

Presbyterian
Understanding and Use
Of Holy Scripture

A Position Statement Adopted by the
123rd General Assembly (1983)
of the Presbyterian Church in the United States

Biblical Authority
And

Interpretation

A Resource Document Received by the 194th General
Assembly (1982) of the United Presbyterian Church in
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The Office of Theology and Worship
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

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PRESBYTERIAN UNDERSTANDING AND USE OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

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Preface

The Office of Theology and Worship is responsible for keeping biblical, theological, and worship issues before the church. As part of this responsibility, the office seeks to engage the church in continuing exploration of the authority and interpretation of Scripture. Thus, the unit and the Office of the General Assembly are providing Presbyterians with two major church documents that address the Bible's place and function within the community of faith.

Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture was adopted by the 123rd General Assembly (1983) of the Presbyterian Church in the United States as a position statement of the General Assembly on the interpretation of Scripture.

Biblical Authority and Interpretation was received by the 194th General Assembly (1982) of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. Its guidelines were adopted by the General Assembly.

The two papers were written in response to the need for a common basis in a diverse church for understanding and using Scripture. The Office of Theology and Worship believes that they remain important resources for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

1. INTRODUCTION

That Holy Scripture is the “rule of faith and life” is a basic principle of the Reformation. This confessional affirmation, in some formulation, is a structural element of all the Reformed confessions. It is stated and developed in the introductory chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Therefore, we might be inclined to assume that it represents a focal point of unity, a sign of commonality, among Presbyterians who are heirs of this Reformed tradition.

A. Variations on a Theme

The truth is that this affirmation is held and practiced among Presbyterians in a variety of ways. The authority of the Bible is understood differently by different groups and individuals. Different approaches are taken to the interpretation of the Bible.

Such variety can be stimulating and illuminating, but where the differences become too great, the variety is the source of suspicion, conflict, and theological paralysis. Since Holy Scripture is the principal criterion of judgment in taking positions and making decisions, radical differences among us in the way we understand and use Scripture as the rule of faith and practice can weaken our ability to live and work as a community of faith. Especially in the case of the theological and ethical decisions that the courts of our church must make corporately, the diversity has become an important source of difficulty in deliberation and agreement.

In the debates over issues of doctrine and ethics that have taken place in recent years, quite personal and individual orientations to Scripture appear. Theological inclinations and the feeling about Scripture that they involve are not simply a matter of intellectual history. They are shaped by personality, experience, training, interest, and the like. Observation of Presbyterian constituencies reveals a range of stances toward the question of Scripture. The following descriptions are only simplified illustrations of such stances:

- The point of view that regards Scripture’s inerrancy as the hinge of theology and the foundation of faith’s certainty and for which every issue is likely to be taken as a question of the doctrine of Scripture, especially the question of the basis of its trustworthiness.

The point of view that does not reflect technical theories of inspiration but which regards the Bible as a supernatural book, a collection of divine oracles, that conveys messages directly from God to the reader.

The point of view that has evolved from one close to inerrancy but which now has as its primary concern a moderating position, maintaining the authority of Scripture but avoids a rigid concept of inerrancy.

The point of view that has developed from a more conservative heritage (partly on the basis of historical criticism), which is primarily concerned to defend against any approach that would undermine the appropriateness of historical criticism.

The point of view arrived at from a somewhat undefined orientation under the influence of twentieth century reformulations of biblical authority and interpretation, which has special concern to maintain the importance of Scripture against theological programs and positions that seem to diminish its authoritative use.

- The point of view that may respect Scripture as one of the revered documents of the church but does not seriously expect it to be illuminating or determining for important issues of either faith or life in the present day.

- The point of view that interprets Scripture one-sidedly because of a primary identification with a stance on one of several social or political issues, a stance that is believed to reflect the primary values to faith.

The point of view that looks to Scripture for authoritative guidance on matters of religious doctrine and personal mortality, but overlooks its teachings which have direct and indirect bearing on communal life.

With such diversity, how do we read the Bible together? And how do we hear the word of God when decisions must be made in the courts of the church on pressing contemporary issues?

The presence of different theological positions and of many individual orientations is, of course, not a peculiar new feature of our time and church. But it poses the question whether we see or can find a common way that allows us to believe and decide as a community in our use of the Bible as the rule of faith and life.

B. Issues of Authority and Interpretation

While none of the opinions just illustrated is an instance of one distinct, systematic theology, closer analysis reveals that two issues are present throughout. One issue is that of the authority of the Bible. It concerns what kind of a rule for faith and life Scripture is taken to be. For example, is Scripture a rule that governs every possible issue of truth, whether it be religious, moral, or scientific? Again, are the words of the direct revelation of God, or are these words the revelation of God that actually occurred prior to its being recorded in Scripture? It is important to note that to answer these questions in opposite ways is not to choose for or against the authority of Scripture; it is rather to choose one or another conception of the authority of Scripture. Whichever way one answers, the authority of Scripture is being affirmed, albeit in different forms.

The second, closely related issue present in this range of opinion is that of the right interpretation of the Bible. It concerns the determination of what a text of Scripture in the original actually says and the judgment of how what is said is properly used for governing faith and practice. For example, the sixth commandment reads in many familiar English translations "Thou shalt not kill" (Ex. 20:13; Deut. 5:17). Careful attention to the original languages and the common usage of terminology in ancient Near Eastern culture reveals that the text actually says something more precise than to do no killing. The text actually says that unlawful, high-handed killing is forbidden. Thus several contemporary translations become more specific, translating the commandment as prohibiting murder. Next, the right interpretation of the text proceeds to the forming of a judgment about how the text is properly used in ruling faith and practice. Should it rule out all taking of human life, some of it, most of it, or none of it? Should it furnish any other kind of guidance for faith and practice?

The first clue is rightly sought in how the believing community has used the text to govern its life in the past. Two contrasting factors emerge. For while the believing community has not used what is said by the text to prohibit all acts of taking life, it has used it to promote the obligations of doing no harm and of looking after the welfare of one's brothers and sisters. This is illustrated by the fact that from Israel on, the believing community has not regarded all taking of life as murder, and by the fact that from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount on, the community has understood the commandment to have a positive (not merely a negative) point of seeking reconciliation with one another (cf. Matt. 5:21-24). While this text is used as a general prohibition against taking human life, it has not usually been used as an absolute one. Furthermore, what the text says has been used to guide faith and life far more thoroughly than on the relatively few occasions when taking life is at issue.

On the basis of this broad, positive usage of what the commandment says, proper interpretation will proceed to form a judgment about its proper usage in governing issues of faith and practice facing the present believing community. What is important to note about such proper interpretation of a text is that exactly what it says can never be carelessly taken for granted, nor can its proper use be arbitrarily invented.

In one degree or another, the issues of both authority and interpretation are implied in each illustration of divergent opinion currently evident among Presbyterians. While the illustrations often are most explicit about the issue of authority, they are inevitably allied to some type of interpretation. In coming to grips with the differences among Presbyterians, it is important to note that while the problem is often voiced as one of authority, the more basic and pressing issue may be one of interpretation.

C. The Relationship of Authority and Interpretation

Interpretation may be regarded as the more critical issue because it is the functional expression of the Bible's¹ authority. The authority of the Bible is realized in its use, and apart from this interpretative use of it, its authority has no expression. Indeed, the authority of Holy Scripture is only recognized where the church has understood the testimony the Scriptures bear to God and God's self-testimony through them. The power of Holy Scripture is experienced when through it the word of God is heard and received by believers.

Thus the church needs always to remember that the use of Holy Scripture is more important than debates about its authority. Theories about authority of Scripture, which are not vindicated and validated in its use in Christian faith and life, become ends in themselves. All theories of the authority of Scripture are tested by the effectiveness and usefulness of the interpretation that they involve. On the other hand, the most serious denial of Holy Scripture is manifest, not so much in doctrine, as in the failure to find a faithful and joyful employment of Scripture as the rule of faith and life. The authority of Holy Scripture is made real in human life when it is employed in reverence and hope and the word of God is heard and received.

As a consequence, the weight of this study falls upon the matter of interpretation. The issue of authority will not be overlooked, but neither will it be assumed that agreements about conceptions of biblical authority will be sufficient to insure the proper role of Scripture as the rule of faith and life. It may not even be necessary to achieve theoretical agreement about Scripture's authority, before reaching consensus about principles that guide its interpretation. If some headway can be made in the latter direction, Presbyterians may find a functional authority of Scripture more impressive than all their doctrinal formulations about Scripture.

D. The Scope of This Study

In light of these comments, the primary point of this study is to seek a common understanding of how Presbyterians might go about the task of using Scripture as the rule of faith and life. It aims to formulate principles by which to guide the interpretation of Scripture principles clearly rooted in the confessional documents that define the Reformed tradition. This approach holds promise of enabling Presbyterians to regain a common ground for the use of the Bible as the rule of faith and life.

Such a common set of guidelines, especially for employment by the courts of the church as theological and ethical decisions are made, is not intended and should not be expected to result in unanimity in every respect. One set of guidelines cannot account for the variety of perspectives— theological, social, and personal—that believers in our church bring to the process of interpretation. But a common agreement about principles can set the limits and lines for the practice of interpretation in the community. This agreement would not necessarily result in or guarantee a single conclusion to any interpretative problem. The process of reaching convictions about what Scripture leads us to believe and do is beyond any method; such

convictions are given through the Spirit's work in the community. But a common understanding of what we are about can strengthen community in the task of seeking the guidance of Scripture.

Besides its normative use in deciding theological and ethical issues in the courts of the church, Scripture functions as the rule of faith and practice. The Bible is employed on numerous occasions in the church's life and in the life of believers. We scarcely ever recall at one time the extent to which Scripture accompanies the whole life of the church. Sentences and passages from the Bible are used in liturgy for invocations, benedictions, prayers of various kinds, and responses. Scripture is sung in Psalms, paraphrases, and hymns. Texts are read and expounded in preaching. The Sacraments are accompanied by the reading of Scripture. Biblical passages are read in the rites of the church, such as marriage and funerals. Holy Scripture is the primary textbook of nurture and Christian education at all levels of the church's work. It provides the material for personal and corporate devotion. It comes to bear on the process of church discipline and judicial procedure. It is consulted in controversies of faith and practice. It is a means of examination and confession in the ordination of all church officers. It is the primary source and supreme norm of our confession and our order.

In all these various uses as "the rule of faith and life," Holy Scripture functions in a variety of interconnected and overlapping ways: as source and resource, as means of grace, and as norm and standard for our believing and obeying. By it we are informed, strengthened, and guided. Such functions cannot be neatly separated in the many uses of Scripture, but are rather interrelated, one function coming to the fore at one time and then another on a different occasion. Because the normative function, that which guides our judgment on matters of belief and obedience, is so important in the controversies of the past and the present, our reflection on the authority and the interpretation of Scripture may tend to overlook other functions. It is important to acknowledge that the Bible proves itself as the rule of faith and life only when all functions are given their full and rightful place. While this paper focuses on principles intended to help us regarding Scripture's normative function, we need to recall that the vitality of this function is intimately related to the vitality of others in the life of the believer and the community.

E. Summary and Prospect

Despite a common commitment among Presbyterians to the assertion that the Bible is to serve as the rule of faith and practice, a remarkable and sometimes troubling variety of expressions of this principle has been noted. Special difficulty has been cited where the normative function of Scripture in the courts of the church is an issue. We have suggested that the underlying issues finding voice in the variety include both the authority and interpretation of the Bible. We have also identified the appropriateness of focusing primary attention on the matter of interpretation, since it is in the actual employment of Scripture through interpretation that it truly has its authority. Thus the primary aid of this study has been established as that of formulating principles to guide the interpretation of Scripture among Presbyterians.

II. GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETATION

A. The Motives of These Guidelines

Although we confess that Holy Scripture as a whole is the rule of faith and life, this way of describing its role does not mean that each passage is to be read as a kind of law that sets requirements for belief and obedience. Any interpretative approach that turns the entire Bible into a deposit of legal precedents is a theological mistake. Also, such an approach ignores the character of the Scriptures, which are composed of narratives, psalms, visions, letters, proverbs, and prayers as well as commands and laws. The variety of material in Scripture is almost as wide as the variety of literature itself. Scripture is "rule" for us as a whole and in the way that a literature of such richness and diversity can speak to us.

Scripture is not to be treated merely as a collection of documents from the past. Though the books of the Bible were written in the past across a period of centuries, their value to the church is far more than that of a record of its beginnings. The significance of these books is not confined to the times about which they speak or in which they were written. The Bible has a unique and abiding authority. The God to whom Scripture points is the living and true God whose word and work are the supreme reality of the present.

Scripture is also to be treated in interpretation as the Holy Scripture of the church. It is the literature that makes known God's identity and God's way with the world. It influences our thinking, imagination, and emotions and it shapes our consciousness and convictions as believers. It is the primary tradition through which the community of faith knows whom it worships, what it is, and how it exists as the body of believers. We call the books of the Bible "Holy Scripture" because of the continuous experience of the church that God by the Holy Spirit confronts us and communicates with us through them. Therefore, guidelines for the interpretation of Scripture are a matter of first importance to us.

B. The Purpose of These Guidelines

These guidelines are an attempt to describe in an orderly fashion the Presbyterian approach to interpretation. They are drawn from the several areas that ought to be considered in such an approach to interpretation: principles of interpretation that are consistently stated or assumed in the Reformed confessions; the historical developments that occurred in the course of interpretation in the Reformed tradition; what has been learned about biblical literature in the study of its character and history; and the general character of interpretation. They do not provide detailed instruction about procedures that belong to exegetical and theological training, but rather set goals for what is to be undertaken.

As already indicated, these guidelines are proposed primarily for use on those occasions when Scripture is appealed to for guidance in making decisions about specific questions posed in the courts of the church. On such occasions, the questions are usually not general inquiries about what the church is to believe and do; rather, they concern the evaluation and development of specific positions on believing and obeying. This use of Scripture makes special demands upon the practice of interpretation. The entire range of Scripture's witness must be brought to bear on the question in an accurate and appropriate manner. If appeal is made to only one text or a selected few, rather than to the whole of Scripture, conclusions may lack adequate foundation or qualification. If the process of deciding does not consider the relation of the question at hand to the faith of the church expressed in its confessional statements and to the shared knowledge of the culture, responses will likely fall short of authenticity and relevance.

The demands made by this use of Scripture exceed those involved in many other of its uses in the community of faith. In liturgy, devotion, and education, Holy Scripture may well function without the range of interpretative procedures appropriate to its use as a critical norm. The purpose of such guidelines as those proposed below is not to set unnecessary and burdensome requirements on the believer's direct and personal use of the Bible or even to hint at limits on the freedom of the Holy Spirit to work through the witness of Scripture in various ways. However, whenever questions of faith and life do arise, the responsibilities of interpretation are the same. What can be said about sound practice in the use of Scripture as critical norm by the courts can be helpful for many other occasions and uses.

C. The Development of These Guidelines

The use of Holy Scripture for guidance and direction requires the interpretation of its texts. Interpretation, as we acknowledged in introducing this study, usually asks two related kinds of questions. The first asks what the text says and is concerned with understanding its language. The second asks about the use or value of the text for some questions with which one is confronted. Consequently, the use of Scripture as a norm for our belief and obedience involves two types of judgment. The first is that employed in reaching a correct and full understanding of what texts say. The second is that employed in selecting and

using texts for some specific purpose at hand. The first type is composed of the procedures of exegesis; the second is composed of the procedures of theology. The two are interdependent and in the history of interpretation have often not been distinguished. They cannot be separated completely, but their difference is important because confusing them can lead to confusion in the use of Scripture. Therefore our guidelines will be divided into those concerning what the text says and those concerning how the text is rightly read.

A primary interest in the development of these guidelines is to demonstrate their continuity with the Presbyterian and Reformed heritage of biblical interpretation. The foundations for the church's view and interpretation of Scripture were laid in the earliest period of the church's history. The books of the Old Testament were already recognized as authoritative writings in the time of Jesus. The first generations of Christians received and read the Old Testament in the light of their faith in Jesus as the Christ, and developed their faith in him in the light of the witness of the Old Testament. Gospels and epistles written in the Christian community were recognized and acknowledged as the writings that gave the true expression to the breadth and character of the catholic faith. A complex of relations between Scripture and the church's growing doctrinal and liturgical tradition was developed.

The Reformed churches received, shaped, and extended this heritage of the early church. It has been transmitted to us through their work. Their version of this heritage is articulated in the confessions of the Reformed churches. The continuity of these confessions with the tradition of the church before the fifteenth century and their distinctiveness as a fresh expression of it makes them the classic statements of our tradition, the resources for learning and clarifying the central character of our approach to Scripture.

There is a remarkable consistency in the way the documents of the Reformed tradition treat Scripture. They deal with the same issues, use similar language, and come generally to the same conclusions. (In the following discussion, these abbreviations are used: Synod of Berne of 1528 [SB], Geneva Confession of 1541 [GC], French Confession of 1559 [FC], Scots Confession of 1560 [SC], Belgic Confession of 1561 [BC], Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 [HC], Second Helvetic Confession of 1566 [2HC], Westminster Confession of 1646 [WCF] with the Larger Catechism [WLC] and the Shorter Catechism [WSC], Barmen Declaration of 1934 [DBI], Confession of 1967 [C67], Declaration of Faith of 1976 [DF].)

It is the consistency of these documents in the interpretation of Scripture that we intend to formulate afresh in these guidelines. To make the grounding of the guidelines in the confessional transparent, a specific discussion of the confessional background material will be introduced in connection with each guideline or each cluster of guidelines. This procedure will help to assure us of the appropriateness of these guidelines to the Presbyterian family of Christians.

III. GUIDELINES CONCERNING WHAT THE TEXT SAYS

The Reformers and the Reformed confessions generally rejected the notion that biblical texts are allegories and the procedure of seeking three or four levels of meaning in them. They emphasized the plain or literal or single sense of the text as its correct meaning. This emphasis led to attention to sound linguistic and literary studies and to the circumstances of the composition of the text. This approach was the basis for the development of an exegesis using linguistic and historical discipline in the interpretation of the Bible. There is a consensus among Presbyterians that the procedures of interpretation in determining what a biblical text says ought to be those generally followed in understanding any written document. The approaches taken to texts and the questions explored in search of a correct and full understanding of them should be appropriate to the character of the text as language, literature, and document of faith.

A. The Use of Original Languages

The biblical text in Hebrew and Greek is to be used in theological work. Translations are to be tested by these original languages. The church recognizes no official translation; all the current English versions

are subject to evaluation in light of the original languages when being used for theological decisions in the church. While this procedure implies the importance of persons with scholarly competence in languages, even the nonspecialist can engage in the evaluation of translation with the help of appropriate commentaries.

B. The Employment of the Best Manuscripts

The text to be used for translation and interpretation should be determined in the light of an evaluation of the different biblical manuscripts that record the textual tradition. There is a general agreement that the best text as determined by textual criticism is to be used as the basis for study and translations.

Confessional Background Material

While Reformed confessional literature is not uniformly explicit about the use of the original languages and the examination of the textual tradition, the clear statements of the Westminster Confession reveal the concern that the tradition has in these matters:

The Old Testament in Hebrew . . . and the New Testament in Greek . . . being immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical; so as in all controversies of religion the Church is finally to appeal to them. (WCF 6.008)

Here it is clear that original languages are to be employed, even as it is assumed that God has providentially provided “authentical” manuscripts through the textual tradition. This paragraph from Westminster goes on to speak of the necessity of translating Scripture into the “vulgar language of every nation.” The relevance of these principles of interpretation is all the more evident in light of the fact that we are now confronted with so many different “vulgar” translations and paraphrases that the original meaning of Scripture is sometimes difficult to discern.

C. The Priority of the Plain Sense of the Text

Various ways of reading and construing Scripture (allegory, second or deeper or spiritual meanings, free association) have been and may be useful in the many roles that Scripture has in the church. However, when establishing what the text says for the purpose of doctrinal and ethical deliberations, the objective is to identify the plain sense of what is said in the text. Three subordinate guidelines help in determining this plain or literal meaning of the text.

1. The Definition of Literary Units

The proper texts for interpretation are those literary units into which biblical books can be divided when attention is given to the manner of their composition. Words, expressions, and sentences should not be read in isolation from the context of which they are an integral part. Meaning is a function of words in sentences and of sentences in paragraphs. Literary units (passages, paragraphs, pericopes, etc.) are to be understood in terms of the relation they bear to the larger whole of the book in which they stand.

2. The Recognition of the Cultural Conditioning of Language

The language of biblical texts is to be understood in the light of what can be learned about the history of their composition. Language itself is a historical phenomenon. Every text was written by someone, sometime, somewhere, for some reason, using the genres of types of communication available in the cultural setting. The validity of implications drawn from what a text says and the appropriateness of using it for theological purposes depends upon the recognition of its historical character.

3. The Understanding of Social and Historical Circumstances

The goal of exegesis is to reach a full and accurate understanding of what texts say in the social, historical, and literary contexts of their composition. Reverence for the text as Holy Scripture gives reason for concern that texts have their say, that the prophets and apostles be truly and faithfully heard in their specific circumstances as witnesses to God and God's way with the world. Thus attentiveness to the social and historical circumstances out of which the text comes is crucial for determining the plain sense of the text.

It is through these three subordinate guidelines that the plain sense of the text is identified and its priority affirmed. Their application helps us see that while a particular text may name a subject with which we are also concerned in the present, the assumption should not be immediately made that the contemporary subject is the same as that addressed in the biblical text or that the circumstances and conditions of the biblical writer and modern interpreter are similar. Just as clearly, the implications drawn from a text should not violate its character and purpose. The kind of literary material being interpreted should be respected in determining what is said. Epic poetry is not historical chronicle; symbolic stories are not science; and admonition to a particular person or community is not general law. Proceeding in this way to ascertain the plain sense of what the text says, the discipline of exegesis assists theological work in maintaining the actuality of the biblical testimony as a real and primary factor in the thinking and deciding of the church.

Confessional Background Material

The importance of the literary and historical context of Scripture is readily recognized in contemporary confessions, but John Calvin and the writers of the confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also used the literary and historical tools at their disposal to interpret Scripture in context. Additionally, at least one of these classic confessions touches directly on the issue:

But we hold that interpretation of the Scripture to be orthodox and genuine which is gleaned . . . (from the nature of the language in which they were written, likewise according to the circumstances in which they were set down) . . . (2HC 5.010)

Among contemporary confessions there is a clear awareness of the importance of this principle.

The church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as prophetic and apostolic testimony in which it hears the Word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated. . . . The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding. As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that he will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture. (C67 SF27, .29)

God has chosen to address his inspired Word to us through diverse and varied human writings. Therefore we use the best available methods to understand them in their historical and cultural settings and the literary forms in which they are cast. (DF VI.3)

Thus both in the practice of interpreting Scripture and in the formulation of rules for that practice, the Reformed tradition affirms the need to understand the literary and historical context of Scripture.

IV. GUIDELINES CONCERNING HOW THE TEXT IS RIGHTLY USED

Using the Bible as a critical norm for faith and life involves a process of ordering, evaluating, and relating what is said in the Bible to the question at hand. The process is an exercise of theological knowledge, experience, and wisdom. It occurs through insight and reflection. Its practice cannot be prescribed by a set procedure. It can, however, be conducted and tested by a set of concerns, criteria, and responsibilities that belong to our tradition of interpreting Scripture.

A. The Purpose of Holy Scripture

Scripture provides the knowledge of what is necessary for the glory of God and for human faith, life, and salvation. The subject of the Bible as Holy Scripture is God and God's way with humanity and the world. Holy Scripture is normative with respect to its theological subject. The purpose of Scripture has to do with questions about the ultimate origin, meaning, and goal of human life in relation to God, all of which lie behind or beyond the scope of secular scientific and historical disciplines. This guideline means that Scripture is rightly used with respect to this subject matter.

Conversely, this guideline means that Scripture is not authoritative for any and everything, in any and every question. It is not an encyclopedia of information about every area of human knowledge and understanding. So, for instance, it is not appropriate to go to the biblical sources for scientific understanding of such things as biology, astronomy, the structure of the universe, or historical knowledge in general.

This formulation of the purpose of Scripture emphasized its concern both with God and the way of God's people in the world. It asserts that the Scripture is misused whenever Christian faith and life are separated, either by emphasizing correct theology to the neglect of obedient Christian life, or by emphasizing the demands of the Christian life to the neglect of its theological presuppositions and goals. Put another way, Scripture is not properly used unless we remember the chief end of human life is to glorify God and seek first God's kingdom of righteousness in the world.

Confessional Background Material

The confessional tradition is quite explicit regarding those matters with which Scripture is centrally concerned. For the confession the Bible is authoritative in matters of faith, life, and salvation. It contains "all that is necessary for the service of God and for our salvation" (FC V). It sufficiently "teaches" "whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation" (BC VU). It "has the most complete exposition of all that pertains to a saving faith, and also to the framing of a life acceptable to God" (2HC5.002). It is "sufficient to instruct and make perfect the man of God" (SC 3.19). It gives us "that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation," and as such is the "rule of faith and life" (WCF 6.001, .002). It is the "authoritative standard of faith and life" (DF VI.3). Easily discernible here is the emphasis on what we call "ethics," the everyday life of Christians, as well as on correct theological belief and salvation.

B. The Precedence of Holy Scripture

In matters of faith, life, and salvation, Scripture takes precedence over all other authorities. However, the precedence of Scripture does not call for the disregard of other authorities. There are other sources from which we can learn something of the matters with which Scripture deals uniquely. Examples of such sources that deserve our respect include church councils, laws and decrees; ancient and modern theologians and thinkers in general; and various forms of knowledge and experience. Since the wisdom of all such additional authorities is subordinate to and subject to correction by Scripture, the guideline of Scripture's precedence is best formulated in terms of three subsidiary guidelines.

1. The Priority of Holy Scripture

The witness of Scripture on matters within its purpose is authoritative over all other knowledge, opinions, and theories. This priority has implications for the way Scripture is used in relation to other forms of knowledge when dealing with issues of doctrine and obedience. While all available pertinent knowledge and experience should inform thinking about such matters, the priority accorded to what is known of God through the Holy Scripture cannot be surrendered.

Since God is creator of all things, respect for the priority of Scripture does not exclude but requires respect for the subordinate, relative authority of such secular disciplines as the natural sciences, psychology, sociology, philosophy, economic and political research. Yet the priority of Scripture is compromised when Scripture is forced to conform or made subordinate to personal likes or dislikes; to any psychology, political, economic, or philosophical ideology, program, or method; to the authority of human reason and logical consistency in general; or to personal or collective experience.

2. The Use of Knowledge

The way in which the biblical testimony should be used needs to be thought out in the light of contemporary claims, insights, and theories that bear on the question. Scripture as norm does not exhaust or limit what faith needs to know in seeking the most faithful course of obedience and confession. The knowledge generated by observation and research can helpfully inform the thinking of faith. It aids the interpreter of biblical material in discriminating between faith and the world view in which faith is expressed in biblical texts. It helps to define the character and complexity of the problem under consideration, furnishes resources with which believers can communicate in contemporary culture, and assists in forming responses that engage the real milieu in which the church exists.

Of course it should not too easily be assumed that current conclusions, claims, and theories on any subject are reliable. All human learning and opinion is tentative and incomplete. Its reliability must be tested with care, and the influence of fads, trends, modes of opinion and the like must be resisted critically. It is also possible that faith guided by Scripture and available knowledge may conflict. In that case, faith must hold to the guidance of Scripture while searching for better understanding and knowledge.

3. The Use of Experience

The use of Scripture in deliberating and deciding questions of faith and life is theological work done in and for the church. The context is the community of faith. The entire company of believers is both a resource and a participant in the process. Questions about how faith is to be held, understood, and practiced arise in the life of believers seeking to be faithful in the lives they live and in the world in which they exist. Out of their individual and corporate experience members of the church become sensitive to dimensions of Scripture not previously discerned. These questions and insights, when offered for corporate consideration, can spur and illuminate the church to different and deeper understanding of Scripture.

Therefore, the church in its institutional life must not discount the experience of its members, but hear their questions and receive their insights as opportunities to read Scripture again in the continuing search for positions and patterns of contemporary faithfulness. For their part, individuals and groups should not allow their own concerns and convictions to isolate them within the community or use them to judge the church in self-righteousness. Instead, they should bring them patiently and insistently to the church to ask whether the larger community of believers can confirm or correct or share their understanding of Scripture.

Confessional Background Material

Accordingly, first priority to Scripture has its source in none other than God. Reformed confessions stress that the source of biblical authority is God alone, often specifying that the Bible's authority is not from humans or the church. Sometimes they speak of God in general as the one who speaks in Scripture (FC V, 2HC 5.001, WCF 6.064). Often they speak of the Holy Spirit who is active both in God's giving and our receiving of Scripture as the word of God (FC IV; BC M; WCF 6.002, .005; DF VI.3). Contemporary confessions tend to emphasize the authority of Scripture in its witness to Jesus Christ (DB 8.05, C67 9.27, DF VI.3). These appeals to God, Holy Spirit, and Christ as the source of authority are not mutually exclusive but reflect the doctrine of the Trinity. They supplement each other, and a full description of the Reformed understanding of the precedence of Scripture in interpretation needs all three.

The authority of Scripture is not based on anything other than God personally speaking in it. This negative point is important because it rejects all attempts to prove the authority of Scripture either by arguments about it or by characteristics of it. Calvin himself led the way for this negative emphasis in the *Institutes* 1.7.4, 5:

Thus, the highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it. The prophets and apostles do not boast either of their keenness or of anything that obtains credit for them as they speak; nor do they dwell upon rational proofs . . . we ought to seek our [conjecture] in a higher place than human reasons, judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit . . . they who strive to build up firm faith in Scripture through disputation are doing things backwards . . . unbelieving men both wish and demand rational proof that Moses and the prophets spoke divinely. But I reply: the testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness to himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit . . . Scripture indeed is self-authenticated; hence, it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning.

Calvin then goes on to discuss some elements in Scripture that lend credibility to it: antiquity, miracles, fulfilled prophecies, preservation despite persecution, and consent of the church. But he says that these arguments are only useful aids and external props. Calvin's position is remarked here in this detail because it is so dearly echoed in the Westminster Confession, which cites characteristics of Scripture "whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God." But the Confession goes on immediately to insist that "our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts" (WCF 6.005).

Given this view of the priority of Scripture, the confessions typically acknowledge that there is some general knowledge of God and God's will apart from Scripture—through creation, providence, the light of nature, and God's preservation and government of the universe (FC V, BC R, WCF 6.001). Thus they acknowledge the appropriate use of other forms of knowledge and experience. But in so doing, they insist that these other forms of knowledge or experience are not sufficient "to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary [to] salvation" (WCF 6.001), and are subordinate to the clear knowledge of God given in Scripture. "We must test any word that comes to us from Church, world, or inner experience by the Word of God in Scripture" (DF VI.3). The Barmen Declaration is even stronger in its insistence that God's Word in Scripture takes precedence over all other claims about God's will:

We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation. . . . We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church in human arrogance could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of any arbitrarily chosen desires, purposes, and plans. (DB 8.12, .26)

Consequently, the confessional tradition can be said to promote the use of other knowledge in the interpretation of Scripture only in the context of the clear priority and precedence of the Bible.

C. The Centrality of Jesus Christ

It is in Jesus Christ that God deals decisively with humanity and constitutes the church. This affirmation implies that all Scripture is to be interpreted in light of the centrality of Christ and in relation to the salvation provided through him. This principle requires a use of Scripture that recognizes Jesus Christ as its center, though not one that regards every text as a witness to Jesus.

No understanding of what Scripture teaches us to believe and do can be correct that ignores or contradicts the central and primary revelation of God and God's will through Jesus Christ made known through the witness of Scripture. Without implying a Word within the Word or a canon within a canon, and without rejecting the authority of the parts of Scripture that are not explicitly christological, this principle insists that all of Scripture should be understood with reference to the central revelation of God in Christ. At the most direct level of application, this principle means that any teaching of the Bible on a matter of faith or life is to be used in a manner consistent with scriptural accounts of Jesus' own teaching and embodiment of the person and will of God.

Confessional Background Material

Calvin himself and many Reformed confessions say that Scripture is to be interpreted in light of the revelation of God in Christ. "In our reading of Scripture we shall hold simply to that which speaks clearly and definitely to our conscience and makes us feel that it leads us to Christ" (Calvin in his commentary on John 12:48). How do we have the "right knowledge of God," that knowledge that tells us that God loves us and desires to be our Father and Savior? "By his Word, in which he declines his mercy to us in Christ, and assures us of His love toward us" (GC 13).

The classical and contemporary Reformed confessions comprise a veritable litany on the principle of interpreting Scripture in light of the revelation of God in Christ.

But where something is brought before us by our pastors or by others which brings us closer to Christ we will gladly accept it and will not limit the course of the Holy Spirit . . . (SB)

When controversy arises about the right understanding of any passage or sentence of Scripture, or for the reformation of any abuse within the Kirk of God, we ought not so much to ask what men have said or done before us, as what the Holy Ghost uniformly speaks within the body of Scriptures and what Christ Jesus himself did and commanded. (SC 3.18)

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death. (DB 8.11)

The Bible is to be interpreted in light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ. (C67 9.29)

Jesus Christ stands at the center of the biblical record. (DF I.4)

When we encounter apparent tensions and conflicts in what Scripture teaches us to believe and do, the final appeal must be to the authority of Christ (DF VI.3). It is this insistence on the centrality of Christ that obliges us to make it one of our guidelines for the right use of Scripture in interpretation.

D. The Interpretation of Scripture by Scripture

The observance of this principle involves searching the whole of Scripture for all texts bearing on the question under consideration and using particular texts or groups of texts in the light of the whole. Identifying all the texts relevant to an issue under consideration is both a topical and theological matter. Thus all the particular texts in which the question is explicitly addressed are to be used. However, the general witness of Scripture to the larger theme or subject of which the particular question is a part should be employed to determine the right use of texts that explicitly address the question. Thus texts should not be selected arbitrarily to support a position in disregard of other texts that qualify or contradict the position; neither should one text or group of texts be used to authorize a theological decision without consideration of their relation to the whole of Scripture and its unfolding movement.

A special dimension of this guideline has to do with the interpretation of the Old Testament in light of the New Testament, as well as the interpretation of the New Testament in light of the Old Testament. Thus the New Testament's emphasis on the gospel is not to be understood apart from the Old Testament's emphasis on the grace of the law; and the Old Testament's emphasis on the law is not to be understood apart from the New Testament's emphasis on the grace of the gospel. Thereby the Reformed tradition of biblical interpretation maintains the entire biblical canon as the context for understanding the fullness of Christian faith and life.

Confessional Background Material

It is sometimes said that this particular principle is the Reformed principle of interpretation. While that statement is an exaggerated claim, it does point to an important characteristic of the Reformed tradition- seeking to understand any given passage of Scripture by comparing it with other passages:

... we hold that interpretation of Scripture to be orthodox and genuine which is gleaned from the Scriptures themselves and expounded in the light of like and unlike passages and of many and clearer passages. (2HC 5.010)

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them. (WCF 6.007)

The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it may be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly. (WCF 6.009)

... comparing Scripture with Scripture we anticipate that the Holy Spirit will enable us to interpret faithfully God's Word for our time and place. (DF VI.3)

The implication of this principle of interpreting Scripture by Scripture, particularly for understanding the Old and New Testaments in light of each other, is more often implied than expressed in the confessional writings. However, the confessions clearly demonstrate the principle in their interpretations of the law. The coming of Christ, for example, influences how we interpret the will of God for our lives, and requires us to distinguish between what is permanently binding and what is meant only for a certain time and place. Likewise, life in Christ is to be understood in light of the promises and blessings of the law.

Besides this law [the Ten Commandments], commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a Church under age, ceremonial laws. . . . All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated under the New Testament. . . . To them also, as a body politic, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any other, now, further than the general equity thereof may require. . . . The moral law doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof. . . . Neither doth Christ in the gospel any way dissolve, but much strengthen, this obligation. (WCF 6.103-105; cf.-6.106)

Thus both in general and in the specific form of interpreting the two Testaments in light of each other, the confessions articulate the principle of interpreting Scripture by Scripture.

E. The Rule of Love

The fundamental expression of God's will is the two-fold commandment to love God and neighbor, and all interpretations are to be judged by the question whether they offer and support the love given and commanded by God. When interpretations do not meet this criterion, it must be asked whether the text has been used correctly in the light of the whole Scripture and its subject.

Any interpretation of Scripture is wrong that separates or sets in opposition love for God and love for fellow human being, including both love expressed in individual relations and in human community (social justice). No interpretation of Scripture is correct that leads to or supports contempt for any individual or group of persons either within or outside of the church. Such results from the interpretation of Scripture plainly indicate that the rule of love has not been honored. This rule reminds us forcefully that as the rule of faith and life, Scripture is to be interpreted not just to discover what we are to think or what benefits we receive from God in Christ, but to discover how we are to live.

Confessional Background Material

Emphasis on the rule of love is found especially in the catechisms of the Reformed tradition as they give extended attention to interpreting the Ten Commandments. Especially in the Westminster Larger Catechism, the commandments are applied not only to personal relationships but also to social-political relationships.

In addition to these applications of the rule of love, the confessions sometimes speak of the rule explicitly:

But where something is brought before us by our pastors or others, which brings us closer to Christ, and in accordance with God's Word is more conducive to mutual friends and Christian love than the interpretation now presented, we will gladly accept it . . . (SB)

We hold that interpretation of the Scripture to be orthodox and genuine which agree[s] with the rule of faith and love, and contributes much to the glory of God and man's salvation. (2HC 5.010)

We dare not receive or admit any interpretation which is contrary to any principle point of our faith, or to any other plain text of Scripture, or to the rule of love. (SC 3.18)

In these affirmations from within the Reformed tradition we find ample warrant for our contemporary formulation of the rule of love as a guideline pertinent to the interpretation of Scripture.

F. The Rule of Faith

Scripture is to be interpreted in light of the past and present Christian community's understanding of Scripture. The general sense of Scripture's teaching on the principal elements of Christian faith, held among believers since the beginning of the church, represents a rule of faith. The confessions and catechisms of the Presbyterian tradition are the particular version of the rule of faith for us. They are the public and common declaration of how the Bible is understood among us as Holy Scripture. Thus all interpretations of Scripture are to be tested for their coherence with the classic statements of the Christian faith held by the Holy Catholic Church, by our confessional standards, and by the Reformed tradition that was the context in which those confessional standards were formed.

This does not mean that new insights into Scripture by individuals are discounted. Because the guidance of the Holy Spirit is promised to individual Christians who read the Bible, the church does not discourage their attempts to interpret Scripture or refuse to consider the convictions of such individuals formed under the guidance of Scripture. Nonetheless, since the guidance of the Holy Spirit is promised to individual Christians for the sake of building up and equipping the community of Christians for its mission in the world, the church's consensus is likely to be more accurate than the opinions of individual persons. The Spirit has been at work in the church through the centuries, as well as in the present. Therefore, individual Christians or groups of Christians must not ignore church tradition or refuse to submit their private interpretations to the judgment of and possible correction by that tradition.

Confessional Background Material

The confessions understand full well that the church's traditional interpretation of Scripture is fallible and subject always to revision and correction. Nevertheless, they give it initial precedence over the interpretations of individuals, both because the understanding of the whole church over time is likely to be more adequate than the opinion of individual persons at one point in time and because Christ himself through the Holy Spirit has been at work in the church.

. . . listening with respect to fellow-believers past and present, we anticipate that the Holy Spirit will enable us to interpret faithfully God's Word for our time and place. (DF VI. 3)

An understanding of the guideline of the rule of faith renders intelligible and otherwise anachronistic and authoritarian sounding note in the confessions: the emphasis on the authority of preachers.

Because these preachers represent the church and its rule of faith, not because of personal privilege, Calvin has a high view of their role. In the Geneva Catechism he says that "it is not enough for people to read [the Bible] privately at [time], without altogether hearing its teaching in common" (GC 305). Why?

Because Jesus Christ has established this order in His Church (Eph. 4:11), and He has declared this to be the only means of edifying and preserving it. Thus we must keep ourselves to it and not be wiser than our Master. (GC 306)

Thus he argues that we need pastors and that:

we should hear them, receiving the teaching of the Lord in humility from their mouth. Therefore whoever despises them and refuses to hear them, rejects Jesus Christ, and separates himself from the fellowship of the faithful (Matt. 10:40; Luke 10:16). (GC 307)

The Second Helvetic Confession makes the same general point in this way:

Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful. . . . The apostle Peter has said that the Holy Scriptures are not of private interpretation (II Pet. 1-20), and thus we do not allow all possible interpretations. . . . (2HC 5.004, 010).

In these ways the Reformed tradition has affirmed the importance of the rule of faith for the right use of Scripture.

G. The Fallibility of All Interpretation

Every reading, confession, and theology that refers to Scripture is subject to testing by further and more faithful searching of the Scripture to see if it is genuinely in accord with the Bible's witness. Where interpretations of Scripture are in tension with the rule of faith, those interpretations should be examined carefully and critically out of concern to maintain the continuity of tradition. On the other hand, we must also reckon with the fact that the past interpretations embodied in the rule of faith are also fallible and susceptible to revision on the basis of Scripture itself. Thus no doctrinal or ethical interpretation of Scripture, whether long established or new, is to be accepted as a final word, but is always subject to possible revision and correction as a result of further study of Scripture.

Confessional Background Material

As mentioned in discussion of the rule of faith, it is characteristic of Reformed confessions that they acknowledge the fallibility of every interpretation of Scripture, including their own. They express a willingness to subject every interpretation (again, including their own) to the correction of Scripture itself.

We protest that if any man will note in this confession of ours any article or sentence repugnant to God's holy word, that it would please him of his gentleness and for Christian charity's sake to admonish us of the same in writing; and we upon our honor and fidelity, by God's grace do promise unto him satisfaction from the mouth of God, that is, from his holy scriptures, or else reformation of that which he shall prove to be amiss. (SC Preface)

All synods and councils since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err, and may have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as a help in both. (WCF 6.175)

We subject to its [the word of God in Scripture] judgment all understanding[s] of doctrine and practice, including this Declaration of Faith. (DF VI.3)

This principle of interpretation, source of the permanent openness to continuing reform in the Reformed tradition, is perhaps most succinctly expressed in the statement of the Synod of Berne to which reference has already been made, that "we will gladly accept" new interpretations that are in demonstrably greater conformity to God's word. This humility regarding the results of all our interpretive activity is an abiding feature of the Reformed tradition.

H. The Relation of Word and Spirit

The work of interpretation leads to God's authoritative and convincing word for us only through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. All interpretation should be undertaken in reverence and prayer for that illumination. This guideline for interpretation is not just a pious platitude. Neither careful rationale nor logical

deduction, nor use of all the tools or critical-historical exegesis, can guarantee the right interpretation of Scripture. After we have done the best we can with all the means at our disposal, we depend upon God's Spirit to enable us rightly to hear and believe and obey.

Such faith in and openness to the illumination of the Holy Spirit does not depend upon any particular theory or doctrine of the inspiration of the Spirit in the writing of Scripture. Since the Holy Spirit is a living Spirit who continues to be active in the lives of individual Christians and in the church, there can be no faith in and openness to the Spirit's guiding presence if we are not ready to discover from Scripture new and different insights into what we have to say and do in our time and place.

Confessional Background Material

It is a clear characteristic of the confessions that they acknowledge the right interpretation of Scripture can only come with reliance on the Holy Spirit and understanding that the work of the Spirit is to enable us to discern what God has to say to us, here and now. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to discover the relevance of this ancient book for our time and place.

... Is all this within our power [to use Scripture right and profit by it]? None of it; but God works them in us in this way by His Holy Spirit. (GC 302)

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture . . . [n]evertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word. (WCF 6.006)

God's Word is spoken to his church today where the Scriptures are faithfully preached and attentively read in dependence on the illumination of the Holy Spirit and with readiness to receive their truth and direction. (C67 9.30)

we anticipate that the Holy Spirit will enable us to interpret faithfully God's Word for our time and place. (DF VI.3)

The ultimate source for the right interpretation of Scripture is well understood by the Reformed tradition to reside in the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit.

I. The Use of All Relevant Guidelines

It has been characteristic of the approach to the interpretation of Scripture in the Reformed tradition that it has been wary of adopting any one principle of interpretation to the exclusion of others. It has preferred, for example, to hold law and gospel in tension, to maintain the full biblical canon as the context for the thinking of faith, to seek to know Jesus as Christ both in the Old Testament's anticipation of him and in the New Testament's memory of him, to pursue theology as a practical discipline on interpreting Scripture for the glory of God, the salvation of humankind, and the ordering of life, and to cherish the hope that the sovereignty of God may be given at least penultimate expression by human worship and obedience in the midst of history. As a consequence, no interpretation of Scripture based on a single one or several of the principles of interpretation we have mentioned is to be accepted without testing it also by all the others that may apply, or by still further principles of interpretation that may help us in the faithful, honest, and accurate use of Scripture.

The basis for this last guideline is found in all the preceding discussions of confessional background material, taken together. The several guidelines formulated here have taken their origin from the fabric of this highly consistent material. The cumulative impact of our survey of this material requires us to be mindful of the variety and totality of guidelines that deserve our careful attention in interpretation. All of these ought to be continually considered as we faithfully seek the guidance of Holy Scripture.

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY AND INTERPRETATION

**A RESOURCE DOCUMENT RECEIVED BY THE
194TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY (1982)
OF THE UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Scope of the Document

In reading this report, several elements that can best be stated at the beginning will become apparent.

First, it is impossible to discuss biblical authority without an awareness of the wider issues of authority and revelation that are raised at so many points within our culture. Yet a discussion of these issues would have to deal with much more than biblical authority and would require study far beyond the limited mandate given to the task force. While these additional issues are significant, the fact that they are not discussed here is due to the intentional limiting of the focus of the task force to the specific requirements of the mandate.

Second, the emphasis on the confessional character of the Reformed tradition has been highlighted as the mandate requested. The intention of the report is to focus on the way in which the use of Scripture in the church is to be guided by its confessions. So the models chosen arise from that confessional tradition.

Third, the task force took with great seriousness the General Assembly's instruction that the guidelines be nonrestrictive. For this reason, the report does not assume that by use of these guidelines controversies will be ended or resolved in such a fashion that there will be agreement. Rather, they are guidelines that allow diversity to continue in the midst of the serious study of Scripture, in the conviction that the church will be strengthened rather than weakened by this process.

B. Background

Recently, the denomination has spent considerable time reaffirming such basic doctrines as the work of the Holy Spirit, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the deity of Jesus Christ. Therefore, at this point in our history, we are involved in the study of biblical authority and interpretation.

In the last several years, other denominations—the Church of the Brethren and the Christian Reformed Church—have also issued major reports on the subject of biblical authority. The Presbyterian Church in the United States is now at work on such a report. We can conclude that the Spirit of God is urging the larger church of Jesus Christ to become more radical, that is, to reexamine its roots in order to develop understandings and approaches to contemporary life that are both faithful to those roots and responsive to the time which we are now living.

The upheavals of the denomination, including the Black Manifesto of 1968, the giving of money to the Angela Davis defense fund in 1971, the Kenyon case in 1975, and the debates over the ordination of homosexuals in 1978, are not isolated occurrences in a stable, harmonious society and world. The late twentieth century is a time of major social unrest throughout the world. Many people respond to the larger global context with a more urgent demand for the church to stabilize and demonstrate unambiguous authority. Others in the church are impatient for a time when a total reordering of society will emerge. Some find any expression of authority to be oppressive; others see rampant freedom as the enemy of civil peace and churchly purity. Most United Presbyterians, as reported in the *Presbyterian Panel* to be described later, experience real conflict between the general culture's understanding of freedom and the biblical notion of obedience.

The United Presbyterian Church finds itself affirming the Reformed tradition* as interpreted through its confessions, although many of its members are unfamiliar with its tradition. Fully one third of the denomination report that they do not know what the Reformed tradition is on the matter of divine inspiration. The challenge is to maintain continuity in the midst of accelerating change, a task that is alternately exhilarating and exhausting.

*See Glossary

The issue of biblical authority and interpretation is crucial to the life of our denomination because the Scripture has always been considered the one, enduring, trustworthy guide to faith and practice. Such a commitment is exemplified by the *Panel* of January 1981,¹ in which a majority of members reported that they considered the Bible to be “very important” in informing their decisions. However, the *Panel* data did not support this claim, since it documented infrequent reading of the Bible by some of the people who made their basic appeal to its authority.

As in the 1920s, the denomination is now discussing biblical authority, since adherents of the inerrantist* view of the authority of the Bible have become increasingly vocal. The inerrantist view was the predominant view in the church from the 1700s until 1927. At that time the denomination debated the extent to which the General Assembly had constitutional power to issue binding definitions of “essential and necessary doctrines” for ordination. In 1927, the General Assembly repudiated earlier declarations that named five fundamental doctrines as essential and necessary for subscription for ordination (the Deliverance of 1910, again adopted in 1920 and 1923). In its action, the General Assembly permitted theological diversity within the limits of the confessions. Thus, the view of biblical authority and interpretation that was held from the mid-1700s gradually made room for new theological perspectives, first as moderate liberalism in the 1930s, then as strong neoorthodoxy in the 1940s and 1950s. From the 1960s to the present, new currents, such as process,* liberation,* and other theologies, have provided additional perspectives.

All through these changing currents, the denomination has affirmed its conviction that the Scripture is “the word of God written.” It has adopted a Book of Confessions by which it promises to be guided in its interpretation of the Scripture. And yet, the church is still troubled with tensions that were not totally set to rest in the action of the 139th General Assembly (1927), the purpose of which was to preserve the denomination’s unity and to assure its peace by restoring a latitude with limits. In 1929, four Princeton Seminary faculty members withdrew from the seminary. Later these, with others, formed a separate denomination. Not all of those who espoused the orthodox* or inerrantist position* withdrew from the denomination with these spokesmen. Recently, their theological heirs have raised strong voices again within the denomination. The present inerrantists continue to assert that theirs is the view of Scripture articulated in the Westminster Confession, taught by Calvin, and held by the early church.

Recent debates in the denomination over the mission of the church, the role of women, language about God, the nature of the Lord’s Supper, and a scriptural view of homosexuality have highlighted conflicting views. All claim to base their views on Scripture. It is in the context of these events and the longer-standing debate over orthodoxy (whether conceived as between Old School* and New School* or fundamentalists* and modernists*) that this task force was created to do its work. The Advisory Council on Discipleship and Worship and the members it chose for the task force sense together that the time is right to address again the basic question of biblical authority and interpretation.

II. AUTHORITY

A. Sampling the Denomination

In order to study the different ways of understanding biblical authority now prevalent, the task force sampled the denomination’s thinking and practices as a whole by use of the *Presbyterian Panel*. The *Panel* is an instrument that is distributed to a representative sample of lay members, elders, pastors, and clergy in specialized ministries. With the help of the Research Division of the Support Agency, the task force developed a questionnaire in the summer and fall of 1979, which was then sent to 3,694 persons. The questionnaires were returned by 2,990 and the results were analyzed by and for the task force.

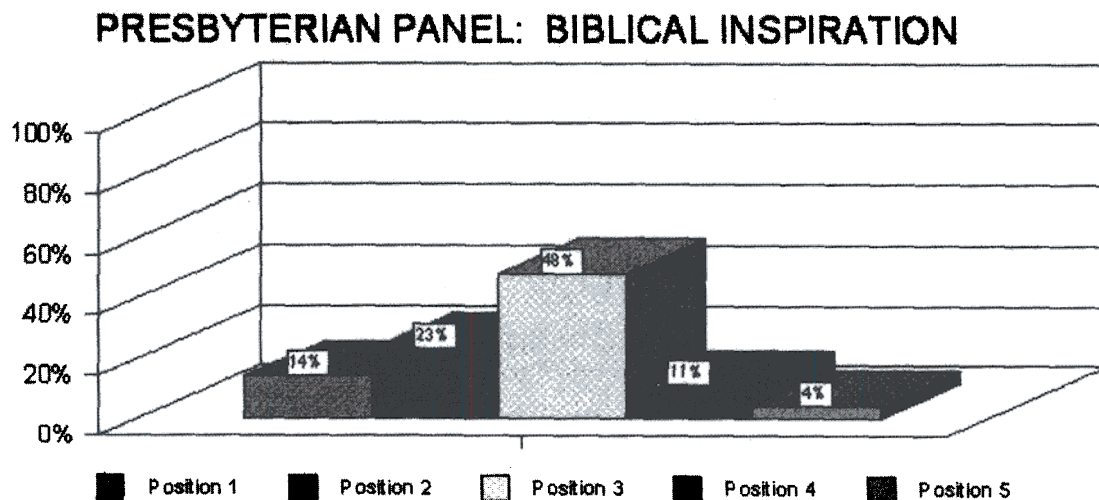
*See Glossary

In authorizing the *Panel*, the task force was following the directives of its assignment. However, it wants to make clear in reporting its observations that it is not implying a “majority rules” mentality in the matter of biblical authority. Scripture itself and the confessions of the denomination, not the greatest number of respondents on an opinion poll, determine the standards. Rather, its purpose in gathering information was to gain a clearer understanding of where the people were in relation to the standards and tradition, not to reset the standard or to change the tradition. The task force offers these findings as useful information to those involved in the teaching and preaching tasks of the denomination.

Panelists were first asked to choose from five positions the one that best represented their understanding of the nature of divine inspiration. The five positions, with the number of respondents and percentage of the whole, are described in Figures 1 and 2. The choices of the respondents, as noted by the numbers and percentages, produced a slightly skewed distribution in favor of positions 1, 2, and 3, rather than a pure bell-shaped curve with equal distribution on both sides of the middle. It is noteworthy that almost half of the respondents reported that they had changed positions during their lifetime, most frequently moving away from positions 1 and 2 in the direction of positions 2 and 3.

Of special significance for the denomination is that about one-third reported that they “do not know” what the Reformed tradition on the inspiration of Scripture is. Another one-third identified position 3 as the Reformed position; 23 percent opted for position 2; and 9 percent chose position 1. As for habits of individual Bible study, one-fourth reported engaging in daily Bible study; one-half studied between several times a week and several times a month; and one-fourth studied several times a year or less. There was broad acceptance of the tools of biblical study and analysis described later in Section III.

Figures 1 and 2



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- Position 1:** 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.
 - Position 2:** 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.
 - Position 3:** All of the Bible is both the inspired Word of God and at the same time a thoroughly human document.
 - Position 4:** Portions of the Bible, including some of its theological and ethical positions, may not be the inspired Word of God.
 - Position 5:** The Bible is merely a record of the moral and religious experiences of Hebrews and Christians.
-

In the section of the *Panel* on resources used for decision making, 87 percent reported that they considered the Bible “important” or “very important” in deciding contemporary social issues. A majority saw that “present cultural views of personal freedom work against the biblical understanding of obedience.”

Of considerable interest to the task force was a finding that a slight majority of the panelists rejected the view reportedly cited to the Committee on Pluralism and Conflict that the major source of conflict in the denomination has been the diverse ways of viewing the authority and interpretation of Scripture. Only a slight majority of those holding position 1 agreed with the Committee on Pluralism and Conflict’s report, whereas more in all the other positions differed with it.

While reflecting on the *Panel* findings, the task force recalled the strong affirmation of the Bible as the word of God written in the whole Reformed tradition and more recently in the Confession of 1967. The *Panel* made the same affirmation in a variety of ways, insisting once more that the Bible has a central and ultimately decisive place in the ongoing life of the church and the whole Christian community. The *Panel* was almost unanimous in asserting the divine inspiration of the Bible while a mere 4 percent ruled out such a component in favor of regarding the Bible as purely human composition. There was a fairly wide range of opinion concerning the nature and extent of the divine inspiration of the Bible and its relationship to the equally recognized human elements. The five positions were seen as describing a range from a maximum recognition of divine inspiration and control in position 1 to a minimum of no divine inspiration in position 5, with a corresponding scale for the human element.

Other aspects of the *Panel*’s selection and distribution need to be noted, however; positions 2 and 4 were essentially efforts to define the divine and human elements in the production of the Bible. They offered compromises at different points in the scale so as to allow for adequate affirmation of the divine and authoritative aspect of the Bible, while also acknowledging clearly human and fallible elements in the extant and resultant text. That such solutions are not entirely satisfying to the church as a whole was clear from the fact that barely over one third of the respondents approved such statements and two-thirds opted for a different resolution. At the right end of the spectrum, 14 percent affirmed the divine aspect to the practical exclusion of any human role. At the other extreme, 4 percent stated that the Bible is merely a record of the moral and religious experience of the Hebrews and Christians, thus limiting it to a human record. But an overwhelming 82 percent maintained that the two components should both be affirmed in spite of the obvious and difficult problem of sorting them out.

More compelling and important is the implication that 48 percent of the total *Panel*, more than double any other group, held the view that the Bible is an indivisible mixture of the divine and human. Position 3 affirmed, in contrast to positions 1 and 5, that justice is not done to the Bible if either the divine or the human component is emphasized to the exclusion of the other. While position 3 may be logically questionable and leaves open to debate the central issue of the way in which the divine-human aspects are related and interwoven, it represents the solid center of the church and its insistence upon the mystery of the inspiration of the Bible as a divine instrument permeated by human characteristics.

The *Panel* clearly leans in a conservative direction when it comes to the inspiration of the Bible. Position 2 was supported by twice as many (23 percent) as position 4 (11 percent). In other words, if an effort is made to rationalize the relationship of divine and human elements in the composition of the Bible, then greater emphasis should be placed on the divine, even at risk of slighting the human. When this is coupled with the even greater imbalance between position 1 (14 percent) and position 5 (4 percent), it is clear that the *Panel*, speaking for the church constituency, affirmed that the Bible is indeed the written word of God.

At the same time, the *Panel* accepted in the finished product an important human component with all of its ambiguities and ambivalence, even though it has been the subject of inquiry, debate, and controversy from earliest times to the present. There are two major implications:

1. Since the Bible is a thoroughly human document, continued critical examination and investigation of the Bible as a literary-historical work is not only permitted, but encouraged; and

2. Since the Bible is considered uniquely authoritative for the church, proposals, arguments, and conclusions drawn from or based upon the Bible have an important place in the life and work of the church.

The clear recognition by the *Panel* of the Bible as the unique authority in the life of the church should lead to greater use of the Bible in discussion and debate. It may even increase controversy. Such a dynamic role for the Bible should be welcomed. Controversy is inevitable, and the more biblically centered the better. The purpose of this report is to suggest ways in which controversy can be used creatively and constructively. The first step is to recognize the preeminent role of the Bible and deal with it appropriately.

B. Exploring the Reformed Tradition

Findings revealed that some people tended to identify their own theological position with the historical stance of the church, especially those who embraced positions one, two, or three.

Others believed that the position they personally espoused was different from the Reformed tradition. It is not clear whether they were not informed about the Reformed tradition or whether they were informed and defended different positions. A further examination and clarification of the historical tradition of the denomination seems warranted and is requested by the referral from the 190th General Assembly (1978) (*Minutes*, UPCUSA, 1978, Part I, pp. 40, 293).

As the Christian faith took root in different countries, it necessarily incorporated some of the distinctive features of the culture, the period, and the temperament of those who proclaimed it. The early creeds of the church, Nicene and Apostles', were attempts to articulate the basic facts of the Gospel to which all Christians agreed. There were, and are, symbols of the unity of the church.

At the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century the words Reformed, Evangelical, and Protestant were initially used interchangeably to designate those who sought radical renewal in the church—a return to the good news of the gospel. As the Reformation developed indigenously in various parts of Europe, varying emphases produced traditions that became denominations. The Swiss branch of the Reformation came to be designated as Reformed in contrast to the Lutherans, the Anglicans, and the Anabaptists. The early Swiss Reformers were perceived to be more stringent than the Lutherans in applying biblical principles to the life of the church. Whereas the Lutherans recommended not disturbing, medieval church practices unless forbidden by Scripture, the Swiss contended that positive biblical warrant was required if a church practice was to be retained. This caused Queen Elizabeth I in a letter to refer to the Swiss churches as “more Reformed.”

The Swiss Reformation spread east to Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland and west through France, in the Huguenot community, into the lowlands of Germany, Belgium, and Holland, and into Scotland and England. Protestant refugees from these countries came to Geneva for sanctuary and study and carried home the distinctive attitudes and interpretations of the Swiss Reformers. The sixteenth and seventeenth century Reformed theological confessions, adopted in the Book of Confessions, evidence three characteristics of this developmental period. First, our confessions are catholic, acknowledging their agreement with the ancient creeds affirmed by the church universal. Second, the Reformed confessions are Protestant, affirming that the church must be reformed, and ever reforming, according to the word of God attested in canonical Scripture. Third, these confessions are evangelical, recognizing the centrality of the gospel of Jesus Christ as the life-renewing and culture-shaping power of God that continually creates and sustains the church in its ministry and mission to the world.

In keeping with this foundational commitment, the Reformed confessions emphasized such biblical themes as the covenant, divine election, the sovereignty of God's grace, and human sinfulness. The Barmen Declaration (1934) reasserted the sole Lordship of Christ in the church against the intrusion of totalitarianism. The Confession of 1967 carried the spirit of the Reformed heritage into confrontation with

specific contemporary moral and social issues. Moreover, the theological tradition has generated a distinctive Reformed ethos constituted by basic attitudes toward worship, education, wealth, and the relationship between church and state.

To say that we are Reformed Christians, therefore, is to claim distinctiveness but not uniqueness. It is to acknowledge the heritage in which we live, as represented by our confessional tradition, by utilizing it as a creative resource in our contemporary life of obedient faith and faithful obedience, along with those ecumenical Protestant and catholic resources that we share with other believers.

The purpose in presenting this historical survey must be clear. In the first place, the task force was instructed by the General Assembly to "include an exploration of our theological heritage in the Reformed tradition and an analysis of the confessional standards that guide our interpretation of Scripture." As the task force pursued such an exploration, it realized that a second aspect of the referral was intertwined with this one, namely, "a study of the diverse ways of understanding biblical authority and interpreting the Scripture that are now prevalent in our denomination" (*Minutes*, UPCUSA, 1978, Part I, p. 293). In many cases, the way people understand the history of the Reformed tradition is inextricably bound up with their theological position. Perhaps that is true for all who wish to be related to their theological roots. Conversations with contemporary theologians and experts in the history of Reformed doctrine convinced the task force that significantly different readings of the Reformed tradition are possible and are currently articulated by scholarly persons in the denomination.

A variety of perspectives on biblical authority have been identified. Three of these perspectives, called Models A, B, and C, represent major points of view. These models, each with historical roots and theological literature, are operative currently in our denomination.

In the following section, the report points to some of the distinctive features of each of these three perspectives and suggests factors that account for these differences.

In describing the three models as historical perspectives and offering guidance from the confessions on the matter of the authority and interpretation of the Scripture, the task force wishes to acknowledge again the fact that significantly different reading of the Reformed tradition are possible. It also wants to underscore that models are never the same as the reality they depict, but are interpretations that select certain features and omit others to provide a meaningful pattern. Even the construction of a model may be effected by the bias of the interpreter.

Perhaps by looking at the past through the three models, facets of the Reformed heritage that might otherwise be overlooked will become apparent. The task force's concern is to encourage the use of the theological and confessional past as a resource on which to draw as members attempt to live as Christians today "in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and continually guided by our Confessions" (Book of Order, UPCUSA, 1978-79, 47.074, 49.044).

MODEL A: THE BIBLE AS A BOOK OF INERRANT FACTS

With the founding of Princeton Seminary in 1812, the Presbyterian church gained a center for its theological training. Its first professor, Archibald Alexander, intended that the seminary should train pastors to refute the deism that had been influential in the Anglo-Saxon world and to resist the biblical criticism that was just beginning to rise in prominence. For his curriculum, he chose the systematic theology of the seventeenth century Swiss Reformer Francis Turretin and the philosophy of the Scotsman Thomas Reid. In 1872, Turretin's work was replaced by the systematic theology of Charles Hodge, a scholar who was completely committed to Turretin's systematic structure and to the epistemology* of Scottish Common Sense

*See Glossary

philosophy as represented by Reid. Succeeding generations of Princeton Seminary graduates thought of themselves as followers of Calvin and subscribed to the Westminster Confession and catechism. Their reading of Calvin and Westminster was shaped powerfully by the writings of Turretin and Reid.

Turretin had succeeded Calvin in Geneva at a time of external and internal assaults on the young Reformed movement. The Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation, the extreme rationalism of anti-Trinitarians, and the rise of textual criticism of manuscripts also came in this generation after Calvin. Turretin perceived all of these developments as a threat and subsequently argued for the absolute inerrancy of the original autograph* of the text and even asserted the divine inspiration of the vowel points* in the Hebrew manuscript, or at least of the sounds of the vowel points. The completed apparatus of the vowel points was a medieval addition to the original Hebrew.

For Turretin, the authority of Scripture was not only a doctrine to be received by faith but also a formal principle* upon which a technical, systematic theology could be erected. The authority of Scripture came to depend not only on its message but also on the claim of a verbal perfection in the autographs. Not just the religious content but also the literary form of the Bible were asserted to be supernatural. Across the English Channel, a generation after the Westminster divines wrote their Confession and somewhat before Turretin's work, the British scholar John Owen also adopted a position that the vowel points were an ancient, sacred, and inspired (though nonverifiable) part of the Hebrew text. Owen combined the earlier emphases of Calvin and Westminster with later scholastic additions similar to those that Turretin later developed on the continent.

The first recorded use in English of the word "inerrant" occurred in 1652 in the field of astronomy. It was used to describe stars, which were fixed (inerrant), in contrast with planets, which were wandering (errant). In using this word to describe the Scriptures, British theologians of the eighteenth century drew upon the Newtonian* notions of perfection and the Lockean* notions of reasonableness that dominated their culture. They thus adopted a mathematical, mechanical model by which the Bible was to be judged. The subsequent skepticism of David Hume threatened to undo empiricism.* Thomas Reid countered by claiming that the mind directly and certainly knew things as they were in themselves. Reid's assurance that his senses were never deceptive was validated for him by an intuition that gave him certainty. This confidence in the mind's direct knowledge of reality provided the Princeton theologians such as Charles Hodge with confidence in the certainty of their knowledge of the Bible. Hodge contended that the Bible was to the theologian what nature was to the scientist. It contained facts that fit the nature of God and God's laws. These could be known directly without problems of interpretation. Reid's Common Sense philosophy gave Hodge and his generation assurance that they could know all of the Bible facts and fit them into a theological system like that of Turretin.

Reid's Common Sense philosophy dominated the intellectual milieu and found wide support among learned people in this country in the first seventy-five years after independence. At midcentury, however, things began to change, signaled by the publication in 1859 of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*.

Whereas leading scientists changed their position to that of a developmental approach, the Princeton theologians clung to the notion of a static universe. Even more directly threatening to Presbyterian biblical interpretation was the Civil War. The Presbyterians split into two denominations. Old School Presbyterians appealed literally to Romans 13 to justify obeying the government. Confederate Presbyterians in 1861 appealed to the absence of any specific literal statement in Scripture condemning slavery. The Princeton theologians, led by Charles Hodge, had to agree that on their literal reading of the Bible, slavery was not wrong as such but only when its power was abused.

*See Glossary

After the Civil War, the Princeton theology of Turretin and Hodge went on the defensive. The son and successor of Charles Hodge, A. A. Hodge, shifted away from his father's insistence on the inerrancy of the traditional text in use to the inerrancy of the (lost) original autographs. A. A. Hodge with B. B. Warfield coauthored the definitive statement on the Princeton doctrine of Scripture, summarized in an 1881 article on "Inspiration":

Nevertheless the historical faith of the Church has always been that all the affirmations of Scripture of all kinds, whether of spiritual doctrine or duty, or of physical or historical fact, or of psychological or philosophical principle, are without any error, when the *ipsissima verba** of the original autographs are ascertained and interpreted in their natural sense.²

When Benjamin B. Warfield succeeded Hodge as professor of Theology at Princeton, he identified the Princeton position with that of the Bible itself and claimed that the church had always held to the Princeton particularities. Such an assertion brought him and the seminary into violent conflict with the rising discipline of biblical criticism. An ecclesiastical struggle over the new methods of biblical criticism ensued between B. B. Warfield and Charles A. Briggs. Briggs' charge that the Princeton theology was post-Reformation scholasticism was rejected at that time by a majority in the Presbyterian church. The theological controversy sharpened other tensions that had long been part of the Presbyterian context.

Union Theological Seminary (New York), where Briggs taught, represented New School Presbyterian, which had long been associated with revivalism and innovation. Princeton, where Warfield taught, stood for Old School Presbyterianism, with its emphasis on doctrinal correctness and tradition. Briggs' advocacy efforts toward church union were also responsible for opposition to him. Controversy centered on his view of Scripture, no doubt because he was perceived as the person most responsible for positively recommending the new German historical and literary criticism of the Bible. After a widely publicized two-year ecclesiastical trial, Briggs resigned from the Presbyterian ministry to avoid suspension.

Until the mid-1920s, the Presbyterian church treated the Hodge-Warfield view on the inerrancy of Scripture as confessional. Conflict increased, however, until the 139th General Assembly (1927) accepted the Report of the Special Commission of 1925. That action loosened the hold of the Princeton theologians on the whole denomination but did not alter the fact that many, then and today, believe that the old Princeton theologians held a view of Scripture articulated in the Westminster Confession, taught by Calvin, and held by the early church.

MODEL B: THE BIBLE AS A WITNESS TO CHRIST, THE WORD OF GOD

Just at the time when Presbyterians opened the doors to a moderate liberalism by the action of the 139th General Assembly (1927), new theological winds were blowing from the European continent. Under the influence of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, theological interest was revived in both Europe and America on the basis of quite different attitudes toward metaphysics. This new way of thinking, called Crisis Theology, developed as a reaction in Europe to the idealism of evolutionary progressivism, which had been shattered by World War I. Confidence in human goodness and the inevitability of scientific progress gave way to Kierkegaard's "infinite qualitative distinction" between God and humanity. Such a shift stood in stark contrast to the seventeenth century orthodox attempt to know God in the inerrant words of the Bible. Kierkegaard saw instead the possibility of knowing God and reality only in the moment of crisis when God breaks into our history and we are confronted with Christ in a personal encounter.

The Bible's authority was its power as the original witness to Christ, the word in and through and with which the living God continues to speak his saving word in the midst of the Christian community of faith. So this community must constantly gather around the Bible's message and pursue its exposition and application.

These theologians found this emphasis on the centrality of Christ in their reading of Calvin's doctrine of the Holy Spirit. They understood Calvin to teach that the inspiration and authority of Scripture were a corollary of faith, and not the basis of faith. Faith was seen as a single reality that included the

experience of the saving power of Christ and the authority of Scripture through which this saving experience came.

This distinctive Christocentric emphasis of Barth and Brunner was welcomed at Princeton in the late 1930s after John Mackay became president. It provided an alternate to liberalism and the older Princeton scholasticism. The doctrinal affirmations of Scripture could be affirmed without denying its literary flaws.

Barth continued to develop those perspectives, but in a new format, in his *Church Dogmatics* from 1932-59. He held fast to his Christocentric emphasis but also developed into a major expositor of Scripture, which he viewed as "the concrete bond of peace" that ties the church together in every age and place. The absolute interdependence of the saving act of God toward us in Christ and the authority of the Bible as the word of God was seen by many as a way beyond the older scholasticism with its insistence on verbal inerrancy of the biblical text.

The basic tenet of this view of the Bible's authority is that revelation does not consist of ideas or propositional truths about God but consists of God's own act of self-revelation to human beings through his coming once in the flesh of Jesus Christ and his coming ever again to succeeding generations in, through, and with the testimony of Scripture to Jesus Christ. This is the work of God, the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the entire canon of Scripture, as the providential gift of God to the church, continues to be the instrument of God's self-revelation. The object of faith, however, is not the book itself but the redeeming grace of God working throughout the covenant history culminating in Jesus Christ.

The years during the introduction of this neo-Reformation theology into Presbyterianism saw many changes. A worldwide ecumenical movement with strong Presbyterian participation came into being with the founding of the World Council of Churches in 1948. As the 1950s gave way to the 1960s, Presbyterians became progressively aware of social problems, such as race relations, poverty, and war, that the church needed to address.

By the early 1960s, it seemed that the denomination had once again a well-established working theological consensus in a developed neoorthodoxy, which found expression in the proposed Confession of 1967. This new confession was to be a brief contemporary statement of faith to the 177th General Assembly (1965). In its section on the place of the Bible, the new confession displayed the developed Barthian view in place of the old Princeton scholasticism. The writers described the first draft of the Confession of 1967 as a "revision of the Westminster doctrine, which rested primarily on a view of inspiration and equated the biblical canon directly with the Word of God. By contrast, the preeminent and primary meaning of the word of God in the Confession of 1967 is the Word of God incarnate."³ The committee preparing the confession sought support in other confessional documents that they believed were historically older, nationally broader, and more representative of the Reformed tradition than the Westminster Confession. They thus created a Book of Confessions, which they proposed would guide the denomination's interpretation of Scripture. The committee included the Westminster Confession as representing the standards that had prevailed from the denominations's founding in America.

When the work of this committee was opened to the denomination for its review, various groups organized to express their concerns. One group in particular, Presbyterians United for Biblical Confession (PUBC), proposed changes to effect a clearer affirmation of the inspiration and authority of the Bible. In 1966, the 178th General Assembly approved some changes suggested. As a result, the Bible was recognized not only as the witness to the incarnate Word of God but also as the word of God written. The distinction between the incarnate Word and the written word was maintained, however, by use of a capital "W" when referring to Jesus Christ and a lower case "w" when referring to the Bible.

Despite the opposition of some groups, especially the Presbyterian Lay Committee, Inc., the required two thirds of the presbyteries of the denomination voted approval of the confessional change. In 1967, delegates to the 179th General Assembly voted approximately four to one in favor of the new confession.

MODEL C: THE DIVINE MESSAGE IN HUMAN FORMS OF THOUGHT

New theological trends began to wax and wane quickly as the general culture experienced change substantially more rapid than in previous generations. Soon other than confessional matters preoccupied the denomination. Disagreement over social issues rent the United Presbyterian Church. Strife over American involvement in the Vietnam War, escalation of the struggle for civil rights of minorities, and heightened awareness of unequal opportunities for women preoccupied the attention of many Christians. Many concluded that none of the previous theological systems adequately addressed these problems. Theology became issue oriented, and a diversity of approaches rather than a confessional consensus prevailed. Liberation theology, developed in the Third World, employed the social sciences to expose the political concerns of those groups whose interpretation of the Bible was viewed as a justification of human oppression. Others gave a higher priority to the need for clarity of philosophical concepts and consistency with scientific criteria than to continuity with confessional traditions. Some Presbyterians were attracted to Process theology, founded on the thought of the late mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. Process theologians developed a view of reality based on Whitehead's understanding of modern scientific insights.

Theology, as it moved from the 1960s to the 1970s, demonstrated a desire to clarify its own methodology and concerned itself with making its philosophical and social commitments explicit. Later events of the 1970s evidenced the lack of any working agreement on the nature of Scripture or appropriate methods of biblical interpretation in the denomination. Controversies over the ordination of homosexuals found United Presbyterians in opposition to one another, holding positions similar to those of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy in the early decades of this century, as well as positions reflecting the newer developments of the 1960s and 1970s.

In this situation of theological diversity, new ways appeared that attempted to appropriate the Reformed tradition. The Dutch theologian G. C. Berkouwer provided a resource for some who characterized the Bible as a book with a divine message given in human forms of thought and speech. Berkouwer saw the central New Testament text regarding the inspiration of the Scripture, 2 Tim. 3:16-17 ("All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" [RSV]), as accenting the usefulness or function of Scripture in conveying to people the means to be rightly related to God and to one another. He received the Bible as authority in the same way that he received Christ as Savior, through faith, the result of the inner working of the Holy Spirit.

Persons who focused on a function approach to biblical authority also sought support in aspects of Calvin's theology. They focused on the dimension of Calvin's thought that stressed that the knowledge of God the Scripture yielded was not theoretical, but practical, leading to reverence, worship, and right living. Such knowledge could not be authenticated by evidences of science or reasoned arguments, but only by the inner workings of the Holy Spirit.

Research on Calvin that focused on his training as a lawyer at a time when methods of study emphasized textual, linguistic, and historical approaches as means of probing the intention of the ancient law codes was found helpful. Calvin was impressed with the relevance of various academic disciplines in order to understand the historical context of the ancient world. He was not primarily concerned with the origin of words, but rather with discerning the intention of the author in order to get at the natural and "plain sense" of the Scripture.

Calvin saw God's revelation in Jesus Christ, in the Incarnation, as the model of God's communication to humankind. Calvin wrote that "in Christ, God, so to speak, makes himself little in order to lower himself to our capacity."⁴ Augustine had a similar image for the Scripture, as a mother who walks at the pace of her child and who stoops to the child so as not to leave the child behind.⁵ God's accommodation to our limited capacity becomes for Calvin, according to T. H. L. Parker, "the completely necessary condition" for our hearing God's word.⁶ The sometimes crude and unrefined language of the Bible, the not-too-

scrupulous use the apostles make in quoting Scripture, the protoscientific descriptions of nature in the Bible did not undermine Scripture's authority for Calvin. Rather, they were merely the means by which the Creator addressed limited creatures in time and space in order "to represent himself to us not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us."⁷ For Calvin, to know God as God relates to us is sufficient to bring humans to salvation, worship, and obedience.

In this third perspective, the accent falls on the saving message of Scripture as the word of God. This word of God is understood only by the closest attention to the human words and to the historical and cultural context in which they were originally written. Openness to the Holy Spirit's leading, as well as the tools of scholarship, implemented in faith and love, must be operative to yield the application of the message, especially in areas of controversy.

*Model A Distinctive Characteristics:
The Bible as a Book of Inerrant Facts*

1. The rational procedure of mathematics, empirical science, and Common Sense philosophy are used in approaching the Bible as a collection of true facts and doctrinal propositions that can be organized into a logical system truly representing the mind and will of God.
2. Each word of the Bible is considered divinely chosen, and it is inerrant in all things, including science and history.
3. In all regards, the Bible is considered to be the judge of human thought and in no way is it to be judged by us.

*Model B Distinctive Characteristics:
The Bible as Witness to Christ, the Word of God*

1. Faith relationship replaces dependence on rational procedures. God can be known not by the mind alone, but by faith encounter with Jesus Christ, God incarnate.
2. The Bible is the word of God because by the Holy Spirit it is the instrument by which God in Christ encounters a person. The Bible is not diminished in its power by the presence of archaic and superseded conceptions of past times and cultures in matters of science and history as well as in religious and ethical realms.
3. The major emphasis is on God's act of self-revelation rather than on the process by which Scripture was written. The inspiration of its authors is not denied, but the stress is on the impact of the Holy Spirit on the readers of Scripture.

*Model C Distinctive Characteristics:
A Divine Message in Human Thought Forms*

1. The social sciences such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology provide crucial insights for a thorough understanding of Scripture.
2. The accent is on the Bible's function as communicating a divine message in human forms of thought. The message speaks to the needs of people in all cultures despite its particular historical context of ancient Near Eastern culture. To understand the divine message, one must pay the closest attention possible to the human words, neither presuming the meaning to be obvious nor forcing meaning into arbitrary harmonies or a preconceived theology.
3. Human, relational metaphors, rather than scientific or propositional statements, aptly describe God's communication with his people and provide us with invaluable attitudes, approaches, and analogies by which people can cope with contemporary problems in a Christian perspective.

These are not the only viewpoints on biblical authority operative in the Reformed tradition today. Other perspectives will emerge as the church continues to reform its thoughts and practice. These too will require examination and dialogue.

Guidance Offered by the Book of Confessions on Scripture

Within the Book of Confessions, one finds a general harmony, a broad consensus, and a functional unity to which one can appeal. Even though the creeds and confessions do not display one voice in all matters, one can find coherence in the following general areas of agreement in all the confessions from the sixteenth century to the Confession of 1967. These areas can help direct us into the guidelines that we seek as the third part of the referral.

The Authority of the Scripture Is Clearly Affirmed

The nature of the authority is practical. It attaches to the written word, the canon of sixty-six sacred books, sufficient guidance for the purposes of salvation and living the life of faith. No new revelations are needed. The locus of the divine message—the gospel message—is not in the bare words, but in the meaning. Only by the inward working of the Holy Spirit can a person be assured that these canonical Scriptures are the authentic word of God.

2. Six Basic Rules for the Interpretation of Scripture Found in the Confessions

First, Jesus Christ, as our Redeemer, is the central focus of Scripture.

Second, our appeal should be to the plain text of Scripture, to the grammatical and historical context, rather than to allegory or subjective fantasy.

Third, the Holy Spirit aids us in interpreting and applying God's message.

Fourth, doctrinal consensus of the early church as summarized in the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Definition of Chalcedon* is the rule of faith that guides us.

Fifth, all interpretations must accord with the rule of love, the two-fold commandment to love God and to love our neighbor.

Sixth, interpretation of the Bible requires human scholarship in order to establish the best text, to understand the original languages, and to interpret the influence of the historical and cultural context in which the divine message has come.

3. Latitude Is Allowed Within Clear Limits

The confessions establish limits within which they may be invoked as guide and outside of which one may no longer be operating within the Reformed tradition. For example, we may not claim as confessional the position that the Bible is an inerrant account of technical information on matters of science. Nor, on the other hand, may we claim confessional support if we treat Scripture only as an account of ancient religious history. One is not confessional in arguing that God is revealed by the Spirit in contradiction to Scripture. One cannot find confessional support for the claim that only human reason, without reference to Scripture, is a reliable spiritual guide. One would be as contraconfessional in asserting either that the Bible has no normative relevance for contemporary conduct or that the Bible provides absolute and detailed laws for every act in human affairs.

* See Glossary

4. *There Is a Center to the Scripture*

The confessions taken as a whole show the center of Scripture to be the normative message of how we may be reconciled to God and to one another. The confessions call the people of God to be dynamic confessing Christians rather than wooden traditionalists. The church recognized that the confessions are standards subordinate to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him.

III. INTERPRETATION

The question of the relationship of biblical authority to biblical interpretation is an important one. In the Reformed tradition "authority" recognized as "biblical" belongs to God, while "interpretation" is a human endeavor dependent on that authority and assisted by the Holy Spirit. The authority of the Bible is exercised effectively only through biblical interpretation. Whether the interpreter be a layperson reading the Bible devotionally or a pastor preparing a sermon or a scholar doing technical exegesis, the maxim holds: Without interpretation, the authority of Scripture may remain merely formal and not functional or practical.

The task of interpretation involves a number of dimensions, both explicit and implicit. Explicit dimensions include biblical scholarship to determine the "plain sense" of the text and its meaning and application. More implicit dimensions include personal, social, and cultural factors, which often have significant impact on the course of biblical interpretation and its application to contemporary issues by individuals and groups.

A. Contemporary Approaches to Biblical Study

Methods currently used by biblical scholars in and out of the denomination across theological persuasions were the subject of one of the working papers. This study revealed that whatever one's theological preunderstandings, each biblical scholar has as her or his primary objective to determine the plain sense of the text and, by inference, the basic intention of the author. To this end, scholars use a number of different approaches that have gained wide acceptance in this century. These include lower criticism (to determine the best text) and higher criticism (literary and historical considerations of which form, redaction,* and canon criticism are newer developments).

For most scholars, these methodologies have produced a "corpus of assured results," but their findings have not been without opponents. Some liberal scholars who agree with the presuppositions and methods of modern scholarship differ regarding the results. Some conservative scholars raise objections on the basis of a priori* theological grounds, as well as differing with the results. When one goes beyond the plain sense of the text to the areas of interpretation and relevant application, variations and shifts of emphasis are introduced.

Some biblical scholars therefore focus their inquiry into the Bible on what it reveals of ancient life. They intend to understand the text as one who read the original in the same time and place would have understood it. The bulk of scholarly work from this perspective is nonpartisan, with a consensus of methods, approaches, principles, and inferences. Among those working in this field there is widespread acceptance of the Bible as authoritative, even though there are different views of biblical authority. (For the full discussion of "Methods of Biblical Study" see Section V.)

* See Glossary

B. Current Issues in Interpretation

When moving from inquiry into the Bible as a primary source document on ancient life to the Bible as a source of contemporary guidance and authority, one enters the current debate of hermeneutics* (from the Greek verb, "to interpret"). Hermeneutics is the theory and practice of interpretation, which is the process whereby one achieves understanding of the meaning of a biblical text.

The issue of interpretation is primarily one of scope. Is interpretation limited to the question of what a text meant originally? Or does it include the question of what that text means presently? Put otherwise, is the task of interpretation that of establishing the author's intended meaning? Or is it also that of discerning the meaning of the text for the interpreter? Traditional hermeneutics (interpretation theory) focused upon the historical question of the author's (or the editor's) intended meaning in the context of the author's life situation. In biblical studies, the so-called historico-critical method that is guided by this goal has dominated interpretation for two hundred years. More recently, however, newer hermeneutical methods have expanded the scope of interpretation to include both the historical and the existential questions, asking not only what a text meant then and there, but also what it means here and now. The task of interpretation is defined in terms of translating not only the language of biblical texts, from Hebrew and Greek into a modern language like English, but also translating the meaning of those texts from their original life situation into our own.

The Reformers rejected the elaborate interpretive methods of the medieval church, especially the allegorical interpretation, which opened the way to an endless variety of meanings. They emphasized rather the plain sense of Scripture that sought to establish a single basic meaning of a text in an objective, scholarly manner.

Since the Reformers assumed that their own world was essentially similar to that of the biblical writers, they easily transferred the meaning of the ancient text to the contemporary situation. This assumption underlies and explains the general harmony of the different Reformation confessions on the interpretation of the Scripture, creeds that in other respects are often diverse.

Because of the Reformation conviction that the Scriptures bear one "plain sense," which is the grammatical sense of the text, hermeneutics concerned itself with matters of grammar, vocabulary, and syntax. The study of language, however, led to the insight that the meaning of terms in discourse depended upon their usage in the cultural framework reflecting particular times and places. The task of interpretation thus was understood to include the determination of the historical meaning of biblical literature.

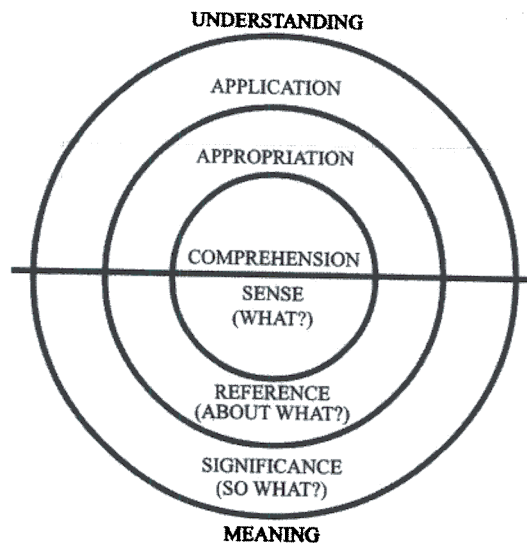
This development in the methods of interpretation was deeply affected by the dawning of the so-called modern era, the period since the Enlightenment, with its corresponding awareness of human historical consciousness. The seventeenth century marked a turning point that has produced the present sense of an intellectual gap in consciousness between antiquity and the modern world. A sense of historical alienation from the past has created a gulf between the time of the origin of the biblical texts and the time of their current interpretation. The strangeness of the biblical way of thinking and speaking has become not only evident but problematical. One example would be Rudolf Bultmann's celebrated claim that ancient people thought and spoke mythologically, while modern people think and speak only scientifically. Thus, while they are able with certain degrees of success to think their way into the world of ancient people and their texts, and thus to understand those texts historically, they are still left with the problem of contemporary meaning.

In the study of a biblical text, one needs to distinguish between meaning and understanding. While the terms are closely related, they are not the same. Meaning is the foundation upon which understanding is

* See Glossary

built. Much confusion in the discussion about the theory and practice of interpretation is caused by the different ways in which these terms are used. We may identify three levels of use. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3



In order to illustrate these concepts, let us examine a familiar text from the Gospels, “. . . The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

At the first level of meaning, one needs to look at biblical scholars to establish that this translation accurately captures the grammatical sense of the text. To understand at this level, the need is only to comprehend the meaning of the words and their grammatical relationship.

At the second level of meaning one asks what a phrase such as “the kingdom of God is at hand” refers to. At this point, the need is to find many differences of interpretation emerging even in the understanding of the original hearers. For example, some hear that God’s reign has begun in Jesus’ presence among them. What the prophets had hoped for but had not seen is realized, at last. Others hear “God’s kingdom is at hand” to mean that it is still ahead, about to break in, and Jesus is announcing God’s perfect justice to come. The impact of the text, its appropriation, differs substantially depending on whether the reference is to Jesus’ presence among people or to God’s ultimate Kingdom.

At the third level of meaning for this particular text, the significance was explicitly stated: You are to repent and believe. The extent to which one repents and believes is a measure of the third level of understanding of this text, application to one’s life.

People may well agree on the sense of a text, but are less and less likely to agree as interpretation goes beyond its sense to its reference and then to its significance. In the church’s use of Holy Scripture, interpretation includes the full process of comprehending its sense, appropriating its reference, and applying its significance.

C. Scripture in Recent General Assemblies

In the 1981 summer issue of the *Journal of Presbyterian History*, a number of scholars studied the way by which American Presbyterians have actually used the Bible as the rule of faith and practice in dealing with several important issues of the twentieth century. In an interdisciplinary study, they sought to evaluate Presbyterian involvement in the biblical theology movement, the way in which biblical authority has been understood in recent confessional debates and changes, and the way the Bible has functioned in denominational discussions about mission, poverty, race, human sexuality, observance of the Sabbath and

the ordination of women. Members of the task force also prepared working papers on the use of Scripture by the denomination in matters of civil rights, Sabbath practices, preparation of Christian education materials, and writing the report on homosexuality.

In the areas studied, the authors reached similar conclusions:

1. Since the shift from the inerrantist position, decisions made by the General Assembly evidence less explicit appeal to scriptural authority than previously was the case, except when providing support for different understandings and emphases for the broad mission of the church.
2. A shift of the locus of biblical authority has been away from the specific text (i.e., proof texting) to the broad message of Scripture, often considered in its historical and social context.
3. One can detect what might be called a hermeneutical spiral in which cultural changes press Presbyterians to search the Scripture for guidance that might then effect further cultural change. Controversial social issues have both impelled Presbyterians to a reexamination of the scriptural bases of action and fueled new controversy over the correct interpretation of what the Bible teaches.
4. In matters where biblical texts can be found to support alternate concepts or understandings for example, the scope of evangelism, it appears that the writers of Scripture were as diverse as present-day Presbyterians.

IV. GUIDELINES

This final section includes guidelines to the General Assembly for a positive and nonrestrictive use of Scripture in matters of controversy. The earlier sections of this report reveal to the reader the dynamic nature of theological understanding. Those understandings have been continually shaped and reshaped as, with the aid of the Spirit, members have interacted individually and corporately with the written word. One should not expect it to be otherwise in this day. The equilibrium of the church is always dynamic, never static. As the tightrope walker maintains balance by movement along the wire and by continuous shifting of the balance pole he or she carries, so the church and individual Christians maintain equilibrium as shifting forces bear upon them by adjusting, in a dynamic way, their understanding of the written word under the continuing guidance of the Spirit.

Interpretations of Scripture are never once and for all, but must be continually renewed in the context of changing circumstances. The dynamic nature of faith thus requires a regular and continuing study of the written word and an openness to finding in that word new meanings in response to the new questions that life presents.

Such a dynamic process is not without pain, however. One grows accustomed to viewing the meaning of the word in one way, becoming familiar with its content and its demands. Faithfulness to God is bound up with an individual's faithfulness to what is understood to be God's word. When presented with evidence contrary to one's view, one may tend to ignore it or accommodate it as much as possible. At some point, however, one may discover that one's understanding is seriously deficient, and faithfulness demands the difficult process of coming to a renewed understanding of what God is saying.

In times such as these, when revolutionary changes are occurring in both the theological and practical life of the church, there is need for an abiding trust in the biblical God who sovereignly acts through individual lives as well as through historical events. Only when such trust permeates the church and its members can one be released from the fear that paralyzes dynamic interactions and from the despair that makes one give up the attempt to work toward a fresh unity in the Spirit. There is need to hear from God as well as from each other and from the world at large. Personally and corporately, there is the need to allow God to confront and correct distortions and incomplete views of the Scripture, the church, and its mission.

One cannot expect to use the Bible in a positive way for guidance and direction in the midst of controversy if one is not accustomed to using it for guidance and direction in daily lives, both individually and corporately. In fact, a more faithful and constant reading of Scripture might provoke more and not less controversy. Nor should this be something to be afraid of. Controversy is a part of life and growth; it may give us the experience of struggling together with Scripture in an authentic and helpful way. For these purposes, the following guidelines are offered.

1. Be guided by the basic rules for the interpretation of Scripture that are summarized from the Book of Confessions.

a. Recognize that Jesus Christ, the Redeemer, is the center of Scripture. The redemptive activity of God is central to the entire Scripture. The Old Testament themes of the covenant and the messiah testify to this activity. In the center of the New Testament is Jesus Christ: the Word made flesh, the fulfillment of Israel's messianic hope, and the promise of the Kingdom. It is to Christ that the church witnesses. When interpreting Scripture, keeping Christ in the center aids in evaluating the significance of the problems and controversies that always persist in the vigorous, historical life of the church.

b. Let the focus be on the plain text of Scripture, to the grammatical and historical context, rather than to allegory or subjective fantasy.

c. Depend upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit in interpreting and applying God's message.

d. Be guided by the doctrinal consensus of the church, which is the rule of faith.

e. Let all interpretations be in accord with the rule of love, the two-fold commandment to love God and to love our neighbor.

f. Remember that interpretation of the Bible requires earnest study in order to establish the best text and to interpret the influence of the historical and cultural context in which the divine message has come.

g. Seek to interpret a particular passage of the Bible in light of all the Bible.

2. Recognize that individual perceptions of the truth are always limited and therefore not absolutely authoritative.

3. Realize that points of view are conditioned by points of viewing. Try to see the issues from the perspective of others. Seek to identify what each one is trying to preserve and defend. Ask whether these elements could be preserved in ways that would lead toward mutual understanding.

4. The preached word must inform the study of the written word. The search for truth includes the life of public prayer and worship.

5. In the immediate situation when controversy arises, locate areas of agreement and disagreement:

a. Is there agreement as to what biblical passages are relevant to the contemporary issues? If not, can all passages be dealt with by all the parties concerned?

b. Is there agreement as to the meaning of those texts in their original setting?

c. Is there agreement as to how these texts should be applied to the present situation? If not, discuss the means by which the various applications have been made. Are there different methods of interpretation being used? Are there different presuppositions that need to be discussed and clarified?

d. Is there agreement as to what the Christian tradition in general and the Reformed tradition in particular, as reflected in the Book of Confessions, have taught concerning this issue? Are different points in the traditions being used?

6. When there are potentially long-term controversies, covenant together to study the Bible in regard to the issue. Plan Bible study groups where opinions differ.

The following procedure may be used.

a. To ensure openness to hearing the whole Bible as it speaks to the whole issue, hold one session where all participants introduce a passage for discussion that they feel is relevant. Bring contemporary methods of Bible study to bear on the issues by using speakers and other resources. Study the complexity of the issue in today's society, using secular as well as theological materials.

b. To ensure that the Bible is heard in depth and leads to decision, encourage subgroups to specialize in one biblical passage, theme, or book as it relates to the issues; structure a debate or forum where differences of interpretation can be clarified; decide what actions will be taken individually or by groups and plan how to support this action.

When approaching a biblical passage:

(1) Study the sense that the language makes. Look at the words used, the sentence structure, the kind of writing (story, debate, poetry, etc.).

(2) Consider what the passage refers to in that particular historical situation.

(3) Consider where there may be an analogous situation today.

(4) Look for the significance of the text for the present situation that corresponds to the meaning of the text in its original situation.

7. Together try to determine the range of options that are open to the church for speech and action in regard to the contemporary problem.

8. Rely on the democratic processes of the denomination in assemblies. Use the established channels of communication and the process of voting to express conviction, either as part of the majority or as part of the minority. Be willing to accept decisions and welcome the continuing advocacy of minority views.

Endnotes

1. *The Presbyterian Panel* is a product of the Office of Research Services, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). See the January 1980 questionnaire on "United Presbyterian Views on the Nature of Biblical Authority and the Use of Scripture."

2. A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, "Inspiration," *Presbyterian Review* No. 2 (April 1881), p. 238.

3. Report of the Special Committee on a Brief Contemporary Statement of Faith to the 177th General Assembly, The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, May 1965. (*Minutes*, UPCUSA, 1965, Part I, pp. 303ff.)

4. Commentary on 1 Pet. 1 :20, cited in Ford Lewis Battles, "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," *Interpretation*, xxxi, No. 1 (January 1977), p. 38.
5. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III, xxi, 4 (hereafter cited *Institutes*). Edited by John I. McNeil. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960.)
6. T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin; A Biography* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 77
7. Calvin, *Institutes*, I, xxvii. 13.

Glossary

- *A priori: those things, if any, that are in the mind before any information from outside is added.
- *Autograph: in the context of biblical studies, the handwritten copy done by the original writer of a biblical book in distinction from later manuscripts.
- *Definition of Chalcedon: the statement of the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451, which states that Jesus Christ is fully human, fully God, and yet one person.
- *Empiricism: a form of epistemology (see below) that holds all knowledge is based on sensory experience. It can also involve the refusal to accept as truth anything that cannot be verified by experiment.
- *Epistemology: the study of how human beings come to know what they know.
- *Existentialist: characteristic of a theological and philosophical development from the nineteenth-century Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard. In the twentieth century there have been both Christian and atheistic forms of existentialism. Usually, Christian existentialists emphasize the awesome responsibilities of the individual standing before God.
- *Formal Principle: when applied to a doctrine, this term implies that the doctrine is basic and foundational for the rest of theology.
- *Fundamentalist: refers to a movement that developed in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It called certain doctrines "fundamental" and essential to the faith. These included biblical inerrancy and the acceptance of the miracles recorded in Scripture.
- *Hermeneutics: the discipline and methodology of interpreting the biblical texts.
- *Inerrantist position: a main tenet of most Calvinist orthodoxy that holds that the Bible is free from error of fact in all that it states. This includes matters of science and history as well as ethical and doctrinal statements.
- *Ipsissima verba: "the very same words"—when used in connection with biblical studies, it refers to the exact words of the speaker.
- *Liberation Theology: a theology of recent development that stresses the interpretation of Scripture and the experience of God by those who are oppressed and/or marginalized in a society.
- *Lockean: a philosophical view stemming from the work of John Locke, who was the first great figure of British Empiricism.
- *Material Principal: when applied to a doctrine, it refers to the actual content of that doctrine rather than to its effect or lack of effect on the rest of theology.

*Modernists: refers to those Protestants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who believed in using scientific method for dealing with religious issues. They regarded Scripture as an account of religious development. Some fundamentalists included all liberals in this category, though many would not have agreed to being so classified.

*New School: a branch of the Presbyterian church in the 1830s. It stressed human experience and was more open to human ability than was the Old School (see below.)

*Newtonian: a view of the universe stemming from the work of Isaac Newton, which sees the world as a predictable system governed by unchangeable laws.

*Old School: a branch of the Presbyterian church in the 1830s. It was characterized by a stress on traditional Calvinist orthodoxy.

*Orthodox Position: in the context of this paper, orthodox refers to the position of Calvinist theology as systematized in the seventeenth century.

*Process Theology: a theology that has developed in the twentieth century based largely on the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead.

*Redaction: the process whereby various sources—written or oral—are put together or edited to form a unified piece of writing.

*Reformed tradition: a broad term for the theology that stems from the Swiss Reformation, notably John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli. Along with the Lutheran, the Anabaptist, and the Anglican, it is one of the major church families that developed at the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century.

*Vowel point: the written form of the Hebrew language did not originally have indications of vowels. In the medieval period, long after the Old Testament was written and after Hebrew was no longer a living language, small marks were added to the Old Testament text by the Jews in order to indicate the vowels that were to be used. At the Reformation, Protestants used the Hebrew text with vowel points as the basis for translations.