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A TRUE WORD?

Scripture, Authority, and the Question of Truth

ALAN G. PADGETT

It is a pleasure and an honor to participate in this Festschrift for an excellent philosopher and Christian scholar.¹ I have known Stephen Davis since 1975; he was my first philosophy professor as an undergraduate. Steve has been a mentor and friend to me for many years, and I have learned much from him both inside and outside the groves of academe. I remain thankful to God for him, his life, and his vocation among us.

There has been a notable growth in philosophical theology of late, and this includes the analytic tradition Davis represents. The current discussion in philosophy of religion in this tradition has moved from general issues of "theism" to specific investigation of particular religious teachings from karma to Christology that cover many of the philosophically interesting aspects of religious thought. Among topics recently taken up by philosophers is the Christian doctrine of scripture. Some of today's top philosophers of religion have written on this important teaching of the church, including Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga, and Nicholas Wolterstoff.² Davis is among those who as philosophical theologians have contributed to this current debate. Indeed, his first published book was on this topic: *The Debate about the Bible*.³

In this essay I first review Davis's contributions to the issue of the truth and authority of scripture for the Christian faith. I show that he holds to the view that scripture is the inspired Word of God, and the first and foremost authority among all the genuine sources of divine revelation. Davis is among those who hold that while scripture is "infallible" revelation for faith and practice as he defines it, the Bible does not operate in an interpretive vacuum. He does not believe that theology is based on scripture *alone* in some simple sense. Let us call this the *primacy* of scripture for theology, a standard view in Anglican and Methodist theological traditions.

In the second part of this essay I move from the work of Davis to that of another philosopher-theologian who has devoted years to this and related topics in Christian doctrine: I defend the primacy of scripture over against William J. Abraham. Abraham considers and rejects this understanding of scriptural authority in favor of a greater parity between scripture and what he calls the "canonical heritage of the church." By bringing Davis into conversation with Abraham, I believe we will in the end find a balanced, rich, and deeply spiritual understanding of scripture's truth for Christian faith today.

DAVIS ON THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE

Since his earliest publication on the authority of the Bible, Davis has defended a robust understanding of it, including the traditional Presbyterian teaching that as the Word of God in written form scripture is "the only infallible rule for faith and practice."⁴ Looking back at this book from a distance of over three decades, we can see that it was a learned and irenic response to the often-fractious debates within American evangelicalism over the question of inerrancy. *Debate* is a reply by Davis to the fundamentalist evangelicals arguing for a narrow understanding of biblical inerrancy. Harold Lindsell's *Battle for the Bible*, for example, was a major tract in this theological conflict.⁵ In his book Davis engages the arguments of historical American fundamentalists and conservative-evangelicals on three points: the concept of inerrancy, the biblical argument, and the slippery slope argument (I use "fundamentalist" in its historical and unbiased sense). He

shows argument by argument that the views put forward by inerrantists are incomplete, defective, or otherwise flawed. Unlike many of his opponents on this issue, Davis is learned, cautious, and scholarly. While clearly an evangelical with a high view of scripture, he rejects the notion of inerrancy then being insisted on by power brokers in the fundamentalist-evangelical spectrum of American Christianity.

What is enduring in this book by Davis is his open and irenic form of evangelical scholarship. His generous biblical orthodoxy is evident in its pages, even when he is being quite critical of the views of inerrantists. He frankly admits the problems of his own view of “infallible” divine revelation for faith and practice in the written Word of God. He admits, for example, that he is “unable to stipulate a clear and infallible criterion to distinguish Biblical passages that are crucially relevant to faith and practice from those that are not.”⁶ Yet his high view of biblical inspiration, his solid Christian orthodoxy, and his public confession in scripture as the written Word of God is quite clear.

Davis’s mature thinking on the nature and authority of scripture is found in two essays that he wrote much later in his academic career. Both were written for anthologies and for special occasions. The first of these examined here considers further the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*. The second looks at the practical logic of affirming that the Bible is the truth of God.

Davis’s essay “Scripture, Tradition, and Theological Authority,” comes out of a symposium at Claremont. It contains serious conversation with Roman Catholic theologians. Looking back, we can see that it anticipates his long collaborative theological work with Roman Catholic theologians, especially Gerald O’Collins and Daniel Kendall.⁷ In this essay Davis develops a theological encounter with the standard Catholic view of scripture and tradition as joint norms for theology and practice.⁸

The second essay, “The Bible Is True,” comes from a symposium on the Bible and the question of truth which the current writer had something to do with organizing at Azusa Pacific University. The volume that resulted from this extended dialogue between philosophers and theologians on this question contains the chapter by Davis, “What Do We Mean When We Say the ‘The Bible Is True?’”⁹ The essay was also incorporated into his monograph, *Christian Philosophical Theology*.¹⁰ Let us begin the

brief overview of Davis's mature thinking on the authority of scripture with his views on scripture and tradition.

Like most Christian theologians over the past two millennia, Davis accepts as authoritative "those places where the Tradition is unified," because "it was the Fathers who set for us the Christian theological agenda and delineated for us the boundaries of orthodoxy."¹¹ As a scholar he wants careful historical work done on both the differences and the commonalities in the long story of Christian theology, yet he affirms (again, with a majority of theologians) that there are genuine common ecumenical practices and beliefs in that history which help define the identity of Christianity over time. Still, Davis is firm in his evangelical point about the centrality and supreme authority of scripture for the church, discipleship, and theology. Also over against Catholic theology, which he agrees with on many points, he does not find that scripture needs a normative or binding interpreter (such as the teaching office of the Holy See). "Their teachings are revisable by appeal to Scripture," he writes.¹² These are of course longstanding differences between traditional Roman Catholic and traditional Reformation theologies. (Davis refers to Barth at this point, noting his call for a "free Bible.")¹³

Where Davis differs from some evangelicals is in his agreement with Catholics that *the Bible does need to be interpreted*, even for matters of faith and practice. No text, not even the scriptures, can speak for itself without needing interpretation. What Davis rejects in the Catholic view, then, is the idea that the faithful need an *authoritative* interpreter: "My view, then, is twofold: (1) scripture is necessary for interpreting scripture; and (2) scripture, our highest source and norm of religious truth, takes priority over tradition." Only scripture is confessed as the Word of God written, and so "Tradition guides the interpretation of Scripture but must never control it."¹⁴

While he thus disagrees at some point with standard Roman Catholic doctrine, he also rejects and revises a standard Reformation view: *sola scriptura*. Scripture alone cannot be our highest source of religious truth, he argues, because "scripture needs to be interpreted and so can be misinterpreted."¹⁵ Davis thus ends up (without mentioning this fact) at something like the classic Anglican *via media* between Puritans and Catholics. But at one point I fault Davis's critique of this Reformation principle of

sola scriptura: he does not show he has done that important historical work which he rightly urges is central to understanding the classic Christian faith. What difference might this make?

Davis considers and reviews four theories or definitions of what it means to affirm "Scripture alone." A portion of the standard evangelical, Reformation view is considered as theory no. 2: "Scripture is our only salvifically sufficient source of religious truth." So far so good. But in his criticism of this theory, Davis makes an error. He rightly points out that people have been saved without ever knowing about or hearing of the scriptures, even the Bible itself. For this reason he rejects this understanding or definition of *sola scriptura*. But the claim of the Reformers is *not* that some knowledge of the biblical text is necessary for salvation. Rather, they taught that all that is necessary for salvation is found in scripture. Logically this is quite a different proposition. Davis interprets theory no. 2 as if "salvifically sufficient" means "if someone is saved, then that someone knows the Bible." Rather, the view of the Reformation is this: "if someone knows the Bible, then that someone has all they need to know in order to be saved." Put in negative terms, the standard Reformation position is that nothing essential to salvation is based on tradition alone: The Bible alone is sufficient. Davis's point that people can be saved without knowing the Bible is quite irrelevant. It's almost as if he thought the principle was that the Bible is salvifically *necessary* rather than salvifically *sufficient*.

While Davis has not quite interpreted the classic Reformation teaching of *sola scriptura* correctly, the main thrust of his argument is sound. *Sola scriptura* should not be understood to imply that the Bible does not need to be interpreted, and does not need the guiding hand of the great ecumenical tradition, to function as the infallible rule for Christian faith and practice. Yet tradition itself, and the common confession of the churches, is that the scriptures are the Word of God. By developing a version of the primacy of scripture while accepting its place in a larger tradition, Davis finds a way of maintaining the emphases of the Reformation in the light of subsequent and important criticism.

In "The Bible Is True,"¹⁶ Davis develops this basic evangelical point, with an essay on the meaning of the idea that the Bible is true. He states one working assumption on the first page: "God speaks to us in the Bible."¹⁷ Answering the basic question of the original conference, "What

do we mean when we say the Bible is true?" Davis starts with the standard understanding of truth for statements (a truth-condition theory, to be specific) and notes a problem. While there are true statements in the Bible, a book full of true statements like $7 + 5 = 12$ would not be true in the way that we as believers approach the truth of scripture. So Davis turns instead to a standard evangelical and Reformed point about the scriptures: we come to them with an attitude of implicit trust. We consider it normative for our lives and spirituality, our obedience and our most fundamental values. "In short, we *submit* to the Bible."¹⁸ Yet Davis takes over one aspect of the truth-conditional or realist theory of truth for statements: the fact that a proposition is true is independent of human belief in its truth. Davis claims not only that we who believe ought to submit ourselves, in the specified way, to scripture: all humans *ought* to do so. Many theologians today would affirm what we who believe should submit to the story of scripture, to the biblical narrative, because it is *our* book: our classic that gives the faith community its identity. Davis would not deny this, but he moves a step beyond it. Not only should Christian believers submit to the Bible, rightly interpreted; *all* people ought to submit to the Bible, *because it is objectively authoritative*.¹⁹

Here Davis puts his finger on an important point. The God of the Bible is not just the God of our community of faith, but the maker of heaven and earth. YHWH is not only the God of Israel, but the Creator and judge of all nations. If the biblical witness about this God is true, then that witness is not true only for those who believe: it is true for the whole human race, for the whole planet, for all reality visible and invisible. The God of the whole Bible is either Lord of all or Lord of nothing and no one. He is not a tribal god.

So far in this essay I have been concerned with an exposition of Davis's evangelical understanding of the primacy of scripture as the highest authority for religious truth. This is a modification of the standard Reformation view of *sola scriptura*, a journey Davis does not take alone but in the company of Anglican and Methodist traditions, among others. Like Davis, I too find the notion of a primacy of scripture among written sources of special revelation to be a helpful and fully evangelical modification, one which rightly sees value for theology and practice in the great ecumenical creeds and traditions.

**WILLIAM ABRAHAM AND THE CANONICAL HERITAGE
OF THE CHURCH**

In an impressive tour de force of some five hundred pages, William Abraham critically surveys the crucial question of canon and authority in Christian theology.²⁰ The work itself is a milestone on this question, and Abraham displays deep learning and profound reflection as a Christian scholar throughout. Although trained in analytic philosophy, Abraham is clearly at home now in historical and systematic theology. The work is detailed and nuanced, with a historical shape to the argument, yet the main thesis can be clearly stated. The rich concept and function of "canon" from the early church was reduced to a kind of epistemological foundation in many and various ways, and among Protestants often reduced to nothing more than the canon of scripture. This led to a number of serious problems in theology, including the regular and disastrous attempt to turn the canonical principles of the church into epistemology. Yet "canon" was a rich and diverse notion in the early church and was not merely the canon of biblical books. The early church "had to hand from the beginning a Gospel, a network of canonical practices, like preaching and sacraments, and a system of canonical oversight represented by episcopal succession and apostolic councils."²¹ All these are equally canonical, and the authority of the biblical canon rightly finds its place in this rich tapestry of Christian practices, beliefs, and persons. This historic, catholic, and orthodox canonical heritage is understood as a means of grace, and a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Bible finds its proper place and authority within this larger complex. Abraham is at pains to criticize the turning of the Bible into an epistemological foundation and instead seeks to "recover a way of thinking about canon which is soteriological rather than epistemological in outlook."²²

Abraham has extensive criticism to make of the notion of *sola scriptura*, but we will not consider this here. Rather, let us look at his criticism of the *primacy* of scripture, which is best found in his extended discussion of and dialogue with the Anglican divine, Richard Hooker.²³ Hooker ably defended the Anglican *via media* against both Puritan radicals and Roman Catholic traditionalists, and in doing so clearly articulated the now-famous Anglican triangle of religious authorities starting with scripture, followed by tradition and then reason.²⁴ Abraham is not only judicious in his

exposition of Hooker's view on scripture, tradition, reason, and salvation, but quite charitable in his critique. Although Hooker does set his view of scripture's authority within a much larger set of church practices and contexts, Abraham still detects even in him the malevolent work of "epistimizing the concept of Scripture."²⁵ Abraham finds impossible, for example, the Protestant notion—found in the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles and defended in Hooker—that the teaching of the ecumenical creeds must be found already in scripture for the creeds to be authoritative. For Abraham, the church needs a broader basis of authority in its worship, mission, preaching, and practices than the Bible alone, or even the tradition truncated to the limits of what can be already found in scripture.

We can extrapolate from his dialogue with Hooker and the Anglican *via media* what Abraham might readily say about the arguments Davis puts forward for the primacy of scripture. By focusing on the issue of religious truth and authority for theology, Davis too is guilty of what so many evangelicals over the century have done: seek in the Bible a kind of epistemological foundation and reduce the rich canonical heritage of the church to the Bible alone.

I think that the general position that Davis defends is capable of responding to and absorbing the important arguments and helpful enrichment of modern theological method that Abraham provides. Despite appearances, nothing that Abraham argues for mandates an abandonment of the notion of the primacy of scripture. To be sure, the *rationalism* of much of evangelical scholarship does need to be resisted. Davis, too, writes often of the Bible as the highest source of religious truth, and does not develop sufficiently enough his basic view that the Bible's authority is for "faith and practice" and so for salvation in its many dimensions, not merely religious epistemology. His essay "The Bible Is True" moves into this larger context rather well, in fact. I find the differences here a matter of emphasis, which can be corrected. What such a change of emphasis (from epistemology to soteriology) does not demand is an abandonment of *the primacy of scripture among and within the rich canonical heritage of the church*. What is missing from Abraham's brilliant historical and philosophical study is a careful demarcation of the centrality of scripture as authority in the "canonical" Fathers of the church themselves. Once we

make the correction, his theory and that of Davis supplement rather than supplant each other.

Now Abraham does admit that

the Scriptures and the Creed were indeed a kind of standard or norm; but they were essentially a standard of teaching and instruction for the Church in its worship, its catechesis, and the direction of its spiritual life. Equally we might say that they provided standards for demarcating orthodoxy from heresy.²⁶

None of this approaches a kind of authorized or canonical theory of knowledge, argues Abraham. But what Abraham fails to show is that once this point is agreed upon (as it should be), and we see scripture in its proper soteriological function and rich complex of the means of grace, this requires abandoning the primacy of scripture as a norm and standard even within that complex. Sure, scripture and creed do indeed belong together, as both Hooker and Davis would agree. But they would press against Abraham that it is part of our canonical heritage itself to confess the Holy Scriptures—and they alone among humanly authored religious texts—to be God's Word and so Holy Writ.

It is not merely Hooker and Davis who would press this claim. It is far older than either of them. Indeed, the very Doctors of the church of the first few centuries of Christianity would press this claim for "the oracles of God" over against not only their own teachings and standards for discipleship, but that of any other text. Examine the work of such canonical doctors and church theologians as John Chrysostom, Gregory Nazianzus, or Augustine: all alike refer us to the foundational authority of Holy Scripture in the spirituality and teaching ministry of the church. For this reason John Chrysostom, to take one example among many, can urge us to "seek no other teacher" than "the oracles of God."²⁷ Abraham's own theological method ought to point him in the same direction as Hooker, and indeed several recent Catholic theologians and authoritative documents, toward seeing the Bible as primary but not exclusive among the means of grace. Holy Writ would thus have pride of place in considering and critically reflecting on the shape of Christian faith and practice today, without being some kind of automatic guarantee of epistemological truth.²⁸

The purpose of this study has been to explore and defend the view of biblical truth and authority found in the writings of Stephen Davis. Toward this end I have not only expounded and at one point disagreed with Davis but also placed his thought in dialogue with another philosophical theologian who has written extensively on the topic. By bringing Davis into conversation with Abraham, not only have we seen the strength of the position Davis arrives at (the primacy of scripture), but we have arrived at a more richly textured theological understanding of scripture's function as one of the means of grace. Abraham's arguments would apply to Davis, to the extent that as a philosopher he still tends to speak of scripture as a highest authority for religious truth. At the same time, we should follow Davis in holding forth the primacy of Scripture within the rich canonical heritage of the church pace Abraham. Thus, the two together form a more perfect union. We can agree that the Holy Bible is not true in isolated bits, nor is it a list of simple facts. The power of the written text of the Bible to bring divine revelation today is part and parcel of a contemporary, traditional, communal, and practical relationship with God in the context of all the means of grace. Scripture thus understood is spiritual truth that comes to us in many forms and genres, written by human beings but inspired by the Holy Spirit and accepted by the church as the Word of God for us and for our salvation.²⁹

NOTES

1. My thanks to my postgraduate teaching assistant, Rev. Eric L. Bodestab, for his comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

2. See representative works by these philosophers: Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), esp. chap. 12, "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship"; and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

3. Stephen T. Davis, *The Debate about the Bible: Inerrancy versus Infallibility* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), cited in the main text as *Debate*.

4. Davis, *The Debate about the Bible*, 9, 15. Davis is a Presbyterian.

5. Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976). Of course this book is not so much a battle for the Bible as a battle for a fundamentalist hermeneutic that insisted on a literal, propositional interpretation of scripture and a correspondingly rigid notion of biblical inerrancy.

6. Davis, *The Debate about the Bible*, 125.

7. See first of all Stephen T. Davis, "Scripture, Tradition, and Religious Authority," in *Philosophy and Theological Discourse*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (London: Macmillan, 1997), 47–72. My references to this essay will be to the later version found in Davis's monograph *Christian Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 265–83, cited in the main text as "Scripture, Tradition." For his work with O'Collins and Kendall, see the fine set of theological volumes from Oxford University Press, edited by the three of them (from international colloquia they organized over several years): *The Resurrection* (1997); *The Trinity* (1999); *The Incarnation* (2002); and *The Redemption* (2004).

8. I will follow common theological practice and indicate the common, orthodox, and ecumenical tradition of Christianity with a capital *T* as "Tradition." See the seminal work by Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions* (New York: Macmillan, 1966).

9. In A. G. Padgett and P. Keifert, eds., *But Is It All True? The Bible and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 86–103.

10. "The Bible Is True," chap. 16 in Davis, *Christian Philosophical Theology*. References in the main text will be to this chapter.

11. Davis, *Christian Philosophical Theology*, 280.

12. Davis, *Christian Philosophical Theology*, 278.

13. Davis, *Christian Philosophical Theology*, 278.

14. Davis, *Christian Philosophical Theology*, 279.

15. Davis, *Christian Philosophical Theology*, 275; see also 270–71.

16. Davis, *Christian Philosophical Theology*, chap. 16.

17. Davis, *Christian Philosophical Theology*, 284.

18. Davis, *Christian Philosophical Theology*, 287; emphasis in original.

19. Davis, *Christian Philosophical Theology*, 288.

20. William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). See also this later anthology, in which Abraham and a number of like-minded theologians develop many of the themes of Canon in a positive direction: William J. Abraham, J. E. Vickers, and N. B. Van Kirk, eds., *Canonical Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008). The chapter by Douglas M. Koskela in this collection is especially relevant: "The Authority of Scripture in Its Ecclesial Context," 210–23.

21. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology*, 467.

22. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology*, 466.

23. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology*, 194–214.

24. For more on Hooker, see W.J. Torrance Kirby, ed., *A Companion to Richard Hooker* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

25. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology*, 203.

26. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology*, 141.

27. John Chrysostom, In Col. Hom., ix.1 (PG 62:361); see also his In 2 Thess. Hom., iii.4 (PG 62:485). PG is the standard abbreviation for the *Patrologia Graeca*: J. P. Minge, ed., *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, Series Graeca, 161 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1857–66).

28. See especially, among Catholic authorities, *Dei Verbum*, the “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” from the Second Vatican Council (available online at the Vatican website, www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council (accessed January 11, 2011)).

29. I was not able to incorporate here, due to time constraints, the lecture by Abraham, “The Future of Scripture: In Search of a Theology of Scripture,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 46 (2011): 7–23, which is an important development of the themes I discuss in this chapter.