The Normative Function of Scripture: Beyond Positivism and Postmodernism

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1. The polarisation in the Christian community

A disturbing feature of the present situation is the hardening of polarised positions about normative issues among Christians. This is not only occurring between Christian groups holding widely differing confessional positions; it is happening within Christian communities whose members share a common confession of faith.

All concerned acknowledge Scripture as having unique normative authority. That is, they agree that Scripture has a unique and central role in determining what is right, or good, or appropriate for the life of faith. To act in accordance with Scripture is to act righteously; to act contrary to Scripture is to act unrighteously.

Yet when it comes to determining what is right, or good, or appropriate in particular cases, they differ. Not only do they differ but their differences involve contradictory judgments. What one judges to be required by Scripture, the other judges to be forbidden; what one judges to be harmonious with Scripture, the other judges to be contrary to Scripture.

One says that Scripture requires the opening of all church offices to women, while the other says that Scripture forbids it. One says that Scripture calls us to recognise that, under certain specified circumstances, abortion is appropriate, while the other says that Scripture forbids abortion under any and every circumstance. One says that Scripture sanctions sexual relations between persons of the same sex, provided certain conditions are met, while the other says that all such relations are unequivocally condemned by Scripture. One says that the moderate consumption of alcohol is in harmony with Scripture, while the other says that only total abstinence is consistent with Scripture. One says that Scripture calls us to the unequivocal support of the environmental conservation movement, while the other says that it calls us to support resource development with appropriate safeguards.

These examples by no means exhaust the cases in which Christians, who confess a common faith, can be found engaged in pitched battles with each other. These battles do nothing to resolve the issues but only serve to harden the positions adopted by each of the parties to the conflict, and widen the gulf between them to the point where Christian fellowship is breached.

It seems to me that this should be a cause for deep concern to all Christians. Nothing is more strongly condemned in Scripture than strife and dissension.[1] In a fallen world it cannot always be avoided, but always it is to be viewed with sorrow and every effort made to overcome it. Vigorous discussion and debate, conducted in the spirit of fraternal dialogue, is necessary for the well-being of the Christian community; internecine strife, even though driven by sincere zeal for righteousness, is a denial of the Gospel we profess.

As I proceed I will inevitably offer some strong criticisms of positions adopted by some of my brothers and sisters in Christ. In doing so I do not in any way imply any lack of integrity in the personal profession of faith in Christ of those who adopt these positions. I am bound with them by one Spirit in one body in the faith of the Gospel, and nothing would be a greater grief to me than a fracture in the

visible expression of this indissoluble fellowship in Christ. My heart's desire is to make "every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace".[2] I trust, therefore, that what I have to say will be seen to contribute to the dialogue within the community of faith that is a necessary ingredient of the ongoing struggle for a manner of living that is faithful to Christ. {1}

2. The underlying issue: How does Scripture function as normative authority?

I suggest that it is impossible to reduce the tensions and conflict while attention remains focused on specific issues of practice. While debate centres on these the more fundamental issue is obscured.

Some attempt to gain support for their own position in the debate by representing the fundamental issue as a defence of Scriptural authority and historic Christian orthodoxy against those who are ready to play fast and loose with the Scriptures, surrendering the certainties of historic Christian orthodoxy to the subjectivism of postmodern secularism.

Such an approach is both unhelpful and inaccurate, not to say quite unfair to those who take a differing position. It supposes, quite wrongly, that the theological modernism that flourished earlier in this century is still alive and well as a major force in Christian thinking.

No more helpful is the approach sometimes taken by those on the other side of the debate that represents their opponents' position as a hidebound obscurantism that is wholly insensitive to the movement of the Spirit of God. Whatever moments of truth there may be in charges of these kinds on each side, they do not increase understanding and reduce tensions but serve only to harden the polarisation.

There is no reason to doubt that, in their intentions, people on both sides of the debate are equally concerned to take Scripture seriously as normative authority, are equally concerned to respect the historical continuity of the Christian faith, and equally concerned to be sensitive to the Spirit of God. None of these issues is in serious dispute, and to make them such only creates peace-destroying confusion. The fundamental issue in dispute is the way in which Scripture functions as normative authority. This issue needs to be debated, but it can only be debated fruitfully if the confusing pseudo-issues are put aside so that the debate can proceed in an atmosphere of mutual respect for each other's Christian integrity.

The underlying issue, then, is not whether Scripture is the normative authority for faith and practice. The question is: How does Scripture *function* as normative authority in the life of faith? To put it another way: *How* does Scripture guide us in matters of conduct? The underlying issue is not whether Scripture is our guide but *how* it functions as our guide.

Perhaps the most disturbing feature of this situation is that the debate is being shaped, in very significant ways, by the philosophical categories of modern secularism. While the language of the debate is that of Christian confession, the conceptual categories that shape the opposing positions are those of secularism. More specifically, the two dominant positions are decisively shaped by positivism, on the one hand, and postmodernist hermeneutic philosophy, on the other.

It is my contention that the debate will continue to be not only unfruitful but actively destructive of effective Christian testimony while its contours are shaped by these secularist patterns of thought. The shaping of the faith of the Gospel within a system of thought generated by the idolatrous faith of secularism inevitably distorts that faith, robbing it of its world penetrating power.

3. The positivist approach

Those who adopt this approach commonly see themselves as the defenders of Christian orthodoxy and historic certainties and as the upholders of Scriptural authority against tendencies to water down that authority under the influence of the spirits of the age. They generally show little recognition of the way in which their approach to Scriptural authority is shaped, in quite decisive ways, by secularist positivism.

I do not imply by this that they have adopted without any modification the principles of positivism as they have been applied to the physical sciences. Clearly the principles of positivistic science have been modified to suit the special case of Scriptural interpretation. What {2} I am suggesting is that key principles of positivism give distinctive shape to the approach that is taken to Scripture.

In the North American Christian tradition the influence of Scottish Common Sense Philosophy (CSP) has modified the positivist influence in some ways. Vander Stelt [1978] provides a valuable treatment of this theme. There are some important differences between CSP and positivism, particularly in the role that CSP gives to the intuitions of common sense [Vander Stelt, 1978: 27,28]. However, for our present purpose they may be regarded as one since they share the belief in scientific method, grounded in the objectivity of a universal rationality, as the instrumentality through which assured truth is established [Vander Stelt: 1978: 30,58]. As it developed in the North American Christian context CSP appears to have become even more closely linked with positivism [Vander Stelt, 1978: 71,77, 288].

Marshall [1982] provides a good example of this positivist approach. Professor of New Testament Exegesis at the University of Aberdeen, Marshall presents a careful, scholarly argument for what many would see as the conservative Christian position on Scriptural authority. His careful scholarship commands respect even if one differs from his conclusions.

Marshall takes Scripture to be the divinely inspired record of a revelation that God gave in the past. He recognises the centrality of God's saving acts in this revelation but insists that these saving events were accompanied by a divinely given interpretation by which their meaning was communicated to humans. The act does not in itself reveal God. It is revelation only through the accompanying divine interpretation. "Without interpretation the event is not an act of revelation ... Interpretation is an integral part of the act of revelation ..."[1982: 14]. Clearly, for Marshall, verbal communication has the primacy in revelation.

Inspiration, for Marshall, is the divine influence on the authors of Scripture ensuring that the words they wrote are a fully accurate representation of the divinely interpreted act of revelation. He carefully distances himself from any dictation notion of inspiration, attempting to give full weight to the historically situated humanity of the human authors of Scripture.

He also provides a careful discussion of the problems surrounding the notion of 'inerrancy'. He does not reject the term, provided it is carefully qualified, and says that, forced to choose between 'inerrant' or 'errant' he would certainly choose 'inerrant'. At the same time, he expresses [1982: 72,73] a preference for the term 'infallibility' as a better way of expressing the 'entirely trustworthy' character of Scripture.

It is when we come to the question of how we are to interpret this divinely inspired record at a distance from the context of original revelation that we come to the heart of Marshall's position, where the positivist nature of his position becomes apparent. At the same time, I would argue that the primacy he gives to the verbal element in revelation already betrays the influence of positivist categories. The belief that all certainties in human experience are encoded in human symbolic systems, with anything else regarded as subjective and uncertain, is basic to positivism.

Marshall accepts that an act of interpretation is necessary if the Bible is to function as normative authority in our lives today. He argues that there are three steps in this interpretive process. The first step is 'exegesis', which is "...the study of the Bible (or of any book) to determine exactly what the various authors were trying to say to their original audiences ..."; if properly undertaken it is a scientific enterprise that "has the effect of putting biblical study on an objective and scientific basis". While there will be some more or less marginal ambiguities, this scientific method enables us, "...with fair success to determine objectively what the Bible said..." [1982: 96,97].

Marshall's second step in interpretation is 'exposition', by which we come to understand what the text means for us today. The meaning of the text for its original readers, which we gain by a proper use of scientific exegetical method, is the basis for exposition. At the same time, exposition involves a reinterpretation of the text in view of the differences between our circumstances and those of the original audience. While Marshall is somewhat less clear {3} about how we engage in this exposition, it is clear that, as with exegesis, a method strictly following logical rules is the key to sound exposition. Exposition

proceeds by a necessary logic from the original meaning, identified by exegesis, to the meaning for us in our situation. So far as its normative function is concerned, the results of exegesis and exposition are universally binding rules of conduct that can be applied with confidence as God's will because they have been derived by a logically systematic procedure from a divinely inspired record of revelation.

The third and final step [1982: 96] is 'application' "...which is finding out how to get the message across effectively to any given audience." Exegesis tells us what the Bible said to the original audience, while exposition tells us what it means for a contemporary audience. Application communicates this meaning to a contemporary audience.

Two features of this process are important, for our present purpose. The first is its reliance on logical, scientific method to give us assured access to Biblical certainties. What we have in Scripture is a divinely inspired record of a divine revelation at another time and in another set of circumstances. This record embodies God's normative will for us today but it is mingled with elements drawn from particular historical and cultural situations. These form the context for God's revelation but are not themselves revelatory.

Furthermore, it includes divine revelation that applied only to a particular time and place and is no longer valid for us. Marshall [1982: 57] is unusually frank about this, claiming that some passages of Scripture '...which once were true in the sense of containing God's binding commands are no longer true in the sense of being binding on us.' These passages do not convey God's will *for us*, though they did once convey his will *for others*.

In Marshall's approach the use of a rigorous logical method of reasoning, of the kind employed by science, is crucial for enabling us to identify with certainty what God's will is for us. We cannot know God's will merely by reading the Scriptures. We must process what we read through the appropriate logical method with exegesis, exposition and application following one another in a strict logical sequence. In this way we can be ensured of the necessary objectivity for our normative standards, and can regard these with absolute certainty as God's standards for us.

The second feature of this process, is that practical normative authority resides in verbal formulas that, as the products of this logical method, establish the standards for human conduct today. These formulas take the form of rules of conduct that function in the manner of a legal code prescribing in unequivocal terms what is acceptable conduct for the various situations of life.

In spite of the tendency of those who adopt this approach to see themselves as maintaining the historic Christian position, it bears the unmistakable marks of the positivism of modern secularism, with its faith in logical reasoning and scientific method to derive assured facts from the data of experience. In this case the data are the data of the biblical text and the assured results of the processing of this data are divinely sanctioned rules of conduct.

So far from representing the historic Christian position, this way of dealing with Scripture is, in fact, a modern novelty. If we examine the statements on Scriptural authority of the Reformation, for example, the emphasis on logical, scientific method as the guarantee of a right understanding of God's will in Scripture is absent.

The Thorough Declaration attached to the Lutheran Formula of Concord, says nothing about the use of the right method but speaks of the importance of the Holy Spirit who "opens the understanding and heart to understand the Scriptures". Similarly, the Westminster Confession assigns supreme authority to "The Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures". Article 2 of the First Helvetic Confession of 1536 declares: "This holy, divine Scripture is to be interpreted in no other way than out of itself and is to be explained by the rule of faith and love." Here the emphasis is on the Holy Spirit and the rule of faith and love rather than the rule of logic as the ground of our assurance that we hear God speaking in the Scriptures. {4}

The shift in modern times to an emphasis on scientific method as the ground of this assurance is a major shift that has clearly occurred under the influence of secularist positivism. It would be quite unfair to suggest that Marshall, and others who take a similar approach, wish to deny the role of the Holy Spirit. However the Holy Spirit, while given a crucial role in the original inspiration, receives little

mention in relation to the interpretation and understanding of Scripture today. Here the emphasis is on logical method. The emphasis of the Reformers was very different.

The result of this shift is that the effective source of normative authority is shifted from the Word of God to human logical method. Inspiration is important background, but in the foreground of contemporary practice it is the logical method that gives us the assurance that we are acting in accordance with God's will. Let me stress that I accept without reservation that the intention is to take the Word of God seriously, and to submit to its authority. In practice, however, the adoption of the methodological assumptions of positivism has shifted the locus of authority in a decisive way.

A disturbing consequence is that the theologian, skilled in the use of the prescribed interpretive method, becomes the mediator of God's will to God's people. The mediation of a priestly class, that the Reformation so vigorously rejected, is replaced by the mediation of a scholarly class.

A further practical consequence is that large sections of Scripture are set aside as having no normative authority for the life of faith today. There is a selectivity in the reading of Scripture that is justified on the ground of the logic of the method employed. It is clearly recognised that all Scripture "is inspired by God"; it is not nearly so clear that "all scripture ...is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness", equip-ping God's people "for every good work".[3]

3. The postmodernist approach

The most influential alternative to this positivist approach today is best described as one that is shaped by postmodernist thinking, and postmodernist hermeneutics in particular.

The identification of the boundaries of postmodernism is not clearly settled. I use the term here for those movements of thought that:

1. Reject the assumption of the positivist tradition that we can attain a universally valid, value-free knowledge that will hold good across cultural and historical boundaries.
2. Locate the source of meaning in human experience within the historically situated free social person.

Within these boundaries there are at least three distinct movements. There is the pragmatism that is most prominently represented by Richard Rorty; there is deconstructionism, associated particularly with Jacques Derrida; and there is the hermeneutic school in connection with which the names of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur most readily come to mind. It is beyond the scope of the present purpose to discuss the important links between these three movements. For the present purpose I focus on the hermeneutic school because it seems to me that the hermeneutic movement represents the most important challenge to the positivist approach in the interpretation of Scripture. In speaking of postmodernism it will be primarily this school that I have in mind.

I have chosen Croatto [1987][4] as the representative of this school because of the clear and detailed quality of his exposition. Whereas Marshall acknowledges no philosophical {5} foundations for his approach, Croatto clearly places himself within the hermeneutic movement. There is no need, therefore, to argue a case for identifying his approach with hermeneutic postmodernism.

In contrast to Marshall, Croatto argues that it is the salvific act that is the primary revelation. He tells us [1987: 461 that the 'canonical text has its point of departure in "God-acting", God's activity in history. God-speaking — the "word of God" — is the *reading*, through the lens of faith, of the God of salvation history'. Scripture, for Croatto, is the reading of God's salvific acts by the authors of Scripture; in it these authors wrote the meaning of the salvation events for them in their situation. He does not question the inspiration of Scripture, only insisting that it applies to the text rather than the human authors [1987: 47].

He does claim that the text of Scripture is not a simple record of God's acting and speaking. Indeed, his thesis is that such a simple record is impossible. All texts are interpretations, and the Bible is no

exception. It is the interpretation, or reading, of salvific events by human authors within a given historical and cultural context.

As a text, Croatto argues [1987: 30] that this interpretation given by the Biblical authors provides a "reservoir of meaning" that includes far more than the authors ever knew or intended. When we read the text in a time and place at a distance from the original situation of its writing, therefore, it is neither possible nor desirable to recover the meaning as understood by the author. In reading the text we reinterpret the original event in a way that is appropriate to our situation.

He argues [1987: 83] that 'just as event becomes word, and word emerges in text, so text, in turn, calls for a new word, to re-read it.' In other words, just as the original authors of Scripture provided an interpretation of the salvific event that they experienced, so the readers of Scripture today must provide a new interpretation of the text of Scripture which they experience as God's word. Croatto argues that this never-ending process of interpretation and reinterpretation is inherent in the nature of texts.

He insists that this does not make the reading of Scripture "subjective", allowing the readers to make Scripture mean whatever they wish it to mean. He contends [1987: 80] that, while the reader inevitably reinterprets the text, this reinterpretation 'is conditioned *by the text itself*. The text indicates the limit (however broad) of its own meaning'. The text provides a reservoir of meaning - a term frequently used by Croatto - that includes far more than is included in any one interpretation. In drawing on this reservoir we produce new meanings to meet new situations. However, like a reservoir, the meaning of the text does have boundaries within which an authentic reading of the text must remain.

It is in this context that we are to understand Croatto's claim that the meaning of the Bible is produced by the reader. This is a consequence of its status as a text. Any reading of a text 'will be a *production* of meaning, not a repetition of the first meaning' [1987: 27]. The meaning of Scripture is always one that is produced by the reader within a specific historical context, but it is a meaning that is produced *from* the Scripture's own reservoir of meaning.

This leads Croatto to speak of the history of the formation and interpretation of Scripture in terms of repeated closures and openings of meaning. As a technical alternative to "reservoir of meaning" he speaks [1987: 32] of the polysemy of the text. In readers' interpretation, one meaning is selected from this polysemy to become *the* meaning of the text; for these readers the meaning of the text becomes closed, limited to this one meaning, with all other possible meanings ignored. However, we are not locked within this closure of meaning. As the existing closure of meaning proves inadequate for the changing circumstances of life we are able to return to engage in a re-reading of the polysemy of the text from which a new meaning suited to the new circumstance emerges, resulting in a new closure.

A consequence of this approach to Scripture is that the meaning of Scripture *for us* is not fixed but shifts as the circumstances of human life shift. Scripture does not function as normative authority by providing us with a set of rules that are universally valid. It enables us {6} to continually reshape the rules of conduct to meet the changing circumstances of human life.

In contrast to the positivist approach, the hermeneutic approach views no Scripture as without enduring normative authority. No Scripture has for us the meaning it did for those who first read it, but all Scripture has authoritative meaning for us.

Croatto's discussion raises some important issues about the way in which language functions in conveying meaning. These issues cannot be set aside lightly. At the same time, it seems to me that he does less than justice to the function of texts as a vehicle for conveying meaning between people. Undoubtedly there is a richness of meaning in texts that allows one to find in a text a meaning that another has missed; equally, in order to do justice to the meaning of a text like Scripture that functions as normative authority, there is a need to reinterpret the text in order to do justice to its meaning in changing circumstances. However, it seems to me that there is a continuity of meaning between author and reader and between readers in varying circumstances.

Whereas the positivist approach shifts the practical authority from the Word of God to the interpretive method applied by scientifically trained persons, the hermeneutic approach shifts that

authority to the interpreting human subject, as an historically defined, free social person. As Watson [1993: 4] puts it:

> Modern hermeneutics and literary theory have introduced a major redefinition of the task of interpretation, shifting the focus of interest ... to the active participation of the reader in producing the meaning of the text.

5. Preparing to move beyond positivism and postmodernism

I submit that what is needed, and needed urgently, is a way to proceed that moves beyond both positivism and postmodernism. Each of these in its own way will frustrate all attempts to achieve a comprehensive faithfulness to Scripture in our normative judgments. Positivism's attraction is that it offers a basis of certainty for our normative judgments, but its certainties are the illusory certainties of an autonomous rationality. Postmodernism, on the other hand, offers to deliver us from the illusory certainties of positivism, and all other forms of rationalism, so that we may live in freedom, but its freedom is the illusory freedom of the autonomous, historical person.

Walter Brueggemann [1993] offers a possibility that moves quite decisively beyond positivism while aiming to avoid surrender to the rising intellectual hegemony of postmodernism. He proposes to achieve this through what he calls a counterworld of evangelical imagination. His work is challenging and stimulating, containing a number of valuable insights and opening some exciting possibilities for a way forward. In my judgment it is a significant contribution. However, he stops short of a fully satisfying answer because of the lack of a sufficiently penetrating critique of postmodernism and the positivism to which it is, in large measure, a reaction.

As theoretical alternatives for understanding our world, positivism and postmodernism can be understood adequately only as we recognise that their theoretical contours have been developed within the context of a secularist Weltanschauung that has given them their distinctive shape. While there are important differences in the Weltanschauungen that inform them, they converge in the common religious commitment of all forms of secularism.

A Weltanschauung is to be understood as a network of beliefs that shapes the way the world is experienced. It might be regarded as a vision of life, a way of experiencing the world, that provides the context for acting in and thinking about the world. It is not a conceptual system developed by a process of logical reasoning. It is not to be confused with a philosophy or an ideology. It is the belief context within which reasoning takes place. While it is possible to articulate the main features of a Weltanschauung, ordinarily it functions as the tacit context that is implicit in our patterns of action. {7}

At the heart of every Weltanschauung is a core commitment, a "belief in", that has the character of the core commitment of religious faith. The articulation of this commitment as a secularised commitment using language stripped of religious jargon disguises but does not alter its character. A secularised commitment merely replaces the sacral object of the commitment — that which is believed in — with a secularised object. Richard E. Wentz [1987] offers a useful and penetrating discussion of this secularisation of religious commitment.

Another important feature of Weltanschauungen is that they are typically communal; that is, a Weltanschauung is not peculiar to one individual but is shared by a community of persons. If the community is large there are likely to be variations in the details of the shared Weltanschauung but its main contours and, in particular, the core commitment will be common.

The disguising of the religious character of the core commitment in a secularised Weltanschauung, together with its communal character, makes it easy for the Christian to adopt key features of a prevailing Weltanschauung without recognising the conflict between its core commitment and Christian faith. When we live, as we should, within cultural and professional communities in which a certain Weltanschauung prevails, there is strong communal pressure to adopt this communal Weltanschauung as our own. For those who share the core commitment of the Weltanschauung it is not a matter for debate; it simply represents the way the world is. And when this core commitment is secularised the alien

Weltanschauung can readily seem to be no threat to our Christian faith. So we willingly adopt its main features in our practice, only modifying it where we see a need in order to accommodate our faith.

The tacit character of a Weltanschauung facilitates this practical surrender to a Weltanschauung alien to our faith. Its adoption in practice does not require of us to confess a faith that is in conflict with the confession of Christ. It is only by a critical scrutiny of the beliefs implicit in practices that we can uncover the hidden, yet powerful, influence of the faith in an idol that is at the core of the alien Weltanschauung.

The common core commitment of all secularist Weltanschauungen, in which positivism and postmodernism converge, is the belief in a radical human autonomy as the source of meaning in the human experience of this world. For positivism, as a type of rationalism, this autonomy is the autonomy of a universal rationality that is individualised in each rational person. This universal rationality ensures the objectivity of human knowledge. For post-modernism, it is the autonomy of the historically defined, free social person. The objectivity of rationalism that envisages a world of settled meaning is regarded as an illusion; meaning is given by the free social person in the historical situation.

Despite their differences, both locate the ultimate normative authority in an autonomous humanity. For this reason, whatever our intentions to the contrary, an approach to Scripture that is shaped by either positivist or postmodernist assumptions will shift the focus of normative authority from God's Word to the autonomous person. Because the Christian person is also a believing person, committed to Christ in faith, the surrender to human autonomy will never be total. God's grace never allows this to happen. However, the tacit acknowledgment of human autonomy will blunt the edge of the commitment to Christ in the practice of our living in the world. The testimony of our living will be blurred, lacking in critical penetration in the confrontation with the idolatry of secularism.

Our confession of faith in Christ rules out the possibility of any kind of human autonomy. All things are under the authority of God revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord, the faithful Creator/Redeemer. He it is who gives meaning to all things. In him, and him alone, "we live and move and have our being".[5]

We do indeed have the power of rational thought, but it is not an autonomous power that will lead us to the truth by the authority of its own internal logic, even when that logic is {8} applied to the text of Holy Scripture. Rational thought, even though its object is Scripture and the intention is to be faithful to Scripture, will lead us astray unless it is itself guided by the Spirit of Christ who alone is Lord.

We are indeed free, but it is not the autonomous freedom of the historical person, even if this person confesses with all sincerity the faith of the Gospel. Our freedom is the gift of God's grace in Christ that is experienced only as, in our historical situation, we submit wholeheartedly to him in faith and love. To acknowledge any other authority than that of the God who has surrendered himself in love to us in Christ is to turn our back on his gift of freedom.[6]

We who are made in the image of God will not find authentic meaning in our own autonomy, whether as a universal rationality or as a free, historical interpretation. We will find it only as we stand naked before him whose image we are, clothed only with his grace. It is only as we abandon all our pretensions to an autonomous power of knowing and yield ourselves in expectant faith to the God who, in the Son, has already given himself without reserve to us in love, that we will find authentic normative meaning for our lives.

This does not mean that all meaning is simply delivered to us ready-made from the hand of God. Far from it. To suppose this is to misconceive the nature of the meaning that the Creator gives to creation. As his image we ourselves are constructors of meaning in the creation, yet our constructions have no authentic meaning as autonomous constructions but only as they are developed within the bounds of meaning given by the Creator /Redeemer.

To be faithful to this commitment to God in Christ as the ultimate focus of all meaning requires a radical break with secularism at another key point that is closely bound up with its belief in human autonomy. Secularism assumes, as a basic given of human experience, an identity, in principle at least, between the world that we experience and our knowledge of that world.

Idealist rationalism sees the identity in terms of universal structures of human thought that give shape to the experienced world. Empiricist rationalism, which includes positivism, sees this identity in terms of a correspondence between our knowledge and the world of sensory experience. The conceptual structure of our knowledge corresponds to the factual structure of the world of our sensory experience. Extended to the realm of Scripture this means that the conceptual structure of our theology, including its normative components, corresponds to the universal givens of God's Word to us.

Hermeneutic postmodernism understands the identity in terms of an historically relative interpretation that constitutes the world of our experience. Extended to Scripture this means that our historically relative interpretation constitutes God's Word to us in this historical situation.

Understanding our world as God's creation that is upheld and governed by his gracious presence, and ourselves as creatures within this creation, calls for the breaking of this nexus of identity between our knowledge and the experienced world that is the object of our knowing. The world we experience, together with we ourselves as experiencing subjects, is the creation of God with an identity consequent on the creation-informing activity of the Word and Spirit of God. It is a world that, as both context and object of our knowing, has an identity independent of our knowing. Our knowledge, occurring within this world, is a creaturely construction that gives an account of what we experience, an account that is more or less coherent with the world that is the object of our experience.

There is, therefore, no component of our knowledge which we can point, in the manner of rationalism, and say: "This is a universal given". All is our construction, subject to all the limitations of the creaturely, including the limits of our historical situation.

On the other hand, it is not a construction lacking any external frame of reference outside the historically conditioned human subject. It is an account of a creation that is what it is in {9} consequence not of our making but of God's creating. That creation, held together by God in Christ, places our knowing under constraint, subjecting our constructed accounts to the condition that they be coherent with it if they are to have authentic meaning.

An important feature of the world we experience is that it exhibits law-like regularities. The existence of these gives a continuity and order to our experience. This merits some attention before we move on because of the key role it plays in the interaction of positivism and postmodernism.

These law-like regularities occupy a central place in rationalist accounts of the world, including those of positivism. First of all, it is assumed that, by the power of rational thought, we can articulate rational laws that govern these regularities, if not as metaphysical laws then as scientific laws. Secondly, it is assumed that the ordered framework of these rational articulations provides the framework within which alone human life can be fulfilled.

It is not difficult to give these assumptions the appearance of a Christian view of the world by speaking of the rationally articulated laws as the articulation of God's laws for creation. Yet, I submit that both assumptions are fundamentally flawed. The first is flawed because God governs creation, not by means of rational laws, but by the personal presence of his Word and Spirit. While he assures us of the constancy and power of his governance directed by his gracious, redemptive purpose, he does not reveal to us the "laws" of his governance. We see in creation God's glory and power and righteousness as he reveals his person to us, but not some set of divine governing laws.

It is significant that Psalm 147, after speaking in the clearest possible terms of God's governance of creation, concludes by saying:

> He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel.
> He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his ordinances.
> Praise the LORD![7]

The only law that God has revealed is his covenant law, revealed of old to Israel and, through Israel's Messiah, to all the world and communicated to us in Scripture. For this reason I disagree with Wolter's [1985: 29-33] when he claims that we are able to discern God's law, including his norms, in our experience of creation. I think that the insight we gain from our experience of creation is important in

the formulation of norms, but any idea that, from our experience of creation, we discern, or in any other way gain knowledge of, God's governing law for creation seems to me contrary to Scripture.

With the failure of the first rationalist assumption, the second must also fail. Life is not fulfilled by conforming to a rational framework of human thought but by living in faith before the face of God. "The one who is righteous will live by faith."[8] Faithful living will respect the common law-like regularities that the world exhibits but will not give primacy to these over and above the other features that constitute the rich fabric of creaturely experience.

Rejecting the claim to universal authority for rational thought, postmodernist accounts reduce the experience of law-like regularities to nothing more than the historically relative interpretations of free, social persons. They lose all anchorage in anything other than human cultural formation.

Once again, it is not difficult to give such accounts the appearance of a Christian view by speaking of the interpretations of human cultural formation as occurring in the historical en-counter with God. I think this is unsatisfactory because, though no doubt unintended, it effectively encloses God within the historical situation.

That our encounter with God is always within an historical situation is, I think, undeniable. However, God, while present, is not enclosed within that situation, and we, as his {10} creaturely image, are not defined by that situation. We are qualified by it — historicity is one of our human qualities — but we are not defined by it. We are defined by the Word of the God who comes to us in our historical situation, in his presence defining us and our world as his creatures. His definition of us maintains a community of human experience that provides us with bridges of understanding across the boundaries of culture, time and place, bridges that include shared experiences of law-like regularities.

However, if we are to make use of these bridges we must steadfastly refuse to identify them with the ordered patterns of the knowledge systems that we construct. These are cultural products, subject to all the relativities of human culture. To make them prescriptive for all people in all cultures is to absolutise the relative. The use of cultural power to impose such prescriptions is an oppressive act of cultural imperialism. We find the authentic bridges only as we join with our brothers and sisters in a mutual quest for the common ground that, by God's grace, is given to us in the community of human experience.

Such a quest in a cross-cultural context has the potential to greatly enrich understanding on both sides of the cultural divide. That potential is lost when cross-cultural interaction is dominated by theories developed within the context of one or the other participating cultures.

One of the tragedies of the Christian experience is that cross-cultural encounters have so often been characterised by a cultural imperialism that imposes the frameworks of Western thought on others. This tendency, in my view, is perpetuated in the contemporary trend to use contextualisation, or enculturation, theories developed by Western scholars as the basis for achieving greater relevance for the Gospel in other cultural contexts. As a result the desired relevance is only inadequately achieved and the opportunity for enriched understanding through genuine cross-cultural interaction is lost.

6. Moving beyond positivism and postmodernism

Against this background I suggest that an approach to the normative authority of Scripture with any prospect of escaping the deadening influence of both positivism and postmodernism must have four key ingredients.

6.1. The recognition of the inseparability of Word and Spirit

There needs to be a clear break with any idea that Scripture is merely the record of a past revelation, a safe-deposit for revelation. It is, of course, an historical record, but it is also much more than that. In coming to Scripture we encounter God speaking, by the Spirit, in and through the Scriptures.

A serious flaw in both positivist and postmodernist approaches to Scripture is that the Holy Spirit slips into the background. I do not suggest that he is not recognised at all, but he is not at centre stage. In the positivist approach that position is occupied by the rational method of interpretation; in the

postmodernist approach it is occupied by the free human interpretation. We can only give to God's Word the normative authority that is its due if we acknowledge the indispensable and central role of the Holy Spirit revealing God's will to us in and through the Scriptures.

In this sense, although the canon of Scripture is completed, the revelatory activity of God, as the Redeemer God of the covenant, is not to be seen as a closed chapter of history. It occurs each time we come to the Scriptures in faith, relying on the Spirit in and through the Scriptures to guide us into all the truth.[9]

As Calvin [Kelly, 1987:39] put it in his usual forceful way in a sermon on II Samuel, if we wish to know what God approves " ... we must come to Holy Scripture, where God gives us testimony of what is to be done. But just as certainly as the blind cannot see in {11} the fulness of midday, so also everything that Scripture furnishes us of doctrine and intelligence will be useless to us unless God blesses it by his Holy Spirit". For this reason Calvin urged humble, fervent prayer for the Spirit's guidance as indispensable if we are to recognise God's normative will in the reading of Scripture. Word and Spirit are inseparable. As a bare text, Scripture is no more than an historical text. Through the Spirit it is the authoritative Word of God revealing God's normative will to us.

6.2. Careful attention to the text of Scripture as God's message effectively conveying meaning to us

The text of Scripture is not just a conduit for the Spirit's communication that has no relation to the meaning of the text. The Spirit does not use it to bring to us conflicting messages in different historical contexts. The words of the text convey meaning from God to us, a meaning that remains constant throughout the variety of human situations.

A text is not an arbitrary collection of symbols. It is subject to intersubjective rules of language ensuring that, subject to appropriate communicative conditions, the meaning that one person encodes in a text will be understood by another. Scripture is no exception. Key communicative conditions are:

6.2.(i) An adequate encoding of meaning in the text

A text bears meaning only so far as that meaning is adequately encoded in it. An intention on the part of the author is no guarantee of communication. Faulty encoding may even mean that the meaning of the text is other than the meaning intended by the author. A text bears no meaning other than that which is encoded in the text itself. In the case of Scripture, we may assume that whatever message God wished to communicate to us has been effectively encoded in the text.

6.2.(ii) A shared field of experience that is sufficient for mutual understanding

As the most obvious example, this includes the requirement of a shared experience of the language in which the text is formulated. A text in Swahili will communicate little, if anything, to a person with no experience of Swahili. Similarly, a text in English employing the technical language of a scientific discipline, will only communicate to those English speakers who have a sufficient experience of that discipline.

This requirement also extends to a shared experience of contextual factors external to the text, so far as these are necessary to the communication of meaning. However, it is important to recognise that the shared field of experience need be no more than sufficient to make communication possible. There may be much experience that is not shared by the participants without any hindrance to communication.

Neither does this condition mean that the text should contain nothing that is strange and unfamiliar to the recipient. An important function of texts is to extend the existing field of experience.

Since Scripture is God's chosen vehicle for communicating with people throughout history and across cultures, we may expect that, assuming an adequate translation, the experience of creation shared by people in varying situations will be at least the minimum required for communication.

6.2.(iii) Adequate attention to the internal context

A text is not a random collection of disconnected sentences. Anyone reading it as such will miss its meaning. It is a connected discourse that must be read as such if it is to communicate its meaning to us. {12}

The meaning of a formula in a scientific text is dependent on the fulness of the scientific discourse to which it belongs. A sentence drawn from a history text only has its meaning in relation to the text as a whole. The meaning of a phrase that, in the context of a love letter is charged with rich meaning, becomes trivialised if removed from its connection with the full text of the letter. Scripture is no exception. Its meaning is lost if we treat it as a collection of disconnected "texts".

It should be noted that the shared meaning that a text communicates may be extremely rich, far too rich to be exhausted by any one reading. For this reason, some may identify meaning that others miss. Or the same person may identify meaning on further reading that was not noticed earlier. Yet, this is a matter of greater and lesser recognition of the meaning that the text bears. It is not a matter of differing meanings.

The meaning of the text is public property, common to all who share in the communication. Provided the communicative conditions are met, disputes about its meaning can be resolved by appeal to the text. It is a meaning that is borne by the text and settled by appropriate reference to the text. Scripture can be an effective normative guide to us only as we take seriously this meaning that is borne by the text.

6.3. Communal reflection in faith in the context of contemporary problem situations

This meaning that is borne by the text we may call *semantic* meaning; it is the meaning encoded in the words of the text. Important as this is, however, it does not yet give us the *normative* meaning of the text. By this I mean what the text means for the way we should behave in particular situations. While the normative meaning of a text will always be coherent with the semantic meaning, the two are not identical.

In the case of an instruction to act that is specific to a particular situation, there may be a very close match between semantic meaning and normative meaning. For example, if a businessman tells his secretary to be sure that a certain letter is typed and posted before 5 p.m., there is a close match between the semantic meaning, what the words mean, and the normative meaning, what the secretary is expected to do in this situation.

On the other hand, an instruction to staff in general that all mail is to be dealt with as expeditiously as possible leaves a gap between the semantic and normative meanings that the staff are required to fill in. The meaning of the text is, in itself, clear enough. However, in order to implement this meaning in practice attention needs to be given to a range of factors that are not included in the text, though they may be taken to be implied — the volume of mail, the setting of priorities, the gathering of information needed for formulating replies.

In this case, staff are not left to make whatever meaning they wish from the text. Their response should be consistent with the meaning of the text, but they can only determine what this means in the constantly varying situations of the day to day operation of the corporation by taking account of the variables of those situations as they occur from day to day. In short, they must make judgments about the normative meaning of the text and these judgments are not determined by the semantic meaning of the text.

The connection between semantic meaning and normative meaning is not one of logical necessity. It requires an act of human judgment that takes account of the full range of factors that apply in the particularity of the actual situation to which the normative text applies. The more generalised a text is in its intended application, the more scope there will be for the exercise of this judgment if the semantic meaning is to be given normative effect in these situations.

Scripture is one of the most highly generalised normative texts in existence. It is directed to all humans in all ages, in all cultures, and in every conceivable situation. Determining normative meaning,

then, always involves an act of judgment by the community {13} of faith within the actuality of the relevant situations. If this judgment is to be faithful to Scripture, certain conditions need to be met.

Firstly, the judgments must be coherent with the common, public meaning that is given in the text of Scripture. There must be the most careful attention to the meaning of the text. Our judgments are to be determinations about what faithfulness to the text of Scripture means in particular situations.

Secondly, it is not sufficient to take previously articulated general principles and apply them to every new situation. We need to be continually relating the normative message of Scripture to the particularities of actual situations.

Thirdly, they are to be the communal judgments of the body of Christ and not the individualistic judgments of persons acting independently of that body. This is not to say that individual persons have no freedom to make their own judgments about their own individual actions. However, these individual judgments should be made in the context of communal reflection and not in isolation from that reflection. And in matters that concern the actions of the community, every member should be ready to respect and support the communal judgment in the life of the community. To make a breach in the fellowship of the community because the communal judgment has not gone my way is a violation of the body of Christ. Equally, of course, it is a violation of the body for a community to force dissenters to leave merely because of their dissenting views on some point.

Fourthly, the judgments should be made in the light of the widest possible range of insights into the practical situation. This will include the insights of theologians, but these will not be given more weight than those of others in the community. Relevant insights from other scholars and scientists will also be brought to bear on the situation to ensure a fully informed judgment. But neither should these be seen as having special weight over and above others. The insights of those with practical experience of the situation is also to be valued and given equal weight with the insights of scholars and scientists. It is to be the judgment of a body functioning in the harmony of a mutual respect for the differing gifts and insights.

Fifthly, the judgment is to be made with prayerful reliance on the Holy Spirit for guidance. Judgments resting on bare majority votes are to be distrusted. Unanimity is not always possible and the demand for it may prevent the making of sound judgments under the Spirit's guidance. On the other hand, seeking of the Spirit's guidance means a genuine readiness to be convinced, by the working of the Spirit in the body, that my present judgment is mistaken. Where a body of people join in faith in this attitude of humble submission to the Spirit we may ordinarily expect a large measure of agreement.

6.4. An outcome of faith acting in love

All the normative meaning of Scripture is focused in love to God and, as the other side of this, love to our neighbour who is made in God's image. "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets".[10] Every command of Scripture is an illustration of the meaning of this love and no command has meaning other than in the coherence of this love.

Any approach that treats Scripture as a book of legal code containing a set of discrete rules that can be applied in isolation from the whole fails to recognise this one central focus of biblical normativity. To take any problem of human behaviour, then go to Scripture to gather all the "texts" that seem to apply to this behaviour, put these texts together and say: "There, this is the clear teaching of Scripture", is a failure to take seriously the coherence of the normativity revealed in Scripture. {14}

In this connection, it is unsatisfactory to assign some biblical material to the historical archives as no longer applicable. Everything is relevant in enabling us to understand what the practice of love means. Every command of Scripture was given in circumstances that are no longer the circumstances of our lives. None can be taken as a rule for our living in isolation from the rest of Scripture. On the other hand, when read in the context of the whole, everything remains relevant for us.

If, on the one hand, we cannot know what love means apart from biblical specifics, it is equally true, on the other hand, that we cannot know the meaning of specific commands of Scripture unless we take them in their coherence with all the other commands in the focus of love. Our bottom line question

should be: "Will this action, in all the circumstances of this situation and considered in the light of **all** that Scripture reveals, fulfil the revealed meaning of love?"

"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love."[11]

In conclusion I want to make it clear that I make no claim to have provided the definitive answer to the question of the normative function of Scripture. I have wished to do no more than offer some stimulus to the ongoing struggle of the community of faith for faithfulness to the Gospel of Christ Jesus in our daily living. If what I have said does this, even in a small way, I shall be content.

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[1] Romans 1:29; Galatians 5:20
[2] Ephesians 4:3
[3] II Timothy 3:16,17 NRSV
[4] This is an English translation of the 1984 Spanish publication *Hermeneutica biblica*. At the time of publication the author was Professor of Old Testament Studies and Hebrew at the Instituto Superior Evangelico de Estudio Teologicos (ISEDET) in Buenos Aires, Argentina.
[5] Acts 17:28 NRSV
[6] Galatians 5:1-6
[7] Psalm 147:19,20 NRSV
[8] Romans 1:17 NRSV
[9] John 16:13
[10] Matthew 22:37-40 NRSV
[11] Galatians 5:6