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The Authoritative Function of Scripture (Canadian MB Study Conference)

I have been asked to address the topic of “Biblical Authority.” This topic is closely related to other topics that will be addressed by others at this Study Conference. It’s difficult for me to address my topic without simultaneously making statements that properly belong to the topics others will be addressing. This is not because I think they need *my* help with *their* topic. It is because the claims I will be making on my topic don’t really stand on their own, unless they are followed up by effective strategies for interpreting and applying the Scriptures we confess to be authoritative.

My presentation will not aim to make and defend claims about *what* the bible authoritatively teaches. If you came expecting me to clarify the authoritative teaching of Scripture on violence, or cannabis, or women in ministry, or homosexuality, or abortion, then either you misunderstood what my topic was supposed to be about, or else I did.

I will be addressing what we *mean* by the Bible being authoritative and *why* we believe it is. My viewpoint may well have some implications for those other questions, but if I were to declare an “authoritative biblical viewpoint” on topics like that, I would be putting the cart before the horse. To answer such questions, we need far more than carefully considered convictions about the Bible’s authority. We also need to practice proper methods of interpreting and applying Scripture (i.e. hermeneutics), we need to learn how best to put Christ at the center, we need to understand community discernment, we need to understand the respective roles of biblical and systematic theology, etc. In other words, we need this Study Conference.

So, what do we mean by the authority of Scripture and why do we claim that the Scripture speaks with authority?

About halfway through my presentation I will be turning to the MB Confessional statement about the authority of Scripture and then addressing issues related to that.

In the first half I want to examine a little-known, but very important, verse in a little-studied, but very important, book in the New Testament. The book is **Second Peter**. It’s three chapters contain the following:

- **Chapter 1:** Wonderful assurances that God has given us everything we need so that we might pursue a godly life . . . not only divine power to live it, but written Scriptures that authoritatively instruct and guide us (and that is of course my topic!). Chapter one is a beautiful and inspiring chapter. And then there is chapter 2!
- **Chapter 2:** This is really tough reading. Chapter 2 is filled with a long list of acts of divine judgment on false prophets, false teachers, angels who sinned, the ungodly people of Noah’s generation, Sodom and Gomorrah,

blasphemers old and new, and finally on Balaam. These divine judgments were pronounced by preachers of righteousness, by God's prophets, even by a donkey. The judgments themselves include "chains of darkness", floodwaters, fire and brimstone, indeed hell itself. All that, and I haven't even begun with the long list of things that bring down all this judgment – false prophecy, destructive heresy, depraved conduct – those three are in the first two verses. There are 20 more verses listing other kinds of sordid sins, acts of debauchery, and blasphemy. As I said: tough reading!

- **Chapter 3:** In addition to important teaching about the final Day of the Lord and a ringing call to holy living, chapter 3 contains two exceedingly important verses that bear directly on today's topic.

If we want to avoid all that "really bad stuff" we encounter in chapter 2, how will we do that? Peter's answer is: Pay attention to "The Authoritative Function of Scripture." He does not say it in exactly those words, but that is the whole point of 2 Peter 3:2.

Let's read first the verse that precedes it. 2 Peter 3:1: "Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking." After all the doom and gloom of chapter 2, Peter turns to the positive goal of all this, to stimulate wholesome thinking. Peter wants to steer his readers away from all that awful stuff in chapter 2, and lead them to the life of godliness referenced in chapter 1. He wants to help them escape the world's corruption as they participate in the divine nature. He wants them to have a faith that is supplemented by goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection and love.

How can that happen? What advice can Peter give to guide his readers on a journey to that lofty goal?

Here's Peter's counsel:

"I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles." (2 Peter 3:2).

How will God's people be kept on the right path? By calling to mind God's prior revelation and being guided by that in the present. If it is not yet obvious what that has to do with the authoritative function of Scripture, hang in there!

In this text there are three components, three movements, if you will:

- The ancient prophetic words
- The teaching of Jesus
- The apostolic tradition

All of these we access *today* through Scripture. That has, however, not always been the case. None of the three movements cited here, started out by being "the inspired word of God." Before the written word, was the *spoken word*, and at the very center of it all has always been the *Living Word*.

There are several places in this letter where Peter explicitly refers to written Scripture. This is indirectly one of them. He refers here to remembering spoken words, remembering Jesus's commandment, and remembering the apostolic tradition. There is perhaps no verse in the entire Bible that comes closer to defining *for us* what the Bible actually is, and what role God intended it to have in our lives.

When Peter refers to "the holy prophets," he does not mean people speaking prophetic words in the early Christian assemblies. Peter is referring to the likes of Moses, Deborah and Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Prophets of old spoke authoritatively to God's people in their generation. Their words were subsequently recorded in written form. Sometimes the prophets themselves were the writers; sometimes others wrote about them and about their prophetic ministries. So, eventually *spoken* prophetic words became embedded within *written* Scripture. For Jesus and the early church, this was "the Bible." We call it the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Scriptures.

Peter knows that "the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets" are no longer available to him and his readers as spoken words. They can access them only through written Scripture. But in this form, they are considered to be authoritative divine guidance, no less than if the prophets were speaking those prophetic words in Peter's day.

Of course, those Scriptures have a wide variety of kinds of texts: narratives, worship songs, wisdom texts, etc. – but when Peter tells his readers to "remember the words of the holy prophets," he was telling them to pay attention to the Scriptures – their Scriptures, a body of Hebrew literature which, by the time of Christ and the early church had become that canon of literature we call the Old Testament.

We have no great need to figure out exactly how the canonizing came about, nor do we need to second-guess whether they made good selections. For us it should suffice that Jesus accepted as authoritative those texts frequently called "Holy Scriptures" in the New Testament, though Jesus referred to them as "the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44).

So how will Peter's hearers be steered away from "false prophecy, destructive heresy, and depraved conduct?" Peter says, by remembering the words of the holy prophets – that is, by paying attention to their Scriptures. These provide authoritative guidance for faithful Christian living. But that is only the first of three parts to his answer.

The second movement is: Remember "the command given by our Lord and Savior." In the earliest church, for two or three decades at least, Scripture did not, indeed *could* not include the New Testament. None of the books had been written. What they had were the teachings of Jesus, set *alongside* Scripture, as authoritative guidance for the church.

Jesus warned against allowing oral traditions to rival the authority of written Scripture. But he meant everyone else's, not his own! For the early Christians, whenever they knew Jesus had addressed a topic, they considered the matter settled. Scripture and the teaching of Jesus – these were the twin sources of authority. If at times it seemed that there was tension between what their Scriptures (our Old Testament) said, and what Jesus himself had said, Jesus's word took precedence. They knew that Jesus had on occasion declared null and void explicit commands and prohibitions of the Old Testament. The most obvious example is recorded in Mark 7,19 when "Jesus declared all foods clean." But other examples could also be cited. When that happened, Jesus's word always took precedence over the claims of the Hebrew Scriptures. The early church never checked with the Old Testament to determine whether or not Jesus had "gotten it right."

Jesus's interpretation of Scriptures became the normative interpretation. If Jesus had completely *set aside* the ancient Scriptures, I suppose the early Christians would have followed suit. But he nothing of the sort. He affirmed Scripture; he said it "cannot be broken;" he declared that its authors were "speaking by the Holy Spirit." Our high view of Scripture can be best defended by saying: We choose to believe what Jesus believed. For the early church, Hebrew Scripture was considered authoritative, among other reasons, because Jesus declared it to be that. And yet that claim to authority was not understood to mean that everything commanded in those texts still needed to be practiced by followers of Jesus. This is a really important distinction that we will come back to. Jesus, and then later the Spirit-guided discerning community decided which did and which didn't.

Peter's word to his readers also has a third movement. The words of the holy prophets, the command of Jesus, and *then the apostolic tradition*. With the passing of time there would inevitably be less and less clarity about what exactly Jesus had said – unless there were authoritative voices in the early church that could function as reliable, indeed as *divinely authorized*, bearers and interpreters of the Jesus traditions. Jesus did not leave things to chance. Part of Jesus's purpose in calling disciples, in naming some of them apostles, in granting them authority over the "12 tribes of Israel," was so that Jesus's teaching could be remembered and passed on as authoritative.

Peter's point of view is this: "If you want reliable authoritative guidance for faith and life, go to the Scriptures, and if you want to know what to do with those Scriptures, check with Jesus, and if you don't know what Jesus's point of view on the matter was, check with the apostles. They are authorized to clarify these things."

Jesus is at the center. Jesus must always be at the center. *Before Jesus* were inspired prophets, whose words became written Scripture. *After Jesus* were authorized bearers of the tradition who would remember and interpret and apply the words of Jesus for the later church. And just as the oral words of the prophet eventually became written words, so also the oral words of Jesus and of the apostles after him became written words. These written words were not intended to supersede the oral words. Rather they were intended to preserve them, and to teach God's people how to apply them.

That is the role of Scripture today. In Peter's day the second movement (the teaching of Jesus) was a remembered tradition. And the third movement (the apostolic role in all this) was an ongoing reality. Within a few short decades both of these would be embedded in written documents (the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament), just as, long ago, the first movement (the words of the holy prophets) had become written Scripture. Peter may never have anticipated that the second and third movements he cited would ever become written Scripture (though I suspect he did). That is, however, exactly what happened. And the expanding church, under the superintending work of God's Spirit, canonized these new writings to be a second authoritative body of Scripture alongside the one the church had always accepted.

I believe we have the precedent of the Old Testament, the authorization of Jesus, and the practice of the apostles all demonstrating that this development is precisely what God intended should happen. The reason that the Scriptures (Old Testament and New) provide authoritative guidance for the church is because God designed precisely that as the means by which a previously *spoken* word, and a previously present *Living Word*, and a faithfully preserved apostolic tradition could continue to be accessible to later generations, so that they too might, as Peter puts it, "participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (2 Peter 1:4).

In my view we do not ground our view of the Bible's authority in particular convictions about how inspiration works, nor in carefully articulated statements of what we call "inerrancy." We ground it in the centrality of Jesus, and the ways in which he views the Hebrew Scriptures and prepares for the Greek Scriptures we now call the New Testament.

The center is always Jesus. It is ultimately Jesus's own view of the Bible that justifies the claims we make about it. It is Jesus, the Living Word, whose life and ministry and teaching and atoning work become the core of all New Testament teaching and the lens by means of which we assess the ongoing relevance of the Old Testament. Each New Testament author, whatever other goals they may also have been pursuing, aimed centrally to do one thing: to help their readers understand what it means to put Jesus at the center as Savior and Lord, and authoritative revealer and interpreter of the will of God.

We never deify the Bible itself. It is not an object of worship. It performs its God-intended function when it points beyond itself to the Jesus, Living Word.

We might put it like this:

Jesus is "THE WORD" . . . i.e. the Living Word of God.

Scripture is "The Word about THE WORD" . . . i.e. the divinely authorized presentation of what the Living Word of God continues to say to us.

All subsequent reflection on Scripture, all theological claims about it, all Confessional Statements, indeed all Study Conference papers are, at most, “words about The Word about THE WORD.”

God has never limited divine revelation and authoritative guidance to “Scripture.” Right from the start there was oral communication before there was written, and then oral communication alongside written. God spoke and speaks through nature. God spoke and speaks by the Spirit. God spoke and speaks through individuals and a community of believers. Supremely, God spoke when the Divine Word became flesh and lived among us.

But our access to all past revelations, and our basis for evaluating all present revelations, *is now* (though it has not always been) the Bible, the Holy Scriptures we call the Old and the New Testament. I believe Peter *propels* us in this direction by the important verse we have been examining. I believe he also anticipated where that whole trajectory would lead, when he includes in his final chapter another often-overlooked statement about Scripture.

In 2 Peter 3:16 we read: “Paul’s letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the *other Scriptures*.” During the lifetime of the first apostles, *they were already aware of and collecting each other’s writings and referring to them as Scripture*. And in the very sentence that discloses this little-known fact, Peter complains that Paul is hard to understand! Amen and Amen! And so is Peter, sometimes. And so are all the other authors of the New Testament. And precisely for this reason, we need scholars who can read ancient Greek; we need historians who can research ancient history and culture; we need translators who can make all this available to us in English; and we need Christian communities that ponder together under the guidance of God’s Spirit, what these Scriptures are really saying and how they should be applied in a new context. And that is why we need Study Conferences to figure out how that whole process most effectively works. But *if we do not start with a conviction that the written texts of Scripture preserve and interpret earlier revelation by God, especially the living, walking, talking, serving, dying, rising revelation of God in Jesus, we have little chance of avoiding all the stuff that Peter talks about in chapter 2.*

The MB Confession of Faith says this about Scripture:

We believe that the entire Bible was inspired by God through the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit guides the community of faith in the interpretation of Scripture. The person, teaching and life of Jesus Christ bring continuity and clarity to both the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament bears witness to Christ, and Christ is the One whom the New Testament proclaims. We accept the Bible as the infallible Word of God and the authoritative guide for faith and practice.

This paragraph follows one clearly stating that God's revelation is *not limited to Scripture* and never has been, and also clearly stating that the ultimate revelation of God is *not* through Scripture but through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the supreme revelation of God. The primary significance of the New Testament is that it is our only reliable access to that revelation through Jesus Christ, both to its contents and to its significance.

And that introduces the next important matter. How does the authority of Scripture relate to the claims about Scripture – that it is *inspired*; that it is *infallible*?

Our Confession of Faith uses both of those terms.

- *We believe that the entire Bible was inspired by God*
- *We accept the Bible as the infallible Word of God*

That the Scriptures were inspired by God is clearly taught in the New Testament and in particular by Jesus (though the reference at that time was to the Old Testament). One of the words used to speak of this is a word Paul uses in 2 Timothy 3:16 ("*theopneustos*"; sometimes translated "God-breathed"). This is sometimes taken to mean that, whatever the human authors *thought* was happening, what was *really* happening was that God was directly supplying every word (plenary verbal inspiration). If that is your view, I will not try to talk you out of it, but do know that this was not the mostly widely held understanding of inspiration among early Church Fathers, nor among the Reformers, nor even among that very influential group of conservative evangelicals who produced a document called "**The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.**"

We should probably reserve judgment on the exact means of divine inspiration. I strongly suspect that God's Spirit used *various different means* when inspiring prophets and apostles to understand God's words and deeds and compose texts that record and interpret these.

"The Chicago Statement" to which I just referred, was **composed in 1978 by more than 200 influential Evangelical Scholars**, including a few Mennonite Brethren. It played a significant role in a powerful movement at that time sometimes referred to as "The Battle for the Bible." It was a serious attempt to define and defend what the document called "the inerrancy of the Bible." Many individuals present here probably consider themselves supporters of this document, whether or not they have ever officially "signed on." Some churches represented here have probably adopted the statement as their official stance on Scripture.

As far as I know, no national conference of MB churches has officially endorsed these particular "words about the Word about THE WORD." We are not required to agree with the Chicago Statement in order to be considered faithful Mennonite Brethren.

That is not because we have a "lower" view of Scripture. It is rather because, for many, "inerrancy" has become a code word – a code word with as many negative connotations as positive ones. Both the movement and the document aimed to endorse a "high view"

of Scripture. But neither the movement nor the document was without its dark side; neither of them produced only good fruit.

I suspect that far more people have *endorsed* the document than have actually *read* it. If you examined it closely, you would discover that it **uses 1755 words to explain what “inerrancy” should be taken to mean** when it is applied to the Scripture. And in the process, you might well be shocked to discover how many of those words are dedicated to **defining the “loopholes”** we are apparently allowed to exploit without giving up the claim that the Bible is inerrant. “Please sign on,” the document invites, “even if you are convinced that the Bible sometimes makes spelling mistakes, is sometimes only approximately accurate, sometimes exaggerates, sometimes quotes people whose viewpoints are wrong, sometimes doesn’t say what *actually* happened, but rather what *appeared* to have happened . . . and on and on.

Those who endorse the document are aiming to defend a “high view” of Scripture and of its reliability. I am in favor of that. But may I urge you to be vigilant lest you adopt, along with the document, also its dark sides, and lest you take advantage of all the loopholes it provides, and thus end up treating the Bible as though it were filled with countless inaccuracies, all the while labeling it “inerrant.”

Our Confession of Faith avoids the term “inerrancy” and does so deliberately. At the time Article 2 was formulated, not only “The Battle for the Bible,” but also “The Battle for the Correct Definition of Inerrancy” was, for many, a painful memory or even an ongoing controversy. The framers of the Confessional statement were concerned that calling the Bible “inerrant” might communicate to some people that only those who sign on to the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy would be considered to be within the boundaries endorsed by the Confession of Faith. And so, they chose a word with a similar basic meaning but a lot less scholarly baggage . . . infallible.

We confess that the Bible is infallible. That means that we can trust the direction that the Bible takes us when we properly use it to discern the will of God. It won’t lead us astray. It is trustworthy. If we still go astray, it will be because of our unfaithfulness, or because we have not properly discerned what the Scriptures teach.

Put another way: when the discerning community, guided by the Spirit, properly interprets the Scriptures, and in doing so discovers God’s point of view on the issues addressed within it, then the teaching of Scripture (thus discerned) represents what we are obligated to believe and required to practice. In still other words, it is our infallible guide for faith and life.

Claiming the Bible *instructs us* infallibly is not to say that *we interpret* the Bible infallibly. We should be more than cautious in claiming that our discernments are always properly conducted, that our ears are always correctly attuned to the Spirit’s nudges, that our exegetical and hermeneutical strategies for interpreting and applying Scripture are flawlessly conceived and appropriately applied. For all these reasons, we should be

humble about the conclusions we reach and generous with those among us who reach different ones.

The Bible is our authoritative guide, but it will take this whole Study Conference and a lot more before we can confidently claim that we have gained full clarity on *what* the authoritative teaching of Scripture is on the topics it obviously addresses, but not always as clearly as we might wish. And if that is true of *those* topics, it is all the more true of those topics that it does not obviously address, but on which we seek God's perspective.

Why have I spent so much time talking about the, sometimes controversial, topics of "inerrancy" and "infallibility"? Because we reach diverse conclusions on these matters. We need to guard against the assumption that if someone does not understand inspiration or inerrancy or infallibility exactly as we do, then presumably they do not consider the Bible authoritative. Not so! At any rate, my own basis for confessing that the Scriptures are authoritative is not that I hold to a particular view of inspiration or inerrancy, but because Jesus did.

I have about 11 minutes left, and I want to use them to make three claims that I hope will help move us towards fruitful, honest, even if difficult, conversations about all of this.

"Authority" doesn't always mean the same thing.

My topic is the authority of Scripture. It is not hard to understand what that word means when we read the Ten Commandments. If Scripture as a whole teaches that these are mandatory divine laws, then we bow to the authority of Scripture precisely by submitting to them as mandatory divine laws. It won't do to say, "Well, that's just the opinion of the Bible. We see things differently today." Yes, of course we can say that, but then let's not pretend the Bible is our authority.

But what about Matthew 1:14? If all Scripture is the *authoritative* Word of God, that must mean that Matthew 1:14 is the *authoritative* Word of God, right? OK, some of you are trying to recall what is in Matthew 1:14. To jog your memory, it goes like this: "Azor the father of Zadok, Zadok the father of Akim, Akim the father of Elihud." (You might think I am joking. Actually, I'm not.) Matthew's genealogy has powerful teaching value on a range of important topics. Who is Jesus? From where did he come? For whom did he come? It is as rich a passage as any in Matthew. But to say that Matthew 1:14 or even the entire list of names in Matthew 1:2-16 is "authoritative" somehow sounds strange. What does authoritative mean? What does it obligate us to do or not to do?

Many parts of Scripture are "authoritative" in a different way than those parts that are obviously intended to declare something right or wrong. There are of course direct commands in Scripture that are clearly intended to be obeyed today. There are others that clearly are not (e.g. when Paul says, "bring me the parchments"). But there are also many texts that *were never intended to command or prohibit anything*: they give us glimpses of God's character; they lead us to worship; they help us recognize our need

for God; they provide us with models of faithfulness and of unfaithfulness; they assure us of God's love and good plans for us and for all creation. All these diverse texts are "authoritative" in the sense that they are authorized by God to perform their intended functions, and we are expected to submit to the ways in which they do that.

You were invited, before coming here, to read a chapter in a book I wrote. In it I refer to the Scriptures functioning sometimes as a window, sometimes as a portrait gallery, sometimes as a mirror, sometimes as glasses. Different kinds of Scripture have different roles to play and, depending what those are, the idea of "authority" will also be quite diverse.

And that might actually help us solve some dilemmas. The Old Testament authoritatively addressed the people of God and obligated them to follow many laws. Among these were detailed food laws. And then Jesus came along and "declared all foods clean" (Mark 7,19). So, what do we do with the Old Testament laws? Do we go back and erase them, declare them non-authoritative? No, we change the status of those texts from exercising one kind of authority to exercising another. No longer do they obligate us to follow what they command and prohibit. But they remain an authoritative record, perhaps we should say, "an authorized portrait" of how God expected *those people* in *that situation* to live. The *authority* remains, but not the *obligation*.

If you think I have just made a minor tweak to what I have said earlier, maybe not. Maybe that is a pretty radical proposal. Which other topics besides Kosher food laws should be treated the same way? The Bible preserves an authorized record of what was expected at one point in salvation history. This authorized record (and in *that sense* authoritative) may well reveal something that was important for God's covenant people to practice at some point in their history, but no longer is, now that the situation has changed. But now I have clearly wandered into the field of hermeneutics, so I will retreat back to another, perhaps just as uncomfortable, proposal.

Sometimes "the biblical viewpoint" seems just plain wrong (at least from the perspective that now shapes our reading).

I think we all recognize that there are viewpoints expressed somewhere within Scripture that fall far short of God's ideal. Alongside these, we often have other texts declaring the revealed will of God. These are the texts that help us recognize that all divergent points of view to fall short of that. Sometimes we even have Jesus explicitly stating the "real will of God" when diverse texts seem to point in a variety of directions.

Take the example of marriage. We speak sometimes of aiming to practice the "biblical view of marriage?" Which one? The one where polygamy is condoned? The one where widows under some circumstances are required to marry their bothers-in-law? The one where wives are treated more like property than partner? Or course not. The "biblical view" is not every view found somewhere within the pages of Scripture. The "biblical view" is the one that corresponds to the declared will of God. It's the one that Jesus

authorizes by saying, “But in the beginning it was not so,” when his opponents are getting a bit too clever with their concordances. But why would we even bother to ascertain “the biblical view” if we were not committed to declaring the biblical view authoritative? God’s point of view . . . the truly “biblical point of view” . . . should be our point of view.

Or isn’t it quite that simple? What about slavery? What exactly is the biblical view of slavery? There are quite a few instructions in Scripture prohibiting the violent abuse of slaves. There are generous provisions for gaining freedom, under the right circumstances. There is some direct instruction to Christian masters on how they should treat their slaves, and vice versa. Paul even suggests in one place that setting a slave free might be something to seriously consider. Yet Jesus regularly uses slaves as characters in his parables, and in doing so never seems to indicate that there is something in principle wrong with slavery as an institution, at least not directly. It takes a pretty nuanced reading of Scripture to confidently conclude that the Bible’s position on slavery is that it is inconsistent with God’s will.

Truth is, during the serious debates about slavery-owning and abolition, both in the UK and in the US, it was usually those *defending slavery* that most frequently cited specific Bible verses more than those that were working towards abolition.

So, I ask: Does it seem obvious that “the biblical perspective” on slavery is that it outside the will of God? Do you see the problem we are facing? Let me put it this way. I think we need to accept one of the following three propositions as true.

1. The Bible’s point of view is that slavery is wrong.
2. On some topics (like slavery), the Bible’s point of view is wrong.
3. Slavery is not necessarily outside the will of God.

If there are other options, I am having a hard time seeing what they are.

But faced with these choices, I think I can guess what most of you would want to say. Number 2 cannot be true: The Bible’s point of view is always right. Number 3 cannot be true: Slavery cannot be God’s will. Therefore, Number 1 must be true. But now we are on a very slippery slope. Can we really decide in advance what the Bible’s point of view needs to be, so that our convictions remain unchallenged?

I am not trying to cast doubt on the “high view of biblical authority” that I have tried to present and defend. I bring this up because we need to have open, honest conversations. Formulating *wonderful-sounding* theories does not help us much if we are unable or unwilling to test whether those theories actually work, when we try to apply them to real issues.

And in case you think the issue of slavery doesn’t matter much . . . after all, who is debating that issue these days? . . . just remove the word slavery from the three sentences above, and drop in other words instead . . . like human trafficking, like

abortion, like cannabis, like homosexuality, like euthanasia, like . . . well, like whatever we need to discuss, to make sure this isn't all just pious theory. I am not proposing that the perspective of Scripture might sometimes be wrong, on these topics or any other. What I propose is that there are lots of test cases available to us, indeed pressing upon us, as we sharpen our convictions about the authority of Scripture and then work out the implications.

Finally:

When we speak of “the authority of Scripture” we should probably acknowledge that this is shorthand for what we *really* mean.

God is our authority. The Word made flesh, i.e. Jesus, is our final authority on the nature and the will of God. Scripture always plays a role that is subordinate to Jesus himself. Scripture points to Jesus. It preserves the teaching of Jesus. It explains Jesus. But the final authority is actually *Jesus*.

When Jesus sent forth his chosen apostles, he did not say, “All authority in heaven and on earth will be given to the books that you will write.” He said, “All authority in heaven and on earth, has been given to me.” (borrowing some ideas from NT Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, p. xi). Jesus is our final authority, indeed, to the end of the age (as he said). We declare that the Scriptures are authoritative, but what we really mean is that the authority of God, the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, is exercised, among other means, through the Scriptures that bear witness to Jesus. That, I propose, is what Jesus himself claimed for the Scriptures, what the apostles claimed for Scripture, what the historic Christian church has always claimed and what our MB Confession of Faith claims.

I now gladly pass the baton to you, discerning community, as we wrestle together with the proposals I have made and the questions they provoke.