ACCEPTING THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE:
IS IT RATIONALLY JUSTIFIED?

James A. Keller

This paper provides an answer to this question: is the Christian of today rationally justified in using the views expressed in the Bible as a (or the) standard for what she should accept for her own beliefs and practices. I argue against trying to answer this question on the basis of some alleged character of the biblical writings (e.g., their inerrancy or inspiredness). Such a thesis would itself have to be rationally justified, as would the interpretations and applications of biblical writings made by a Christian of today who held the thesis. Instead she should seek to understand how the writers' faith was expressed in their views and use that understanding to guide her as she constructs (or adopts) a set of beliefs by which to express her faith today. I argue that using the Bible in this way and the conclusions reached in doing so are rationally justified.

A central role for the Bible as a standard for Christian belief and practice is one of the most widespread features of the Christian tradition. Yet that generalization, true though it is, does not indicate anything of the wide variation in the ways the Bible has been used as a standard. These different ways are related to different answers to questions such as the following:

1. Is the Bible alone the standard, or is it one standard along with others —e.g., church tradition, reason, experience, etc.?  
2. Is the Bible a standard only in matters of faith and practice, or is it a standard for beliefs on all matters to which it refers?  
3. In virtue of what is the Bible a standard—e.g., in virtue of its doctrines, its concepts, its stories, its images, its symbols?  
4. What are the correct hermeneutical principles to use in interpreting the Bible?

The answers to these questions should not be assumed to be independent; in general they will be interrelated in various complex ways. In addition to these normative questions, there are also various historical questions about the role which the Bible has in fact played in the life and thought of individuals and groups. If one grants to church tradition a normative role for Christian thought, the answer to these historical questions may also be thought to have some relevance for the answer to the normative questions. Thus we find that the
seeming agreement on the general principle of the authority of the Bible is, upon closer examination, liable to fracture into a mosaic of conflicting views, which are probably entangled in various complex ways with other aspects of one's theological and philosophical views.

Thus, any attempt to discuss, in less than a full book, the rationality of using the Bible as a standard can be nothing more than an investigation of some normative issue which presupposes answers to various other important, and controversial, issues. In this paper I shall be focusing on this topic: is the Christian of today rationally justified in using the views expressed in the Bible as a (or the) standard for what she should accept for her own beliefs and practices. I should say explicitly that I am referring to her beliefs about the matters on which a biblical writer expressed a view, not to her beliefs about what the views of a biblical writer were. That is, I am interested, e.g., in whether the Christian is rationally justified in adopting as her own the beliefs about God which Paul expressed in his letters because he expressed them, not in whether she is rationally justified in taking Paul's letters as a standard for determining what certain of Paul's beliefs about God were.

One might wonder what is meant by the term "Christian." In light of the person-relativity of the rationality of at least many of our beliefs, some answer to my question might follow from the very definition of the term. It would be possible to define the term to give such a result, but I wish to try to avoid doing so. I want to use a very minimal definition of "Christian"—something like "one who has faith in the God who acted in Jesus Christ as identified in the Bible." Because this God is identified in the Bible, I shall also take it that the Bible in some way (perhaps in any one of a variety of ways) plays some special role in awakening, sustaining, and/or interpreting faith in this God. Perhaps we shall find on reflection that even on these deliberately minimal assumptions, being a Christian makes it rational to give more authority to the Bible than a non-Christian typically gives it or than the Christian herself gives similar writings from other religious traditions.

The Bible as an Absolute Authority

Some thinkers attempt to derive an answer to our question from some thesis about the nature of the Bible. For example, some hold that the biblical writers were in some special (perhaps unique) sense inspired by God. Others hold that the Bible is (or contains) the word of God or that it is God's special revelation. They combine such a thesis with the claim that God knows all truths and is sovereign, and they conclude that God would not permit the Bible to contain any errors. But as a way to answer our question, such an approach faces at least three serious problems. First, the thesis about the nature of the Bible (as well
as the other premises) would itself have to be rationally justified. What this would require would, of course, depend on exactly what the thesis claims. In this paper I shall not evaluate any of the particular theses about the nature of the Bible, for I think that the other problems I shall mention are sufficient to show that this way will not enable us to answer our question. But for the sake of completeness, here I merely note that this is a problem which must be faced if one were going to use this approach to answer our question.

But even if the thesis is rationally justified, there is a second problem: premises about God’s knowledge and power are not sufficient to justify the conclusion; one needs also some premise about what God wanted to accomplish in inspiring the authors. Unfortunately, we have no detailed knowledge about this and about what consequences this purpose would have for the views expressed by biblical writers. To assume that this purpose would require that these views contain no errors (or no errors of a certain kind, say on matters of doctrine and practice) or to assume that the honor of God would be impugned if any views expressed in the Bible were erroneous—all such assumptions are instances of a priori theorizing about the Bible which we would do well to avoid. On similar grounds, one might argue that God would not permit the Bible to contain grammatical errors or inelegant writing (for these are flaws of a sort), but it clearly contains both. Or one might argue that if inerrancy were important, God would insure that the text remained inerrant, but it plainly has not, for errors in transmission have certainly occurred. Or one might argue that God would make every important matter so clear that there would be no significant disagreement on it, but obviously God has not done so—or the church would not be divided on the role of Peter and his successors or on the mode and proper recipients of baptism, etc. So this sort of a priori theorizing is clearly not reliable in general. And in light of examples to be given in this paper of inconsistent, erroneous, and historically relative views expressed by many biblical writers, it also seems unjustified to draw the proposed conclusions about the implications of various divine perfections for the inerrancy of the views expressed in the Bible.

A third problem with this proposal as a way of answering our question is that even if the conclusion of the argument were true and rationally justified, it would not enable today’s Christian to determine what she should believe. I say this because even proponents of the argument insist that the Bible must be correctly understood and applied if we are to derive from it what our views today should be. Therefore, to answer our question, hermeneutical issues must be faced. These prevent the view under discussion from delivering the clear-cut norm for our views which it seems to promise. I shall mention five of these issues. (1) Not every view expressed in the Bible should be taken as one we should adopt today, but only a restricted group of these. Obviously, one should not necessarily regard as true some view which is just reported; the view must at least be in some way
endorsed by the writer. Making this distinction requires a hermeneutical principle enabling one to distinguish which is which. Sometimes this is easy. If an idea is clearly attributed to some person, then it is that person’s view. But is every view not expressly attributed to some person a view the author endorses? Conversely, on the other side, if a view is attributed to a godly person, should it therefore be accepted as a norm for the beliefs and practices of Christians today? (For example, should the Christian of today accept as true the conclusions about the obligations of Christians attributed to speakers at the Jerusalem Council [Acts 15] because these men expressed these conclusions?)

The other hermeneutical issues all apply to views not expressly attributed to some person. (2) Should one distinguish between views which are endorsed by the author and views which are merely employed or alluded to, but not endorsed, by the author? I think that one must and that everyone does. The hermeneutical categories of allegorical, parabolic, hyperbolic, and poetical language all refer to ways of expressing views which, in their literal sense, are not endorsed. It sometimes is difficult to determine whether or not such language is being used and, if it is, what the literal meaning is. Another hermeneutical category which employs the distinction between a view which is endorsed and one which is employed for another purpose is the category of accommodation (or speaking phenomenologically). For example, according to Joshua 10:12-13, Joshua caused a long day by ordering the sun and moon to stand still. Both the words attributed to Joshua (“Sun, stand thou still . . . .”) and the author’s description (“The sun stayed . . . .”) employ locutions about the sun’s standing still. These texts were among the reasons why some churchmen supported geocentrism against Galileo. Later when geocentrism had been universally abandoned, the texts were reinterpreted. It was claimed that the wording of the text employed the author’s accommodation to the beliefs of the people of his day or that the author was speaking phenomenologically (speaking in terms of the way things looked, but not necessarily in terms of the way things really were). But the admission of this hermeneutical category introduces a great complexity into the attempt to use views apparently endorsed by biblical writers as a norm for the views which Christians today should hold. For the occasions when accommodation is used are not explicitly labeled in the Bible. Rather, it seems that the basis on which interpreters identify a view as an accommodation is that they, on other grounds, think it false but do not want to attribute error to the writer. In any event, they are not in fact using a view apparently endorsed by the writer as the norm for their own view on the subject; instead, they are using a view derived from non-biblical sources.3

(3) Another hermeneutical issue concerns the distinction between commands which are still binding on Christians today and those which are not. Christians generally agree that this distinction must be made in relation to portions of the
Old Testament law. Certain parts of that law have been explicitly set aside by Christian writers (cf. the account of the Jerusalem council, with the conclusion in Acts 15:29—assuming, of course, that one is correct in taking that conclusion as normative). Moreover, much of that law is no longer adhered to on the grounds that the Christian is not under the law. But some parts—notably the ten commandments—are still widely regarded as binding. On whatever basis this distinction is made, those who make it are plainly not adopting everything that any biblical writer said on matters of doctrine and practice as binding for them today. But the discrepancies are not limited to the applicability of Old Testament law. For example, Paul commands that men have short hair and have their head uncovered when they pray, while women are to have long hair and to wear a veil when they pray. Most Christians today do not feel obligated to obey these commands, with the possible exception of men praying with their heads uncovered. Should they? If not, why not? Paul’s injunctions have not been explicitly contradicted by any other biblical writer. I imagine that most Christians today would see such practices as culturally conditioned expressions of appropriate ways to show reverence and would judge that our obligation today is to show reverence in ways understood in our culture. But once we admit the difference between some basic principle and its culturally conditioned expression, can we avoid asking about any matter of practice enjoined by a biblical writer whether it is still binding on us or whether it too is some culturally conditioned expression of a more basic principle? This point is no small matter. On certain issues today the church is deeply torn by the division between those who conclude that the practice is still binding and those who do not. To cite only one issue, are the New Testament practice of ordaining only males and statements like those in 1 Tim 2:11-12 still binding today?

(4) A fourth hermeneutical issue is that analogous questions can be raised about matters of doctrine. New Testament writers speak of God as the father but not as the mother. Is this a culturally conditioned form of expression, reflecting the patriarchal thinking of the time, or is it a permanently valid way of speaking of God, binding on us today? The Christian hope after death was expressed by some New Testament writers as a hope for resurrection. Historically speaking, the idea of the resurrection of the dead came into Palestine and Jewish thought from non-biblical sources. (Note that the earlier books of the Old Testament contain no hint of it, and the Jewish biblical conservatives of Paul’s day—the Sadducees—denied it for that very reason.) Is it therefore only a culturally conditioned expression of the Christian hope, so that we should not feel bound to express that hope in the same way today, or is this way of speaking of and understanding that hope one we must still accept today?

(5) A fifth hermeneutical issue is the problem of determining what view one should hold when different biblical writers express apparently inconsistent views.
For example, there is an apparent inconsistency over whether or not unchastity is a legitimate grounds for divorce (Mk 10:11-12 and Lk 16:18 vs. Matt 5:32 and 19:9), and on a more minor note whether or not the disciple is to take a staff with him on his travels (Matt 10:9 and Lk 9:3 vs. Mk 6:8). In these cases the apparent inconsistency is explicit. In other cases it is implicit, resting on implications drawn from views expressed in one or more passages. For example, the apparently unjust commands attributed to God in some Old Testament passages seem inconsistent with the justice attributed to God elsewhere in the Bible, as does the vengeful attitude exemplified in some Psalms with the commands to love and forgive given elsewhere in the Bible. Paul's affirmation of the equality of all Christians in Gal 3:28 seems inconsistent with certain writers' insistence on various sexual inequalities. Of course, the implications drawn may be incorrect, but if we are to use the Bible as the norm for our views today we cannot avoid drawing implications, and the approach under discussion does not eliminate this task.

The arguments and questions in the three previous paragraphs exemplify a pattern which I use several times in this paper. I begin with a fairly trivial example of something on which it would be widely agreed that a Christian today is not required to adopt some view endorsed by some biblical writer. My point in doing this is to show with a variety of examples that (virtually) no one today accepts every view endorsed by some biblical writer as something which is binding on him today. Then whatever the reason for not adopting some biblical writer's view today, I push that reason, asking why we should restrict it to fairly trivial matters. In no case do I see any principled (non-arbitrary) answer to that question. But even if there were some principled answer to this question, the trivial examples alone would establish that Christians should not adopt every view endorsed by some biblical writer.

It is not an adequate defense of the approach under discussion to say something like the following: "Of course, the Christian of today should not adopt every view expressed by a biblical writer. The Christian should adopt only those views which the biblical writer meant to teach." This defense is not adequate both because it assumes that all such views are those God preserved from error and because all the hermeneutical issues discussed above recur in trying to distinguish, among the views which a biblical writer expressed, those which he meant to teach. Nor is it much help to propose that we should accept as the author's meaning what we arrive at by interpreting the text in its natural sense, interpreting history as history, poetry as poetry, etc. While this proposal is unobjectionable as a principle, we still have to identify each type of writing. Debates about whether the book of Jonah is a parable and whether the Song of Songs is an allegory suggest that this may not always be easy. Moreover, once we have done this and interpreted what the author meant, we still face at least the last four
Some defenders of the approach under discussion may object that I am confusing matters of interpretation of the text with matters of application. I don't think I am confusing the two, but I would say that both are involved in answering our question. For if we are concerned with what our views today should be (in other words, with what we today should believe and do), we must not think that determining what views the biblical writers expressed (or endorsed) will by itself answer our question. If Christians of today are to take the Bible as their authority, then they must consider questions of application as well as questions of interpretation. Perhaps no one would explicitly deny this, but I think that it is often overlooked or not sufficiently appreciated in discussions about the role which the Bible should play in determining the views of Christians today.

If we look at the way Christians of today actually employ the Bible as a (or the) norm for their views, we find that they may draw on any area of their knowledge and beliefs in determining both matters of interpretation and matters of application. One might think that Christians should use only their knowledge of such areas as biblical languages and of the culture of biblical times in interpreting the text, but in fact they use far more. For example, determinations of whether a particular text is meant literally or not—a matter of interpretation, not application—are often based at least in part on the interpreter's theology. When Jesus said that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, did Jesus mean this literally? When Jesus said that the bread and wine at the last supper were his body and blood, did he mean this literally? As I have suggested, the interpreter also draws on her general knowledge in deciding that an author used accommodation in a particular text. I do not object to the Christian's employing whatever of her knowledge and beliefs seem relevant in deciding matters of interpretation and application; indeed, I shall argue that this is appropriate. But so far I have merely tried to suggest that everyone does it and that it is unavoidable. My argument has been directed against those who do not exhibit sufficient awareness of it and its implications for questions about how the Bible should be used as a norm for the beliefs of Christians today.

The Bible as a Defeasible Authority

The problem raised by the sort of hermeneutical issues discussed in the previous section will, I believe, plague any attempt to state a simple rule for the way Christians should use the Bible as a norm for their views today. I can illustrate this problem by looking at another approach, which might be described as a proposal that the Bible be taken as a defeasible authority on all matters. This proposal was made by Stephen T. Davis in a recent book. He states his view...
as follows: “The Bible is or ought to be authoritative for every Christian in all that it says on any subject unless and until he encounters a passage which after careful study and for good reasons he cannot accept” (p. 116). This proposal raises a hermeneutical issue not raised by the earlier approach: in speaking of what “the Bible says,” is Davis referring to what a particular author says in some particular passage or to some kind of overall view derived from the Bible? If the latter, he should tell us how to derive an overall view; and the reference to a “passage” as well as some of Davis’ detailed discussion suggests the former. So I take him to be referring to particular passages. Such a locution also glosses over the differences among expressing, employing, and endorsing a view. Which of these must an author be doing if the view is to be one which “the Bible says”? More generally, Davis needs to clarify the relation between what particular authors say and what “the Bible says.”

An even more serious problem with Davis’ proposal is that what we learn about an author or his work may give us good grounds not to accept anything he says on a particular topic, thus obviating the passage-by-passage approach which he seems to suggest. For example, suppose that a Christian finds (after careful study and for good reasons) that an author did not intend to give an account which is historically accurate in our sense. (Some scholars think that the entire book of Jonah is an extended parable; some think this of the book of Job.) If the Christian concludes this, is it then proper for him not to give defeasible acceptance to any seeming historical detail in the entire book? Or to take a more important and controversial example, suppose that a Christian concludes (as some New Testament scholars claim) that the Evangelists were not concerned to distinguish their accounts of what Jesus did prior to his crucifixion from their insights into what he said and did which were gained in light of his crucifixion and resurrection. Would this be good reason not to give defeasible acceptance to anything the Evangelists say about historical matters involving the life of Jesus?

If (as Davis admits) the biblical writers did write with “their cultural and historical frames of reference intact” (p. 64), is there any justification in according them even defeasible authority on any scientific matter? Given the vast changes in scientific beliefs since the days of the biblical writers and given our scientific method (which did not even exist then), does today’s Christian have “good reason” not to accept as authoritative (even defeasibly) anything which biblical writers said on any scientific matter? This is not to say that they could not describe ordinary observable situations as well as we can today. And it is not to say that what they said on some scientific matter must be in error. But it is to ask whether the Christian should feel obligated to accept even only defeasibly what a biblical writer says on some scientific matter just because the author is one of the biblical writers. Since the biblical writers in general did not employ careful historical research techniques, could not—indeed, should not—one raise
similar questions about giving defeasible acceptance to everything they said about various historical events? 

This question becomes all the more pressing if it is true (as many biblical scholars claim) that the biblical writers’ purpose in their narratives often was something other than to give what we would think of as a historically reliable account. For example, if one were to conclude that the Evangelists’ purpose in some places was to express Jesus’ significance rather than to give what we would consider a historically reliable account, one must seriously consider the possibility that this was everywhere their purpose, for one should presume consistency of purpose; if that were so, it would preclude even a defeasible acceptance of their representation of the details of the life of Jesus. Of course, it would not necessarily imply that all (or even most) of the details were not historically accurate, but it would be grounds to give critical scrutiny to everything they say if one wishes to use it to recover historical details of the life of Jesus. Note how different this consequence is from the consequence of finding an error in some historical detail. Finding one error is not by itself grounds to refuse to give defeasible acceptance to the rest of what an author wrote. (How many even good textbooks do contain a few errors?) But an error is something the writer himself would repudiate if it were brought to his attention, for an error is a failure to achieve a standard the writer accepts for himself. If, however, one discovers that in some places the writer has some purpose or standards other than those one has in one’s work, this must affect how one uses everything the author says. (The point made in this paragraph is admittedly conditional, based upon possible findings. But my point is to indicate how particular findings could give us grounds not to grant defeasible acceptance to an entire class of things a writer says. Claims about the purpose of various biblical writers are admittedly often controversial, but surely everyone would grant the claim, made in the previous paragraph, that in general they did not employ techniques of critical historical research.)

We could press this point beyond the historical and scientific issues to issues of doctrine and practice. There might be reasons to refuse to give blanket defeasible acceptance to everything any biblical writer says on matters of doctrine or practice. One such reason is that the grounds for not giving even defeasible acceptance to what the biblical writers say (or appear to say) about historical matters may in some cases also apply to matters of doctrine and practice. (For example, since even details about the actions and words of Jesus are often thought to have great significance for matters of doctrine and practice, any grounds not to give even defeasible acceptance to the Evangelists’ representations of Jesus’ career might also be grounds not to give it to the consequences for doctrine and practice which are drawn from these representations.) A second is that perhaps the writers were so influenced by outdated beliefs or by other aspects of their culture as to express their convictions even on matters of doctrine and practice.
in ways which may no longer be appropriate. (We have seen that this is likely on scientific and historical matters. Not only are there no grounds for ruling it out *a priori* on matters of doctrine and practice, but there are also positive reasons to think that it has occurred.*) A third reason is that it is possible that other biblical writers might have different views on this topic, thus suggesting that there might be a range of views—and not just one—compatible with Christian faith. To whatever extent these reasons apply, the Christian should not grant even defeasible acceptance to every view on matters of doctrine and practice expressed by any biblical writer. Of course, it is possible that with careful checking we might find that none of these possible reasons apply. But it would seem that we have to consider them as possibilities and that even that consideration should give pause to those who would urge a blanket, even if only defeasible, acceptance of every view of every biblical writer on these matters.

I am uncertain how Davis would respond to the questions I have raised. Because he describes himself as an evangelical, I am sure that he does not believe that the possible reasons which I have suggested for not granting even defeasible acceptance to broad categories of things said by many biblical writers would be found to apply if they were carefully investigated. But would he admit that these questions should be investigated? I find nothing in his book to indicate that the questions are illegitimate questions, and it is hard to see on what basis they could be ruled out *a priori*. But if they are legitimate questions, one might wonder in what sense his proposal gives any special authority to the Bible. It does to this extent: it says that the Christian should accept what the Bible says unless she has reason not to; unless she has specific reason to the contrary, the fact that the Bible says something is reason enough for the Christian to accept it, regardless of the topic. But our typical attitude toward a work (other than one narrating personal observations and experiences) is that we need a positive reason to accept what it says—e.g., that the author is a recognized expert or that the work is approved by a recognized expert or that the author employed appropriate research techniques. How one would justify according the Bible this special status on all matters is, of course, a crucial issue for our question (though not for Davis in the work referred to). And as I pointed out earlier, there are hermeneutical issues which someone who followed Davis’ proposal must address. For all these reasons, I do not think Davis’ approach looks like a promising way to answer our question.

**A Proposal Regarding Biblical Authority**

Despite their differences, the two types of approaches we have considered share two important features. One is that they give every passage equal initial authority for one’s beliefs today (to be accepted as inerrant or until defeated by
good reasons). In so doing, these proposals function as though the locus of authority were the biblical passage and as though the Bible itself were basically a collection of passages. But any rationally justified use of the Bible as an authority for our beliefs today will have to take account of the diversity of purposes, literary techniques, etc. among the authors (a diversity which no one denies) and will have to recognize that, if the whole Bible is to function as an authority, not every view in every passage should be regarded as equally authoritative for us today. Indeed, my earlier discussion gives reason to think that every Christian in fact recognizes these factors in the way she uses the Bible, regardless of what her theory of biblical authority may be. Many of the most significant theological differences among Christians today turn not on whether these factors ever apply, but on the extent to which they apply and on the results for our beliefs of differing conclusions in applying them.

The second feature shared by these types of approaches is that they give the impression that one can determine what the Bible says independently of consideration of what one should believe on the basis of what the Bible says. While the two are not identical, I have given reasons for thinking that they cannot even in principle always be separated—e.g., in determining whether something in the Bible was meant literally, in determining when (if ever) the writer was using accommodation, and in determining whether what the author says is meant as a formulation binding on all Christians or as an appropriate expression in his day of a more basic idea which is binding on all Christians. Such determinations are made in part on the basis of one’s theology and other beliefs, not simply on the basis of exegesis construed in a more narrow sense (as, roughly, a literary-philological enterprise).

These two features underlie many of the problems connected with the hermeneutical issues which I raised about these approaches. And as noted earlier, both types of approaches face the problem of justifying their basic thesis regarding the nature of biblical authority. In the rest of this paper I intend to sketch a theory, which does take account of these factors, of how the Bible should be used as an authority and of why such use is rationally justified.

one hand, and beliefs and practices, on the other. As Christians we have faith in God who acted decisively for humankind in Jesus Christ. Associated with that faith are certain beliefs and practices by means of which we understand and express that faith. But the nature of that association is different for different beliefs and practices. At least four different possible relations can be distinguished. Certain beliefs and practices may be essential or indispensable for faith in that God—e.g., presumably, the belief that God exists. Other beliefs and practices may be one of a closed disjunctive set such that some member of this set is essential, but not any particular member—e.g., that God is omniscient or
that will happen or in the sense that God knows everything that has happened but not those future events which are not already determined by events which have occurred. Still other beliefs and practices may be one of a disjunctive set such that some member of this set is necessary but the set has no well defined limits—e.g., the elements which might be used in celebrating the Eucharist (or the Lord’s Supper). Some churches today use wafers that are not really bread. And I remember hearing a discussion by some missionaries to certain Indians in Ecuador about the suitability of using bananas instead of bread in such celebrations because bananas were the food staple of these people and bread was unknown. Finally, some beliefs and practices may be purely contingent in the sense that they do not even belong to any (obvious) disjunctive set of which the adoption of some member is necessary, yet they may play roles in the faith of particular believers which vary from very important to peripheral. For instance, one may have chosen his career because he believes that God called him to that career at a particular time and place; and one may believe that God has done certain particular things, yet recognize that one’s more general beliefs about God would change very little if this particular belief were to be given up. I do not claim that these four types exhaust the possibilities, but they do seem to be four different sorts of association. (It is also possible that, despite the best intentions of those who hold them, some beliefs and practices may be inadequate or erroneous expressions of faith.)

If beliefs and practices can be associated with faith in all these (and perhaps other) ways in our lives, there is no reason to think that the same would not be true of the biblical writers. Thus, when we find them expressing (or even endorsing) a belief or practice, we must recognize that it could be associated with their faith in any of these ways. And of the four ways, only the first would be absolutely binding on all Christians as something they must accept; for all the other ways, either there are alternatives or the belief or practice is completely optional. So if a belief or practice falls into any of these categories except the first, it should not necessarily be given even defeasible acceptance. Unfortunately, however, beliefs and practices do not come labelled as to the way in which they are associated with faith. Thus we must construct (or adopt13) a set of beliefs and practices associated with faith and an understanding of how they are associated with faith. In doing this, we will be guided by the biblical writers, for they identified for us the God in whom we have faith. But in this construction we will have to be aware of the issues and questions mentioned in our discussion of the approaches which we have already rejected. How shall we do this?

I suggest that for each biblical writer we try to become clear regarding what views he was expressing and how they related to his faith.14 In doing this, we shall have to consider such issues as how central they seem to be to his faith, how they were related to other beliefs and practices in his community and in his
culture, and how much they reflected perspectives distinctive to his faith as opposed to perspectives which he shared with persons of his time who did not belong to the community of faith. We shall have to be open to the possibility that different writers endorsed different views on the same topic; if we found this happening, it would be strong (but not conclusive) evidence that any of these views is a legitimate expression of faith. It is not conclusive because we also have to consider the possibility that biblical writers expressed (and even endorsed) views which are not consistent with faith in God as known in Jesus Christ. In doing all this we shall have to draw on everything which we can learn about the biblical writers from various secular sources as well as religious sources. And finally in constructing the set of beliefs and practices by which we express our faith, we will be guided and constrained also by our other beliefs from religious and secular sources. The very existence of the Society of Christian Philosophers testifies to its members' conviction that philosophical analysis, drawing on a multitude of considerations, can assist us in formulating a more accurate understanding of the beliefs and practices involved in Christian faith. What one is doing in this process is nothing less than constructing a total theology in which the Bible plays a central role but in which one uses all the knowledge, justified beliefs, experiences, and techniques of reasoning of which one is aware.

Thus, we have to look as honestly and objectively as possible at each biblical writer, to see what he was deliberately expressing and, more subtly, what he was expressing unconsciously or without trying. (Sometimes we may be unsure which category a view falls into.) Then if there is some particular topic (e.g., Jesus' relation to God or the acceptability of divorce) in which we are interested, we should look in particular at the way every biblical writer who touched on the subject understood it. At this point we are taking it as data for our theological construction that certain biblical writers expressed certain views, but we are not giving these views either complete or defeasible acceptance. Our aim is to understand how their views related to their faith in order to be guided in constructing our views by which to express our faith. But we are not committed to adopting all of their views as our own. If on some matter we find a range of views expressed by biblical writers, we cannot say that faith in God (as Christians understand God—a qualification which I intend in what follows but which I shall not continually repeat) requires a particular position. But should we at least adopt the requirement that the Christian is bound to adopt a view within the range of those expressed by biblical writers?

There are at least two problems with imposing such a requirement. First, as we have seen, the biblical writers spoke as men of their times, and what they said was affected by their culture as well as by their faith. Surely we are not bound to accept views which are just a reflection of their culture, even if there is unanimity among the writers who expressed them. Thus, we should use what
we can learn of the culture of the biblical writers to discern the faith which is refracted through that culture. It may well be impossible to be certain in all cases that we are correctly distinguishing between the faith and the culture, but we cannot ignore the distinction as though it did not exist. I will illustrate this in connection with the second point.

Second, imposing this requirement would give us results which in some cases seem very dubious, to say the least. To recur to a previous example, Paul says that it is a disgrace for a woman to have short hair, and no biblical writer explicitly expresses any other view. Thus, there is only one position expressed in the Bible on this matter. Is today’s Christian bound to accept this view too? I think most Christians would say no. They would probably give largely the same reasons: Paul’s view reflects something in his culture; moreover, making something like this into a requirement on all Christians violates the liberty we have as children of God. These responses suggest (though they certainly do not certify) two important questions to be used in determining whether some view of a biblical writer is binding on us today: (1) does the view seem to be primarily a reflection of something in the writer’s culture and (2) how is the view related to what seem to be central considerations in the understanding of the God, faith in whom has brought us salvation. Unfortunately, we have no access to these “central considerations” free of the writer’s cultural influences, nor have we any reason to think that our own understanding of them is free of the influences of our culture.

The upshot of all this is that we have to construct for ourselves (or to accept from someone else) an understanding of what Christian faith involves. In doing this we will be guided very importantly by what the biblical writers express and teach. (But the unit to which we should look for guidance is never simply the passage; rather it is the faith of the biblical writers as expressed in various views contained in certain passages.) Our overall task is to work out a view of what our faith in God involves or implies about the various matters which we face in life—matters of belief and practice. Some of these matters will seem more central than others to our faith—e.g., that God is the creator seems a more central belief than that God caused the sun to stand still for Joshua, and that we are to love one another seems more central than that women are to wear their hair short. The more central some item seems to be to the faith, the more cautious a Christian should be about adopting a view outside the range of views (perhaps a “range” of only one) expressed by the biblical writers. But since there is no declaration in the Bible supported by all (or even a great many) of the writers regarding what is central and what is not, even our view of what is central is our own construction based on a particular way of putting together a theology. And that way of putting things together will inescapably and properly be shaped by other beliefs which we have—beliefs about the extent to which and the ways in which
the biblical writers were affected by their culture and beliefs about the world, about moral principles, etc. which we have derived from our culture. The total set of beliefs and practices which we construct (or adopt) will then serve as a standard in light of which we may reinterpret, modify, de-emphasize, or reject views expressed in particular passages in the Bible.

That the resulting beliefs and practices are rationally justified is clear provided that one is rationally justified in giving to the Bible the central place in theological construction which I have suggested. With this proviso (to be discussed below), the result is rationally justified because one is drawing on all of one's knowledge, justified beliefs, experience, techniques, etc. to arrive at one's conclusions. If such a process does not result in rationally justified beliefs and practices, nothing will. (This much seems clear regardless of what theory of rational justification one holds—foundationalist, coherentialist, etc., for I have not specified any theory of rationality. But on any theory of rationality, a belief which is arrived at using in appropriate ways all the considerations one has is certainly rationally justified.)

Given the number and complexity of the considerations adumbrated above, it is very unlikely that one could show that the same set of beliefs is rationally justified for every Christian. Indeed, given that we have had somewhat different experiences and have become acquainted with somewhat different items of knowledge and belief, it seems unlikely that exactly the same theology would turn out to be rationally justified for every Christian. (This is not to say that inconsistent theologies could all be true, but only that different people could all be rationally justified in holding theologies inconsistent with each other.) It should be apparent too that in principle the rationally justified theologies (sets of beliefs and practices) that emerge from this process might vary greatly, from what would be considered conservative to what would be considered liberal. For the content of the theology would depend on one's conclusions about such matters as how much the views of the biblical writers were influenced by their culture, how much they accommodated, with what purpose(s) they wrote, etc. Thus, though this approach to the authority of the Bible is not that typical of theological conservatives, there is no reason in principle why the results of applying it might not turn out to be theologically conservative, both in overall doctrine and in the doctrine of the extent to which the biblical writers were correct in what they said. On the other hand, not every set of beliefs and practices would be rationally justified, for any that did not use the considerations available to a person in an appropriate way would not be rationally justified.

But is the Christian rationally justified in giving the Bible the central place in her theological construction which my proposal calls for? Yes, for two reasons. First, because the biblical writers have identified for her the God through faith in whom she has found new life. This new life and its connections with faith are matters of present experience; thus, she is justified in believing that she has
it and that she has it as a result of her faith in this God. Moreover, she came to
this faith through response to something—perhaps preaching, perhaps the lives
of others, perhaps the way she was raised—which is grounded in a community
which looks to the Bible as a central source for its understanding of that God.
That is, only through the community which takes these writings as its standard
for identifying God has she come to faith in her God, and faith in that God has
brought her salvation. Moreover, faith in that God was born and nurtured in the
community(ies) which produced these writings. Thus, it is rationally justified to
look to these writings for guidance regarding how to understand that God and
what the life of faith involves.

Second, the set of beliefs and practices which she has constructed giving the
Bible this central role is rationally justified in light of everything she knows,
believes, etc. If she could not construct a rationally justified set of beliefs and
practices giving the Bible this central role, that would be serious grounds for
questioning whether she was rationally justified in giving it this role; that she
can do so at least indicates that giving the Bible this role is not rationally
unjustified. And unless she (and those from whom she adopts her beliefs and
practices) could arrive at and hold these beliefs without using the Bible at all,
it is positive confirmation for the rational justifiedness of giving the Bible this
sort of authority.

My approach contrasts with the two which we looked at earlier in that it does
not begin with a thesis regarding the extent to which everything said in the Bible
should be accepted by Christians today as a norm for what they should believe.
In those approaches, the justification of the authority of the Bible would be based
on the justification of that thesis. But in my approach the justification of the
authority of the Bible is its role in mediating for us the salvation which is our
present experience. The most basic thing which we share with the biblical writers
is faith in the same God, not acceptance of the same beliefs by which to express
that faith. While faith cannot be completely divorced from the beliefs by which
it is expressed, there is no simple relation between them either. Faith in the same
God can be expressed by one person in beliefs which are inconsistent with those
by which another person expresses faith in the same God. By making faith in
the same God, rather than acceptance of the same doctrines, the basic item which
we share with the biblical writers (and with other Christians), my approach leaves
for further determination the beliefs which we ought to hold in common.

Let me try to summarize my conclusions. The faith through which we have
found salvation is faith in the God identified for us in the writings which were
gathered in the Bible. Since we have experienced salvation and new life through
that faith, we are rationally justified in accepting that faith. And since the God
in whom we have faith is identified for us in the writings in the Bible, we are
rationally justified in taking these writings as our best guide to what that faith
Faith and Philosophy

involves. Taking them as our best guide means using them as the primary basis for constructing an overall understanding of the God in whom we have faith, an understanding which has implications for what we believe and do in all areas of our life. But though they are the primary basis for constructing this overall view, they are not the only basis (as I have argued throughout this paper). That overall understanding of God in turn serves as a standard in light of which we may reinterpret, modify, de-emphasize, or reject views expressed in particular passages in the Bible.

Wofford College

NOTES

1. Something of the variety of answers to this question and their implications for theology has been insightfully discussed by David H. Kelsey, The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975).

2. These are not just empty speculations. Deductions like these have been drawn by important Christian thinkers. One commentator wrote:

Quenstendt declared that Luke did not write from memory or from what others related to him, but by dictation of the Holy Spirit, who suggested to his mind the thoughts and words which he should use. In 1659 the theological faculty of Wittenberg condemned Beza’s view that New Testament Greek contained barbarisms and solecisms. Gerhard argued that the Hebrew vowel points were inspired. John Owen thought that the Holy Spirit had kept the Greek and Hebrew texts pure throughout all textual transmission. (Daniel P. Fuller, “Evangelicalism and Biblical Inerrancy” [unpublished], p. 17, cited in Stephen T. Davis, The Debate about the Bible: Inerrancy versus Infallibility. [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977], p. 63.)

3. The example in the text illustrates the way in which the thesis of biblical inerrancy disposes (critics would say, forces) a proponent to seek some interpretation of the text which does not seem in error. To achieve this goal, proponents sometimes adopt interpretations which seem unlikely, to say the least, and which are guided by information which the interpreter has from non-biblical sources; moreover, the procedure causes the apparently more natural sense in which the text has been taken to be judged a misinterpretation. In such cases it is only the non-biblical information which makes possible a “correct” interpretation of the text; thus the interpreter is not genuinely using the text itself to guide his beliefs. One example of this is the interpretation of Matt 13:31-32, where Jesus is represented as saying that the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds. Biologists, however, inform us that the mustard seed is not the smallest seed. So inerrants (who typically do not want to attribute error to Jesus) must look for some other way to interpret Jesus’ words. They suggest that perhaps Jesus meant that the mustard seed is “one of the smallest seeds” or “the smallest seed of which you know.” But any such strategy has the result that today’s Christian should not accept, on the basis of the “correct” interpretation of the text, that the mustard seed is truly the smallest seed, yet it is only non-biblical sources which enable one to know this. Therefore, it seems that even the inerrantist is in fact not using a view expressed by a biblical writer to guide his own belief.
on this matter. (I owe this example to Davis, op. cit., pp. 100-02, though the conclusions drawn about it are my own, not his.)

4. I Cor 11:2-15. Paul’s reasons are worth noting: (1) certain theological considerations—man is the image and glory of God, while woman is the glory of man; and woman was made from man, not *vice versa*; and (2) appeals to what “nature itself” teaches. *Prima facie*, at least, none of these reasons seem limited in applicability to Paul’s day; they seem to have as much validity today as they did then, despite the fact that few Christians today would consider Paul’s injunctions binding today.

5. The apparently unjust commands I have in mind are the commands given to Israel to destroy all the inhabitants of Canaan (Joshua 10:38-40 and 11:19-20). The inhabitants included children, and it is hard to see how ordering their deaths could be just. One place in the Psalms where a vengeful attitude is expressed is 137:9, where the Psalmist pronounces a blessing on him “who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks.” I know of no Christian today who takes these as proper norms for his behavior.

6. Among these inequalities are the wife’s being subject to her husband (Eph 5:22) and a woman’s not being permitted to teach or have authority over a man (1 Tim 2:12). It is well known that the Christian of today must decide what stance to take on a variety of issues regarding the relation between men and women, such as whether to support ordination for women or to oppose it. Views expressed in various passages can seemingly be—and in fact are—cited in support of both stances.


8. It might be wondered whether here I am doing just what I criticize others for doing: lumping all biblical writers together. Why might one not conclude that some biblical writers should be taken as authoritative on historical matters—or on scientific matters—even though perhaps others should not be? Am I not painting all of them with the same brush? I think not. For in everyday life we do not regard any author as an authority until he has proved himself; that is, we do not with confidence even defeasibly accept what he says as true without some reason to think that that author is an authority on that topic. In the case of the biblical writers we are considering as a reason the fact that they are writers whose work was included in the Bible. But if being such a writer does not guarantee an approach to the recounting of events which we would regard as consistent with good historiography (or with good science), then someone’s being a biblical writer is not an adequate basis for us to accept him as an authority on matters of history (or science). So then we must determine whether to accept a particular author as an authority on that kind of matter by considering details peculiar to that author, not a feature which he shares with all the biblical authors. But if we must use other knowledge about particular authors to determine whether to accept what they say as authoritative, then there is no reason, prior to a detailed investigation of them, to give their views even defeasible acceptance. (Again, I point out that I am not denying that we might, by checking certain statements, discover that a particular author has been remarkably accurate on certain kinds of matters and therefore give a defeasible acceptance to everything he says on them. But then the author is accepted as authoritative because he has passed certain tests, not because he is a biblical writer.)

9. The example of Paul’s injunctions regarding hair length and head covering for women would seem a case in point. So too might his advice against marriage given in I Cor 7:1-31, which seems based at least in part on a belief in the imminent end of the world (cf. especially 31b). Perhaps other moral advice and injunctions were also, though less clearly, influenced by such a conviction. Still another possible example would be the employment of pseudonymous authorship by some biblical
writers. Certainly their secular contemporaries used pseudonymity, and most contemporary New Testament scholars hold that the writers of certain New Testament books did so as well—e.g., the writer(s) of the Pastorals and perhaps certain other letters bearing the name of Paul. (I include this as a matter of doctrine because some conservatives hold that the literal accuracy of the attributions of authorship is such a matter.) A still more controversial example is the claim of some scholars that the stories of the Virgin Birth were intended only as a way to highlight Jesus’ significance, rather than as the literal truth about the causal antecedents of Jesus’ birth. (This seems to have been the intention behind the attribution of divine intervention in the conception of certain other notable figures in the classical period. This practice even spread to Judaism, for Philo spoke of divine intervention in the conception of certain Old Testament figures, such as Samson and Samuel.)

10. In an earlier note I pointed out that according to Mark and Luke, Jesus denied any grounds for divorce, but according to Matthew, he accepted unchastity as a grounds. Paul also accepted the desire of the unbelieving spouse for separation as a grounds for divorce (I Cor 7:15). (Of course, Old Testament law accepted divorce.) No matter how one reconciles these disagreements, one has the result that one is not accepting as authoritative for oneself today every view approved of by every biblical writer.

11. In our society, before they will accept what a writer says on such matters as events in the Middle Ages or the structure of the atom, careful thinkers check the credentials of the writer (e.g., his university degree or the inclusion of his work in the bibliography of an encyclopedia.) Indeed, perhaps we tend to accept without any ‘positive reason’ what a person says about her direct experience because we believe that most people are competent to report their experience; this belief may provide (or replace) the ‘positive reason’ in such cases. I would claim that such procedures are rationally justified, though I cannot here argue for that claim.

12. For each of the four types of association, I have tried to give some clear and relatively uncontroversial example. Nothing, however, hinges on any particular example, as long as there is at least one example for each type—i.e., as long as no type is an empty set.

13. For most people on most issues, it is probably more accurate to speak of adopting rather than constructing a set of beliefs and practices by which to express their faith. I do not wish to suggest or imply otherwise, nor to suggest that adopting is inferior to constructing. But I shall continue to speak of constructing in order to remind us of two things. First, even if one simply adopts the view of some biblical writer, that writer himself was expressing a view that someone constructed. Second, our lives are lived and our faith is expressed by these beliefs and practices; adopting a set rather than constructing it does not free us from the risk of adopting a set which results in our living somewhat less fully Christian lives than we might otherwise have done.

14. This first suggestion might seem to run afoul of my earlier claim that it is not always possible to determine what the writer says independently of what we think it is appropriate to believe on the basis of what the writer says. I would deny neither the claim nor its applicability to my proposal. But I would point out that it is not nearly so damaging to my proposal as it was to the earlier ones. For I am not proposing that we conform our views to what we have antecedently determined to be the views of the biblical writers. So I can admit that we may not be able to determine, independently of our other beliefs, whether a writer meant something literally; then I can add that on the basis of other considerations we today should (or should not) believe literally what he said.

15. For example, the contents of the book of Proverbs reflect a wisdom tradition common to many of Israel’s neighbors; conversely, distinctive biblical themes—Abraham, Exodus, covenant, etc.—are absent. Presumably the material contained in this book was considered consistent with Israel’s faith.
16. Even an evangelical like Davis can admit that this has occurred. He claims that the writer who said that God commanded that all the Canaanites be killed when Israel entered the land was wrong. (Davis, op. cit., pp. 96-98.)

17. My approach assumes that God is identified not as the instantiation of a definition (e.g., the all-perfect being) but in terms of someone else’s identification of God (e.g., the God whom Jesus proclaimed). For a fuller discussion of the application of this causal theory of reference to making reference to God, see Richard B. Miller, “The Reference of God,” Faith and Philosophy, Vol. 3, No. 1 (January, 1986), pp. 3-15.