perspective the authoritative.

The wide-spread acceptance of the idea that all religions are the same cannot be understated. Tolerance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been redefined from granting people the opportunity and right to voice their perspective on any subject to a no holds-barred, anything goes diatribe that does not seek to gain a hearing but instead seeks to forcible gain cultural recognition and acceptance for any behavior or view point to the degree that dissenting views are deemed intolerant. Once again however, the disconnection from a transcendent view occurs.

What must be the response by evangelical Christians to this situation? Oden suggests that evangelicals are “living in a decisive period of evangelical opportunity, a consequential moment of apostolic apologetics.”<sup>40</sup> Because postmodernity cannot ultimately answer anything with enduring truth, it is the opinion of this writer that it will pass as a vanquished relic like so many pop philosophies before it. What will remain however are the lingering characteristics of uncertainty and skepticism framed within an individualistic morality. This is very much like the times faced by the early church. Morality was individualized and truth was accepted on the basis of pragmatism and convenience.

Lindsell believes the way to address the current crisis of authority is to remember our past.<sup>41</sup> He believes that the church has a rich history of tradition and experience to call upon when addressing questions and challenges to God and His authority. He insists that to abandon the doctrine of the authority of God and His Scripture is sheer evangelical suicide. While it is true that evangelicals must staunchly defend the notion of authority we must not rely too heavily on

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<sup>40</sup>Dockery, 393.

<sup>41</sup>Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible: Defending the Inerrancy of Scripture* (Costa Mesa, CA: Calvary Publishing, 2008),

tradition as this has limited value as a resource for engaging current thinking and is certainly not an “ace” that might trump secular objections.

The real question that must be answered by evangelicals is, “How is the Bible authoritative?” A second question might be, “By what means can the Bible actually exercise authority?” What we must accept from the outset is that these questions will have different answers depending on the environment in which they are asked. Stated another way, the definition, understanding, and application of authority as it relates to God and the Scripture will vary according to the context of the inquiry. As has already been demonstrated, authority is located in the individual in modern secular America and even among many Christians. At the heart of this issue of authority is the question of what does it mean for the evangelical Christian and how will it be presented both within the church and to the secular culture.

N.T. Wright in his 1989 Laing Lecture offered the following understanding of what evangelicals ought to mean when they speak of God’s authority:

Authority is not the power to control people, and crush them, and keep them in little boxes. The church often tries to do that—to tidy people up. Nor is the Bible as the vehicle of God’s authority meant to be information for the legalist. We have to apply some central reformation insights to the concept of authority itself. It seems to me that the Reformation, once more, did not go quite far enough in this respect, and was always in danger of picking up the mediaeval view of authority and simply continuing it with, as was often said, a paper pope instead of a human one. Rather, God’s authority vested in scripture is designed, as all God’s authority is designed, to liberate human beings, to judge and condemn evil and sin in the world in order to set people free to be fully human. That’s what God is in the business of doing. That is what his authority is there *for*. And when we use a shorthand phrase like ‘authority of scripture’ that is what we ought to be meaning. It is an authority with this shape and character, this purpose and goal.<sup>42</sup>

Pinnock, Witherington, and McGowan appear to advocate an abandonment of talk of authority as it relates to inerrancy on the basis that inerrancy is a characteristic of the autographs

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<sup>42</sup>N.T. Wright, *How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?* The Laing Lecture 1989. Available from [http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright\\_Bible\\_Authoritative.htm](http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Bible_Authoritative.htm) Accessed March 9, 2009.

only and as such is not meaningful today. Bloesch stops well short of proclaiming that Scripture is the Word of God. Morrison points out that:

The result is similar to what Thiselton has critiqued as “Word magic.” Admittedly, “Word of God” is used with much contextual variety in Scripture. Scripture is not the Word of God in the same sense or at the same level as Christ the Word, he who is by nature the eternal self-disclosure of God. Also, Scripture is the God-given witness to Christ. The Scriptures, by the work of the Spirit via inspiration, in, of, from and to Christ, are derivatively the Word of God. But by God's grace they *are* the Word of God. It is at this crucial place that Bloesch, like Barth, Brunner *et al.*, fall into a dichotomous way of conceptualizing the Word in a neo-Platonic fear that an affirmation of such historicity will tarnish the Word.<sup>43</sup>

Complicating this issue of authority at least for Pinnock is his affinity for what has become known as Open Theism. This theological perspective insists that while God has exhaustive knowledge of past and present He does not possess exhaustive foreknowledge. Ware responding to what many term as Pinnock’s muddled theology says that open theists such as Pinnock “denies that God knows—or can know—the future free decisions and actions of his moral creatures, even while it affirms that God knows all future possibilities and all divinely determined and logically-necessary future actualities.”<sup>44</sup> Ware also quotes Hasker who like Pinnock advocates an open theism: “Since the future is genuinely open, since it is possible for a free agent to act in any of several different ways, it follows that it is not possible for God to have complete and exhaustive knowledge of the entire future.”<sup>45</sup> This is not to say that open theists are heretics but merely that the authority of God is necessarily called into question by these systemic speculations.

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<sup>43</sup>John D. Morrison, “Holy Scripture: revelation, inspiration and interpretation.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39 (S 1996):505-506.

<sup>44</sup>Bruce A. Ware, “Defining evangelicalism's boundaries theologically: is open theism evangelical?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 (June 2002):193-212.

<sup>45</sup>William Hasker, “An Adequate God,” in John B. Cobb, Jr. and Clark H. Pinnock, eds., *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theists* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 218. Cited in Ware, 193.

The perspective of this writer is that authority is being sacrificed on the altar of theological gymnastics and while such pastimes might seem engaging to the scholar they have far-reaching and devastating effects upon Christians outside of academia. In the least challenging God's authority opens the door for challenging His character, purposes, and work because if God is ignorant of the future He cannot be rightfully deemed authoritative in the present; the accuracy and surety of revelation and Scripture because if God cannot know the future then the biblical texts as redemptive history and prophetic fulfillment are merely guesses; the truthfulness and design of the gospel of salvation because if God can not know who will be living throughout human history, Christ's death cannot be substitutionary for sin; and the Christian life of faith and hope in God because Christians cannot be certain that God really can work all things out for the good of the individual or that God really has a purpose for suffering in the Christian's life.

What is the path that Christian theists must take to traverse these turbulent waters of defection and compromise? A return to the authority of God through the working of His Holy Spirit and by His Word Jesus Christ is the priority. The effects of postmodernism are seen in the hopeless abandonment of transcendent morals in American culture and a quiet acceptance among many Christians that the church may teach one thing but the individual must interpret what that means for them and act accordingly. Evangelicals must address this in their own house and then correct the misconception in the culture that truth is subjective. How can that be done?

The first thing that evangelicals must do is to decide whom they serve. If man then the discussion in this paper is irrelevant but if God then it is of the utmost importance that we pay attention to what is happening around us and by God's guidance chart a course out of the swamp. Evangelicals must resist the temptation to seek approval from the culture. Many would adamantly reject that such a thing is happening but the seeker-sensitive purpose driven mentality

that seeks to have the culture inform the church as to what is appealing in a church is a tell-tale sign that accommodation is under way. Why would evangelicals believe that God's people need a fresh perspective from the lost world on what an effective God-fearing church looks like? Haven't we learned anything from the liberal and neo-orthodox theologies that are stuck in a moral morass of their own choosing?

A second and equally important issue that evangelicals must clarify and stand firmly on is the existence and necessity of propositional truth. There is right and there is wrong and we are informed of their existence and difference by a transcendental ethic. The authority of God must necessarily be declared as the source. Postmodernism's most powerful weapon is the charge of intolerance, narrowness, and exclusiveness, with this last charge being perhaps the most inflammatory. Postmodern's understand that if the Christian truth claims related to Christ and the way of salvation are right then their system is in shambles.

The third issue that must be addressed is the over-dependence on politics and government. Conservatives and evangelicals criticize the religious left and secular culture for believing that government has the ability to solve all the problems of America. Evangelicals must gain some perspective and balance themselves in this area. Political power can be intoxicating and while this paper is not suggesting that Christians withdraw from political activity it is suggesting here that we forsake this attitude that the right political structures embodied in law will create an environment whereby people would stream to God. Laws cannot change the human heart. Only God through the work of the Holy Spirit can transform the human heart and that is a necessary prelude to a changed culture.

Finally, I propose that evangelicals refuse to succumb to the temptation to follow postmodern culture into the realm of reality defined by experience. Postmoderns reject head knowledge in

favor of heart knowledge.<sup>46</sup> This is so because verbalized ideas, opinions, and perspectives are merely expressions of cultural experiences. Words are only an expression of the individual sharing them and therefore become the experience of the individual and their reality. This leads in turn to a dependence on the heart or emotions as the barometer of reality and the rejection of the mind or reason. Churches have fallen prey to this experience over mind perspective most notably in the Word faith movements and experience driven sects that seek demonstrative exhibits over the biblical pattern of worship and teaching doctrine. What is not recognized beyond the obvious incompatibility with the biblical pattern is that secular people will only be drawn to experience driven situations until another experience driven situation presents itself as more valuable, enjoyable, or beneficial.

It is my hope that the church will awake from its slumbers and rise once again to a place of prominence in America. I do not hold out hope for those apostate denominations that have rejected God and His Word and thus His authority. There is still hope however for some who are still fighting the good fight of contending for the faith.

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<sup>46</sup>Dennis McCallum, ed., *The Death of Truth* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), 239-241.