

Grappling with the New Testament Session 9



The Authority of the New Testament



Learning for
Discipleship
Programme

2023 - 2025

Grappling with the New Testament

Session 9 – The Authority of the New Testament

1. “The Word of the Lord”

- 1.1 There is a difference between a faith attitude which proclaims the Bible as ‘scripture’ and a literalist view about the nature of and the content of the texts of the Bible’s books. Occasionally it is necessary to reassure people that (in most ‘churches of tradition’ of the west) there is no requirement to think that every word / description / injunction / teaching found in the Bible has to be taken literally.
- 1.2 The early Christian scholar Origen (c185-253 CE) cautioned the Church to recognise that not all texts of the Bible are of the same sort and that there are times when metaphorical, non-literal understandings and interpretations are needed.
- 1.3 From the early 19th century, the impacts of Enlightenment thinking, the development of scientific method and of literary criticism were being felt. In addition, with new historical and archaeological evidence, including textual evidence, the academic development of Biblical criticism was a natural development. Biblical ‘criticism’ (as we have seen) is the study of the Biblical texts in order to better understand their nature, purpose, origins and contexts.
- 1.4 For many this has enabled ‘liberation’ from superstitious or untenable interpretations of the Bible. It is worth noting that some of the leading scholars in Germany, Britain and elsewhere were ordained and were firm believers.
- 1.5 Others were shocked and affronted by the rise of the Critical movement. One famous confrontation in a very public forum was the so-called Oxford debate of 1860



The Great Debate of 1860 - Oxford

www.youtube.com/watch?v=povYofKYqJM

‘On 30 June 1860, the Museum hosted a clash of ideologies that has become known as the Great Debate.

‘Even before the collections were fully installed, or the architectural decorations completed, the British Association for the Advancement of Science held its 30th annual meeting to mark the opening of the building, then known as the University Museum. It was at this event that Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford, and Thomas Huxley, a biologist from London,

went head-to-head in a debate about one of the most controversial ideas of the 19th century – Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection.

'Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* had been published the previous November, so the ideas it contained were fresh. The lecture and discussion on the subject took place in what was then the Radcliffe Library, on the first floor of the Museum. Although no-one accurately recorded what was said in front of the noisy crowd of almost 500 people, the story that has emerged is of a sharp intellectual volley between Wilberforce and Huxley.

'Huxley was a brilliant young scientist who had studied invertebrate fossils, apes and humans. As one of Darwin's closest associates – he was later nicknamed 'Darwin's bulldog' – Huxley was among the few people to know about the ideas presented in *On the Origin of Species* ahead of its publication.

'As Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce had reached the pinnacle of a highly successful career in the Church of England. Renowned as an eloquent and influential speaker, Wilberforce also had a first-class degree in mathematics and was a Fellow of the Royal Society. In the debate, he threw the full force of his theological training into upholding the idea of biblical creation, refuting Darwin's picture of evolution through natural selection.

'As the debate unfolded, Wilberforce taunted Huxley about his possible ape ancestry, to which Huxley is claimed to have retorted: 'If then the question is put to me whether I would rather have a miserable ape for a grandfather or a man highly endowed by nature and possessed of great means of influence and yet employs these faculties and that influence for the purpose of introducing ridicule into a grave scientific discussion, I unhesitatingly affirm my preference for the ape.'

'This 'Great Debate' was a dramatic event that marked a key moment in the development of modern evolutionary science.'

(Report on the web site of The University of Oxford's
Natural History Museum)

- 1.6 Not only natural science but also matters of theological, ethical and social importance present challenges in the light of our present age, its norms and its realities. For example, here is a selection of difficult New Testament passages...



Activity 1:

Discuss in a small group your immediate thoughts about some of the following;

Psalm 137 verse 9

Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!

1 Corinthians 14:34 & 35

Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

Matthew 5:32

I say this to you, everyone who divorces his wife, except for the case of an illicit marriage,¹ makes her an adulteress; and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

¹ Marriage within the Jewish forbidden degrees, allowed by the Romans but not in Christianity.

Proverbs 20;30

Blows that wound cleanse away evil; beatings make clean the innermost parts.

Acts 5;9

(but look at the whole passage if you are not familiar with it)
Look [said Peter], the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out....

1 Peter 2;13 & 14

¹³ For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴ or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right.

John 14;6

Jesus said to him [Thomas], "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Are there any other examples you would wish to add to this list?



Word of God?

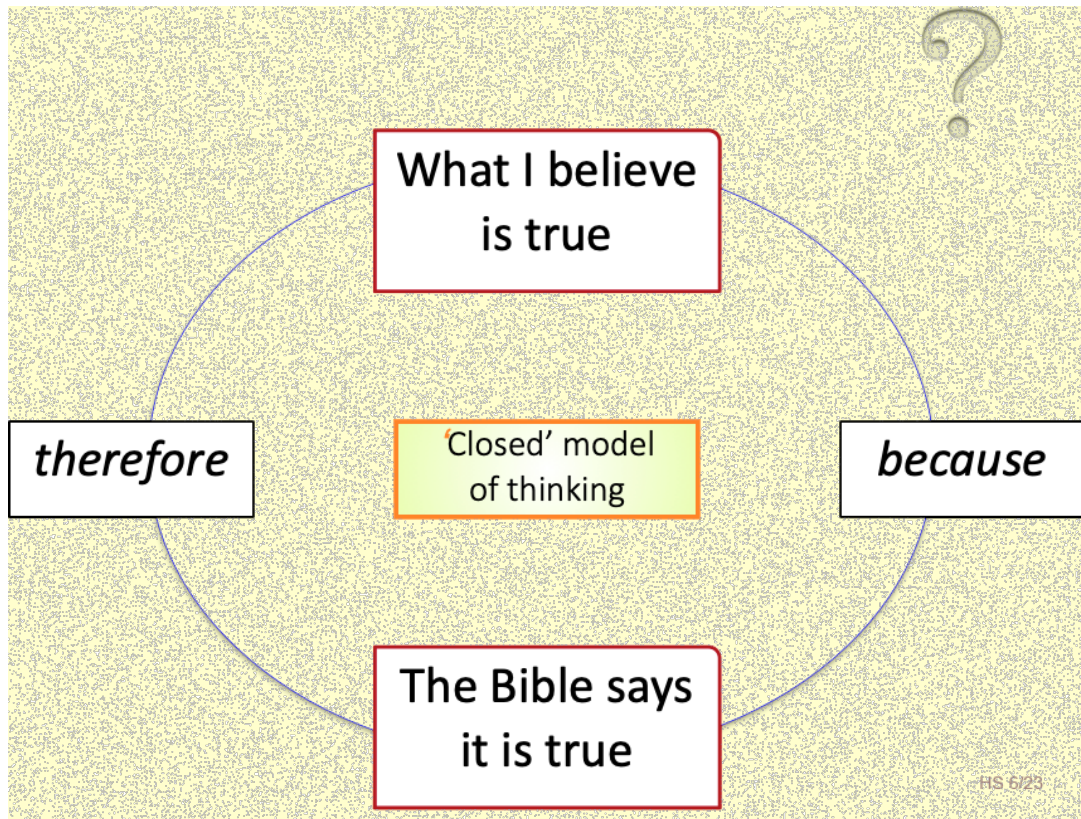
- 1.7 In a multitude of ways Christians refer to the Bible as 'The Word of God'. Certain, prescribed books make up the 'canon' of scripture. There are some variations including the Apocrypha. Similarly, there are books now excluded from the New Testament which were previously used. One example is the 'Didache' – again refer back to this in earlier work.
- 1.8 The 'Word of God' as an expression 'disguises' a collection of divergent views of Churches and among individuals of those churches. We meet non-literal interpretations of the Bible in the Early Church. We also see firmly literalist understandings of the Bible through the centuries.
- 1.9 In what way or manner can the Bible be a "Word of God" for all? In Reformation times in Western Europe the idea of 'sola scriptura' (Scripture alone) as the source of Christian teaching was shaped into the culture of many countries. But this is neither the view of the late Reformation Church of England nor of Counter-reformation Catholic teaching. 'Sola Scripture' meant that things were permitted only if mentioned in the Bible. If it is not in the Bible then it was not acceptable. Richard Hooker (Church of England) and the teachings of the Council of Trent also emphasised the developed and developing traditions of the historical Church which expand on, interpret and present the texts in each age.



Activity 3: Word of God?

- With one or two others discuss your understanding of "The Word of God" in relation to the New Testament.
- We often justify our understanding of the authority of the Bible in terms of "inspiration". Discuss what this may mean.
- Philosophers are very wary of "closed approaches" to the concept of truth; they can be very sceptical of any suggestion of "absolute truth". The closed view of truth may be summarised as shown in Fig.1:

Fig. 1



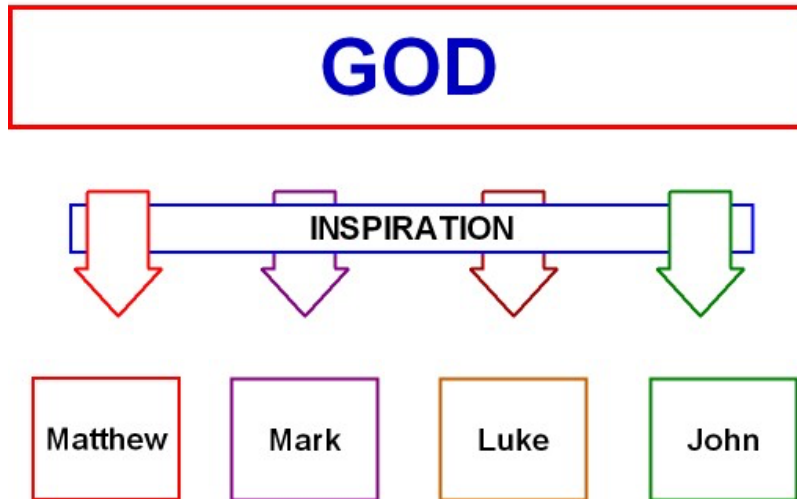
Closed thinking

- How accurate a picture is this of a Christian view of the Bible?
- What problems can such a model present for
 - a. Believers? b. Enquirers? c. Non-believers?
- As we have seen, since the early 19th Century scholars have engaged in "critical" approaches to the Bible, including the Gospels. This has included close examination of the texts and exploring what is known of the cultural, religious and political environment from which the texts sprang.
 - a. Suggest why such scholarship may have become so important?
 - b. What fears may this bring to some traditional believers? Why?

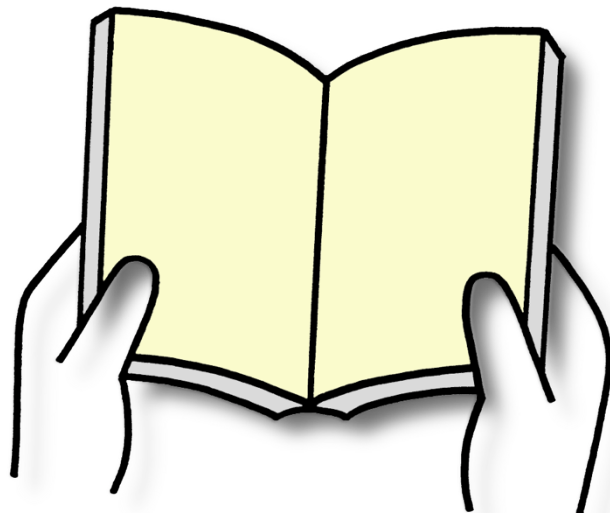
Inspiration

Fig. 2

Inerrancy Theory and the Four Gospels



- 1.10 In the diagram above (Fig. 2) we are reminded of the most clear-cut, literalist understanding of the inspiration of the Scriptures (in this case, of the four Gospels). Consider how this affects the world view of the believer and his or her attitude to (for example) moral issues and decisions about them. In general terms this approach is clearly related to what is called a closed model of thinking (represented in the diagram on the previous page).
- 1.11 'All scripture is 'inspired' by God does not need to be taken as an 'inerrancy' doctrine. To be inspired by someone can mean such things as 'example', 'lead', 'disclosure', 'providing a basis' and much more. To some the literalist 'inerrancy' suffices. For others the Bible is seen as a human product of spiritual / religious experience, insight and learning rooted in the reality of the presence of God (whatever that may be understood to mean!).



Activity 4 – non-literal approaches to ‘Word of God’

What of the Liberal end.... what diagram might best reflect their position?

Can you explain your diagram to your neighbour?



Is there a spectrum – a gradual range of views between these apparent “extremes”?

3.3 For the majority in the ‘Churches of Tradition’ Biblical criticism has been embraced, studied and responded to. There is no requirement in such Churches to adopt an ‘inerrancy’ stance. Rather, Biblical criticism has often been understood to deepen our understanding of the nature and purposes of the texts of the Bible and to inform our age and situation in the light of that critical approach.

Sola Scriptura: The Scripture contains all things necessary...

- 4.1. In the early decades of the English Reformation a growing tension was developing about the attitude to and the rôle scripture in the faith and life of the Church. The climax of these tensions came together with the Civil War and the attempted establishment of a Puritan state (The Commonwealth) partly modelled on the Genevan society established by Jean Calvin.
 - 4.2 This Puritan stance insisted that all that is needed for our salvation is a faith in God as taught in the bible. One extreme consequence of this was that it was proclaimed that something is permitted if it is in the Bible. If it is not in the Bible then it is not permitted for it is not 'godly' or 'pure'. Up and down the country in the early decades of the 17th century Puritan town councils were imposing a sort of moral policing overseeing the conduct and morals of the population – both in their private lives as well as in their public behaviour.
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Activity 5 – Life in a semi-theocracy

- Find out more about life in Puritan communities in England and in the American colonies of the early to mid-seventeenth century
 - Share in your group what appear to be the strengths and the weaknesses of trying to organise communities in this way.
 - Just as then in England, so now in such countries as Iran and Afghanistan, a semi- or totally theocratic society is being shaped by revolutionary leaders. Why does this worry so many so much?
-

Richard Hooker

In the late 16th Century an English academic and priest in Hampshire, Richard Hooker, was to set out a 'push back' against these apparently extreme, Protestant views about the authority of the Bible. His arguments provided, and continue to provide, a base line of understanding of authority within the Church

Activity6 ; Richard Hooker and the question of authority in the Church

- Bring to the session what you have managed to find out about the life and teachings of Richard Hooker.
- Look at the image in Fig. 3 below. Do these priorities still balance successfully? In what ways may they be under strain?
- What of the more recent trend in Pentecostalist Protestant thought which places high authority on direct spiritual experience?

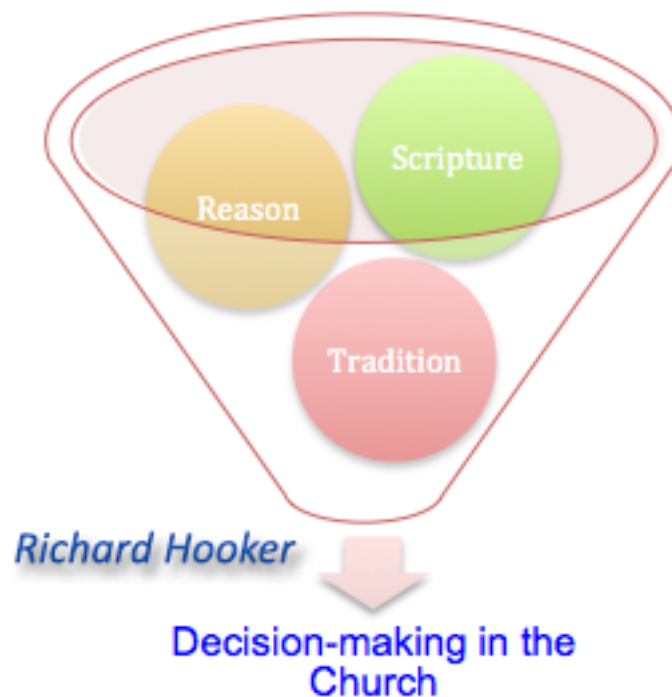


Fig. 3

The following is an extract about Hooker on the authority of Scripture;



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Vol. 21, No. 1, February 1997
BRUCE KAYE

Authority and the Interpretation of Scripture in
Hooker's 'Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity'

Placing the debate in the public arena is a natural implication of his development of the idea of natural law and the connection between reason and Scripture. In Book 1, when Hooker develops his understanding of the basis of human society, he makes clear the character of the authority of Scripture. He speaks of a desire for all men to be happy. Humanity seeks a physical perfection, an intellectual perfection, and also a spiritual and divine perfection.

This last can only come by divine reward, which man naturally cannot attain and apart from which he is lost. "God has revealed a way which begins with his compassion for the lost condition of humanity and then redemption out of the same by the pretious death and merit of a mightie Saviour, which hath witnessed of himself saying, I am the way, the way that leadeth us from miserie into blisse. This supernaturall way had God in himself prepared before all worldes. The way of supernaturall dutie which to us he hath prescribed, our Saviour in the Gospell of Saint John doth note, terming it by an excellencie, the worke of God. (1.11.6)

In this context Hooker develops two important points. On the one hand, the authority of Scripture is contingent upon its relationship to the Incarnation; and on the other, its authority is demarcated in terms of the purpose for which it was given. He speaks of '*that eternal veritie which hath discovered the treasures of hidden wisdom in Christ*' (1.11.6). Scripture stands as witness to this great supernatural revelation.

The emphasis here is in sharp contrast to the exalted and comprehensive place given to Scripture by the Puritans. Hooker has argued for a conception of law which emphasises continuity between that ideal law of nature and of reason which belongs in the foundation of things to God himself and those laws which are revealed in Scripture and are more positive in character and which relate to our salvation.²

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² See R. Orr, 'Chillingworth versus Hooker: A Criticism of Natural Law Theory', *Journal of Religious History*, Vol. 2, 1962, pp. 120–32.

The great divide between nature and the transcendent God of the Deists has not occurred in Hooker's thoughts and he is much more able to see the sovereign providence of God in the natural order and operating in history. That fundamental approach means that when Hooker comes to the authority of Scripture, he approaches it in much more open terms in relation to authority generally and to the character of the human condition. He sees the authority of Scripture as not only related to natural reason but also as having a specific and demarcated purpose in pointing us to salvation and in itself being contingent for that purpose upon its witness to the Incarnation which is the centre of revealing truth in Christian faith. For Hooker, the community which constitutes the area of operation for the authority of Scripture is the community of humanity. In general terms modern theologians have redrawn that community to refer more to the community of the church thought of as a discrete and distinct subgroup of humanity.

Further Reading

You may wish to read further on this. For example

- [SCM Study Guide to New Testament Interpretation by Ian Boxall page 15 to page 17](#) (© 2007 and published by SCM Press ISBN 978 0 334 04048 4)
- [A History of the Bible by John Barton page 483 to 489](#) (© 2019 and published by Penguin Random House. ISBN 978 0 141 97850 5)
- [On Being a Christian by Hans Küng pages 411 to 462](#) (© 1974 Published by Fount Paperbacks. ISBN 978-0385192866.)