

An Interview with Greg L. Bahnsen

**By Byron Snapp**

## The Presbyterian Witness

**Q.** How would you define the authority of Scripture?

**A.** First, as the concept of authority is ordinarily used, we find that people or things which are worthy of respect are said to have authority because we defer to them, take account of them and honor what they say or do. Secondly, people or things have authority because they are in a position to require belief of us or obedience of us – they are in a position which gives them the right to command allegiance from someone else. Thirdly, we find that there's an aspect of power involved. In other words, a person who has the power to punish disobedience or to compel compliance with his wishes has authority.

First, in our ordinary experience, we recognize that somebody has the authority to command public opinion when the public looks up to him and finds him worthy of respect. (2) Policemen, judges, parents, or teachers have authority because they are in a position to require things of others. (3) Some people have authority over us even if they don't have our respect or if they don't have the position to require things of us because they have the power or the might to compel things from us. For example, the neighborhood bully has authority even though he doesn't have it by right or by respect.

Let's take these three things and apply them to Scripture. When we speak of "Scriptural authority," we're saying that Scripture has all three of these elements to it. In the first place, Scripture is above anything else in this world, worthy of respect. It's the Word of God. Scripture has such attributes, has such a benefit, has such an infallibility, that anybody who understands it, who is familiar with it, ought to bow in respect to it and recognize that it's the very Word of God. Of course, the authority of Scripture is precisely the authority of God Himself. As God is worthy of respect, so His Word is worthy of respect.

Secondly, we say that Scripture has authority because it has the right to call on us to believe things. It has the right to require us to obey and do certain things. Scripture is in a position to do that. The Word of God – even if people don't respect (although they should) – is in a position to require these things of us: that we believe what God has said and subordinate all of our opinions to His infallible revelation. It is in a position to require of us a certain lifestyle and require that we subordinate every other loyalty in

life to what it commands so that we do not put our traditions above what the Word of God says; we do not put our family, our self-interest, our money, our fame, or anything else above submission to Scripture in its right to require us to live a certain way.

Thirdly, Scripture is authoritative in its power to compel or apply sanctions or punishments to those who will not comply with what it teaches to be believed and what it commands to be obeyed. Jesus says in John's gospel that anyone who rejects His Word will be judged by that Word on the final day. The Word of God has authority even if we don't recognize its right and even if we don't respect it. It has authority because in the end it will be the standard of judgment that all men will undergo. This isn't the same kind of power or authority that I spoke of in regard to the neighborhood bully because the neighborhood bully is unrighteous and obviously doesn't deserve people's respect. But my point is that even when people will not submit to Scripture, they will undergo the judgment of Scripture eventually.

**Q.** One would think that conservatives should not have to worry about this doctrine, yet it seems Scriptural authority is under attack even in Reformed denominations. Do you see this as a problem too?

**A.** Anyone who is a conservative in any of the Reformed denominations in our country today has to have a very uneasy conscience about many of the practices that he sees and the things that he hears argued on the floor of presbytery or General Assembly. The problem conservative denominations are having with Scriptural authority is in one sense much more insidious and dangerous than what we see in the mainline liberal denominations. The reason is that, generally speaking, in the mainline liberal denominations many people will come right out and admit they don't accept the authority of Scripture in certain areas. Early in this century liberals made it clear that they didn't believe everything in the Bible was God's Word. So it's no surprise when we see people with a liberal tendency unwilling to accept the plenary, verbal authority of God's Word.

On the other hand, conservatives are almost by definition people who won't say that they reject the authority of God's Word. They know better than to say that sort of thing. I think, in all honesty, most of the people who are not living up to Scriptural authority in Reformed denominations would not want to believe that they are failing in this area. But I think that many of us believe they are failing to live in accordance with Scriptural authority. We find it very difficult to accept the rationalizations, explanations, and excuses that are given for not obeying certain commands or not being consistent with the teaching of Scripture.

I think the problem with Scriptural authority that we see in conservative denominations is not an outright or explicit rejection of Scriptural authority, but rather professing Scriptural authority and then living by some higher authority when it comes to Biblical matters which are inconvenient to people, or which do not fit into their preconceptions, or into the traditional way of doing things.

**Q.** How much of it is the problem of being blind to our own depravity and taking too much pride in our conservative tradition of loving Scripture, not realizing that we conservatives are just as prone to wandering as the liberals?

- A.** You're right. We haven't taken into account the subtle ways in which we deceive ourselves and the ways in which we rationalize our compromises with the authority of God's Word, all the while wishing to confess it and to proclaim it to men.

Even though I might disagree vehemently on some point with conservative, Reformed men because I'm trying to adhere to Scriptural authority and I think there are inconsistencies in what they are saying or doing, I don't believe that in most cases these men see themselves as departing from Scriptural authority.

- Q.** Often at our General Assembly, we hear, "Trust me" and "Trust your committees" without realizing that our ultimate trust is not in man, but in God who is the measure of all things.

- A.** When you consider Reformed denominations having committees that call for people simply to trust them and then set them side by side with the Apostle Paul, who commended the Bereans because they even tested his word by the Scriptures that they had already received, you get an interesting contrast between practices of the Church today and the Biblical model. If even an apostle says, "Test me, check what I'm doing, check what I'm saying against the Scripture," how much more should committees in presbyterian denominations be willing to have their work examined, scrutinized, and set up against the standard of God's Word?

I'm not making an absolute rule out of this, but for the most part, when people – individually or as committees – say "Trust me" we should see it as a red flag warning us, "Don't trust them." (Trustworthy actions and policies will welcome scrutiny.)

- Q.** Would you comment on some particular areas and discuss how these things agree with or fail to agree with Scriptural authority? For example: marketing the Church to make it attractive to the unchurched.

- A.** Obviously no one wants to go out and purposely make the Church unattractive to those who are outside. That shouldn't be our goal! The question here must then be: Should we try to tone down those things which are hard to swallow by the unbeliever, or should we exclude mention of such things because we are motivated to see our churches grow and to make it easier to market them?

The answer to that has to be no. We have no right to tone down the message or to tamper with the message because we think we are wiser than God or can make it more attractive to the unbeliever. I know one pastor who says that his Church is not full of "Reformed flagwavers." That is to say, they don't make a real point of putting forward their Reformed convictions because that's not what will be of interest to people in the community. As a result, this pastor implicitly holds that proclaiming the Reformed faith will confuse or scare off the community.

However, if the Reformed faith is just the gospel as our forefathers have taught us – the best, most consistent, expression of the gospel – then the Reformed faith is the sweetest thing we can offer to the world, as well as the most faithful thing we can offer to the world. So I would counsel against trying to wear down the edges and smoothing out the presentation of our theology so that the Reformed distinctives don't come out. If we aren't proud of our Reformed distinctives, if we aren't committed to them as what people need to hear, then we probably belong in other churches.

**Q.** What about the use of drama and dance within worship?

**A.** The Bible teaches us two different regulative principles for areas of human conduct. On the one hand, if you look at I Timothy 4, it's clear that Paul teaches us that everything created by God is good. Nothing is to be rejected if it's consecrated by the Word of God and prayer. We know that as the general rule of life, nothing is wrong in itself unless God tells us so. We can use anything in this world to our own good, well being, and pleasure unless God says otherwise. Paul says in I Corinthians that all things are lawful to him, even though not all things are expedient. So with respect to life in general, or if you will, life outside of worship, the regulative principle is that everything is permissible except what God has forbidden.

On the other hand, when it comes to the corporate worship of God's people, which God Himself has commanded and by which we approach unto Him in His holiness, the Bible teaches very clearly that we have no right to devise ways of worship by our own imagination or according to our own will or desire. God alone can tell us how we are to worship Him aright. So in this particular area of life – the corporate worship of God's people – the regulative principle is no longer, "Anything is permissible unless forbidden" because no man has the right to dream up a way to approach God in worship. Only God can lay that down. The Second Commandment teaches us that very clearly: No graven images, and not just graven images, no image or imagination is to be that by which we draw near to the Lord. So, within corporate worship, the regulative principle is that nothing is allowed unless it is commanded.

We have in worship, then, the very opposite of the regulative principle of life in the world. So the question we must ask is, "Has God Himself authorized the use of drama and dance as part of the corporate worship of His people?" We also have to ask, in terms of the relationship of the Old Covenant ritual (or ceremonial law) to the New Covenant, "Does the worship of God's people in the New Covenant authorize such things as drama and dance?" The reason for specifying the question in this way is that we know there has been a great deal of God-ordained change from the ceremonial system of the Old Testament (the temple, the levitical priesthood, sacrifices) to the New Testament.

**Q.** What about the relation of one church court to another? How is the lower court to be submissive to a higher court?

**A.** Our Confession of Faith teaches us that Christ is the only Head of the Church and that He rules His Church by means of His Word. In His Word, we read of the appointment of elders, the function of Church courts, and something of the relationship between them. After the apostolic council of Acts 15, when the elders and apostles had come to a conclusion on a very important doctrinal matter, they

didn't simply say, "This is for everyone to consider. You reflect on it and see if you agree or disagree with this." They sent out a letter from the court itself to all other Churches with the expectation that those Churches would then submit to the word of the higher court. I believe that this is the Scripture-authorized pattern of Church government. This teaches us that the lower courts in all presbyterian bodies are under obligation to be submissive to the higher courts, except in such cases where it is plain or demonstrative that the higher court is violating the Word of God. In a situation like that, clearly, we must obey the Word of God rather than man.

**Q.** What about the ordination of female members of the Church?

**A.** This is a very distressing matter in our day. It is probably the vehicle being used by the Evil One to introduce a kind of cultural relativism into the Church, even into Churches that have been previously stalwart in their defense of Biblical authority. It has become a very popular idea that when Paul spoke about women not exercising authority over men in Church, he was reflecting his own day and age – his own culture – and that his teaching in this area was not really God's ideal. As we move ahead in history and closer to the consummation, it is said, we should be moving closer to the ideal of what God really wants – which is that men and women will stand on an equal footing with respect to the worship and the governing of the Church.

The problem here is that there is not the slightest shred of Biblical evidence that this is the divine ideal – that men and women will stand on an equal footing with respect to leading worship or having governmental authority in the Church. There is plenty of evidence that men and women stand on an equal footing in terms of entrance to the kingdom of God and in being beneficiaries of the grace of God in salvation. But that is quite different from saying they have the same function or authority (even ideally) within the Church.

Once we think the culture of Paul's day relativizes his comments to us, and we think it is therefore proper for us to depart from them and begin to ordain women in our day, we have really opened the door – in principle (even if people don't want to go all the way because they are inconsistent) – but in principle, we've opened the door to say that we can define what apostolic Christianity is in terms of the needs and desires of the following generations. That would be a dreadful thing for the Church of Christ altogether.

If the Church began to operate in that way, it would no longer have a distinctive message for the world. It would be left mired in subjective and fluctuating and fallible opinions of men for what it does. It would be the height of foolishness for the Church to give up its position in the world and its distinctive proclamation for the sake of making its message more acceptable to the world.

Paul said that if anyone did not acknowledge the things he was teaching, (following his command about women being silent in the church) that person was unspiritual and stupid. Those are very strong words! But they are words we need to hear today. We will not demonstrate spirituality or better insight or enlightenment by departing from the direction of the apostle Paul with respect to the teaching authority of female members of the Church over male members.

**Q.** What about the opinion that God can speak to people today, however He doesn't do so on the same level of Scripture?

**A.** I don't even understand how such a claim can make sense, much less what kind of evidence could be offered from the Bible for such a matter.

What would it mean for God to speak "with different levels of authority"? Are we to believe that God's creature, man, who has been made in God's image, created to submit to the Lord in all things, and apply His word to all of areas of life and who is not only finite, but fallen and therefore fallible, and therefore in need of direction and correction from God – are we to believe that man is ever in a position to listen to what God says and then say, "In some things I agree, and in some things I disagree"?!

If the authority of God's Word is its right to be believed and obeyed in whatever it says because it is worthy of respect, and God has the right and power to back it up with His sanctions, then anytime God speaks, it has that same full authority. So the idea that God can speak to people today, but it not be on the level of Scripture, really doesn't make any sense whatsoever.

What if someone comes to me and says God has told him to have me give \$10,000 to this building fund? If I accept the premise that God has actually said this to that person in order that it be communicated to me, then I have no option here – it is no longer a voluntary matter. It is no longer something I can choose. If God has said that, then I must obey.

Often when people speak this way, what they say doesn't have that kind of clarity and definition and specificity. When they say things of that nature, they try to back out of the situation and mitigate the character of their claim by saying, "Well God wants you to give this money, but it isn't as though I can say that with the same authority that Scripture does." But there is only one Spirit of God, and when the Spirit of God speaks – wherever the Spirit of God speaks – the same authority is communicated.

**Q.** What about the Lord's day?

**A.** When people say that the Lord's day observance is optional outside the morning worship service, I think we have to step back and begin very fundamentally by saying that this could be true only if Lord's day observance is defined in the Bible as merely a matter of worship service.

We have to study the Bible and ask what is required on the Lord's day and what is forbidden on the Lord's day. As human beings, we don't have the right to, in some advance fashion, decide that the Lord's day observance can only pertain to a narrow slice out of the day or a narrow slice out of the various kinds of possible human conduct and behavior.

**Q.** How would you answer people who are convinced God's speaking directly to man is very relevant to the Christian walk?

**A.** People who think God must speak today for His ancient Word to be relevant have forgotten some things about God in the first place, man secondly, and the character of Scripture thirdly. In the first place, the Bible teaches us that God is unchanging. He is immutable. Therefore when we read what God has said in previous days in His Word, what He said is just as relevant, just as appropriate, just as true and binding as if He said it just last night. Because God is unchanging, when He speaks His Word, that Word is going to be relevant and applicable for all of human experience in history.

**B.**

The second thing that we forget is that human nature hasn't changed. We have the same basic needs, the same foibles, the same proneness to sin as those to whom the Word of God originally came. God hasn't changed in His character, and we haven't changed in our need and in our problems. Consequently when God has once spoken to man's problem in His Word, we have no reason to think He has to repeat it for us today.

Thirdly, we have to remember the sufficiency of Scripture. Scripture says about itself that it gives us all things necessary for faith and life. In II Timothy 3, Paul not only tells us that all Scripture is inspired and therefore profitable for doctrine and instruction in righteousness, he also says that it's been given that the man of God may be perfectly furnished to all good works. When God revealed the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, He didn't leave anything out that was necessary to direct us as to how we should believe or what we should obey in order to please Him in this world.

So, if we remember the immutability of God, we remember the fact that human nature is still the same and has the same needs, and if we remember the sufficiency of Scripture, we would not possibly offer as an excuse for departing from the Bible, "Well God didn't say it recently, or hasn't spoken to us today about this matter."

**Q.** Pastors are at fault in that they don't teach the whole counsel of God. When they preach the Word, they do not search the Scriptures and apply it to peoples' lives.

**A.** I imagine that most Reformed and Presbyterian pastors in our day want to profess the sufficiency of Scripture. In fact, many of them will say things like, "Jesus is the answer in every area of life." But making these broad and abstract claims about the sufficiency of Scripture is not going to reign us in, if in the detailed, week-by-week, day-by-day exposition of God's Word, we don't deliver the whole counsel of God to God's people.

If pastors are not aiming to preach meaty sermons and to really educate the people and to get them deeper and deeper into the Word of God, then I think pastors – even if they don't say it outwardly – say by their actions, "Scripture doesn't have a lot to say to us about concrete problems, so you are on your own in this matter." It's not surprising that people, when faced with tough questions, ask

themselves what it means to live a Christian life or how we should worship, and dream up their own answers. They begin to take very broad, very general and fundamental things they have heard from the pulpit and begin to make extrapolations and implications from that, rather than realizing and being blessed by the fact that the Bible has a great deal to say that would be helpful to them in answering their questions or telling them about God and how He wants them to approach Him in worship, or the attitudes they should have, or how they should conduct their lives.

**Q.** What impact has public education had on the demise of respect for Scriptural authority?

**A.** It has had a tremendous impact on that demise. Public education cannot bring God into the picture when mathematics, history, literature, science, or anything else is taught. If it is going to be truly “public,” state sponsored education, it cannot be prejudiced toward theism over against atheism, Christianity over against Hinduism, or anything like that. Therefore, when our children go to state sponsored public schools, what they are being exposed to day by day by day is the attitude that God is irrelevant to most of life. They subtly learn that there is a God and if He is somehow relevant, it is certainly only something very private – just a narrow slice out of life, something you do at Church and maybe with your family. But God doesn’t really pertain to the really big issues of life like the world, science, mathematics, how we should live, or the meaning of history. God is left out of the picture, and consequently children learn to ignore Him. If they are going to ignore God when it comes to everything except their private devotions and Church life, it’s no surprise that they don’t expect God’s Word to say anything to them in other areas. That in itself diminishes the respect people ought to have for the authority of God’s Word.

**Q.** How can a local pastor or a ruling elder concerned about the Scriptural authority work to implement that within his own church at various levels in the denomination?

**A.** I think that whether you are talking about pastors, elders, or members of the church, the best way they can come to a proper understanding of Scriptural authority is to study Scripture itself on this matter. Undertake a special study of Scripture and what it says about itself. Scripture is going to be the most authoritative way for us to understand the authority of Scripture because, in the nature of the case, it is our highest authority.

When I am asked this question, the temptation is for me to think of books written by other men that may be helpful in discussing Scriptural authority. There is a place for that. But, to be very honest, the way in which we are to become convinced of the authority of Scripture is by letting that authority be exercised in our lives. We have to turn to the Bible to learn about the bible. We have to let God’s own Word tell us its character. This is what we call the “self-attesting” authority of Scripture. This means Scripture doesn’t depend upon the word of another man or some counsel of men, but Scripture is its own authorization. If we want to see people grow in their appreciation of Scriptural authority, then I think we should go the Bible and make a point of presenting that to them.

Pastors and elders should make it a point always to be taking note of what Scripture says about its own authority, even when they are engaged in the study of other topics or the presentation of other matters.



**Q.** We should never fear to take a stand at Presbytery or at any court level on what Scripture says about an issue. Even then you are teaching people that God's Word does speak to the issue.

**A.** Our obligation in being ambassadors for the Lord Jesus Christ is not to be ambassadors for the sake of changing people's minds. We cannot change people's minds. We do not know what the outcome of our witness will be. We would like to see the Church changed, we would like to see our arguments prevail in Presbytery. We would rather that people in the pews submit to what we preach to them. But even if they will not, even if we will not be heard, the honor of God is at stake and the authority of His Word must be acknowledged. So even when we don't expect that we are going to be heard, that people are not going to submit to what we have taught them, we need to set forth what Scripture says, because it is worthy of respect, because it has the right to require belief and obedience of people, and because it in the end will become their judge if they disobey it.

**Q.** Among other things, you are associated with the Southern California Center for Christian Studies. Could you share with us how the aims and objectives of that study center and its offerings to the public will help bring about a greater knowledge and awareness of Scriptural authority in our day?

**A.** The Southern California Center for Christian Studies was established in September 1990 as a ministry outreach of our particular congregation. At SCCCS, we are committed to the full authority of God's Word for the whole of life. We have a burden that a competent and challenging presentation of the Christian world-and-life-view be made available to God's people so they may more effectively defend the faith against the unbelief in this world and apply the faith more fully in their own lives and in the culture about them.

The study center offers a number of educational opportunities toward that end. We have in-residence courses that are taught in Southern California. Tapes are made of our classes which people may get through Covenant Media Foundation. (1-800-553-3938) We also offer correspondence courses and tutoring for people who would like to learn about theology or apologetics or ethics, and yet cannot move to Southern California for that training. We offer those separate courses as well as a Masters of Arts degree in Christian Studies that would be the equivalent of a Masters of Arts in Religion from one of our Reformed seminaries in this day. It is intended not only for those who wish to enter Christian ministry in the Church, but for any Christian who would like a deeper understanding of God's Word and the ability to defend and apply it for his or her own vocation.

The Study Center also sponsors speaking engagements, conference speaking, and debates that I engage in. It likewise supports my production of Christian literature, whether articles or books. A list of the courses we have available as well as publications and tapes available can be obtained by writing to the study center.

We also have a monthly publication, "Penpoint," that is free of charge to those who request it. We hope to use these various resources to build up the people of God wherever they may be found – to give them greater confidence in the Word of God, greater understanding of it, a more faithful presentation of it as well as a desire to apply it to everything that they do.

We attempt to make our educational offerings as convenient as possible to God's people and at a reasonable price. We recognize that not everybody can move to Southern California to go to school. We also recognize that there are special needs that God's people have. We have courses of study tailored to the questions they have and what they hope to accomplish. Likewise when people take the correspondence courses, they go through the material in those courses at their own pace.

The Southern California Center for Christian Studies is convinced that the historic, Reformed faith is precisely what the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century need to hear.

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