

# The Nature of Theological Authority in Protestantism and Eastern Orthodoxy: Searching for Common Ground

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## Abstract

At first glance the understandings of theological authority in Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestantism are quite different. This fact has the potential to hinder effective dialogue between the two traditions. This article examines the possibility of the Protestant understanding of theological authority being read and interpreted through the reformer's doctrine of the *Testimonium Spiritus Sancti Internum* (the Inner Witness of the Holy Spirit) such that it meets the Eastern Orthodox objections. Applying the teaching of the Spirit's witness provides an opportunity to emphasise some important features and highlight nuances in the understanding of authority that otherwise could be easily neglected. While it does not solve all the problems in the dialogue, this approach could possibly lead to important rapprochement of the two positions.

## Keywords

Authority; Eastern Orthodoxy; Protestantism; witness of the Holy Spirit

## Introduction

The question of authority in Protestantism and Eastern Orthodoxy is at the same time important and often underestimated. It is not unusual for either of the two sides to enter into dialogue not only without complete understanding of the other view but also without having thought carefully through their own presuppositions. As a result, they soon find not only lack of agreement but also lack of understanding of the arguments presented, even when participants use more or less identical vocabulary.

In what follows, I first seek to briefly present some specific aspects of the Orthodox and Protestant conceptions of the nature of theological authority and then to suggest what might be a possible way

for dialogue.<sup>1</sup> I will use the term ‘authority’ in the sense of both ultimate authority and its proximate expressions that enable the believing community to understand what is entailed in and meant by its revelation.

### **Aspects of Theological Authority in Eastern Orthodoxy**

The starting point of the Orthodox theological model is its lack of formal, external authority. Georges Florovsky succinctly says, ‘In the Church there is not and cannot be any outward authority.’<sup>2</sup>

But what does this mean in practice? Obviously, there are many sources on which Orthodox theologians base their views, such as Scripture, Tradition,<sup>2</sup> ecumenical councils, defined dogmas, church canons, liturgy and its symbols, fathers of the church, and icons to name just a few. Nevertheless, none of them stand ‘over’ the church as some formal authority.<sup>3</sup> For example, in Eastern Orthodoxy the main way of taking decisions is conciliar, and the teachings of the ecumenical councils have non-negotiable status. Nevertheless, their authority is not derived just from the fact that they are ecumenical and that at a certain time and place the officially gathered delegates reached a certain conclusion. In history, there were councils that were both ecumenical and conducted in an orderly manner which were subsequently rejected by the believing community.<sup>4</sup> What makes certain conclusions

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<sup>1</sup> The question of authority in the dialogue between Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestantism runs on at least two connected but different levels. The first relates to the nature of the authority itself, while the second concerns the convergence of the sources used in the two traditions. In this article I will limit myself mainly to the first level.

<sup>2</sup> I use ‘Tradition’ (capital ‘T’) for the tradition that preserved the authentic Christian teaching. Respectively, I use ‘tradition’ (small ‘t’) for the ‘human traditions’ that could be either personal opinions, a mixture of truth and error, or sometimes even flatly wrong. With some adaptations, a similar but more nuanced elaboration could be made on the basis of the terminology used in *The Fourth World Conference of Faith and Order, Montreal 1963*, ed. by P. C. Roger and L. Vischer, (London: SCM Press, 1964), p. 50, para. 39. It is important to note that the report from which this section is derived represents the common work of Orthodox Georges Florovsky and Methodist Albert Outler.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 47; Alexander Schmemmann, *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy*, trans. by Lydia W. Kesich (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston), p. 235.

<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), p. 187; John Meyendorff, *The Orthodox Church: Its Past and Its Place in the World Today*

authoritative is the acceptance of these decisions by the church. This is, though, not quite the same as formal adoption in the juridical sense. As John Meyendorff comments,

[T]he canons of these councils that it [the church] acknowledged as authentic were regarded merely as an expression of the Church's nature under certain concrete circumstances, a kind of 'jurisprudence of the Holy Spirit', as it were, reflecting the eternal *order* of the Body of Christ. They were never transformed into a kind of juridical supergovernment and were never looked upon as a means by which to exercise an effective control over all members of the Church, centrally or from above.<sup>5</sup>

Alexander Schmemmann says something similar about the Bible:

If we proclaim Scripture to be the supreme authority for teaching the faith in the Church, then what is the 'criterion' of Scripture? Sooner or later it becomes 'biblical science' — i.e., in the final analyses, naked reason. But if [...] on the other hand we proclaim the Church to be the definitive, highest and inspired interpreter of scripture, then through whom, where and when this interpretation is brought about? And however we answer this question, this 'organ' or 'authority' in fact proves to be standing *over* the scriptures as an *outside* authority [...] [I]f Orthodox theologians firmly hold to the formal principle that the authoritative interpretation of scripture belongs to the Church and is accomplished in the light of tradition, then the vital content and 'practical' application of this principle remain unclear and in fact lead to a certain paralysis of the 'understanding of scripture' in the life of the Church.<sup>6</sup>

On the most general level, authority in the Orthodox Church is perceived as a result of the communion and union between God and humanity and the sharing of divine life. The result of this is 'the fullness of revelation given to the true witnesses, to the sons of the Church, enlightened by the Holy Spirit'.<sup>7</sup> But this seemingly simple statement is actually much more complicated. As Schmemmann points out, the revelation of the Spirit is not an authority understood as power but is

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(New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), pp. 24–26. See also Georges Florovsky, 'The Authority of the Ancient Councils and the Tradition of the Fathers', in *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View: Vol 1 of the Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1972), pp. 93–104; Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy*, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Meyendorff, *The Orthodox Church*, pp. 207–208.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, trans. by Paul Kachur (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988), p. 67.

<sup>7</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, p. 243.

entirely different in nature.<sup>8</sup> It is much more like an inner leading to the truth. This revelation to the truth is neither encapsulated (mainly) in the Bible as in Protestantism nor is seen as coming from two separate sources (Scripture and Tradition) as in Catholicism. For the Orthodox believers, Scripture is seen as a part of the Tradition, but again, this notion is understood in a much larger sense as, in the famous words of Vladimir Lossky, ‘the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church’.<sup>9</sup>

Following this understanding of Tradition, it is possible to call Tradition ‘experience’ — as some Orthodox theologians actually do: ‘The experience of the Church is the primary source and measure of every genuine effort to construct theology.’<sup>10</sup> This understanding of the nature and source of theological authority, at least in part, transcends rational understanding and explains why apophatic theology has such an important place in contemporary Orthodox thought. Part of this revelation just cannot be fully and adequately expressed through human language. As a consequence, the Orthodox Church claims both that it has never given a full expression of its faith (even in the creeds and the decisions of the ecumenical councils) and that its ‘symbolic books’ are by no means definitive and binding expressions of its teaching.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, the influence of different Orthodox catechisms and confessions of faith is relatively smaller than that of the Western ones. To approach the same question from a different angle, it is believed that the fulness of the Orthodox faith can be grasped not so much with rational human capacities as through immersion in the liturgical life of the church, by ‘taste and see’.

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<sup>8</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, ‘Freedom in the Church’, in *Church, World, Mission: Reflections on Orthodoxy and the West*, by Alexander Schmemmann (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1979), pp. 179–191.

<sup>9</sup> Vladimir Lossky, ‘Tradition and Traditions’, in *In the Image and Likeness of God*, by Vladimir Lossky (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), pp. 141–168 (p. 152). See also John Meyendorff, *Catholicity and the Church* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1983), pp. 83–102; John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1987), pp. 168–178.

<sup>10</sup> Georges Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology: Part 2*, trans. by Robert Nichols (Vaduz: Buchervertriebsanstalt, 1987), p. 53. See also Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Ladouceur, *Modern Orthodox Theology: Behold, I Make All Things New* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), pp. 28–29.

From what we have just said, several conclusions could be deduced: authority in the Orthodox Church (1) cannot be reduced to any external source; (2) it is experiential and proceeds from the communion with God and sharing of the divine life; (3) it is strongly pneumatological; (4) it cannot be fully expressed with language and reduced to rational propositions; and (5) it is more communal than individualistic and sustained by the corporate liturgical life of the church.

### **Protestant View of Theological Authority**

The traditional notion of theological authority in Protestantism<sup>12</sup> is closely connected with the Bible. The Bible can function as the highest source of authority because it is seen as divinely inspired, as revelation from God, and therefore rightly can be called the Word of God.<sup>13</sup> These claims lead to several very important consequences. The understanding of the Bible as revelation defines its authority as *delegated*, which means that it is derived neither from the book itself nor from its human author but from someone else — in this case from God.<sup>14</sup> Its divine inspiration means that while the Scriptures are written by people, those people were moved by the Holy Spirit and therefore could be called its authors in a true but qualified sense. This also means that while undoubtedly written in the church, it is, according to Protestants, somewhat misleading to claim that the church produced the Bible. In the words of N. T. Wright,

This makes a rather obvious logical mistake analogous to that of a soldier who, receiving orders through the mail, concludes that the letter carrier is his

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<sup>12</sup> By ‘Protestants’ I mean representatives of all branches of the Reformation that hold to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and Trinitarian beliefs and start their theological quest with the Bible. These criteria effectively exclude both later liberal movements and earlier rational and spiritual offshoots of the Radical Reformation.

<sup>13</sup> Here I very intentionally do not enter into the extremely complicated and highly nuanced debates concerning questions such as what is the nature of inspiration, whether the Bible is revelation or a record of revelation, and whether it is God’s Word, contains God’s Word or becomes such at a certain level of interaction with the listener/reader. In most cases the conclusion, which is important for our case, is that the Bible could in some way function as the highest authority.

<sup>14</sup> Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern of Authority* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), pp. 11, 27–28, 55–56.

commanding officer. Those who transmit, collect and distribute the message are not in the same league as those who write it in the first place.<sup>15</sup>

John Calvin uses inspiration and revelation to point to the inner quality of the Scriptures as the means of its self-authentication as such, thus rejecting any need (or right) of the church to pronounce a decision on the matter.

As to the question, How shall we be persuaded that it came from God without recurring to a decree of the Church? it is just the same as if it were asked, How shall we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter? Scripture bears upon the face of it as clear evidence of its truth, as white and black do of their colour, sweet and bitter of their taste.<sup>16</sup>

Calvin pushes his claims even further insisting that not only can the church not decide nor make any judgements about the Scriptures but it is actually the opposite — the Bible stands over the church and judges it as God's revelation and Word.<sup>17</sup>

This argument is sometimes expressed in a different way. Reformers were ready to accept the claims of the Roman Catholic Church that the divine revelation cannot be restricted to the Bible but has existed and was preached even before it had been written. They were ready even to agree that not everything revealed by God had finally found its way into the Scriptures and therefore the notion of revelation is wider than the Bible. However, the reformers forcefully denied any idea that the church which has received, kept, and preached this revelation has status and authority equal to the Bible. Their answer was that the Scriptures are basically a record of the *euangelion*, revealed gospel, and that there is no way to say that the church precedes the gospel because it is exactly the gospel that has created the church in the first place. This is articulated by Bernard Ramm:

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<sup>15</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Scripture and the Authority of God – Getting Beyond the Bible Wars* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), p. 63.

<sup>16</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, trans. by Henry Beveridge <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes/institutes>> [accessed 3 March 2023], I.7.2. See also Bernard Ramm, *The Witness of the Spirit: An Essay on the Contemporary Relevance of the Internal Witness of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), pp. 12–14.

<sup>17</sup> Ramm, *Witness*, pp. 11–22.

[I]t must be remembered that the Church was founded by both redemption and special revelation. *Salvation and revelation are the absolute presuppositions both logically and temporally for the salvation of every single person and therefore for the entire church.* The Church by definition is the redeemed and enlightened people of God. Before there is a Church there must be both revelation and redemption. Before there can be tradition there must be revelation and redemption. *No real headway could be made in the debate over tradition until it is clearly seen that revelation and redemption are absolutely prior to the Church.* The Church has no existence apart from these, and she exists by the virtue of them. She does not partake of them in *any originative sense* so that she may become a lord of revelation and a dispenser of salvation.<sup>18</sup>

It is exactly because it is a record of the gospel that the Bible in its final form can function as a cannon — a measuring stick — for the Christian truth and as its highest authority. In their performance of this function, the Scriptures are placed over both the church and the tradition.

It is easy to see how such a way of reasoning leads to the Protestant idea of the Bible as the ‘formal principle’ of the Reformation and *Sola Scriptura* — Scripture alone. However, we should be careful to understand what exactly this means. While in some Protestant circles, especially at the grassroots level, the Bible is seen as the only source of theological authority, this was never the original idea of the mainstream movement. *Sola Scriptura* does not mean *Solo Scriptura* or *Nuda Scriptura*.<sup>19</sup> Instead ‘*sola*’ here once again expresses the idea of highest or final (proximate) authority to which everything else conforms and might better be named *Prima Scriptura*, or, as the well-known Baptist theologian Oliver Crisp calls it, *norma normans*, the norming norm.<sup>20</sup>

Once this notion is established, Protestants are ready to consider a host of other theological sources. Probably the most popular grouping is the so-called ‘Wesleyan quadrilateral’ whose influence goes

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<sup>18</sup> Bernard Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1961), pp. 170–171, emphasis original. See also the more elaborate treatment of the same line of thought in Ramm, *Pattern*, pp. 24–25. According to Ramm, the Bible cannot be seen as ‘exclusive authority’ because even before it the revelation has existed in oral form and has functioned as such. It is just the final form of this revelation, revelation inscripturated, that contains the gospel, functions as a measure, and is used by the Spirit.

<sup>19</sup> See Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> Oliver Crisp, ‘Christological Method’, in *God Incarnate: Explorations in Christology*, by Oliver Crisp (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), pp. 8–33.

far beyond Wesleyan churches.<sup>21</sup> Alongside the Bible, it also lists tradition, reason, and experience as sources of theological authority. Originally formulated by the Methodist theologian Albert Outler,<sup>22</sup> ‘the Wesleyan quadrilateral’ is sometimes modified to accommodate additional sources such as the church<sup>23</sup> or culture.<sup>24</sup> All are important, deserve careful attention, and are extremely helpful in understanding the meaning of the Bible.

Finally, Oliver Crisp points to another widely used way of grouping Protestant sources of authority, identifying the difference between dogma, doctrine, and personal opinion.<sup>25</sup> The dogmas are beliefs shared by the great majority of Christians. They are most clearly formulated in the pronouncements of the ecumenical councils<sup>26</sup> and deemed as most authoritative. Second, we have the so-called doctrines, which constitute a lower level of authority and are connected with the specific beliefs of different Christian groups like Baptists, Roman Catholics, or Eastern Orthodox. Often, they are expressed in their different confessions — such as the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), or the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith (1689). In Protestantism, they are usually highly influential and binding for their own communities and sometimes could be quite elaborate and systematically arranged.<sup>27</sup> Finally, we have personal theological opinions. Although, according to Crisp, there is a substantial difference between how we should evaluate these. The opinions of noted theologians like

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<sup>21</sup> Crisp, ‘Christological Method’. See also N. Clayton Croy, *Prima Scriptura: An Introduction to New Testament Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Albert C. Outler, ‘The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in John Wesley’, *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 20, no. 1 (1985), 7–18.

<sup>23</sup> Graham McFarlane, *A Model for Evangelical Theology: Integrating Scripture, Tradition, Reason, Experience, and Community* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2020); Ramm, *Pattern*, pp. 56–59.

<sup>24</sup> Stanley Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

<sup>25</sup> Crisp, ‘Christological Method’, pp. 17–20.

<sup>26</sup> There are numerous Protestant groups that refuse to accept such formulations as official statements of faith. Still, most of them practically hold to the theology of at least the first four ecumenical councils.

<sup>27</sup> Grenz and Franke mention that sometimes there is real danger that the searching for ‘facts’ in the Bible results in replacing the Scripture itself (theological source of first order) with some kind of theological system (theological source of second order) which, according to them, is a grave mistake. See Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, pp. 16, 63.



Basil the Great or Martin Luther should be seen as much weightier than the opinion of the average Christian.

From the above, we can conclude that in the Protestant understanding, theological authority (1) is delegated and proceeds from God; (2) can be found most importantly in the Bible which has the highest place as *norma normans* — the norming norm; that (3) it functions as a kind of formal, or external authority, and (4) stands over the church and judges every kind of tradition; that (5) *Sola Scriptura* does not mean that the Bible is the only source of authority, and there exist a host of additional, secondary sources which are invaluable for the proper understanding and interpretation of the Bible; that (6) in many cases (but not always) it is expressed in propositionally defined and binding confessions of faith.

### A Possible Way To Dialogue

These short notes cannot give sufficient due to the host of highly complex and nuanced questions concerning the nature of theological authority in Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestantism. Still, from some of the aspects they touch it becomes obvious that there exist serious differences between the conceptions of the two Christian traditions, and if the understandings of religious authority are too different, this without doubt will severely hinder the possibility of dialogue between them. The question that should thus be raised is whether they are really so remote from each other, or whether this impression is at least partly a result of different religious vocabulary and emphases.

My tentative suggestion is that the answer is somewhere in-between, but that there is possibility for real progress on the topic. While there are several different ways to approach it, here I will concentrate on what is known as the Protestant doctrine of *Testimonium Spiritus Sancti Internum*, the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. Since there are several versions of it,<sup>28</sup> I will follow mainly the classic presentation of the Baptist

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<sup>28</sup> For the presentation of different versions see James Sawyer, “The Witness of the Spirit in the Protestant Tradition”, Bible.org, 14 December 2005 <<https://bible.org/seriespage/4-witness-spirit-protestant-tradition>> [accessed 30 January 2023]. See also Barry D. Jones, “The Spirit’s

theologian Bernard Ramm in his book *The Witness of the Spirit* (first published in 1959),<sup>29</sup> which is a sequel to his earlier work *The Pattern of Authority* (1957). The doctrine simply states that God's Spirit testifies to the human spirit that Jesus is God and Saviour.<sup>30</sup> While this testimony is direct, it is at the same time usually connected with the Bible.<sup>31</sup> This means that when the Bible is read or heard, the Holy Spirit witnesses that it is true, creates an inner awareness in the trustworthiness of its message, and leads the person to Christ. There are at least five important points closely connected with our topic that could be deduced from this teaching.

First, as has already been said, what Protestants call the authority of Scripture is in practice the authority of God exercised through the Scripture. According to Ramm, the Bible is revelation from God which is not impersonal but always personal and gracious. 'There is no impersonal force in grace, and God's authority is sealed by grace, not by impersonal force [...]. In subjection to this authority the Christian is subject to a Person.'<sup>32</sup> N. T. Wright states this idea even more clearly:

When we take the phrase 'the authority of scripture' [...] we recognize that it can have Christian meaning only if we are referring to scripture's authority in a delegated or mediated sense from that which God himself possesses [...]. It must mean, if it means anything Christian, 'the authority of God exercised through scripture'.<sup>33</sup>

While it could be rightly said that the final authority lies in God because the Bible is God's revelation that God has inspired in the first

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Witness: A Historical and Theological Examination of the *Testimonium Spiritus Sancti Internum*' (doctoral dissertation, Wheaton College, 2008), available at the Theological Research Exchange Network <<https://www.tren.com/>>; Ramm, *Witness*, pp. 22–27.

<sup>29</sup> See also the very helpful presentation of G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture: Studies in Dogmatics*, trans. by Jack Rogers (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), chap. 2, pp. 39–66.

<sup>30</sup> In *Witness*, pp. 22–27, Ramm notes that the teaching appears in several of the fathers of the church, Protestant confessions of faith, and in the works of important theologians. See also Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, pp. 41–42; and Ramm, *Pattern*, pp. 30–33.

<sup>31</sup> Ramm, *Witness*, pp. 30, 62–63, 98–99.

<sup>32</sup> Ramm, *Pattern*, p. 21, 26. See also p. 37.

<sup>33</sup> N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), p. 23. See also Ramm, *Witness*, pp. 14–15, 57–58, 70–71; Ramm, *Pattern*, pp. 19–23; Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, pp. 64–69, 74, 83, 115, 117.

place, the doctrine of the witness of the Spirit puts the emphasis in a different place. According to this, the Bible is not so much an authority by itself but the instrument that the Spirit has chosen to speak through. In a narrow sense this happens when the Spirit leads people to Christ through the Scriptures. In a wider sense, it also includes the consequent application of the Word in the current situation and practical life of the believer, sometimes called illumination.<sup>34</sup> As Ramm summarises, ‘In reading the Bible, in applying the Bible to personal life, in interpreting the Bible, and in using the Bible theologically, the believer must conscientiously through prayer seek the ministry of the Spirit through the Word.’<sup>35</sup>

Ramm goes even further. Pointing to some cults, he observes that while they accept the Scriptures as authority, their theologies are obviously different from the historical Christian orthodoxy. According to Ramm, this shows not just a combination of right authority with wrong hermeneutics but outright wrong authority — because the Spirit does not work to give them light.<sup>36</sup>

This clear and strong emphasis on God as the supreme source of theological authority in Protestantism is extremely important. Because Eastern Orthodox believers share the same belief,<sup>37</sup> it could serve as an effective common base and starting point for further dialogue between the two traditions.

Second, the work of God’s Spirit through Scripture creates an *experience*. Speaking about Martin Luther, Ramm observes that

[t]he actual bringing of Christ to the consciousness of the believer by the Spirit through the Word results in an ‘experience’. By ‘experience’ Luther did not mean ‘religious experience’, but rather the act whereby the Holy Spirit takes Christ out of the realm of idea and history and makes him a reality to

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<sup>34</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, p. 66.

<sup>35</sup> Ramm, *Pattern*, p. 35. See also pp. 38–39.

<sup>36</sup> Ramm, *Pattern*, p. 35. See also his view that an unbeliever cannot fully understand the Bible in Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955), pp. 46–47.

<sup>37</sup> See John Meyendorff, *Living Tradition: Orthodox Witness in the Contemporary World* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978), pp.192–193.

the believer. This is no metaphysical something, but is the direct action of God himself, the working of the Holy Spirit of God.<sup>38</sup>

It is important to observe carefully what Ramm is stating here. The fact that the word ‘experience’ is common for both traditions does not mean that it is used in the same way and with the same meaning. In general, Orthodox theologians are quite suspicious of various religious experiences that could be observed in Protestantism.<sup>39</sup> Neither does the ‘experience’ correspond to the Orthodox understanding of ‘Tradition’ that was described above. Ramm also sharply distinguishes it from the ‘experience’ of liberal Christianity.<sup>40</sup> What he is specifically trying to point to here is the personal encounter between Jesus Christ and humanity accomplished by the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures. The immediate result of this event, or experience, is a communion between humanity and God in trinitarian dimensions<sup>41</sup> — the very source of every theological authority that Eastern Orthodox Christians emphasise.<sup>42</sup>

The idea routinely appears in the Protestant literature. Beyond the already cited passages from Ramm’s works, one good, contemporary popular presentation, among others, can be found in Fred Sanders’s

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<sup>38</sup> Ramm, *Witness*, p. 21. See also pp. 89–90, 104; Ramm, *Pattern*, pp. 105–110.

<sup>39</sup> See Карл Кристиан Фелми, *Въведение в съвременното православно богословие*, прев. Свилен Тугеков, Даниел Йорданов (София: Омофор, 2007), pp. 18–19 [Karl Christian Felmy, *Introduction to Contemporary Orthodox Theology*].

<sup>40</sup> Ramm, *Witness*, pp. 49, 119–123.

<sup>41</sup> Ramm, *Witness*, pp. 28–41, as well as pp. 44, 49; Ramm, *Pattern*, p. 21; Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, p. 117.

<sup>42</sup> Meyendorff comments, ‘The really important implication of this attitude concerns the very notion of Truth, which is conceived [...] not as a concept which can be expressed adequately in words or developed rationally, but as God Himself personally present and met in the Church in His very personal identity. Not Scripture, not conciliar definitions, not theology can express Him fully; each can only point to some aspects of His existence, or exclude wrong interpretations of His being or acts. No human language, however, is *fully* adequate to Truth itself, nor can it exhaust it. Consequently, Scripture and the Church’s magisterium cannot be considered as the only ‘sources’ of theology. Orthodox theology cannot fail to check its consistency with them, of course, but the true theologian is free to express his [sic] own immediate encounter with the Truth. This is the authentic message maintained most explicitly by the Byzantine ‘mystical’ tradition of Maximus the Confessor, Symeon the New Theologian, and Gregory Palamas.’ (Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, p. 11)

book *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything*.<sup>43</sup> There Sanders cites Henry Scougal, a seventeenth century Scottish Puritan who in his highly influential book *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* writes the following:

They know by experience that true religion is a union of the soul with God, a real participation of the divine nature, the very image of God drawn upon the soul, or, in the apostle's phrase, 'It is Christ formed within us'. — Briefly, I know not how the nature of religion can be more fully expressed, than by calling it a Divine Life.<sup>44</sup>

While it would be an overstatement to claim full convergence between the two traditions at this point — for example in the Eastern Orthodoxy this experience is by no means mainly connected with the Scriptures — here the ideas as well as the vocabulary are quite close: personal experience of the divine life through communion with Jesus Christ accomplished by the Holy Spirit. Seen in the common context of the theological authority in which they are expressed, these ideas present an opportunity for fruitful further engagement.

Third, the witness of the Holy Spirit through the Bible is by default pneumatological.<sup>45</sup> This means that the Bible cannot work by itself if it is not made alive by the Spirit. As Ramm says,

[T]he Word without the Spirit is mere letter, mere law, mere writing [...] [T]o the heart untouched by the Spirit it is like any other book [...] The Lord must speak its inner Word to the inner ear if the Word of God is to be heard as the Word of God.<sup>46</sup>

It should be noted again that according to the Protestant reformers, Scriptures are the fully divinely inspired Word of God in the qualitative sense, even without the witness of the Spirit. But without this witness,

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<sup>43</sup> Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything*, 2nd edn (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017).

<sup>44</sup> Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library) <<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/s/scougal/life/cache/life.pdf>> [accessed 26 December 2022] (p. 3). See also Ramm, *Witness*, pp. 57, 76, 96. Note also how on pp. 99–105 Ramm refuses to separate the form of Scripture (the idea that it is inspired and true) from its content (Jesus Christ as Saviour). This, according to him, would inevitably lead to a 'paper pope' — the exact problem in Orthodox understanding of the nature of authority.

<sup>45</sup> Ramm, *Witness*, pp. 16–17, 33, 55.

<sup>46</sup> Ramm, *Witness*, p. 21. See also pp. 63–64.

the sinful person will never recognise it as such and will neither comprehend it fully nor will believe it for his or her own salvation.<sup>47</sup> This understanding is the theological ground for the teaching of the witness of the Spirit. We can call these two sides objective and subjective, although the names are not entirely adequate.<sup>48</sup>

On this basis, Ramm is able to claim that the Protestant principle for religious authority is two-sided, consisting of ‘Scripture, sealed by the Spirit and Spirit speaking in the Scripture’.<sup>49</sup> Each element has its own specific purpose: the Scripture contains the revelation and the Spirit enlightens it.<sup>50</sup>

In the matter of religious authority, the Spirit and the Word are insolubly conjoined. The Scripture functions in the ministry of the Spirit, and the Spirit functions in the instrument of the Word. In this vital relationship of Spirit and Scripture the Reformers grounded their doctrine of religious authority.<sup>51</sup>

This link can be broken from both sides, which results in serious problems. Scripture without the Spirit is just a dead letter. But any attempt to live under the single authority of the Spirit who supplies the cognitive content of faith without the written Word is no less deadly. This, according to Ramm, was the mistake of a part of the radical Reformation at the time of Luther and Calvin.<sup>52</sup>

In the light of the doctrine of the witness of the Spirit, Scripture can function only pneumatologically or internally. While it is possible to see it as objective, external authority, without the inner work of the Spirit in the heart of the person the Bible will produce no good. This, I suggest, leads to a very important qualification to the conception of the external source of authority in Protestant theology that is able to overthrow the serious objections from the Orthodox tradition.

This naturally leads to the fourth characteristic: the witness of the Spirit neither bypasses nor ignores the intellect but at the same time

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<sup>47</sup> Ramm, *Pattern*, p. 104.

<sup>48</sup> For the question why the term ‘subjective’ is not entirely adequate see Ramm, *Witness*, pp. 116–117. See also p. 33.

<sup>49</sup> Ramm, *Witness*, p. 29.

<sup>50</sup> Ramm, *Witness*, p. 106.

<sup>51</sup> Ramm, *Pattern*, p. 29. See also p. 103.

<sup>52</sup> Ramm, *Witness*, pp. 15–16; Ramm, *Pattern*, pp. 34, 46, 103–104.

is not restricted to rational human understanding. This is so because while witnessing to the trustworthiness of Scripture, the witness of the Spirit goes beyond the intellect — it is an inner persuasion that appeals to the whole person.<sup>53</sup>

This understanding is a natural part of Ramm’s wider view of the interaction between revelation, reason, and authority. Since God is outside and beyond humanity, religious authority can start only with a revelation. The Bible can function as such exactly because it is a revelation from God. Human intellect does not deny the revelation, just the opposite — it demands it as the only logically possible way to reach God. In this sense the revelation and intellect are in accordance.<sup>54</sup> Even further, since this revelation is revelation of the truth (or Truth, with a capital ‘T’ — a favourite expression of many Orthodox theologians<sup>55</sup>) it could never expect us to discard the intellect. However, the movement toward knowledge here is, in direction, opposite to that in science. We are not moving toward the object of knowledge, it (or He) is moving toward us. Even more than that, Ramm strongly emphasises the noetic effect of sin and the need of the intellect to be humbled and brought into submission to the revelation.<sup>56</sup> Lastly, Ramm refuses to rely on logical proofs for the trustworthiness of revelation for two reasons. One is the already mentioned noetic effect of sin and the second is that such proofs would produce only human faith.<sup>57</sup> Instead, he turns to Calvin’s idea of the witness of the Spirit that transcends reason and does not need additional proofs.

The witness of the Spirit is primordially divine and if it is, no assisting witness to its divinity is necessary. It is [...] a *persuasion* — a state of conviction induced by direct perception, no reasoning; a *knowledge* resting upon a perception which transcends reasoning; and a sense that is able to taste the divinity of the Scriptures. It is therefore autopoietic — credible within itself and needing no additional divine ratification.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ramm, *Witness*, p. 19. See also pp. 45–46, 51–52, 74, 84–87, 112–113.

<sup>54</sup> Ramm, *Pattern*, pp. 19–20, 38. See also pp. 44–47.

<sup>55</sup> Ramm, *Pattern*, p. 43.

<sup>56</sup> Ramm, *Pattern*, p. 23.

<sup>57</sup> Ramm, *Pattern*, pp. 28–29, 33, 104–105; Ramm, *Witness*, p. 16.

<sup>58</sup> Ramm, *Pattern*, p. 106.

From this basis, Ramm is able to launch a serious criticism of a purely rationalistic and intellectual approach to Christianity on both sides. He claims that philosophers and liberal Christians in his own time, with their purely rationalistic methods, will never be able to reach God.<sup>59</sup> But he is equally unhappy with the fundamentalists of his own time who, he notes, are so concentrated on the Bible as ‘the inspired Word of God’ that they forget ‘the revealed Word of God’ that alone can make this Word alive. Thus, they operate from the wrong assumption that Scripture has life of its own.<sup>60</sup>

Ramm, following Calvin, goes even further and criticises an apologetic that tries to prove God, Christianity, or Scripture with purely rational arguments. Such arguments are not wrong by themselves, he claims, but they are unable to bring anyone to faith without the working of the Holy Spirit and therefore could serve only as ‘secondary aids’.<sup>61</sup>

Again, while not entirely identical with the Orthodox position concerning the interaction between reason, revelation, authority, and experience, this view has strong affinity with it and emphasises many points that are characteristic of it.

Lastly, this witness of the Spirit addresses the Orthodox concern that Protestant readings of the Bible are often helplessly individualistic and subjectivistic. Ramm is well aware of this very real danger, and clearly states that the exchange of God’s word for a human one is ‘not only the end of authority, but the end of truth’.<sup>62</sup> However, he claims that the witness of the Spirit is able to make the reading ‘personal but not individualistic’.<sup>63</sup> By this, he means that the Holy Spirit works personally in every heart according to the specific human condition, but the Spirit’s witness cannot be separated from the common witness of the church in which it is tested and therefore ‘does not lead to subjectivism’.

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<sup>59</sup> Ramm, *Witness*, pp. 16, 33, 38–39, 54, 61, 64–66, 82–86, 111.

<sup>60</sup> Ramm, *Witness*, pp. 123–26. See also pp. 58–59, 64–65, 74, 120.

<sup>61</sup> Ramm, *Witness*, pp. 12–13, 106, 117–119, 126–127.

<sup>62</sup> Ramm, *Pattern*, p. 25.

<sup>63</sup> Ramm, *Pattern*, p. 81 and the wider section 16 on pp. 79–81. See also pp. 52, 76, 117.



Stated in another way, the subjective reading of the Bible can be avoided when the individual is not elevated over the community.<sup>64</sup> This reading in the context of the whole community, according to Ramm, is imperative because the revelation (as well as redemption) is not only individual but also communal<sup>65</sup> and because the Spirit is the driving agent who has created the community for this reason in the first place.<sup>66</sup> Ramm, echoed a generation later by Stanley Grenz, further notes that while very important and immediate, the local church does not constitute the whole community of faith that should be consulted during such a reading. It should include the wider Christian community both in space and time.<sup>67</sup> This in turn leads to the at least partial rehabilitation of Christian tradition in Protestant theology as was sketched above.

In this reading, therefore, Scripture cannot be separated either from the Spirit or from the church.<sup>68</sup> While in practice (as we all know) this does not always happen, at least in theory Protestant theology could be seen as strongly communal.

## Conclusion

The Protestant teaching of the witness of the Spirit is only one of the several means that could be used in the complex and nuanced discussion of theological authority between the Protestant and the Eastern Orthodox traditions. As we have already hinted, the closely connected doctrine of the illumination of the Spirit could very usefully supplement and reinforce all that was said here.<sup>69</sup> Another promising route is the contemporary awakening of understanding and appreciation among Protestants of the ways in which the Bible addresses not only the

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<sup>64</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, p. 68.

<sup>65</sup> Ramm, *Pattern*, pp. 26–28, 58.

<sup>66</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, pp. 81–83.

<sup>67</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, pp. 91–92.

<sup>68</sup> This is why Ramm prefers to speak not of a single element that carries the theological authority in Protestantism but of a pattern of authority in which the elements should be ‘properly related’. See Ramm, *Pattern*, pp. 18, 37, 46, 62, 103.

<sup>69</sup> It seems to me that Bernard Ramm does not distinguish clearly the two teachings to the point that he sometimes even flattens them together. Other theologians keep them more separate. See for example Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, chap. 3, pp. 57–92.

intellect but also the feelings, imagination, and will of the reader through stories, poetry, and different figures of speech. This in turn could lead to a more holistic understanding of its function, going far beyond a purely propositional level and, by analogy, to a renewed and more positive attention upon Christian liturgy, worship, symbolism, tradition, and arts in the pattern of theological authority.<sup>70</sup> A third option is an emphasis on the practical function of the Scriptures for distinguishing between divine Tradition and purely human traditions that exist in the church. If both sides agree on this, it would be much easier for Protestants to accept, or at least to appreciate, the Orthodox perspective of the Bible as a part of the Tradition which has a very important and specific function. This move has already been fruitfully done in some discussions with Lutherans and Anglicans.<sup>71</sup>

The brief remarks presented here by no means solve all the problems concerning the nature of theological authority between the two traditions. More concretely, we still have in our way at least (1) the Protestant understanding that the Bible has more authority than the church;<sup>72</sup> (2) the much more liturgical understanding of this authoritative experience in the Orthodox church;<sup>73</sup> and in terms of Protestantism, (3) a more optimistic view of the role of propositional language, (4) a much stronger emphasis on the written revelation as final authority, and (5) a stronger bond between Spirit and Scripture — to name just a few.

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<sup>70</sup> See for example Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*; Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, p. 84.

<sup>71</sup> See for example, The Anglican Communion, ‘The Dublin Agreed Statement 1984’, <[https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/103812/the\\_dublin\\_statement.pdf](https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/103812/the_dublin_statement.pdf)> [accessed 25 March 2023] (para. 48–49); and 4th Plenary of the Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission, 27 May–4 June 1987, Crete/Greece <<https://blogs.helsinki.fi/ristosaarinen/lutheran-orthodox-dialogue/>> [accessed 25 March 2023].

<sup>72</sup> See especially Ramm, *Witness*, p. 114. It is notable how on the next page (115) he claims that the conception of authority is more predominant in Protestantism than in Roman Catholicism exactly because it is inner (the work of the Spirit) and not external (the Church magisterium).

<sup>73</sup> It could be said that this function in Protestantism is connected with Scripture (including the ‘taste and see’ moment — see Ramm, *Witness*, p. 87). But it also could be said that in some Protestant circles (especially Lutheran) Scripture and its preaching is understood in a quasi-sacramental (and therefore liturgical) way.

However, the doctrine of the witness of the Spirit shows that traditional Protestant understanding of theological authority is far more flexible and nuanced than is often thought and is open to being interpreted in ways that probably could further the dialogue with the Eastern Orthodox Christians, meeting at least some of their objections. I maintain that it could help us, at least partly, to agree on some common conceptions which are expressed with different vocabulary, with different emphases, and that address different historical needs and problems. The skill of understanding and thinking between different vocabularies and theological frames of presuppositions is among the most important in the dialogue between Orthodox and Protestant traditions.