

Paper F1

Faith and order committee

Scripture and the Church

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Basic Information

Contact name and email address	The Revd Dr Alan Spence, Convenor alanandsheila@gmail.com
Action required	Reflection
Draft resolution(s)	None

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	The committee has spent much time in recent years reflecting on the URC's relationship and response to scripture. Alan Spence will share some of that thinking with Mission Council.
Main points	As above. A digest of some of the committee's work follows this template.
Previous relevant documents	Nothing very recent.
Consultation has taken place with...	

Summary of Impact

Financial	None
External (e.g. ecumenical)	Better engagement with the views and beliefs of other Christians and churches.

Scripture and the Church

Sola scriptura in the United Reformed Church

1. What role should the bible play in the corporate decisions that we make as a church? It is a serious question that has arisen in recent debates in the General Assembly and it is worthy of serious consideration.

Our history

2. The United Reformed Church was formed comparatively recently but its ancestral line can be traced back through British Puritans, Independents and Presbyterians, European Reformers, Latin Catholicism including theologians such as Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas, and the Greek speaking churches represented by their bishops at the Council of Nicaea. It goes right on back to the Jewish community of the Way who gathered together for prayer on the day of Pentecost. One of the strands that unites these outwardly disparate communities is the content of their faith, determined as it has been by their common scriptures. In the many debates that have shaped the doctrines, creeds and confessions that have brought our churches to where we are today, the bible has always played a decisive role. Protagonists in the arguments determining the theological understanding of Christians have consistently sought to show how their doctrines reflected the true mind and intention of the scriptures.
3. This does not mean that the church has felt constrained or limited by the terminology of the bible in its theological formulations. For instance, scholars in the fourth century found it necessary to introduce the non-biblical word *homoousion* (of one substance) in order to describe adequately the relation of Jesus to God in the face of subtle Arian arguments that undermined his divine status. Similarly, the use of the term *trinity* to explain the nature of the God who is made known in the life of Jesus and the dynamic experience of the Holy Spirit was quite novel.
4. This dependence of our forebears on the scriptures in determining the content of Christian faith and practice was neither naïve nor unreflective. Commenting on the temptation to use the bible as a scientific manual Augustine of Hippo wrote in his book *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* some 1600 years ago:

‘Often, a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other parts of the world... it is thus offensive and disgraceful for an unbeliever to hear a Christian talk nonsense about such things, claiming that what he is saying is based in Scripture. We should do all we can to avoid such an embarrassing situation, which people see as ignorance in the Christian and laugh to scorn.’

5. Further it was generally recognised that there is a spiritual dynamic in properly understanding and interpreting the scriptures. The Apostle Paul wrote: ‘God has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant – not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills but the Spirit gives life’ (2 Cor 3:6). True understanding requires spiritual enlightenment. ‘I believe so that I may understand’ was the insightful maxim of Anselm of Canterbury.
6. Sometimes the implications of the bible message have remained hidden in its pages for centuries. It was William Wilberforce, a British reforming politician in the late 18th century, who helped us to see that a gospel of genuine freedom requires the abolition

of slavery even though the text did not appear to explicitly demand it. Secular feminists have enabled us to understand that the logic of their equal status before God as divine image-bearers encourages women in the modern world to go to university if they so wish, to vote, and to receive the same salaries as their male counterparts. Marxist liberation theologians have opened our eyes to God's concern that there should be justice for the poor, the dispossessed and the powerless. This divine mindfulness for the cause of the oppressed was always there in the text but, blinkered as it is, the church sometimes failed to give it due attention. Environmentalists have made us more aware of our biblical duty before God to act as responsible stewards and caretakers of the earth. Our own sinfulness is recognised as being closely related to the pains of our planet.

Our founding documents

7. The United Reformed Church shares in this rich biblical heritage with other Christian communities and has affirmed the determining role that the Scriptures play in the expression of its own faith. Augur Pearce reminds us of some of its formal statements (paras 8-14 below).
8. We 'acknowledge the Word of God in the Old and New Testaments, discerned under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as the supreme authority for the faith and conduct of all God's people'.ⁱ We also assert that the Church's life 'must ever be renewed and reformed according to the Scriptures, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit',ⁱⁱ and that study of the Scriptures is one of the ways through which 'God makes known in each age his saving love, his will for his people and his purpose for the world'.ⁱⁱⁱ And although we acknowledge the church's duty to be open to the Spirit's leading and its right to make new declarations of faith, this acknowledgment is made 'under the authority of Holy Scripture',^{iv} which suggests that any fresh corporate understanding of the faith in our church must reflect the truth of the Bible.
9. We are a confessing church which affirms together, particularly at ordinations and inductions, the shared content of our biblical faith in the Statement of the Nature, Faith and Order of the United Reformed Church. Such public confession is a central feature of the public expression of our unity. We declare openly that we share a common faith.
10. Our own tradition, however, is also one of non-conformity. That is why we are determined to defend the right of an individual in good conscience to come to their own view of the meaning of scripture and not to be bound absolutely by the corporate interpretation. So it is that the church 'believing that it is through the freedom of the Spirit that Christ holds his people in the fellowship of the one Body', commits itself in the Basis of Union to uphold the rights of personal conviction; though acknowledging that the assertion of these rights may sometimes injure its unity and peace (and therefore, presumably, need to be restrained).^v
11. In many cases when individuals are not able to assent to our foundational doctrines they will leave the United Reformed Church, which is their privilege. But assertion *within* the church of the right to such divergent views is more likely to injure its unity and peace the more public it is, the more fundamental is the belief in question and the more recognized is the dissident's role among us. For a non-serving elder to maintain there is a divine mandate for corporal punishment and to act accordingly in their family circle, despite what was said on this topic by the Assembly of 1999, would be less divisive than for a Synod Moderator at an ecumenical service to deny the existence of the Holy Spirit.

12. Councils of the church can form their own views on questions where the Basis, Structure and any other doctrinal formulations of the church are silent. Those conclusions should be reached with reference to the Word of God discerned in Scripture as the supreme authority for faith and conduct. That discernment is we trust aided by the Spirit present within the council concerned, by the wisdom of other councils through consultation and by the insights of the past, through the heritage of predecessor churches and the wider tradition of Christendom.
13. The General Assembly is described as ‘embodying the unity of the United Reformed Church’ and as ‘the final authority, under the Word of God and the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, in all matters of doctrine’.^{vi} Its functions include both declaring doctrine and interpreting what has been declared. It can ‘alter, add to, modify or supersede the Basis of Union or any other form or expression of the ... doctrinal formulations of the United Reformed Church’. This amending function is restricted by the requirement to consult (at least) the mind of the church’s provinces and nations through their synods.^{vii} But without altering formulations, and therefore without pursuing that particular mode of consultation,^{viii} it can also ‘interpret all forms and expressions of the ... doctrinal formulations of the United Reformed Church’.^{ix} Thus it can – if it sees fit – say in more detail what is meant by the Basis of Union assertions of belief in the call of Israel,^x the showing forth of Christ’s sacrifice in the Lord’s Supper^{xi} or the member’s promise of faithfulness in public worship.^{xii} And in so doing it is to be ‘recognised by members of the United Reformed Church as possessing such authority, under the Word of God and the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, as shall enable it to exercise its functions’.^{xiii}
14. This does not mean that General Assembly is to be regarded as an authoritative interpreter of Scripture. The bible is regularly expounded by ministers and other preachers, by biblical scholars and systematic theologians, each sharing the insights that specialist knowledge, skills and inspiration combine to suggest. But no exposition is ‘authoritative’ in the sense that others are bound to accept it. Individuals also ask for the Spirit’s guidance when they read Scripture, and believe that they receive it. If the Assembly comes to feel that the Word of God discerned in Scripture for our time and place is so clear and so compelling on a particular topic that it needs to be spelt out in the church’s doctrinal formulations, it can supplement those accordingly after the required consultation. That will be authoritative in the sense described earlier.

The problem

15. In practice, however, we in the councils of the United Reformed Church have sometimes struggled to determine our theological, moral and social questions by reference to the scriptures. Further, we are generally reluctant to exercise any form of discipline over those among us who write or speak publicly against the central articles of our faith however damaging such views might appear to be to the unity of the church. Why is this?
16. From his doctoral thesis Romilly Micklem argues that what we have in the United Reformed Church is a supreme source of authority for our life of faith, and a separate conciliar structure for managerial authority, which is neither constituted nor in a *de facto* position to make determinations on the validity or otherwise of specific readings of scripture. The reasons for this are complex but have much to do with the lack of shared traditions of interpretation. Put bluntly, Micklem holds that the URC does not have enough of a common framework or shared tradition for the interpretation of scripture to be carried out meaningfully as a collective enterprise. This makes for a very rich diversity... but it also makes for insular bodies or silos of interpretation,

between which interpreters cannot work collaboratively, because they do not have enough common ground on which to build together. Let us consider more closely how these ways of interpretation have come about.

Ways of interpretation in the past

17. It is of course true that everyone approaches the scriptures with their own interpretive framework whether or not they recognise it. There is no neutral space or value-free position from which we can study the Bible. We all bring to the reading of the text our own particular world-view which has been shaped by our intellectual history, our religious experience and our cultures.
18. This was the case from the very beginning. The first Christians, transformed by their experience of divine salvation in Jesus, read the Jewish Scriptures as a Christian text. They believed that its pages were inspired by the Spirit of Christ and saw them as referring to him and the events of his life almost everywhere. This way of interpreting the Old Testament is particularly apparent in the book of Hebrews which relativized the significance of Moses, the Levitical priesthood and the Jewish cult with the coming of the Messiah. Jesus was recognised as a son and not just a servant of God; an eternal priest and not one of a passing community of priests whose work was never completed; his death was a sacrificial act which was effective in securing the forgiveness of sins unlike the blood of bulls and goats. In short Christ was understood as the reality of which Jewish religious practice was no more than a shadow.
19. A rather different interpretive key was the distinction Paul made between grace and law, or faith and works in the redemptive process. In the unfolding history of salvation the giving of the law through Moses was viewed by him as no more than a temporary measure, in due course living under the Torah was to be superseded for the people of faith by the coming of Christ. Consequently early Christians did not believe that civic and ceremonial laws in the Old Testament applied directly to them. As to the moral law their interpretive key was love. This simple notion 'to love God and one's neighbour' learnt from Jesus, summarised for them all that the law and commandments demanded. This meant not an easing of the requirements of the moral law but a radicalisation of them. In the past the notion of an eye for an eye might have been a valid response to those who mistreated us, but now we are called to love our enemies.
20. It was not long before different ways of interpretation began to develop in the new Christian communities. In the face of the speculative theories of Christian Gnostics, Irenaeus spoke of the 'rule of faith' (a core set of Christian beliefs) and the (unwritten) apostolic tradition as interpretive safeguards to counter unrestrained speculation. In the city of Alexandria, initially through the person of Origen, a way of reading the scriptures developed which favoured allegorical interpretations and sought to discover in the text three levels of meaning: the literal, the moral and the spiritual. Somewhat in conflict with this was a group of theologians living in Antioch who emphasised literal, historical and linguist approaches to the text. What is important for us is to recognise is that during the crucial debates about the person of Christ in the fourth and fifth centuries theologians from these opposing schools made concessions and nuanced their positions so that they might come to a common mind on what was most central to their faith.
21. *Sola scriptura* ('by scripture alone') is consequently not a claim that we can read the bible without the interpretive frameworks that have developed throughout the history of the church. Rather it is the view that all of our theological formulations, creeds,

confessions and statements of faith are themselves subject to the critique of the scriptures.

22. Logicians will recognise that we have here an interpretive circle. The Scriptures are to act as a critique of our religious formulations, but it is these formulations which shape the framework by which we tend to interpret the Scriptures. How do we break out of our closed interpretive schemes?
23. We do so by open and fearless dialogue with other Christians, other churches, other traditions and by engagement with the shared theological history of the church. The Holy Spirit has been given to the church as community so that we might come to the truth together. A dialogue of spiritual openness is essential. One of the most divisive debates in the Christian Church was that between Luther and Rome over the nature of justification. Recent discussions between Lutherans and Catholics have led to a nuanced joint declaration with very little that still separates the two parties on this matter. The Holy Spirit can and does enable the people of God in humility and openness to come to a shared understanding of the mind of the Scriptures.

Ways of interpretation today

24. What has modernity brought to the table in the matter of biblical interpretation? Here are just three of the significant new approaches that have come to influence the religious sensibilities of our age.
 - 24.1 A scientific approach. The Age of Reason encouraged the application of scientific method to the study of the Scriptures. It began with trying to determine which of the various early copies of the original manuscripts were most trustworthy but went on to raise questions of authorship, sources and dates of the various books of the Bible. The methodology used to understand other ancient texts was now applied to the Scriptures. Historical criticism of this sort initially challenged many orthodox beliefs of the church particularly those relating to the person of Christ. Nevertheless such an approach now generally informs, at least to some extent, the way the majority of Biblical scholars of all traditions view the Scriptures.
 - 24.2 A subjective approach. As a response to the religious cynicism initially fostered by the use of the scientific method Friedrich Schleiermacher encouraged us to think of theology not as a study of God as such but as a study of human spirituality or piety. In particular, he viewed it as an examination of our sense of absolute dependence on God. In his classical work *The Christian Faith* Schleiermacher brilliantly transposed classical Lutheran dogmatics into a systematic theology based on the shared phenomenon of human spirituality. Celebrated as the father of liberal theology Schleiermacher has influenced the way many now approach the Bible. They would understand it as saying something about our experience of God rather than about the objective reality of God. Theological truth is consequently viewed as a subjective construct rather than as an external reality that exists independently of human experience.
 - 24.3 A neo-orthodox approach. The Reformed theologian Karl Barth was deeply distressed that his liberal German theological professors colluded with the rise of German nationalism. He believed that an interpretive method that had nothing to say about injustice was deeply flawed. He went on to construct his immense theological masterpiece *The Church Dogmatics* around the concept of divine revelation. Barth summarised the gospel as God speaks to man, God enables man to hear him speak. Central to this way of approaching the Scriptures is his emphasis that Jesus as the

'Word of God' is in effect the dynamic act of divine self-communication. Apart from this speech-act of God all human spirituality is according to Barth empty and meaningless. This way of interpretation encouraged many to approach the Bible humbly as the place where God might speak to them and bring them to salvation. For in Barth's thought revelation and redemption are not to be neatly distinguished.

25. John Proctor has helpfully highlighted three kinds of attitude to scripture flowing out of approaches such as these that now guide Christian enquiry:
- 25.1 Pre-modern: 'Truth is given to us'. This approach is still alive, and we call it 'pre-modern' because it seems not to lean at all heavily on the historical and critical work of the last couple of centuries. It seeks to view the text as authoritative, and to emphasise that the Church's task is to learn from scripture and thus to form an organised body of belief about God and about Christian behaviour. An obvious strength of this approach is that it takes seriously the given-ness of the biblical text and of the canon. A common weakness is that it does not always ask careful questions about the context or genre of individual texts. Even though the approach is often accompanied by quite a subtle hermeneutic, which sets aside for example much of the Old Testament legal material, it is less common to hear this hermeneutic being explicitly articulated.
- 25.2 Modern: 'Knowledge comes through reasoned enquiry'. This approach is a product of the age of reason. It owes something to the rise of science, with its pursuit of causes and explanations. It responds too to the academic emphasis in recent generations on the historical character of the Bible books and on the need to read them against their own contexts. In Reformed churches this approach has quite a democratic tone, as it allows church members to ask honest questions, and resonates to some extent with our ideas of sola scriptura (the Bible is not fenced off by church teaching) and clarity (people can find out for themselves).. An obvious strength is that reading biblical material historically takes seriously the historical character of our faith – God became human in a particular time and place. A weakness of the approach is its tendency to become a cul-de-sac: we ask questions about the past, then do not know how to learn wisdom from these about the present and future. Apparently Walter Brueggemann once said, 'You can't do without the historical-critical method. But you can't do much with it.'
- 25.3 Post-modern: 'Reality is personally experienced.' Talking of post-modernism seems recently to have gone out of fashion. But in its day it taught us to use our imagination to engage with scriptural texts, and to let our own perspective illuminate and inform our encounter with ancient words. If something in the text resonates for us, then scripture comes alive. A strength of this approach is that it takes experience seriously, and acknowledges that we all learn from experience, about many of the most vital and central aspects of life – for example about love, or conflict. So when we encounter either of these realities in the Bible, our personal story can alert us to some of the angles and depths in the text we are reading, in ways that a wholly detached encounter (were such a thing possible) could never do. A weakness is, of course, that deeply subjective readings of scripture may owe more to us than they do to the Bible. Attending to some of these is one way that Christians can attend to one another: hearing exegesis that arises from within another person's story can, on occasion, be a complement and corrective to my own subjectivity, prejudice and ignorance.
26. These ways of reading the Bible are not put forward as neat alternatives that allow us to choose our own way forward and allow other Christians to do as they wish. Rather they are a challenge for us to be open to one another as we seek to come to a common mind in the presence of the Spirit. We must learn to listen to ways of reading

that are different from our own as we seek a common biblical understanding of the issues before us. A shared engagement with the Scriptures in rigorous dialogue with other Christians, near and far, past and present, is in large part what it means to act as a conciliar community. This is how we practise the principle of 'sola scriptura'.

Questions:

1. Should we look to the Scriptures to determine the direction of our denomination?
2. How are we to come to a common view of the meaning of the scriptures in a broad church such as ours?
3. Does Paul's comment 'the letter kills but the Spirit gives life' have any significance for the way we should use the scriptures in our church councils?

ⁱ BU 12 and Schedules B, D and F

ⁱⁱ BU 6r

ⁱⁱⁱ BU 13

^{iv} BU 18

^v BU 10

^{vi} Structure 2(6)(intro)

^{vii} Structure 2(6)(xi) and 3

^{viii} Though Structure 4 still requires 'the fullest attempt to discover the mind of the other councils or of local churches likely to be affected'.

^{ix} Structure 2(6)(x)

^x BU 1

^{xi} BU 15

^{xii} BU Schedule A

^{xiii} Structure 1(3).