

Building Your Theology

Study Guide

LESSON
FOUR

AUTHORITY IN THEOLOGY



THIRD MILLENNIUM

MINISTRIES

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STUDY GUIDE

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How to use this lesson and study guide

- **Before you watch the lesson**
 - **Preparation** — Complete any recommended readings.
 - **Schedule breaks** — Review the outline and the time codes to determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions in the outline.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
 - **Notes** — Use the Notes section to follow the lesson and to take additional notes. Many of the main ideas are already summarized in the notes, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
 - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
 - **Review Questions** — Questions on the basic content of the lesson. Answer review questions in the space provided. Review questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
 - **Application Questions** — Questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

Outline

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 - 3. Obscurity (8:58)
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- V. Conclusion (1:09:02)

Notes

I. Introduction

II. Medieval Roman Catholicism

A. Authority of Scripture

The vast majority of medieval theologians believed in the authority of Scripture. But the medieval church made it nearly impossible to act on this commitment.

1. Inspiration

Theologians affirmed that:

- The Bible was fully inspired by God.
- The Bible came through human instruments.

Theologians overemphasized the divine origins of Scripture to the neglect of its human and historical origins.

Theologians depended heavily on Greek philosophies for the categories and priorities of Christian theology.

Medieval biblical scholars:

- were uninformed about the history of the Bible
- could not make much practical use of the Bible's historical backgrounds

2. Meaning

One proof of biblical inspiration was that texts of Scripture had manifold meanings.

Augustine believed that divine inspiration caused passages in the Bible to burst with multiple meanings.

Classical Polyvalence: The belief that biblical texts have many levels of meaning or value because they come from God.

According to John Cassian's *Quadrige*, each biblical text has four distinct meanings:

1. *Literal* — the plain or ordinary meaning of a text
2. *Allegorical* — interpreted texts as metaphors for doctrinal truth
3. *Tropological* — the moral sense, ethical guidelines for Christian conduct
4. *Anagogical* — future fulfillment of the divine promises in the eschaton

The literal or plain sense of a passage was often considered too elementary for serious theological reflection.

3. **Obscurity**

The Bible came to be treated as a book that was remarkably unclear:

- except to those who had been given special supernatural insights

- even to those with the ability and opportunity to read the Bible

God had placed multiple layers of meaning in the Scriptures that were hidden from plain view.

The Bible was so obscure that it was unable to guide theologians.

B. Authority of the Church

Because the Bible was considered obscure, ecclesiastical or church authority began to play a very important role in theology.

1. Past Authorities

Medieval theologians looked into the history of ecclesiastical theology to determine what they should believe.

What the church taught in the past was of vital interest to medieval theologians:

- Much attention was given to the early church fathers.
 - not usually considered infallible
 - assumed that God had given them special insights

- The ecumenical councils of the church were regarded as unquestionable summations of the teaching of the Bible

Ecclesiastical dogma was not thought to be a human fallible theology, but theology that bore the same authority as the Scriptures.

2. Contemporary Medieval Authorities

Medieval theologians believed that God had established a system of living authorities:

- in the hierarchy of the church
- that provided unquestionable teaching

The official hierarchy of the church, not the Scriptures, served as the infallible guide for contemporary theology.

III. Early Protestantism

The heart of the controversy between Catholics and Protestants was precisely over the question of authority:

- Bible
- ecclesiastical authority

A. Authority of Scripture**1. Inspiration**

The Scriptures had both divine and human origins.

The Scriptures came through human instruments, through historical processes.

The Scriptures rose out of real human situations, and were written by people for particular historical circumstances.

2. Meaning

Interpretations were grounded in the literal sense of biblical texts, the meaning the human writers intended to communicate to their original audiences.

The Reformers placed greater emphasis on the intended meaning of human authors than did most of their catholic counterparts.

The emphasis on the literal or plain meaning of biblical texts paralleled the hermeneutical approach of the Renaissance of the 15th century:

- Understand the ancient texts of the classical period free from ecclesiastical supervision.
- Interpret these writings as their authors first meant them to be understood.

During the Renaissance, new editions of the Hebrew and Greek Bibles were published.

3. Clarity

The Reformers argued that the Bible was understandable.

A number of factors contributed to the Protestant doctrine of biblical clarity:

- The widespread use of the moveable-type printing press had made more Bibles available.
- Bold pioneers had begun to translate the Scriptures into the languages of the common people.
- Focus on *sensus literalis* enabled theologians to base their interpretations on something that could be examined and tested.

Some portions of the Bible are clearer than others.

In contrast to the medieval church, the Protestant Reformers exalted the Bible over the authority of the Church.

B. Authority of the Church

Ecclesiastical theology had much authority, but this authority was subject to the teachings of Scripture.

1. Past Authorities

Early Protestants attributed a great deal of authority to:

- the teachings of church fathers
- the early creeds

Sola Scriptura:

- **Not** “No authority but the Bible.”
- **Rather** “The Bible is the only unquestionable authority.”

“The supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture” (*Westminster Confession of Faith* 1.10).

The Reformers did not reject the past as they maintained their doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*.

Several ideas that stand out from Calvin:

- The councils of the church need to be understood historically.
- The teachings of the church should finally be evaluated in the light of Scripture.
- The longstanding findings of the church should be accepted as our provisional or preliminary judgments, until Biblical exegesis proves them wrong.

2. Contemporary Protestant Authorities

Early Protestants highly respected the authority of duly ordained teachers in the church.

Building a Christian theology was not a task for individuals or groups apart from such structures of authority.

“The Reformed church is always reforming” — Ecclesiastical authorities must always be subject to the scrutiny of Scripture.

IV. Contemporary Protestantism

A. Authority of Scripture

1. Inspiration

Romantic

- Process:
 - God motivated biblical writers.
 - God did not superintend their writings.

- Scripture:
 - just the opinions of men
 - fallible
 - lacking absolute authority over the church

Mechanical (“inspiration by dictation”)

- Process:
 - Biblical authors were relatively passive.
 - God essentially authored the Bible himself.

- Scripture:
 - Can no longer be assessed and followed.
 - No longer serves as our supreme authority in theology.

Organic

- Process:
 - God moved the biblical authors to write.
 - God superintended their writing so that they wrote infallibly and authoritatively.
 - God did not circumvent their personal thoughts, motivations, feelings or theology.

- Scripture:
 - Timeless truths in highly human, culturally conditioned texts.
 - Normative for all times, but presented within the context of particular circumstances.

The Reformed view of organic inspiration emphasizes the human and divine, the historical and the transcendent qualities of the Bible.

2. **Meaning**

Contemporary Polyvalence

- Usually based upon the ambiguities of human language.

- Biblical passages are empty vessels for interpreters to fill with meaning.

- Renders the authority of Scripture null by giving human interpreters the right to pour their own ideas into Scripture.

Simplistic Univalence

- Every passage of Scripture has just one meaning.
- Denies that a single meaning may be complex.

Multifaceted Univalence (“complex univalence”)

- Each passage has one complex and multifaceted meaning.
- The Bible presents authoritative meaning rather than waiting for us to provide it.
- The meaning of a text is interwoven with the entirety of Scripture.
- Every text stands as an authority above our very best efforts in theology.

“When there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly” (*Westminster Confession of Faith* 1.9).

3. Clarity

Utter Obscurity

- The Scriptures as almost entirely obscure or hidden from us.
- The Bible is self-contradictory and self-defeating, like all other literature.

Utter Clarity

- Nearly all of Scripture is so clear that it can be quickly and easily understood.
- Advocates of such views often dismiss out of hand all interpretations that do not come from their very narrow Christian communities.

Degrees of Clarity

- That which is necessary for salvation is clear in one place or another.
- Not everything else in Scripture is equally clear.

All of Scripture is unquestionably authoritative, but we grasp its authoritative guidance to varying degrees.

- Many aspects of biblical teaching require little or no scholarly effort to understand.
- Some aspects of Scripture are known only by serious students.
- Some portions of Scripture appear to remain unclear no matter how much scholarly effort we put forth.

B. Authority of the Church

1. Past Authorities

Traditionalism

- Affirms the authority of Scripture.
- Rejects the traditions of Catholicism.
- But fails to scrutinize past Reformed theology.

Biblicism

- Acts as if each person must come to the Bible and decide every theological issue without the aid of past Protestant tradition.

- Neglects the wisdom God's Spirit has granted to the church.

- Grants theological judgment only to the individual or groups of individuals who are currently at work.

Semper Reformanda

- Accept as provisional judgments
 - the early church Fathers and councils
 - Reformed confessions and traditions

- Authorities from the past should always be subject to the unquestionable teaching of Scripture.

2. Contemporary Protestant Authorities

- *Skepticism*

Some Reformed theologians tend to be skeptical about doctrinal formulations today.

- *Dogmatism*

Others tend toward dogmatism about contemporary doctrinal formulations.

- *Faithfulness*

Authentic Reformation theology strives to be faithful in contemporary doctrinal formulations.

Binary — Skepticism and dogmatism exist in part because doctrinal statements are thought to be either true or false.

Analogue — All theological statements are more or less false, depending on how closely they mirror the infallible teachings of Scripture.

- Some theological statements are close enough to Scripture to be counted as true.
- Others are far enough from Scripture to be counted as false.
- All ecclesiastical theological statements can be improved by constantly submitting them to the scrutiny of further insights into Scripture.

V. Conclusion

9. What are the effects of the contemporary Protestant view of the authority of Scripture and the church?

Application Questions

1. The writings of the early church fathers have influenced the church throughout its history. Is this good or bad? Should modern theology seek to move past these primitive views? Or should we rely strongly on the wisdom of those who have gone before us?
2. In what ways has this study helped you understand the historical controversy between Catholics and Protestants?
3. Why is it important to maintain a balance between the divine origin of Scripture and the human origin of Scripture?
4. What are some practical ways we can observe the principle of “always reforming” in the modern church? What are some areas in your own church that need to be reformed?
5. How should the concept of complex univalence influence us as we engage in modern theological discussions? What are some dangers of this approach to meaning? What are some of its benefits?
6. How can the model of the cone of certainty aide you in assigning priorities and levels of conviction to your understandings of scriptural passages that are not entirely clear?
7. What are the dangers of Traditionalism and Biblicism? Have you seen these extremes in the church today?
8. There were several “extreme” positions mentioned in this lesson. Did any of them describe your own approach to theology? Which ones? What practical steps might you take to adopt more responsible perspectives?
9. What is the most significant insight you have learned from this study? Why?