

Presbyterian Faith That Lives Today

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PREFACE

I HAVE BEEN A LIFELONG PRESBYTERIAN. THE PRESBYTERIAN Church (U.S.A.) has been my denominational home, even as some of its immediate predecessor denominations have been part of my experience as well.

My life in the church has enabled me to participate in various forms of ministry, most particularly in the largest sense as a theologian of the church. I have tried to provide theological resources for the Presbyterian Church and the Reformed family of churches as part of my overall work as a theologian. A number of the books I have written are focused on Reformed and Presbyterian topics.

This book is another one, written to provide theological understandings and nurturing for Presbyterians particularly. It doesn't cover everything there is to

consider for Christian belief and Christian living, but it is a start. I offer it to the church in the spirit of St. Augustine's motto: Faith seeking understanding. "I believe in order to understand," said the great saint; that is the direction for who we are as Christians and our Christian lives.

The book originated with the Uemura lectures I presented for the Church of Christ in Japan a few years ago. LindaJo and I were graciously received throughout the presbyteries of this Reformed denomination, and it was an honor to be extended this opportunity to reflect together with Reformed Christians in Japan. I especially thank the Lecture Preparation Committee for the invitation to deliver these lectures as well as my friend, Dr. I. John Hesselink of Holland, Michigan, for suggesting my name to the committee. President Akira Miyoshi of Tokyo Theological Seminary and Rev. Yasumasa Sato gave us special help in preparing for and taking our journey. For all their wonderful kindnesses, LindaJo and I are especially grateful.

An earlier version of these lectures was translated into Japanese and published. This was also an honor.

For the interest of Geneva Press in publishing this volume, I am grateful. Thanks especially to David Dobson and Julie Tonini for their always excellent work and support.

My loving family brings blessings and joys to living. I thank my wonderful wife, LindaJo, for all her love, which encourages me along the way. Our sons and their families bring delight. Karl and Lauren share life with their energetic dog, Beatrice Arthur ("Bea"), and rabbit, Mr. Tipton. Stephen, Caroline, and Maddie

have welcomed the birth of Suzanne Hawes McKim, to whom this book is dedicated. May Annie know the blessed joys of Christian faith and learn appreciatively from the Presbyterian tradition.

Donald K. McKim

Germantown, Tennessee
Reformation Day
October 31, 2013

INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK IS FOR PRESBYTERIANS. I HOPE OTHERS BESIDES Presbyterians will read it, but the book is for Presbyterians who want to know more about our Christian faith. I have spent my life in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), so the book is specially written to those people in this communion. I offer a look at important theological beliefs we share as Presbyterians and what they can mean for our lives. We share these beliefs with others in our Reformed family and with most Christians throughout the world.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is part of the Reformed theological tradition. This tradition is rooted in the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation and is associated with reformers such as Huldrych Zwingli, Heinrich Bullinger, Martin Bucer, and most especially,

John Calvin. I have most often quoted Calvin in these pages. He was a leading voice, and his legacy to us endures. Other voices join the chorus. Presbyterians have inherited a rich theological heritage. We have many important theologians and confessional documents within our family circle. They speak with different accents and emphases, but they witness to a Reformed faith with significant theological emphases that, historically, have distinguished it from other Reformation theologies and ecclesiastical traditions as well as from Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox church traditions.

Since Presbyterians are part of a larger Reformed family, I sometimes refer specifically to a “Presbyterian” view, and sometimes to a “Reformed” view or to a “Presbyterian and Reformed view.” These terms are meant to be basically synonymous. Both “Presbyterian” and “Reformed” are rightly used as adjectives. They are adjectives that modify the noun “Christian.” We are “Presbyterian Christians” or “Reformed Christians.” “Presbyterian” and “Reformed” are our ways of living and expressing our Christian faith. We are, first of all, Christians—disciples of Jesus Christ. This is our primary identity. We express this identity through our ecclesiastical and denominational traditions. Here in the United States, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is one Presbyterian denomination. There are others. All Presbyterians are part of the larger Reformed family, which includes churches that do not have “Presbyterian” as part of their names but that hold Reformed theological convictions in common with Presbyterians. Some examples are the United Church of Christ,

the Reformed Church in America, and the Christian Reformed Church. The Reformed family has many branches in the United States and throughout the world. As we reflect theologically in relation to one denomination, we realize that there is a greater body—and a greater unity—that is represented by the terms “Presbyterian” and “Reformed.”

This book is meant for those without formal theological education as well as seminary students and pastors. Much more documentation could have been provided, but I hope this has been written accessibly and can be read easily. The intention is to take a look at some important theological themes and how they have been understood and emphasized in Reformed and Presbyterian theology. These theological insights guide our churches and affect the whole of the church’s life. The book does not try to prescribe answers to issues that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) faces in these days. It does try to provide some foundational understandings that can broaden and deepen the faith of church members and provide theological nourishment for a Presbyterian faith that lives today.

Chapter 1

THE BIBLE

The Source of It All

WE BEGIN WITH THE BIBLE. FOR PRESBYTERIAN AND Reformed Christians, the Bible is the source of it all. The phrase says much. It focuses on “the Bible” and the Bible as that which is the source of “all,” of so much for our Christian faith.

We are going back to basics for our Christian faith. We are Christians. We know and love Jesus Christ. We have dedicated our lives to serving God through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is who we are as persons, as Christians.

But when we probe further, or start thinking about the reasons for this identity—or the ways in which we know who God is, who Jesus Christ is, who the Holy Spirit is—then we come back to the Bible. We acknowledge that the Bible is the source of our knowledge

of God; the Bible is the means by which we come to know Jesus Christ. The Bible is the continuing source for our understanding of what God wants us to do, in the church and in our Christian lives, by the work of the Holy Spirit among us and within us. So the Bible is basic—*very* basic. It is the source of our knowledge of the one God who has called us into lives of committed service and asked us to do God's work in this world as we live out the days we have been given on this earth. For Christians, the Bible is the source of it all.

Reformed Christians have been especially focused on the Bible. We believe Scripture is the means that God uses to communicate who God is and what God has done. The Bible is the unique source of our knowledge of God. We find God in Scripture, and God finds us in Scripture, as in no other book, as in no other place. So we recognize the special place the Bible holds as the way by which the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ is made known to us today. Throughout the writings of theologians in the Reformed tradition and confessions of faith by Reformed churches, emphasis is strong on the Bible as the authoritative source from which our Christian faith emerges.

THE NATURE OF THE BIBLE

How do we understand the nature of the Bible? This question is one of the most basic we have to ask. What we believe about the kind of book the Bible is has tremendous implications for a number of other dimensions of our Christian belief and lives of faith. We may not think of this point very much, but it's true. If you believe

the Bible is a certain kind of document—given for a particular purpose and to be interpreted in a particular way—then your understandings of many other aspects of Christian faith are affected. The way you interpret the Bible reflects what you believe the nature of Scripture to be. If you believe the Bible is intended to convey certain types of information to contemporary people, you read the Scriptures with that type of focus. If you believe the Bible is a record of the religious experiences of some ancient people and that is about all, then you also interpret the Bible according to that type of conviction.¹

So biblical interpretation is very much intertwined with our views about the nature of the Bible. In difficult passages or passages that seem unclear or contradictory, or perhaps not relevant for today—in all these kinds of approaches to interpretation, the place we come to as we interpret the Bible is greatly affected by our understanding of the kind of book it is. For this reason, we need to reflect on the nature of the Bible and understand what we are saying when we say the Bible is “the source of it all.”

THE WORD OF GOD

One of the most important descriptions of the nature of Scripture, found throughout Reformed writings as well as in the Christian church more generally, is the description of Scripture as the Word of God. This point is captured in the opening words of the Second Helvetic Confession, written in 1566 by the Swiss reformer Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), which states, “We believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the

holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of men. For God himself spoke to the fathers, prophets, apostles, and still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures.”²

This confession affirms that the Bible, which consists of the Old and New Testaments, is the “true Word of God.” This designation comes because it is through the Scriptures that “God himself spoke.” To say that “God speaks” is to say “Word of God.” God is the source or the origination of the Scriptures. The Scriptures communicate God’s very self. This self-communication of God came to the biblical writers—“the fathers, prophets, and apostles”—but the confession goes on to say that this communication continues now, into the present day, to us. God is continually communicated to us “through the Scriptures.”

In another place, the Reformer Bullinger wrote, “We know very well that the Scripture is not called the Word of God because of the human voice, the ink and paper, or the printed letters (which all can be comprehended by the flesh), but because the meaning, which speaks through the human voice or is written with pen and ink on paper, is not originally from [humans], but is God’s word, will, and meaning.”³ Scripture as the Word of God is more than words on a page; it is the divine communication of God who through Scripture communicates the divine will and purposes.

So to affirm Scripture as the Word of God is to point to Scripture’s origin as being with God and that the Bible is the place we turn to know who God is and what God has done.

THREE TERMS

Three terms describe dimensions of the Bible that can help shape our understandings of this claim about the Bible being the source of it all. These terms have emerged through the centuries in the church and are used by theologians to try to understand different aspects or facets of the nature of Scripture. These words offer ways of asking certain questions of the Bible and viewing the Bible in different lights in relation to the questions we are asking.

These terms can help us clarify certain aspects of Scripture and give us an appreciation for the gift that we have in Scripture. The Bible is—among many other things—a gift from God to us. It is God’s way of providing for us a means that can become the source from which so much else flows. As we think on these things, we can be grateful for the gift of God that is the Scriptures themselves. No matter what we come to believe about particular aspects of Scripture—and our beliefs sometimes, sadly, divide Christians into differing groups—we can all confess our gratitude to God for the Bible as a source for us in understanding who God is, who we are, and how we can serve God in this world.

Revelation. The first term to consider is “revelation.” When we hear that word, we may think of the New Testament book of Revelation. It is the last book in the New Testament, the last book in the whole Bible. The book of Revelation is mysterious, written with all kinds of graphic and strange images—beasts, battles, burning fires—and these can be very difficult to understand.

Yet the word “revelation” means an “uncovering,” a “revealing,” a “stripping away.” That which has been hidden is now made known. A revelation provides a new knowledge, a new understanding, a new way of perceiving reality.

Theologically, we say “revelation” means that the God who is hidden has now been made known. The God who is beyond us has communicated with us. God has been revealed

Now that is a big idea, isn't it? To think that the eternal God, the God who is transcendent, beyond us, greater than us—greater than all else in the universe—has now been revealed or made known . . . can you think of any greater message than that? Revelation is the self-disclosure of the God whom we can never know by ourselves, on our own, by our human powers. To say that God is revealed is to make an astonishing claim! The claim is that we now have a knowledge or perception, an understanding of the eternal, divine God—which God has decided to make known to us limited, mortal, human beings.⁴

Historically the church has considered this astonishing idea of revelation in two dimensions. One is to ask: Is God revealed in nature? Is God revealed to the human mind? Can we know God by our own powers by observing what is around us or thinking about God in certain ways?

Christian theologians have come to differing conclusions in response to that question. Some, like Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) in the Middle Ages, believed that certain logical arguments can convince us as rational creatures that there is a creator, a power behind all

things that exist in the world. By following the logical proofs for the existence of God, we can know the reality of a divine power.

But Aquinas also knew that this wasn't enough. We need to know more than just that there is a power. If revelation is to be significant for us, we need to know the nature of that power, the character of that power behind all things. In short, we need to know who this God is.

This is why Christian theology, and our Presbyterian and Reformed view of Christian faith, has stressed the second dimension of God's revelation: God's revelation in Scripture. The Bible takes us where our reason cannot go. The Bible tells us not only that there is a God behind it all—the creator of all things—but the Bible is the means that God uses to reveal to us who God is.

We believe the Bible is God's self-revelation or self-communication. Through the Scriptures we learn the character, nature, and personality of God. This knowledge is not available to us from any other source. The Bible is a unique and an authoritative revelation of the God who created the heavens and the earth and then who has been involved with the creation, in the world, in human history, and particularly in the history of the people of God whom we know as the people of Israel and the people of God who make up the Christian church. The Bible tells us of a God who is revealed in history and who has called out a people within history to carry out God's purposes in and for the world that God created.

This, too, is an astonishing message—a message that leads to worship and praise! God has revealed who

God is through the Bible that has come to us. The great God has been revealed to human people. Imagine that!

This point is so astounding because “revelation” indicates that we have what we could never have gained by ourselves. We’ve been given the great gift of God, which is the knowledge of who God is and what God has done. We could never have gained that knowledge from any other source. We could never have climbed a ladder up to heaven, torn back the clouds, and peered into the face of the Creator God. Not us!

But the wonderful news of God’s revelation is that we don’t have to try. God has already done it. God has not made us ascend to heaven; God has descended to earth. God has communicated with us through other humans whom God used to write the Scriptures. We did not have to learn the language of God—“God-talk”—to be able to speak to God. Instead, God has learned our human languages and has communicated to us in the words of human beings that we can understand. This is the great gift of God’s revelation.

We believe this revelation has come to us through the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. The Bible is the source of our knowledge of God, of God’s revelation. The Bible is the means of God’s self-communication. Whatever else we may believe about the Bible, this much is basic. The Bible is the gift God gives through which to make God known. So we celebrate the Bible as the source of it all. We honor and listen to Scripture in worship, in the church, and in our lives because we believe the Bible is God’s revelation of the divine self. The Bible is God’s gift of grace to us all.

Authority. A second word to help us understand the Bible as the source of it all is the word “authority.” This term may seem rather flat, or perhaps even scary. We may not like to think of authority in our lives, since that brings up images of people with power over us who try to make us do what they want us to do instead of what we ourselves want to do.

In the church we speak of the “authority of Scripture.” Christians have understood this term in different ways. It is used to describe the way we believe God’s revelation—found in and through the Bible—becomes real for us, in the here and now. “Authority” is a way of indicating that we as Christians are recognizing who God is and what God has done, and we are responding to this message that God has been and is active in the world through Israel, through Jesus Christ.

Revealed in Scripture is the story of this God who has created the world and who has been at work within the world. Every biblical book conveys this message. God has been at work in this world, seeking to carry out the purposes of love—for the creation and for the people God made and who are created in the “image of God.” People reject this love from God; they hide from it and they live lives without regard to what God wants, which the Bible calls “sin.” Sin is the story of humanity, the story of each one of us.

Yet, in the midst of this sin, God does not close us down. God does not come in wrath and vengeance to make us pay for the results of all we have done that is contrary to God’s will for us. No, the astonishing story of the Bible is that this God of love has loved us and continues to love us! The proof of this amazing love is

that God sent the Son of God, Jesus Christ, into the world to live and die and be raised again so that the relationship with God that our sin has broken can now be restored and life can begin for us anew.

By faith we receive the gift of God's love in Jesus Christ in his life and death and resurrection. By the power of the Holy Spirit we believe this message of God's love in Christ, and we become disciples of Christ—"Christians," "little Christs"—in seeking now to live in obedience to God's Word and will for us and in service to the God we love in Christ, in this world. So the message of God's revelation in Scripture is very simple: God created the world, humans messed it up by sinning, and God has come to set things right in Jesus Christ.

We know the nature of this God and what God has done, particularly in Jesus Christ, through the Scripture, God's revelation. So we say the Scriptures have authority for us, in the church and in our lives. We acknowledge the unique message of the Bible and affirm that this message is the message by which our lives will be lived. We confess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Since we know Jesus Christ only through the Scriptures, we confess as well that the Bible is the source of it all for us. The Bible is the authority for our lives, since it is through the Scriptures that we come to know Jesus Christ and through them we know the message of the salvation that God has given to us in and through Christ. Martin Luther said that the Bible is "the manger in which Christ lies."⁵

We say the Bible is our authority because the message of God's love in Jesus Christ is made known to

us through the Bible. We acknowledge this authority by also confessing that we want to live on the basis of this love that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament convey to us. The Scriptures have authority for us in the church since they are the *locus* or the place where God is revealed. By acknowledging the Bible as God's authoritative word, we are aligning ourselves, by faith, with the God who is revealed in Scripture and who calls us to worship and serve Christ in this world.

The Bible is God's revelation. The Bible has authority for us in the church and in our lives.

Inspiration. One more term is important for us in understanding what we mean when we say that the Bible is the source of it all. That word is "inspiration."

As Presbyterian Christians, we say that God is revealed through the Scriptures, that the Scriptures have authority for us; we also say that the Bible is "inspired by God." Two biblical texts are important here. Second Timothy 3:16–17 says, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." The Holy Spirit inspires Scripture to be "useful." Scripture has a function to carry out, and that function is to equip "everyone who belongs to God" to be "equipped for every good work." The inspiration of Scripture is the work of the Holy Spirit.

A second text is 2 Peter 1:21, which says that "no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." The Holy Spirit used human beings to speak God's Word. The Spirit worked in and through real, live human beings

and their personalities. Inspiration is both a divine and human activity.

The inspiration of Scripture is a way of confessing that we believe the Bible is a unique document, unlike all others. We believe God used humans to communicate God's message. How can this be? How can the great God condescend and accommodate the message of God to the world through humans?

To be honest, we don't know the answer to the how question. How can God do this? Actually, how can God do anything? We're humans, we're limited and finite—we can never know how the infinite, holy God can do something!

But we confess in the church that we believe God *has* done this. God has used human beings to communicate God's unique and authoritative message to us through the Scriptures. The way we confess this conviction is to say that we believe in the "inspiration of Scripture" or that the biblical writers were "inspired" as they conveyed God's Word or message in writing.

The word "inspired" can mean a lot of different things. We say a great work of art is "inspired," or that a great musical performance is "inspiring." A sports team that comes from behind to win in the last minutes of a game is "inspired." But the church has said the inspiration of Scripture is unique. The church believes that God has spoken through the writers of the Bible in a way that God has not spoken anywhere else.

How is this possible? We don't know. We do not know how God can work in and through the personalities of human writers to convey what God wants to convey. Inspiration is a mystery, just as revelation itself

is a mystery. But it is an experienced reality just the same. God the communicator has desired to communicate a message—we call it the “gospel” or “good news.” God wants us to respond to this message, so God has graciously chosen to use human beings to be the bearers of this message. God has used human beings and their language to say what God wants conveyed. In the Bible, God speaks as nowhere else.

Though we confess that the Scriptures are inspired, there are differing ways to understand the nature of this inspiration and what it means. To be honest, this issue poses difficulties between Christians. In Reformed churches, for example, there are at least five ways of understanding the inspiration of Scripture and its implications. These ways were explored in a Task Force on Biblical Authority and Interpretation report from the former United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. in 1982.⁶

First, some Reformed Christians believe that the Bible is merely a record of the moral and religious experiences of Hebrews and Christians. Inspiration then occurs only as people read the Bible and are inspired to live more loving and just lives.

Second, some Reformed Christians believe that portions of the Bible, including some of its theological and ethical positions, may not be the inspired Word of God. The parts of the Bible that convey moral or ethical or theological viewpoints that we believe are not consistent with the rest of the Bible are not regarded as inspired by God.

These two viewpoints, we can say, emphasize the human dimension of Scripture. Humans write

what they write, and it may or may not be inspired or regarded as the Word of God.

On the other end of the spectrum, in the third place, some Reformed Christians believe that the Bible, though written by individuals, has been so controlled by the Holy Spirit that it is without error in all it teaches in matters of science and history as well as in matters of theology. This model sees the Bible as a book of inerrant facts—that no errors of any kind appear in the Scriptures. This viewpoint emphasizes almost exclusively the divine dimension of Scripture. Since the Bible is God's Word and God cannot lie, therefore the Bible cannot lie.

Between these extremes are two other viewpoints. The fourth position can be characterized as the Bible being a witness to Christ. In this view, the Bible, though written by individuals and reflecting their personalities, has been so controlled by the Holy Spirit that it is trustworthy in all it teaches in matters of theology and ethics, but not necessarily in matters of science and history. As one encounters the Christ of the Scriptures by faith through the Holy Spirit, one encounters an inspiration within oneself.

Finally, the fifth position that Reformed Christians hold is the one that is dominant in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In this view, inspiration is best understood by recognizing the entire Bible simultaneously as both the inspired Word of God and a thoroughly human document. The focus of this view is that the Bible is a book with a divine message in human thought forms. God uses human writers with their own limitations and personalities to communicate a message that

transcends cultures. To understand this divine message, we need to pay the closest possible attention to human words and the contexts in which they are written. God inspired the writers of Scripture, mysteriously being able to work through their lives and personalities and writings with all their limitations to speak the Word of God through what we have today as our Bible.

These five views about the nature of the inspiration of the Bible mean that we have a variety of ways of understanding the nature of Scripture and its appropriate interpretation within Presbyterian and Reformed traditions. All the viewpoints acknowledge the Bible is somehow special or unique. The viewpoints vary on the ways in which they understand the nature of this uniqueness and what that uniqueness means for interpreting the Bible as a whole as well as in individual biblical passages.

WORD AND SPIRIT

Historically and classically, the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition has recognized the Bible as God's inspired, authoritative revelation. But to acknowledge the Bible in this way comes by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit inspired the biblical writers in mysterious ways. The Spirit also illuminates those who read the Scriptures. It is the Spirit who witnesses to the Bible as the Word of God, just as the Spirit also witnesses to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. We come to know and recognize the Bible as God's revelation, as being authoritative, and as being inspired by the work of the Holy Spirit. Word and Spirit are inextricably bound up

together. The Spirit, in addition to inspiring the Word and illuminating our hearts and minds to recognize the Word, also helps us interpret the Word. The Holy Spirit of God leads us to understand what God's Word is saying to us and what the meaning of God's Word is for our lives, every day. The Holy Spirit makes the Word of God come alive for us.

The internal witness of the Holy Spirit is necessary, according to the Reformed tradition, to enable us to recognize Scripture as God's Word. John Calvin (1509–1564) wrote, “The Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded.”⁷ We come to confess Scripture as the Word of God, as we confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior—not by our own intellects or reasoning powers but by the witness or testimony of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds.

THE BIBLE: THE SOURCE OF IT ALL

So where are we in all of this? The differing views of the inspiration of Scripture and various models of the authority of the Bible have practical consequences for us as Christians, and particularly as Presbyterian Christians. Many of the past and present controversies we have in the church can be traced back to these different ways of perceiving the nature of Scripture and the means of its appropriate interpretation.

Positively, however, we can affirm that for us as Presbyterian Christians, the Bible is the source of it all. Making that statement does not solve all our problems. There are many dimensions related to Scripture that need to be explored to gain further clarity about what we believe about the Bible. But to affirm that the Bible is the source of it all unites us with Christians in traditions other than the Reformed and Presbyterian. This confession unites us with other Christians who recognize the Bible as

- the revelation or self-communication of God,
- the authority for the church and for our individual lives, and
- inspired by God to convey God’s word to us in a way that we do not find in any other source.

As we live as Presbyterians in our churches, we can emphasize what unites us with other Christians. The more we study the Scriptures together, the more we listen and pray to God for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the more we turn to the Scriptures to instruct us in what to believe and how to live—the more the Bible will take a central place in our lives. Our faith will live by nourishment from the Word. The Bible as the source of it all will become even more valued and treasured in our lives.