

# Building Your Theology

Lesson 4

Authority in Theology

Lesson Guide



**thirdmill**

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## CONTENTS

<b>HOW TO USE THIS LESSON GUIDE .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>NOTES.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>I. INTRODUCTION (0:19).....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>II. MEDIEVAL ROMAN CATHOLICISM (1:44).....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>A. Authority in Scripture (2:55).....</b>	<b>2</b>
1. Inspiration (3:42).....	2
2. Meaning (5:48).....	2
3. Obscurity (10:41).....	3
<b>B. Authority of the Church (13:36).....</b>	<b>4</b>
1. Past Authorities (14:20).....	4
2. Contemporary Authorities (17:43).....	4
<b>III. EARLY PROTESTANTISM (21:22).....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>A. Authority of Scripture (22:37).....</b>	<b>5</b>
1. Inspiration (22:52).....	5
2. Meaning (28:08).....	6
<b>B. Authority of the Church (40:38).....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>IV. CONTEMPORARY PROTESTANTISM (53:56).....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>A. Authority of Scripture (53:47).....</b>	<b>9</b>
1. Inspiration (54:54).....	9
2. Meaning (1:00:27).....	10
3. Clarity (1:07:14).....	11
<b>B. Authority of the Church (1:16:31).....</b>	<b>13</b>
1. Past Authorities (1:16:43).....	13
2. Contemporary Authorities (1:23:20).....	14
<b>V. CONCLUSION (1:30:05).....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>REVIEW QUESTIONS .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>APPLICATION QUESTIONS .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>GLOSSARY .....</b>	<b>22</b>

## HOW TO USE THIS LESSON GUIDE

This lesson guide is designed for use in conjunction with the associated video. If you do not have access to the video, the lesson guide will also work with the audio and/or manuscript versions of the lesson. Additionally, the video and lesson guide are intended to be used in a learning community, but they also can be used for individual study if necessary.

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- **Before you watch the lesson**
  - **Prepare** — Complete any recommended readings.
  - **Schedule viewing** — The Notes section of the lesson guide has been divided into segments that correspond to the video. Using the time codes found in parentheses beside each major division, determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may also want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
  - **Take notes** — The Notes section of the lesson guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each segment and key notes to guide you through the information. Many of the main ideas are already summarized, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
  - **Record comments and questions** — As you watch the video, you may have comments and/or questions on what you are learning. Use the margins to record your comments and questions so that you can share these with the group following the viewing session.
  - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
  - **Complete Review Questions** — Review Questions are based on the basic content of the lesson. You should answer Review Questions in the space provided. These questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
  - **Answer/discuss Application Questions** — Application Questions are questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

## Notes

### I. Introduction (0:19)

### II. Medieval Roman Catholicism (1:44)

#### A. Authority in Scripture (2:55)

The medieval church's posture toward the Bible made it nearly impossible to commit to the authority of Scripture.

#### 1. Inspiration (3:42)

Medieval Catholic theologians overemphasized Scripture's divine origins.

Medieval theologians:

- depended heavily on Greek philosophies.
- were uninformed about the ancient history of Bible times.

#### 2. Meaning (5:48)

Many medieval theologians followed Augustine in believing that texts of Scripture had manifold meanings.

*classical polyvalence* – The belief that biblical texts have many levels of meaning or value because they come from God.

According to John Cassian's *Quadrigena*, each biblical text should be viewed as having four distinct meanings:

- *literal* – the plain or ordinary meaning of a text.
- *allegorical* – interpreted texts as metaphors for doctrinal truth.
- *tropological* – moral sense; ethical guidelines for Christian conduct.
- *anagogical* – future fulfillment of the divine promises in the eschaton.

Most Catholic theologians believed that the meanings of biblical texts went far beyond the ordinary meaning.

### 3. **Obscurity (10:41)**

The Bible came to be treated as remarkably unclear, except to those who had been given special supernatural insights.

Belief in the obscurity of the Bible made it nearly impossible for the Bible to have real authority over the development of theology.

**B. Authority of the Church (13:36)**

The medieval church exalted ecclesiastical authorities as the interpreters of Scripture and began to treat church authority as equal to the Bible.

**1. Past Authorities (14:20)**

Medieval theologians looked into the history of ecclesiastical theology to determine what they should believe:

- Early church fathers (not infallible but given special insights).
- Ecumenical councils (unquestionable summations of the Bible's teachings).

Teachings of the fathers and findings of church councils developed into traditions and church dogma that, in effect, replaced Scripture.

**2. Contemporary Authorities (17:43)**

Medieval theologians believed that God had established a system of living authorities in the hierarchy of the church.

The official hierarchy of the church, not the Scriptures, became the infallible guide for contemporary theology.

### **III. Early Protestantism (21:22)**

Early Protestants addressed the abuses of church authorities by reasserting the practical authority of Scripture over the church.

#### **A. Authority of Scripture (22:37)**

##### **1. Inspiration (22:52)**

The Reformers affirmed that the Scriptures had come to God's people through divine inspiration (2 Timothy 3:16).

Protestant Reformers also acknowledged that the Bible's human authors contributed significantly to the content and meaning of the Bible.

The concern with human authorship accords well with the way Jesus and biblical writers often approached the Bible (e.g., Matthew 22:41-44).

To understand the Scriptures properly, Christians must stress both the divine origins of Scripture and their human, historical origins.



## 2. **Meaning (28:08)**

The Reformers sought to ground all of their interpretations in the literal sense of biblical texts.

*literal sense* – the meaning the human writers intended for their original audiences.

The early Reformers' emphasis on the literal meaning of biblical texts was influenced by the Renaissance of the 15<sup>th</sup> century:

- Scholars desired to understand the texts of the classical period, free from ecclesiastical supervision.
- Scholars began to interpret classical writings as their authors first meant them to be understood.

Protestants' orientation toward the original meaning as the basis of interpretation, led to a significant shift in understanding Scripture.

“The true and full sense of any Scripture ... is not manifold, but one”  
(*Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1, section 9).

## 1. Clarity (33:48)

Factors contributing to the Protestant doctrine of biblical clarity:

- The printing press made Bibles available.
- Scripture was being translated into the languages of the common people.
- A focus on *sensus literalis* meant they no longer needed to rely on ecclesiastical authorities for interpretation.

Some portions of the Bible are clearer than others (degrees of clarity).

The Reformers affirmed the clarity of Scripture and reinstated the Bible as the absolute authority over all ecclesiastical authority.

## B. Authority of the Church (40:38)

Protestants believed that God had granted secondary, fallible authority to the church in submission to the infallible teachings of Scripture.

### 1. Past Authorities (41:33)

Early Protestants highly valued the teachings of church fathers and early church councils.

Reformers did not believe that the Bible was the *only* authority for believers but rather the only *unquestionable* authority (*sola Scriptura*).

The Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures is “the supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1, section 10).

With each revision of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin added more interaction with early church fathers. He insisted:

- The councils of the church need to be understood in their historical context.
- The teachings of the church should finally be evaluated in the light of Scripture.
- Doctrines of the past should be held “like a provisional judgment” — accepted until careful exegesis proves them wrong.

## 2. Contemporary Authorities (49:29)

Early Protestants highly respected the authority of duly-ordained teachers in the church.

The Reformers believed the Scriptures taught Christians to honor the authorities God had placed in the church (e.g., Titus 2:1, 15).

The Reformed church is always reforming (*semper reformanda*); we must always be subject to the scrutiny of Scripture.

#### IV. Contemporary Protestantism (53:56)

##### A. Authority of Scripture (53:47)

It's very important that Scripture dominate the Christian's life so that we give God his proper place as the ultimate authority.

##### 1. Inspiration (54:54)

- **Romantic inspiration**

God motivated biblical writers but didn't superintend their writings.

In this view, the Scriptures are the fallible opinions of men and, therefore, lack absolute authority over the church.

- **Mechanical inspiration** ("inspiration by dictation")

God essentially authored the Bible himself, while human writers acted as his compliant secretaries.

This view denies the importance of the human author's historical context and the original meaning, hindering Scripture's practical authority.

- **Organic inspiration**

God moved and superintended biblical authors through their personal thoughts, motivations, feelings or theology.

This view emphasizes both the human and the divine and maintains the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*.

## 2. **Meaning (1:00:27)**

- **Contemporary Polyvalence**

- The Scriptures have different meanings based on the ambiguities of human language.
- Biblical passages are empty vessels for interpreters to fill with meaning

This view renders Scripture's authority null by letting human interpreters pour their own ideas into Scripture.

- **Simplistic Univalence**

- Every passage of Scripture has one meaning, and that single meaning is not complex.

This view allows us to identify our interpretation of the Bible too closely with the Bible itself.

- **Complex Univalence**

- Each passage has one meaning, which is complex and multifaceted.

This view affirms that the Bible's authoritative meaning stands above our best efforts to interpret the text.

### 3. **Clarity (1:07:14)**

Modern Protestant views on the Bible's clarity include:

- **utter obscurity**

The Bible is self-contradictory and self-defeating and nearly impossible to understand.

- **utter clarity**

Nearly all the Scriptures are so clear that we can understand them quickly and easily.

- **degrees of clarity**

That which is “necessary ... for salvation” is clear in one place or another (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1, section 7).

Not everything else in Scripture is equally clear.

We can think of the clarity of Scripture in terms similar to the “cone of certainty”:

- Many aspects of biblical teaching need little or no scholarly effort to understand.
- Some aspects of Scripture are known only through serious study (e.g., Paul’s eschatology).
- Some portions appear to remain unclear no matter how much effort we put forth.

**B. Authority of the Church (1:16:31)****1. Past Authorities (1:16:43)**

- **traditionalism**

Strays toward practices that closely resemble medieval Roman Catholic traditionalism.

Values past expressions of faith so highly that it fails to scrutinize the past adequately.

- **biblicism**

Acts as if each person must decide every theological issue without the aid of past Protestant tradition.

Neglects the wisdom that God's Spirit has granted to the church.

Grants theological judgment only to the individual or groups of individuals who are currently at work.



- *semper reformanda*

Affirms the supremacy of Scripture without ignoring the importance of Reformation tradition.

Provisionally accepts the judgments of the early church fathers and councils and our confessions and traditions.

Always subjects past authorities to the unquestionable teaching of Scripture.

## 2. Contemporary Authorities (1:23:20)

- **skeptical**

Skeptical theologians reject all sense of authority or need for submission to what the church says today.

- **dogmatic**

Dogmatic theologians insist that contemporary formulations are perfect.

- **faithful formulations**

Theological statements are more or less true or false depending on how closely they align with Scripture.

We humbly and responsibly use all the resources God has given us to develop faithful doctrinal formulations:

- exegesis of Scripture
- interaction in community
- Christian living

## **V. Conclusion (1:30:05)**









9. What are the effects of the contemporary Protestant view of the authority of Scripture and the church?

## Application Questions

1. The writings of the early church fathers have influenced the church throughout its history. Is this good or bad? Should modern theology seek to move past these primitive views, or should we rely strongly on the wisdom of those who have gone before us?
2. In what ways has this study helped you understand the historical controversy between Catholics and Protestants?
3. Why is it important to maintain a balance between the divine origin of Scripture and the human origin of Scripture?
4. What are some practical ways we can observe the principle of “always reforming” in the modern church? What are some areas in your own church that need to be reformed?
5. How should the concept of complex univalence influence us as we engage in modern theological discussions? What are some dangers of this approach to meaning? What are some of its benefits?
6. How can the model of the cone of certainty aid you in assigning priorities and levels of conviction to your understandings of scriptural passages that are not entirely clear?
7. What are the dangers of traditionalism and biblicism? Have you seen examples of these extremes in the church today?
8. There were several “extreme” positions mentioned in this lesson. Did any of them describe your own approach to theology? Which ones? What practical steps might you take to adopt more responsible perspectives?
9. What is the most significant insight you have learned from this study? Why?



## Glossary

**allegorical sense** – Approach to interpreting Scripture that treats people, places, things and events as if they were symbols or metaphors for spiritual truths

**anagogical sense** – Approach to interpreting Scripture that focuses on what the text says about the eschaton or last days

**Aristotelianism** – A philosophical tradition based on the works of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle; focused primarily on practical matters

**Athanasius** – (ca. A.D. 296-373) Fourth-century Bishop of Alexandria and theologian who affirmed the Trinity and refuted Arianism

**Augustine** – (A.D. 354-430) Bishop of Hippo who believed in the Scriptures as our final authority in doctrine and considered the creeds of the church to be helpful summaries of scriptural teaching; wrote numerous works that continue to influence the church today

**biblicism** – View that every theological issue must be decided based solely on the Bible without the aid of past Protestant tradition

**Calvin, John** – (1509-1564) French theologian and key Protestant Reformer who wrote *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

**Cassian, John** – (ca. A.D. 360-435) Medieval monk and theologian who popularized the approach to biblical interpretation known as the quadriga

**cone of certainty** – Model illustrating different levels of belief in which the top represents core beliefs and the bottom represents the outer edge of beliefs with beliefs held with different levels of conviction in between

**Council of Chalcedon** – Church council held in A.D. 451 in the city of Chalcedon that affirmed, among other things, that Jesus is truly God and truly man

**Council of Nicea** – Church council held in the city of Nicea in A.D. 325 that affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity and refuted Arianism

**deconstruction** – Post-modern theory of literary analysis developed by philosopher Jacques Derrida concerning the relationship between text and meaning

**doctrine** – A synthesis and explanation of biblical teachings on a theological topic

**dogma** – The established belief or doctrine held by a religion, ideology or organization

**ecclesiastical** – Relating to the church, especially as an established institution

**exegesis** – From a Greek term meaning "led out of" or "derived from"; the process of drawing out the proper interpretation of a passage of Scripture

**First Council of Constantinople** – Church council held in A.D. 381 that rejected the Arian heresy and defended and expanded the Nicene Creed

**hermeneutics** – The study of interpreting the meaning and significance of Scripture

**Ignatius** – (ca. A.D. 50-108) Church father and third Bishop of Antioch who wrote a series of letters to early Christians addressing a number of important theological topics

**inspiration** – Theological term that refers to the way the Holy Spirit moved human beings to write God's revelation as Scripture and superintended their work in a way that made their writings infallible

**Irenaeus** – (ca. A.D. 130-202) Second-century bishop and early Christian writer who wrote *Against Heresies* in which he refuted Gnosticism and affirmed the validity of the four gospels

**Jerome** – (ca. 345-420) Early church father known for his translation of the Bible into the language of the common people known as the Latin Vulgate

**literal sense** – Term referring to the original or grammatico-historical meaning of a biblical passage; the plain or ordinary meaning of a text

**Luther, Martin** – (1483-1546) Sixteenth century German monk and Protestant reformer who initiated the Reformation when he posted his *95 Theses* on the door of the Wittenberg church in 1517

**Martyr, Justin** – (ca. A.D. 100-165) Early Christian apologist who converted to Christianity as an adult and was martyred for his beliefs

**mechanical inspiration** – View of inspiration that asserts that the Holy Spirit essentially dictated the Bible, and human writers passively recorded what he said

**Neo-Platonism** – A philosophical school of thought rooted in Plato; begun by Plotinus (A.D. 205-270); idealistic, spiritualistic teaching bordering on mysticism; taught that all existence comes from the "One," the "Absolute"

**organic inspiration** – View of inspiration that asserts that the Holy Spirit used the personalities, experiences, outlooks, and intentions of human authors as he authoritatively and infallibly guided their writing

**Polycarp** – (ca. A.D. 69 – 156) Church father and bishop of Smyrna who was a disciple of the apostle John and was martyred for his Christian faith

**polyvalence** – In theology, term used to refer to having multiple levels of meaning or value

**postmodern** – Philosophical term used to describe the skeptical and subjective reaction against rationalism and the scientific methods of modernism

**Protestant Reformation** – A sixteenth-century religious movement that attempted to reform the Roman Catholic Church, but eventually broke away, forming the Protestant church

**Quadruga** – An interpretive approach to Scripture that considered a biblical passage to have four distinct meanings

**Renaissance** – A period of “rebirth” between the middle ages and the modern era (from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries) that stimulated a renewed interest in classical Roman and Greek literature, art, and culture

**romantic inspiration** – View of inspiration that asserts that the Holy Spirit inspired biblical authors to write but did not superintend their writings

**semper reformanda** – Latin term meaning "always reforming"; refers to the Reformed view that ecclesiastical authorities must always be subject to the scrutiny of Scripture

**sensus literalis** – Latin phrase meaning "literal sense"; refers to the original or literal meaning of a biblical passage

**sola Scriptura** – Latin phrase meaning "Scripture alone"; the belief that the Scriptures stand as the supreme and final judge of all theological questions; one of the basic principles of the Reformation

**Tertullian** – (ca. A.D. 155-230) Early Christian writer and church father from Carthage who wrote *Against Marcion* and popularized the Latin terminology used to discuss the Trinity

**traditionalism** – View that bases theological beliefs on longstanding traditional preferences rather than on the Scriptures

**tropological sense** – Approach to interpreting Scripture that focuses on the moral or ethical aspects of the text

**univalence** - In theology, term used to refer to having only one unified meaning or significance

**Westminster Confession of Faith** – An ecumenical doctrinal summary composed by the Westminster Assembly of Divines and published in 1647

**Zwingli, Ulrich** – (1484-1531) Influential Swiss Reformer and priest who is regarded as the founder of Swiss Protestantism