

The Authority of Scripture

1 Thess 2:1-16; BCF 5

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 19 September 2021, 16:30

(Put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)¹

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

At the end of 2016, I attended the prize-giving ceremony of Te Kura, the correspondence school who is still using our church building on Thursday mornings.

Well, it was at that prizegiving ceremony that I met one of the students' mothers.

In the discussion that followed, it came out that this mother used to be a fairly regular churchgoer to one of the local churches. However, since a few years ago, she has no longer been attending her church services. The reason she gave was that her church has taken a strong stance against gay marriages. She didn't like this stance, because, said she, "The leadership at my church have been defending their stance from the Bible, and I don't believe that everything the Bible says is the Word of God, because," continued she, "the Bible was written by human beings who not only *could* but definitely *did make* mistakes!" Wow!

What could I say?

I bit my bottom lip to show my dismay at such statement. And I would have loved to continue the discussion, but, at that very moment, the prize-giving was just starting and everyone was called to silence.

My brother & sister, what shock that a churchgoer, like that lady, dared question the divine authority of the whole Bible!

Well, to assure ourselves of the divine authorship of the Bible – especially in the post-Christian times in which we are living – you & I will do well to hear again the Biblical answers to the following questions:

- Why are only sixty-six books included in the Bible/Canon?
- How can you & I be assured that these books alone are to be included in the Canon?

Well, by way of the following three points, this sermon will answer these questions.

- Faith? Or Because the Church Says So?
- The Spirit Witnessing to Our Hearts
- Self-Evidencing Scriptures

Faith? Or Because the Church Says So?

My brother & sister, based on Bible references which you & I will soon be reminded of, the Belgic Confession says that there's only one way how we can know which books are canonical, i.e., God's Holy Word! That way is not by decree of a church leader or any human being, but it is by humble faith.

Thus, the Christian – and certainly the Reformed churches, by way of Article 5 of the Belgic Confession of Faith – say,

¹ In writing this sermon, I am greatly indebted to my main source whose guidance I greatly appreciate: HYDE, Daniel R. 2008. With heart and mouth: an exposition of the Belgic Confession. Grandville, MI : Reformed Fellowship, Inc. pp.81-87.

We receive all these books... believing without any doubt all things contained in them, not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but especially because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God...

In other words, receiving and believing the Word of the Lord is a virtue the Holy Spirit has given us as Christians.

It is an act of faith, not something that has been determined by the church, or by an elder, pastor, synod or pope!

Someone might say, “But come on, preacher, give us some Bible verses on which the Belgic Confession has grounded its Article 5!” Well, here they are...

- 1 Thess 1:6, “...*And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received² the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit”³ (ESV).*

See the emphasis?

The Apostle Paul does not say, “The church guarantees you that this is the Word of God;” no, he simply says, “*You have received the Word...*”

How?

Well, “...*with the joy of the Holy Spirit*” – i.e., the joy worked by the Holy Spirit.

Then, one chapter further (1 Thess 2:13), the Apostle Paul who was inspired by the Holy Spirit of God, tells the Thessalonian Christians again,

- “...*when you received⁴ the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted⁵ it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers*” (ESV)

You received and accepted it as the Word of God!

See? No church decree was needed – or even desired! The Thessalonians simply received and accepted the Holy-Spirit-inspired apostle’s words as words from God!

Again, in 2 Thess 2:15, the Holy-Spirit-inspired apostle says,

- “*So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.*”

My brother and sister, just as the Ancient Israelites did not doubt when Ezra read the Law to them;⁶ just as Isaiah did not question the authority of the LORD when he said, “For the mouth of the LORD has spoken;”⁷ and just as John on the Island of Patmos did not ask whether it was really Christ who spoke to him in Revelation 1, so right through redemptive

² δεξάμενοι Aorist Deponent Participle Masculine Plural of δέχομαι “to receive..., accept.” (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 571). New York: United Bible Societies.)

³ μετὰ χαρᾶς πνεύματος ἁγίου in which πνεύματος ἁγίου is a Subjective Genitive, which means: it is the Holy Spirit who gave them the joy (convincing joy/faith) that the word they just heard is from God.

⁴ παραλαμβάνετε Second Aorist Active Participle Nominative Masculine Plural of παραλαμβάνω “to welcome, receive, accept” (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 452). New York: United Bible Societies).

⁵ ἐδέξασθε Aorist Indicative Deponent Second Person Plural of δέχομαι^c: to readily receive information and to regard it as true—‘to receive readily, to accept, to believe’ (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 371). New York: United Bible Societies).

⁶ Cf. Nehemiah 8

⁷ Cf. Isaiah 40:5 “*And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.*”

history the Word of God was simply received the way also you & I should receive it – by humble faith!

What's more, if we simply receive the Bible's sixty-six books by faith, we're following the example of our Lord Jesus who never gave any indication that He questioned the authority of any of the Old Testament books – just the contrary!

I mean...

- do you remember how, at the age of twelve, Christ discussed the Scriptures in the Temple (Lk 2:41-51)?
- Do you remember how Christ rebuked unfaithful Israel for having slain God's prophets from the time of the first Old-Testament book, when Abel was killed, up until the time of the last Old-Testament book which mentions the slaying of a certain Zechariah? Yes, in saying this, we must remember that Abel's account is found in Gen 4, and Zechariah's account is found in 2 Chronicles (24:20-24), *which is the last book in the Hebrew text of the Old-Testament*. Thus, having referred to Abel in the first Old-Testament book, and to Zechariah in the last Old-Testament book, was not Jesus covering all of the Old-Testament books in one breath? And was Jesus, by that, not indicating that He simply accepted all of the Old-Testament books as Holy writ!?
- But, of course, the clearest indication that Christ Himself had accepted all the Old Testament books, is found in Mt 5:17-18, ***“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished”*** (ESV). Of course, when Christ says, “Law and Prophets,” He uses the generally accepted wording for “Law, Prophets and Writings,” i.e., all of the Old-Testament!

My brother & sister, in contrast to what we have just said – that the church *receives* and *accepts* the Bible books in humble faith – the Roman Catholic Church of the sixteenth century believed that the *church*, through several councils,⁸ has approved which books are inspired.

Now, granted! It is indeed so that the church councils had to sit to make sure that only Holy-Spirit-inspired books should be grouped together in the Bible (as canon); yes, to, in the face of many heresies (false teachings), make clear which books are truly from God. But to then say that the church has *approved* which books are inspired, that's putting the wrong emphasis on the matter.

Therefore, does the Belgic Confession Art 5 put the right emphasis on it when it says, “We receive all these books... *not so much* (i.e., not solely) because the church receives and approves them as such...”

See? It's a matter of putting the horse where it should be – *before* the cart and not the cart before the horse, because it is not so that the *Bible* is founded upon the *church*, but rather that the *church* is founded upon the Bible! Look, is that not what Eph 2:20 says...

- The household of God (i.e., the Church) is “... ***built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets*** (in other words, on the Holy-Spirit-inspired words of the apostles and prophets), ***Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone***” (ESV).

⁸ Councils like Laodicea (360 AD), Hippo Regius (396 AD), and Carthage (397 AD).

Indeed, that is why Martin Luther preferred to say, “The Scripture is the womb from which are born the divine truth and the church.”⁹

Thus, it is best to say that the sixty-six books of the Bible were canonical/authoritative the moment they were written, and only later did the church give witness to this fact!¹⁰

Somebody might now ask, “But what helped the church to determine/see that these sixty-six books are canon?” “Did the church simply, as those 1 Thessalonians verses say, *receive* them by humble faith?” “If so, does this *humble faith* mean *blind faith*?”

The answer to such question is, “No, it was not by a blind faith that the church received these sixty-six books as from God, but, on the contrary, by a faith firmly rooted in truth!”

And how do we know that these sixty-six Bible books speak the truth?

Well, for two reasons, which I will now explain under points 2 and 3 of this sermon...

The Spirit (The Witness of the Spirit)

My brother & sister, I pray that, by your personal experience, you will agree that the first reason why you/I know that these sixty-six books are from God, is because, as you have read (and as you are are reading) them, the *Holy Spirit witnessed (witnesses) in your heart that they are from God!*¹¹

Now, I agree, someone might say to us, “But that’s a rather subjective way of claiming that the Bible books are all from God!”

Yes, they will say that! But look, we’re not talking about *our* internal spirit witnessing to us! No, we’re referring to the Holy Spirit of God who convicts our hearts through His testimony! Yes, we’re talking about the same Holy Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles – the One who guided them to write; yes the same Holy Spirit who has preserved and is preserving His Word in the world. He *objectively* witnesses in these sixty-six Scriptures while you & I subjectively receive them!

Look, is this work of the Spirit not one of His primary tasks in the life of the church!?

And indeed, those who don’t believe in God through Jesus Christ, they will laugh at this.

But does 1 Cor 2:14 not forewarn us about their attitude...?

- ***“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned”*** (ESV).

And is it not true that 1 Cor 12:3 speaks clearly about the power/witness of the Holy Spirit in you and me...?

⁹ cf. Martin Luther’s Werke WA III 454. For this quote, cf. Hyde (ibid:83), and also cf. Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion, p.76 at

https://books.google.co.nz/books?id=0aB1BwAAQBAJ&pg=PA76&lpg=PA76&dq=Martin+Luther+The+Scripture+is+the+womb+from+which+are+born+the+divine+truth+and+the+church&source=bl&ots=qBHOq3ik0s&sig=brUrI7U1b_wrTBJwALix_UVaQ_k&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj5493UngrSAhUMppQKHWSuDIYQ6AEIGjAA#v=onepage&q=Martin%20Luther%20The%20Scripture%20is%20the%20womb%20from%20which%20are%20born%20the%20divine%20truth%20and%20the%20church&f=false

¹⁰ Says Herman Bavinck (apud Hyde, ibid:84), “We must not suppose, however, that the church made this Canon, or granted canonical authority to the writings of the prophets or apostles. Rather, those writings, from the moment they were composed, were immediately authoritative in the church and operated as the rule of life and faith.”

¹¹ My free rendering of the Belgic Confession of Faith Art 5, “*We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith. We believe without any doubt all things contained in them, not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but especially because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they contain the evidence of this in themselves; for, even the blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are being fulfilled.*”

- ***“Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says ‘Jesus is accursed!’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit” (ESV).***

See how the Holy Spirit works a good response to God’s Word in our hearts?

My brother & sister, the Holy Spirit is the same One who not just convicts our hearts about what is true *in Scripture*, but also about *which preacher* is truly from God. Look is that not why 1 Jn 4:1-2, 6 says...?

- ***“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God... By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error” (ESV).***

And is 1 Jn 5:10 not beautiful?

- ***“Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself” (ESV).***
- In other words, whoever is truly a follower of Jesus Christ, will also have the Holy Spirit inside him/herself who will testify to the truth!

My brother & sister (dear boys & girls), have you seen those video clips on YouTube – and there are several of them – those video clips that show you how a shepherd has tested his sheep to prove to the sceptics how sheep know their master’s voice? So, the shepherd has told two or three people the exact words he uses to call his sheep. Then he gave those people the chance to call his sheep by the words he had taught them. However, the sheep ignore those people – just keep on grazing despite the fact that those people are shouting out the correct words of calling! Then, the video shows how the real shepherd comes and says the same words – and how all the sheep then respond by bleating and walking closer to the shepherd. Well, that’s John 10:27 in video format: ***“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.”***¹²

Well, that’s the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart & mind of Christ’s followers. They hear His Words and they know they come from the Good Shepherd! And *this secret, internal witness of the Holy Spirit in the Christian’s heart, is not a mystical experience apart/loose from the Word. No, it’s the Spirit’s work through the Word.*¹³

John Calvin has said it well: “For by a kind of mutual bond the Lord has joined together the certainty of His Word and of His Spirit so that the perfect religion of the Word may abide in our minds when the Spirit, who causes us to contemplate God’s face, shine; and that we in turn may embrace the Spirit with no fear of being deceived when we recognise Him in His own image, namely, in the Word.”¹⁴

So far, re the Holy Spirit’s witnessing to our hearts that the sixty-six books of the Bible are indeed from God.

¹² [New American Standard Bible: 1995 update](#). (1995). (Jn 10:27). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

¹³ Hyde (ibid:85)

¹⁴ Calvin (apud Hyde, ibid:86) or cf. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.9.3 (also cf. 4,8.13).

Here is the last point in the sermon – point 3 – giving the second reason why we accept the sixty-six books as from God...

Self-Evidencing Scriptures

I love the way the Belgic Confession spells out this truth! This is what it says: “*For even the blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them (Scriptures) are being fulfilled.*”

So, where in the Bible do we see that the Scriptures are being (have been) fulfilled?

Yes, where in the Bible do we see the perfect harmony between promise and fulfilment of promise?

Well, there are many. But how about this one...? In Gen 15:13-16,¹⁵ God promised Abraham that his offspring would be foreigners in a land which is not theirs, but that, after four hundred years, the LORD would lead them out of there. Then in Exodus and later Bible books we read how God fulfilled that promise!

And how about the prophecy of Christ’s virgin birth given seven hundred years before He was even born? Of course, this prophecy was given in Is 7:14 and then Mt 1:23 gives its fulfilment!

Again, how about God’s prophecy/promise through Isaiah, given about two hundred years before it happened? I’m referring to Isaiah’s mentioning by name of King Cyrus whom God would raise for the main purpose to set the Jewish captives of Babylon free so that, for God’s glory, they could go home to Jerusalem (Is 45:1).

Then, of course, how about the many Old-Testament sayings/phrases that were all fulfilled in the suffering of Jesus Christ? I mean, verses like...

- Is 52:13-53:12 – about the *suffering Servant*
- Ps 22:1 “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*”
- Ps 22:7-8 “*All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: “He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.”*
- Ps 22:16 “*...a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet...*” Verse 18, “*they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.*”

Indeed, there are hundreds more such verses!

And there are also verses from *one* Bible book that support the same doctrine explained by *another* book! Yes, Scripture explains/supports Scripture. And the remarkable thing is: these sixty-six books were written down over a period of roughly one thousand five hundred years. Yet, they give a homogenous message and set doctrines!

My brother & sister, it is my prayer that you & I, and our children & grandchildren – our whole offspring until Christ returns – will continue to be upheld by God speaking to us through these sixty-six books!

You see, there are many voices out there! But there is only One who ultimately saves – the one of the Son about whom the voice from heaven once said, “This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!” (Lk 9:35).

AMEN (2,771 words excluding footnotes)

¹⁵ *Then the Lord said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. ¹⁴ But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. ¹⁶ And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”*