

## Understanding the Bible

An Aid For Those Wising to Better Understand The Bible's Authority,  
and For Those Wishing to Study and Interpret It

Matthew Ruttan | March 2015

### 1. Introduction

The Bible has always been of pinnacle importance to God's people. This is true not only in the Christian tradition, but in Scripture itself, in important statements like ordination vows, and also in the devotional lives of those who try to follow Jesus.

As a church father named Jerome said over 1500 years ago: "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ." The Bible is our "canon," meaning "that which regulates, rules, or serves as a norm or pattern for other things."<sup>1</sup>

This idea with this document is to provide some basic background information and help for two groups:

1. Those who want to better understand the nature of the Bible's authority
2. Those wishing to interpret it

When it comes to the often challenging task of interpretation, there are principles that help us. These aren't meant to limit us. Instead, they help guide us as we try to discern God's will. This document attempts to draw attention to some of these principles and tools.

You should also know that this isn't an academic document. My hope is simply that it can be a helpful guide to all people who seek assistance when trying to understand, study and interpret the Bible.

## 2. The Relationship of Scripture to Authority

When making statements about various topics, many people quote or appeal to the Bible. When people say “The Bible says...” or “God’s Word says...” they are often appealing to God (through the Bible) as an authoritative voice who lends strength to a point of view. So it’s important to understand the nature of this claim to authority, especially since, for people of faith, there is no higher authority than God.

So what is God’s “authority”? In short, it is God’s rule. It is when and how God makes his will be done. It is God’s to have and use.

But let us go a bit deeper. According to Anglican Bible scholar Tom Wright, it “is the sovereign rule of God sweeping through creation to judge and to heal. It is the powerful love of God in Jesus Christ, putting sin to death and launching new creation. It is the fresh, bracing and energizing wind of the Spirit.”<sup>2</sup>

So what does “the authority of Scripture” mean, and how does that relate to God’s authority? It is helpful when answering this question to consider three things:

1. All true authority is from God.
2. God shares that authority with Jesus. (In Matthew 28: 18, Jesus says: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”)
3. Scripture is the primary way we learn about and encounter this authority. According to Wright, “the authority of Scripture” is shorthand for “God’s authority exercised *through* Scripture.”<sup>3</sup>

## 3. What does it mean to say the Bible is “inspired”?

Different people will understand this idea in different ways. Within Scripture itself, we recall passages like 2 Timothy 3:16 that say, “All Scripture is inspired by God...” But how can we get a handle on the idea of “inspiration” from the outside looking in?

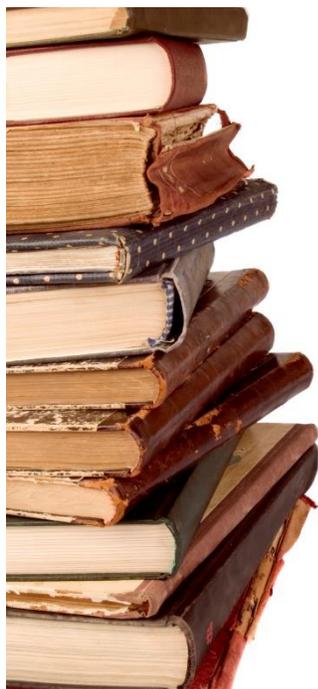
Here is a helpful way to understand it. To say the Bible is “inspired” means that Holy Spirit guided the different biblical writers and editors so that the books in the Bible “were the books God intended his people to have.”<sup>4</sup> The Israelites, and later, Jewish people, assumed this of their Bible, and the Christian community came to assume this of their Bible too.<sup>5</sup>

As it says in the Westminster Confession, a widely-used statement of faith in the Presbyterian tradition, the books of the Bible “are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life.”<sup>6</sup> Because of this, and because God inspired the writers to produce the books he wanted his people to have, “God... still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures” (Second Helvetic Confession, chapter 1).<sup>7</sup>



#### 4. Who wrote the Bible?

The Bible is not a book in the modern sense of the word where we think of a single human author. The Bible is a library—a collection of ancient writings by dozens and dozens of authors spanning hundreds and hundreds of years. We know who many of these writers are because some of the writings themselves tell us.



Many different people wrote and edited the Bible. Sometimes it is hard to know who wrote certain books—for example, the letter to the Hebrews. Ancient convention did not always demand that authors identify themselves. But other times, authors state who they are making it more obvious. This is the case in writings like Paul’s letter to the Romans. The writers were guided by the Holy Spirit to give God’s people the books God wanted them to have to be the rule of faith and life.

This is not to say that everyone agrees about who wrote different biblical books. There is much debate, including ongoing discussion about the process of writings being passed down through time (something called textual transmission), and what roles editors—who can also work under the inspiration of God—may have had in the shaping of Scripture. In all of it, an important thing to keep in mind is that the community of faith agreed upon the writings that would be authoritative for their lives.

John Calvin, the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformer who had a lasting impact on Christian thought, placed a high emphasis on the Bible. He knew that human writers and editors were not perfect, but felt that ultimately, God was the author of Scripture. In a sense, people held pens and God moved hearts.<sup>8</sup> He compared the Bible to the eye glasses we must use to see clearly.<sup>9</sup>



#### 5. The Bible as a Story

One helpful way to think of the Bible is that it is a story: A big story with different segments that contribute to a larger storyline. Some have subdivided the story into six segments and think of it as an “unfinished dramatic script”:<sup>10</sup>

1. God creates the world and people
2. People sin and trust themselves more than God
3. God chooses a people (“the Hebrews,” later called “Israel”) through whom he’ll restore creation and all people through his covenant with them and a promised “Messiah” (a word that means “anointed one”—a kind of royal ambassador for God)
4. This Messiah (Jesus) comes with this message of restoration and good news
5. The church is established to continue this message and ministry

6. God's creation and his people are restored into perfect relationship with God—something called “the new heavens and the new earth.” It's how things were always meant to be.

Some call this a play in six acts, and we are somewhere in the 5<sup>th</sup> (the story of the church). It is, therefore, unfinished and we all have a role to play in the continuing narrative.

Because God's purposes are made complete in Jesus, some scholars like Swiss thinker Karl Barth say that Scripture is authoritative when it points us to him. After all, he is the central figure in the story.



More recently, Letty Russell writes, “...the Bible continues to be a liberating word as I hear it together with others and struggle to live out its story. For me the Bible is “scripture,” or sacred writing, because it functions as “script,” or prompting for my life.”<sup>11</sup>

These ways of thinking of the Bible as a story can help us give shape to the wider movements of Scripture, and also to see ourselves within the narrative.

### 6. Jesus' Perspective

As Christians, it's also helpful to reflect on Jesus' own use of Scripture. Jesus is often called “Rabbi,” and although that title is informal before the year 70 C.E.,<sup>12</sup> it highlights how he was seen as an authoritative voice in a variety of religious matters, even for those who may not have yet known him as Lord. Jesus the Rabbi, and also our Lord, frequently appealed to Scripture as an authority.



He often quoted Scripture (which in his day would have been what we think of as the “Old Testament”), as an authority when in controversial discussions with other religious leaders. When he was tempted by the Devil he always countered by quoting Scripture. He said that the Bible testifies about him (John 5:39), and “cannot be broken” or “cannot be set aside” (John 10:35). What's more is that he said his words (which are recorded in Scripture) “will never pass away” (Mark 13:31).

### 7. Understanding “Sola Scriptura”

You might sometimes hear reference to the five great “solas” of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformation. One was “sola scriptura”—meaning, “by scripture alone.” When trying to learn about God's will, one meaning of the *sola scriptura* expression was that scripture was the *primary* place where this could be found. (The *primary* place—not the *only* place, as is sometimes thought.)

According to Tom Wright, in the great debates of that time, this phrase meant that “nothing *beyond* scripture is to be taught as needing to be believed in order for one to be saved. On the other hand, it gave a basic signpost on the way: the great truths taught in scripture are indeed the way of salvation...”<sup>13</sup>

In 1923 Karl Barth said something that endures today. He calls it the “scriptural principle” and is closely linked to the idea of *sola scriptura*: truth is found in Scripture, and “every *doctrine* must therefore be measured against an unchangeable and impassable standard discoverable in the Scriptures.”<sup>14</sup>

This thrust is present today in the ordination vows of The Presbyterian Church in Canada and also in the preamble where it states, “The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as the written Word of God, testifying to Christ the living Word, are the canon of all doctrine, by which Christ rules our faith and life.”

The *sola scriptura* emphasis can also be seen in *Living Faith*,<sup>15</sup> an authoritative faith statement in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, which says, “The Bible has been given to us by the inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life. It is the standard of all doctrine by which we must test any word that comes to us from church, world, or inner experience” (5.1).

### 8. The “literal” sense of Scripture

In popular vernacular, the expression “taking the Bible literally” has almost become synonymous with *fundamentalism*—a movement that sprung from a meeting in 1895 in Niagara that tried to stress certain “fundamentals” of the faith.<sup>16</sup> Today it more broadly refers to “conservative” theological positions on various topics. However, an uncritical “literal” reading of Scripture does injustice to the history, layers and interpretation of the text.



For the reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the *literal* sense (as opposed to the allegorical, analogical or moral sense) means “the sense of the letter”—i.e. “the sense that the first writers intended.” It doesn’t mean the same thing as when people today say “take it literally.” The reformers who sought the literal sense, would have pursued the historical, cultural and linguistic background and context to better understand a passage. This is necessary when trying to find out what the first writers intended.

### 9. One perspective on why the Bible is authoritative

In light of some of what has been said, here are six points that may help us think about how Scripture is authoritative.

1. Scripture is the *primary* way we learn about and encounter God’s will.

2. God uses Scripture to judge and to heal.
3. Jesus himself appeals to the authority of Scripture.
4. God's people have affirmed its use as authoritative for hundreds upon hundreds of years and we stand in solidarity with them as an ongoing community of faith.
5. If we look within the Bible itself, its authors confirm divine origin.
6. Our lives are living evidence of Scripture's ongoing power in the world, especially as our lives point to this grand story's main character—Jesus Christ.

As it says in *Living Faith*, the Bible “is the standard of all doctrine by which we must test any word that comes to us from the church, world, or inner experience. We subject to its judgment all we believe and do” (section 5.1).

### Aids For Interpreting The Bible

If we conclude that the Bible is authoritative, we'll need help interpreting it if we to honour its richness. So here is some help in the multi-layered process of interpretation. Perhaps I'll call them tools of interpretation.

#### A word of caution

It should be noted that there are many interpretive considerations that could be listed but are not. One of these is being aware of how hard it can be to obtain *objectivity*—meaning that we can be very *subjective* in how we see and interpret things. When we're overly subjective we can take things that are in our mind—ideas, our experiences, our biases, that sort of thing—and think the passage we're studying is about them (when often they're not).



Some authors argue that we are always subjective and so it's hard to ever fully know what a passage is really about. I honour that, but also know that it can be used as an excuse to never do the work of interpretation or take seriously the ideas that are in Scripture. That said, it still serves as a healthy warning to be cautious that we are not just thrusting our own ideas onto a passage making it say what we want. Further, history is full of examples of those who have highlighted certain parts of scripture at the expense of others in a way that was harmful—for example, to justify slavery.

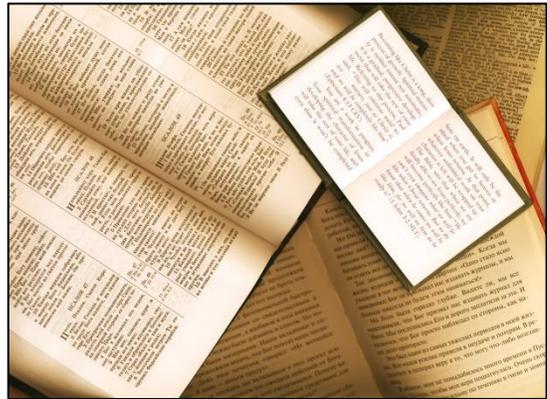
I recall reading something German New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann said: that if you don't go about your work responsibly, you can find anything in the Bible that you want to find there.<sup>17</sup> So we should proceed prayerfully and with diligence.

This document seeks to be a direct, practical and helpful tool as God's people seek to better understand his will in Scripture.

I have not included many lenses that could be used—for example, the lens offered by those who work in post-colonial studies. That's just one example; but there are many lenses from a variety of disciplines, and I don't pretend to be fully comprehensive. My goal here is to nevertheless provide tools which seek to honour the authority of Scripture as we seek to interpret it.

## A) Heinrich Bullinger

Bullinger was a 16<sup>th</sup> century Swiss theologian. He held 5 principles of interpretation that are helpful today. Each principle is listed below with some short explanation. Some of his language has been updated to reflect modern usage. The explanation found under the titles is my own:



1. *Scripture should be interpreted by Scripture, the more obscure passages by the clearer*

What this means is that if one passage is confusing, we look at other passages on similar topics. The hope is that other passage(s) will be able to shed light on the more difficult one.

2. *With attention to language, to historical setting, to the author's intention*

This means that looking to a word's meaning and context can be important. For example, the word "cool" today means more than just a low temperature. Some biblical words also have more meanings that the original author may have had in mind. Context is very important. For example, if a passage says that "All chocolate is bad," but it was originally written to a group of people who were all allergic to chocolate, then we have to take that into consideration. The author was surely looking out for their health and not pronouncing a universal principle for all-time. This is a light-hearted example, but more serious ones exist for bigger issues.

3. *In the light of the church's understanding of Scripture*

This is meant to encourage us to lean on the enduring wisdom of the church and its teachers. It has long and deep wisdom, dating back centuries from which we can benefit. And if you're serious about Bible reading, why not buy a commentary? Bible teachers and ministers can also be a helpful resource to know the historic wisdom of the church. Most have training in this area.

4. *Any authentic interpretation of Scripture will increase love for God and love for humanity*

Jesus emphasizes the great commandment as loving God with our whole being and our neighbours as ourselves. Therefore, any interpretation that instead advances hate, greed, etc is surely misplaced. We must have this central command in mind as we interpret Scripture. John 3:16 says, “For God so *loved* the world...”

5. *All true interpretations of Scripture presuppose that the heart of the interpreter loves God and seeks to do his will*

When we go to the Bible to find out what it “says” about something, we must ask whose agenda we are trying to further. It is sometimes possible to find small chunks of Scripture and pull them out of context to support a variety of views. So we need to pray before we read the Bible, asking that God purify our motives so that they align with God’s own. Interpretation is not an abstract dusty exercise, but an act of love and devotion, furthering what Jesus taught us to pray: “Thy will be done.”

## B) Tom Wright

This contemporary English scholar also has some advice. He writes, “How can we be sure that our understandings of Scripture facilitate the Spirit’s working in and through us? We do so by a reading of scripture that is (a) totally contextual, (b) liturgically grounded, (c) privately studied, (d) refreshed by appropriate scholarship, and (e) taught by the church’s accredited leaders.”<sup>18</sup>



Here is how he explains this further:

- a) *Totally contextual*: Wright says that “Each word must be understood within its own verse, each verse within its own chapter, each chapter within its own book, and each book within its own historical, cultural, and indeed canonical setting.”
- b) *Liturgically grounded*: Here Wright stresses that Scripture should be grounded in the public worship of God’s people where they have long gathered to praise, learn about, and be nourished by God: “we must work at making sure we read scripture properly in public, with appropriate systems for choosing what to read and appropriate training to make sure those who read do so to best effect.” This advice also aids against only reading portions of Scripture which may serve to advance the views of the worship leader or an interest group.
- c) *Privately studied*: Christians are encouraged to incorporate the reading of Scripture into their personal routines. It “is vital that ordinary Christians read, encounter and study scripture for themselves, in groups and individually. The famous passage

about the inspiration of scripture in 2 Timothy 3: 16-17 was written, not so much to give people the right belief *about* scripture, as to encourage them to study it for themselves.”

- d) *Refreshed by appropriate scholarship*: We are called to love the Lord with our minds (Mark 12:30), and this includes benefitting from advances in biblical scholarship. “Biblical scholarship is a great gift of God to the church, aiding it in its task of going ever deeper into the meaning of scripture and so being refreshed and energized for the talks to which we are called in and for the world... When a biblical scholar, or any theologian, wishes to propose a new way of looking at a well-known topic, he or she ought to sense an obligation to explain to the wider community the ways in which the fresh insight builds up, rather than threatens, the mission and life of the church.” This is an essential point: We benefit from the wisdom of the church’s teachers. But the church’s teachers must also be reminded that their work is not motivated by novelty or criticism as an end in itself; but rather, by the call to build up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).
- e) *Taught by the church’s accredited leaders*: As we seek to understand this point, Wright provides some clarification: “The word “leader” is actually not very helpful for various reasons, but I use it here as a summary of the various offices listed in Ephesians 4:11 and elsewhere.) This obviously includes people at several different levels of ministry, including for instance those who take charge of Sunday schools and home groups.” “To be a leader in the church is, almost by definition, to be one through whose work the mission comes about, enabled and directed by this scripture-based energy; and one through whom, again with scriptural energy to the fore, that unity and holiness is generated and sustained.”

### C) The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America

In 1982 this denomination produced a resource to help summarize some of the basic principles of interpretation from the Reformed tradition. Here are these six basic rules for interpreting the Bible found in this tradition’s confessions:

1. First, Jesus Christ, as our Redeemer, is the central focus of Scripture.
2. Second, our appeal should be to the plain text of Scripture, to the grammatical and historical context, rather than to allegorical or subjective fantasy.
3. Third, the Holy Spirit aids us in interpreting and applying God’s message.
4. Fourth, the doctrinal consensus of the early church as summarized in the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Definition of Chalcedon is the “rule of faith” that guides us.
5. Fifth, all interpretations must accord with the “rule of love,” the two-fold commandment to love God and to love our neighbour.

6. Sixth, interpretation of the Bible requires human scholarship in order to establish the best text, to understand the original languages, and to interpret the influence of the historical and cultural context in which the divine message has come.

Some of these principles are reflected in Bullinger's and Wright's approach. Yet they stand as strong summary statements of much of the wisdom in the Reformed tradition.

## D) Living Faith

When *Living Faith* was adopted as a Subordinate Standard in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, it included a section on the Bible. Although intended to be a statement of faith and not necessarily a guidepost for scriptural interpretation, its words nevertheless help in that process.

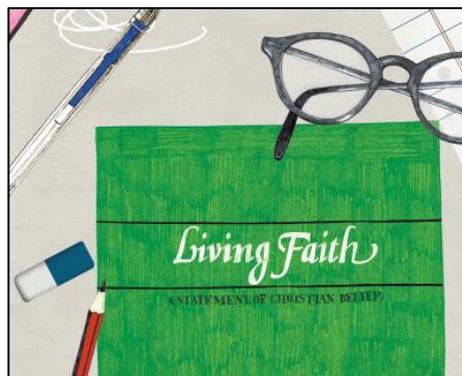
That section is reproduced here:

5.1 The Bible has been given to us by the inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life. It is the standard of all doctrine by which we must test any word that comes to us from church, world, or inner experience. We subject to its judgment all we believe and do. Through the Scriptures the church is bound only to Jesus Christ its King and Head. He is the living Word of God to whom the written word bears witness.

5.2 The Holy Spirit gives us inner testimony to the unique authority of the Bible and is the source of its power. The Bible, written by human hands, is nonetheless the word of God as no other word ever written. To it no other writings are to be added. The Scriptures are necessary, sufficient, and reliable, revealing Jesus Christ, the living Word.

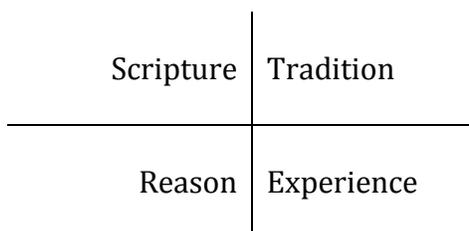
5.3 Both Old and New Testaments were written within communities of faith and accepted as Scripture by them. Those who seek to understand the Bible need to stand within the church and listen to its teaching.

5.4 The Bible is to be understood in the light of the revelation of God's work in Christ. The writing of the Bible was conditioned by the language, thought, and setting of its time. The Bible must be read in its historical context. We interpret Scripture as we compare passages, seeing the two Testaments in light of each other, and listening to commentators past and present. Relying on the Holy Spirit, we seek the application of God's word for our time.



### E) A Note on The “Wesleyan Quadrilateral”

People often talk about the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as a helpful tool when trying to interpret something. Although John Wesley (1703-1791) never used the term, he did talk about these concepts. Here is the quadrilateral.



The idea is that you reflect with these four lenses to better understand something and make a decision.

However, this was never intended to be a four-legged stool—i.e. never was it intended that these four things be weighed equally. To Wesley, Scripture was primary, and our tradition and reason helped us better understand Scripture. Further, “experience” was never our ‘isolated modern experience.’<sup>19</sup> What was meant was our experience of God’s love through the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps it’s easier to understand the quadrilateral like this:

1. Scripture guides us
2. Reason, Tradition and our Experience of God’s love through the Holy Spirit help us better understand how Scripture guides us.

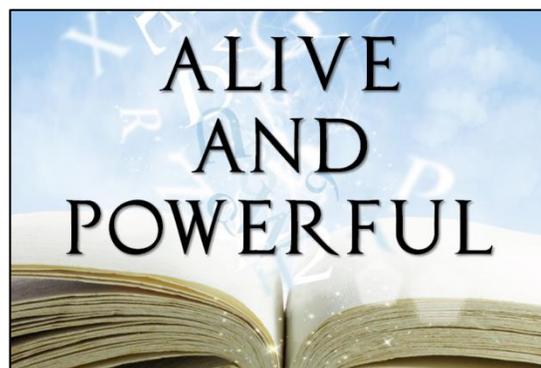
### Conclusion

The Bible has long been authoritative for God’s people. It has also been the primary place where we seek God’s will no matter what it is that lies before us. Hopefully this document has helped provide some basic background to Scripture and its authority, and also some practical helpful tools when trying to interpret it.

As it says in *The 10 Theses of Berne*, a statement of faith from 1528 authored by Swiss thinker Ulrich Zwingli:

“The holy Christian Church, whose only Head is Christ, is born of the Word of God, and abides in the same, and listens not to the voice of a stranger.”

“The word of God is alive and powerful”  
(Hebrews 4:12, New Living Translation)



## Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Jackson Flanders, Jr., Robert Wilson Crapps, David Anthony Smith, *People of the Covenant: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Last Word* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2005), p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> Wright, *Last Word*, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Wright, *Last Word*, 37.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Wright, *Last Word*, p. 37ff.

<sup>6</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith, section 1.2.

<sup>7</sup> Second Helvetic Confession, (Heinrich Bullinger, 1566).

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006 reissue): “God is its Author. Thus, the highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it.” ... “the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.” Section 1.7.4.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.6.1.

<sup>10</sup> J. Richard Middleton & Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 182

<sup>11</sup> Letty M. Russell, “Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation,” in Letty M. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 1985, 138.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Craig Evans, *Jesus and His World: The Archaeological Evidence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 85.

<sup>13</sup> Wright, *Last Word*, 72.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1957), 241.

<sup>15</sup> Living Faith is a “subordinate standard” in The Presbyterian Church in Canada. This means that it speaks authoritatively on many matters; but on all things it is “subordinate” (i.e. under) to the authority of the Bible and Jesus.

<sup>16</sup> These were: the verbal inerrancy of Scripture, the divinity of Jesus Christ, the virgin birth, the substitutionary theory of the atonement, and the physical resurrection and bodily return of Christ.

<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately I can no longer find this exact quote, although I think I remember reading it in one of his shorter research essays on the process of exegesis and eisegesis.

<sup>18</sup> Wright, *Last Word*, 127ff. The following quotations are from this same chapter.

<sup>19</sup> This is the language employed by Wright. Cf. *Last Word*, 100ff.