Scripture’s Role in Discerning Theology

in The United Church of Canada

by

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Abstract

Traditionally, the Bible has been at the centre of the Church’s life and thought. It has been viewed as the Word of God, a unique work, revealing God and God’s ways to humankind. Authority and the authority of scripture have been questioned, however, in recent years particularly within mainline Protestant denominations. The following study seeks to clarify the role of scripture in discerning theology within congregational life of the United Church of Canada. It begins by examining the view of scripture held by the Protestant Reformers of the 16th and 18th centuries. It moves to discuss how those views have been affected by the rise of modernist and postmodernist thought, and then looks at the changing role of scripture within the history of the United Church. These contextual studies form the base for a case study of the practices and thought of three United Church Councils in the city of Toronto. There, it was found that more experiential factors were the chief influences on United Church lay leaders today as they make theological
decisions. Scripture’s influence and engagement of it are limited. Since even the newer model of theological discernment supported by the United Church still requires a knowledge of scripture at a foundational level, this study calls on the Church to clarify its position on scripture and to re-educate the Christian community as to its unique character and value.
Acknowledgements

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To the ministers, staff and congregation I serve, Timothy Eaton Memorial Church, I extend heartfelt thanks for your support and generosity in helping me through this degree programme. Your on-going encouragement and the help of some individuals within the congregation has been truly amazing.

Finally, to my 20-something children, Heather, Andrew and occasionally Thomas, who have watched their Dad sit at a table night after night for over four years and have dealt with a certain level of detachment, I can only ask your forgiveness and thank you for your quietness and patience.
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Abbreviations

*AIS* The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture, 1992

*ASOF* A Statement of Faith, 1940

*BU* The Basis of Union, 1908

*GDP* Gift, Dilemma, and Promise, 1984

*IGI* In God’s Image…Male and Female, 1980


*MBDR* Marriage Breakdown, Divorce, and Remarriage, 1962

*OWF* Our Words of Faith: Cherished, Honoured, and Living, 2010

*ROP* Record of Proceedings (various years)

*SOLM* Toward a Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientation Lifestyles and Ministry, 1988

*TACU* Toward A Christian Understanding of Sex, Love, Marriage, 1960

*WC* The Westminster Confession

With the exception of the last item listed above, all of the above are publications of The United Church of Canada. See the bibliography for full reference.
Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Theology in the practice of ministry

For centuries theology has largely been the domain of the expert. It has tended to be propositional in nature, heavily philosophical, esoteric, and somewhat irrelevant to the life of many. During the last half century, however, there has been a growing recognition that the ground of theology may be more concrete, connected with life and with human experience. John W. de Gruchy, for instance, differentiates between *studying* theology, which he views as a necessary and important academic exercise, and *doing* theology, a form of faith-praxis which attempts to make theological sense of God’s presence in the trenches of life and ministry.¹ The following represents an exercise in the latter. It is an attempt to “do” theology within the practice of ministry in The United Church of Canada.

The situation that gave birth to this study occurred in 2010. In that year, I organised a series of lectures for the United Church congregation that I serve entitled, *The Bible in the Church Today*. A number of professors from nearby theological colleges were invited to speak on issues related to their field of research, how the Bible informed them, and how they saw scripture informing life and thought in the local church. After one of the lectures, a senior member of the congregation approached and uttered these

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words, “David, I’ve never read the Bible, probably never will, but these lectures are most interesting. Well done.”

The individual probably did not realise the issues that his statement raised in my mind as I encouraged him to read even a little of the Bible. The issues were exacerbated by the fact that he was a member of the church Council and the Council is sometimes called to make theological decisions on behalf of the congregation. Chief among them was the question of authority. Scripture has historically been regarded as the primary authority within the Protestant tradition. If the Bible is not engaged, however, one wonders what exactly is authoritative for this individual as he makes theological decisions on behalf of the local church. Furthermore, how widespread is the practice of not engaging scripture? Is it true of this one individual alone? Is it true of a few Council members? Or, is the practice common to the lay-leadership in general? I thus set out to come to a clearer understanding of scripture’s role in discerning theology within local congregations of The United Church of Canada.

1.2 Direction of the study

James and Evelyn Whitehead have offered a useful method for theological reflection. Practical theological studies, they suggest, involve:

Attending - drawing together a description of the church’s culture, tradition, practice, or experience in relation to the issue being studied.

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2 In the United Church context several administrative structures are approved. See The United Church of Canada, The Manual (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2013), Bylaws § B ¶ 7.2, 61. Each of the congregations that took part in this study have a “Council” model. The Council is the governing board of the local church between General Meetings of its membership. Only the laity are voting members of the Council. Clergy are non-voting members. Throughout this study, the term “Council” will be used for the governing board of a congregation. Some, however, may be more familiar with “Official Board” terminology and structure. Although there are some differences, the terms may be read interchangeably for the purpose of this thesis.
Assertion - drawing on the various elements of the Attending phase in dialogue and analysis.

Response - drawing out of the Attending and Assertion phases implications and suggestions for future action.

In trying to understand scripture’s role in discerning theology within the United Church, the Whiteheads’ Attending phase suggests gaining an understanding of context. The United Church of Canada is a denomination within the Protestant tradition. Historically, it traces its roots through its Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist ancestors to the Protestant Reformation and beyond. We will begin, in chapter two, therefore, with a short historical study of the United Church’s mother-tradition, examining the role and understanding of scripture among Protestant reformers. The United Church today, however, exists in the twenty-first century and a great deal has occurred philosophically and theologically since the days of reform. Chapter three will, thus, seek to survey the changes brought about by the Enlightenment and postmodernism and, specifically, how they affect understandings of authority and perceptions of scripture. Third, in chapter four, we will focus on The United Church of Canada itself. Through selected, official documents of the Church, we will trace the development of United Church positions on scripture and its role over the course of its short, ninety-year history.

With this foundational work done, the Attending phase will continue with a multiple, bounded, case study involving Council members from three, Toronto-area, United Church congregations. Through a questionnaire, interviews, and a focus group of clergy from three other congregations, it is hoped that we can learn more about the role of

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4 The introduction to the case study as a whole is found in chapter five.
scripture at the ground level of central Toronto church life. Among other things, we will attempt to uncover whether Councils engage in any intentional processes when they face theological decisions. Second, we will seek to clarify the things that influence Council’s members when making decisions (e.g. prevailing cultural norms, tradition, reason, experience, scripture, social scientific studies, the word of a respected minister or lay person etc.). Third, where scripture is utilized, we will try to understand the extent of that usage and how capable lay leaders feel about their ability to use it. Fourth, where varying influences, or authorities, are acknowledged, we will ask how those are ranked in terms of influence. If, for instance, prevailing cultural norms influence the decision-making process, is scripture perceived as having an ultimate authority that can trump what culture teaches, or, does culture trump understandings of scripture? Positions on these will reveal much about how scripture is used and valued within the practice of several Toronto congregations. How scripture is perceived and how the participants perceive that they attain knowledge of God and God’s will for the Church form the fifth area of interest for this study.

As the data is being reported, it is difficult not to analyse and comment on it. The analysis begins the “Assertion” phase of the study. It will continue in summaries of significant findings at the end of the chapters on the questionnaire, the interviews, and the focus group (chapters six, seven and eight respectively). The study culminates in the final section of this thesis, as we turn to an evaluation of major findings and discuss their

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5 Of course, some will argue that prevailing norms affect us, whether we acknowledge them or not. Here, the interest is in what is consciously acknowledged and practiced.
6 It is not the intention of this thesis to deal specifically with matters related to the interpretation of scripture. We cannot help but touch on that area from time to time but the main focus is on whether scripture has a continued and primary role in discerning theology in The United Church of Canada. i.e. regardless of interpretation is scripture used and at what level.
7 Whitehead & Whitehead, 13.
significance (chapter 9). Here we will interact with scholarly literature on the issue of biblical authority and, then, seek to move forward to what the Whiteheads term, “Pastoral Response.” The aim of the study is, thus, not merely to work through and evaluate an issue; it is to respond pastorally to what is uncovered on the ground level of church life. Where there are perceived issues and areas of difficulty, recommendations will be made aimed at improving Council practice and the work of ministry. Finally, an assessment will be made about the model of governance within the Church. We will try to ascertain if the current model is working and how it may be improved.

At all times, it is recognized that this study has limitations. The sample sizes are small and the study involves primarily three congregations of the United Church within a specific region of the city of Toronto. Clemens Sedmak refers to practical studies of this nature as “little theologies.” Little theologies, he maintains, arise in concrete occasions in response to specific needs or questions, and attempt to find God and God’s presence within the local context. What derives from doing local theology is thus limited in significance and may not easily be generalized to other scenarios and contexts. The very term, “little theologies,” suggests that the researcher should state findings with a measure of humility, not inferring too much (nor perhaps, too little). There is, nonetheless, value in the study, in the sense that what is reported from the collective of three churches may not be too far away from what occurs in some other congregations. Where there are similarities, careful reporting and inferences may be found to be transportable to other

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8 One might argue that it includes six congregations since the focus group of clergy are from three congregations not involved in the questionnaires or interviews.
congregational situations. It is hoped that the study may provide some direction for a much broader spectrum of churches.

On a personal note, I am a minister in The United Church of Canada. I grew up as the son of a Methodist manse in Ireland and some years after arriving in Canada, I associated with the Free Methodist Church. I was ordained to the ministry within that denomination and served congregations in Toronto, Ottawa, and Markham. Ten years ago, in an effort to realign with my mainline Church roots, I transferred to The United Church of Canada and have served since then in a midtown Toronto congregation. The congregation has a multiple staff and my main duties include Education, Outreach, oversight of Children’s and Youth ministries, as well as the traditional pastoral duties.

1.3 Relevance of the study

The United Church of Canada has a statement of faith contained in its Basis of Union that affirms scripture as the primary source for faith and Christian practice. Increasingly, however, evidence suggests that engagement of scripture by lay people and within the courts of the church has declined. The authors of the 1992 study entitled The Authority of Interpretation of Scripture, for instance, state openly, “Few Christians (including United Church members) regularly read or study the Bible.”10 The question arises, “Can something be the primary source of faith and practice if it is not engaged at

10 The United Church of Canada, The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture: A Statement of The United Church of Canada (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1992), 1. Anecdotally, in addition to the statement that gave birth to this study (above p.1), a colleague in ministry informed me that she had come across a similar problem at General Council level (General Council is the top, national court of the United Church). Some years ago at a General Council, she asked a presenter calling for a boycott of Israeli goods what biblical and theological reflection the committee had done in preparing their report. After some equivocation, the response was, “Is this a theological document?” My colleague interpreted the response to mean that they not only had not engaged in theological or biblical reflection but, further, it had not occurred to them that it might be appropriate.
reasonable levels?” Furthermore, if it is not engaged, upon what grounds are theological decisions being made? Chapter four, below, will show that the United Church, outside of its *Basis of Union*, has not been altogether consistent or clear in its guidance about scripture and authority. There is, therefore, a need to state more clearly what is authoritative for the Church of the early 21st century and what, precisely, is the role of scripture? For centuries, it has been scripture that has grounded Christian faith and life. If that has changed, all members of the Church need to know (officially) and be guided in how theological decisions are to be made.

As much as this study seeks clarity for the Church, it is also very much a personal quest for lucidity. My personal experience of the role of scripture in the church of my youth is of a Bible considered holy; sacred texts, inspired by God, revealing God and God’s ways. This view led to increased study of scripture in my young adult years and, eventually, to the pursuit of advanced graduate work in biblical studies. During graduate work, I discovered critical scholarship and very different presuppositions in approaching the text. After a return to the Church and ministry, I have personally felt a continual tension between the Bible of faith and the Bible of scholarship. A number of questions arise. Is there, for instance, a faithful way for the confessional church to treat biblical material that brings together the historic faith and critical scholarship? Can we have a scripture that is authoritative yet one that is to be engaged, interpreted, and sometimes overridden by the advanced perceptions of our culture? Where it is overridden, how does that affect, or what does that say about, its perceived authority? How does a change in authority affect faith? This study, thus, seeks personal clarity on the role of scripture today, its authority, and its use in 21st century life and Church. Is scripture still the
Church’s primary authority? Do we engage it as such and what does that entail practically speaking?
Chapter 2

Scripture in Early Reform & Wesleyan Thought

“To a Christian there can be nothing either more necessary or profitable, than the knowledge of holy scripture.” Thomas Cranmer

2.1 The place of scripture at the beginning of the Reformation

In 1517, Martin Luther nailed ninety-five theses to the door of the Wittenberg Church. It was an event that is widely viewed as setting in process a chain of events that would alter Church and society in the western world for centuries. Through it, Luther challenged what he perceived to be serious errors in the Church and in the process was discerning where true authority lay. In 1521, at the Diet of Worms, he uttered words that came to represent a core aspect of Protestant thought, namely, the importance of scripture for Christian life and practice. He stated,

Unless I am proved wrong by the testimony of scriptures or by evident reason, I am bound in conscience and held fast to the Word of God … therefore I cannot and will not retract anything, for it is neither safe nor salutary to act against one’s conscience. God help me. Amen.

Religious zeal, the reassertion of civil power, and many other factors led to and supported the reformation movement of the early 16th century. The Church has commonly been thought to have been in spiritual decline. Bernard Reardon, for instance,

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2 It was, of course, one of a number of events that had been leading toward a reformation for a generation or more.
3 Patrick Collinson, The Reformation (New York: Modern Library, Random House, 2006), 63. It is noteworthy that “reason” also appears to be an authoritative source in this quotation.
suggests that its prestige and spiritual influence had been waning for some time due to “worldliness, corruption, and venality rife among its official representatives, including, most signally, the papacy itself.”⁴ As reformers took aim at ecclesiastical tradition and its hierarchy, the prominence given to “the Word of God” is evident in their writings. David Lotz affirms this with respect to Luther. He states, “I will take for granted the indisputable fact that Luther insisted upon scripture’s sole normative authority for Christian faith and life.”⁵ The same could be said for all major reformers as continually we find that scripture’s authority was elevated above any other and, specifically, above that of Church councils and the papacy. In the words of C. H. Dodd, “The infallibility denied to the Pope and the Councils was attributed to the Bible in all its parts.”⁶

We will see, below, how this plays out in the thought of a number of reformers. Since the focus of this study is on The United Church of Canada, we will concentrate on individuals who fed the main streams of its tradition. Thus, to highlight the Presbyterian and Congregationalist traditions, the thoughts of Calvin are examined. Since the Scottish form of Presbyterianism was the most influential in Canada, the related thought of John Knox is also surveyed. To highlight the Methodist tradition, the thoughts of early

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⁴ Bernard M. G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Reformation* (New York: Longman, 1981), 1. An alternate position on decline is taken by Duffy who makes a strong case that the narrative of decline in England, at least, was a political strategy. Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400 – c.1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). It should be noted also that not everyone in the church’s domain was content with the idea of a singular, papal authority. Thus, there were already existing forces interested in reform of the church and political powers. Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 39.

⁵ David W. Lotz, “Sola Scriptura: Luther on Biblical Authority,” *Interpretation* 35 (July, 1981): 260. Yet, the matter must be seen as more complex. Luther read the Bible through specific lenses such as those associated with his thought on *sola fides* and *sola gratia*. This led him to question the canonicity of a few biblical books including The Epistle of James, Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation because they were less clear on the subjects of faith and God’s grace. In a sense, therefore, Luther stood above scripture as its judge. See Martin Luther’s prefaces to these works. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, eds: Helmut T. Lehmann, Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 395-399.

Anglican reformer, Thomas Cranmer, are examined as well as the eighteenth century founder of Methodism, John Wesley. Of course, a consideration of the role of scripture and authority related to any one of these individuals could well supply us with enough material for a thesis in itself. The attempt here, however, is to provide a brief and limited survey of their thought with the help of primary and secondary sources.

2.2 John Calvin and the basis of scriptural authority

John Calvin has been lauded as the main influence on the Reformed theology and tradition. He was born in 1509 in Noyon, France and is best known for his work and ministry in the city of Geneva where he died in 1564. Over several decades, Calvin toiled on his expansive work, *Institutio Christianae Religionis*. He published a first edition containing six chapters in 1536, with ensuing, growing editions going to print in the years 1539, 1550, and 1559. As if the *Institutes* were not enough, Calvin penned, *inter alia*, commentaries on many books of the Bible and considered himself primarily a biblical scholar and exegete.

Unlike Luther and others, Calvin laid out, in Book I of the *Institutes*, a relatively comprehensive statement on scripture and the grounds for its authority. He begins his discussion with how human beings attain knowledge of God. In the early chapters he follows St. Paul’s lead on the value of “general” or “natural revelation,” i.e. the knowledge of God available from creation. In chapter VI he moves on to the greater importance of the “specific revelation” contained in the sacred scriptures. In comparing

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8 Lotz, 259.
the knowledge of God attained through general and specific revelation, he likens the
superior insights of the Bible to providing spectacles to a poorly sighted reader struggling
with a text. With the spectacles, suddenly confusion is gone, the words spring off the
page, understanding and true impressions of the Deity fill the hitherto confused mind.\textsuperscript{10}
The scriptures are therefore of utmost importance for Calvin if one is to gain true
knowledge of God.

When it comes to the basis of scripture’s authority, Calvin takes great pains to
ensure that this not be seen to rest on the affirmation of the church. He writes,

A most pernicious error has very generally prevailed – \textit{viz.} that scripture is
of importance only in so far as conceded to it by the suffrage of the
curch; as if the eternal and inviolable truth of God could depend on the
will of men. ... These ravings are admirably refuted by a single expression
of an apostle. Paul testifies that the church is “built on the foundation of
the apostles and prophets” (Eph. ii.20). If the doctrine of the apostles and
prophets is the foundation of the church, the former must have had its
certainty before the latter began to exist.\textsuperscript{11}

Behind this thought was the notion that the mediaeval church, pope and council, had
errred as never before. It was inconceivable to Calvin that the “eternal and inviolable
truth of God” needed the approval of sinful humanity, especially when it was actually
“the foundation of the church.” Scripture’s authority, he thought, must lie elsewhere.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} Calvin, I.vi.1.
\textsuperscript{11} Calvin, I.vii.1f.
\textsuperscript{12} Calvin continues, “Nothing can be more absurd than the fiction that the power of judging scripture is in
the church and that on her nod its certainty depends. When the church receives it … she does not make that
authentic which was otherwise doubtful … but acknowledging it as the truth of God she shows her
reverence by an unhesitating assent.” (I.vii.2). Calvin is even unmoved by his opponents appeal to his
beloved, Augustine, who had intimated that he would not believe the gospel were he not moved by the
authority of the church. Calvin argues astutely that Augustine’s words must be seen in light of literary
context and their historical setting addressing the Manichaens. As such they do not apply to the current
has a strong appreciation for the tradition of the Church. In an argument with Castellio over the place of
\textit{The Song of Songs}, Calvin used tradition to affirm the whole of scripture. MacCulloch, \textit{Reformation}, 241f.
Essential to Calvin’s thought is the understanding that God had authored the sacred scrolls and that the character of God itself gives them credence. He states,

Our faith in doctrine is not established until we have a perfect conviction that God is its author. Hence the highest proof of scripture is uniformly taken from the character of him whose word it is. The prophets and apostles boast not their own acuteness, or any qualities which win credit to speakers, nor do they dwell on reasons, but they appeal to the sacred name of God, in order that the whole world may be compelled to submission.13

The belief in divine derivation entailed, for Calvin, that scripture bore a self-authenticating element. In a reflection on the patriarchs and prophets, he noted that the conviction of what they had learned was so “engraved on their hearts” that they had full assurance that it had come from God.”14 The conviction did, of course, contain an element of faith but it was the work and testimony of the Spirit that were of primary import for Calvin.15 He specified,

If then, we would consult most effectually for our consciences, and save them from being driven about in a whirl of uncertainty, from wavering, and even stumbling at the smallest obstacle, our conviction of the truth of scripture must be derived from a higher source than human conjectures, judgments, or reasons; namely, the secret testimony of the Spirit.”16

In the same section of The Institutes, he takes on those who oppose inspiration and those who feel that religion is a matter of mere opinion on the grounds of reason. He continues,

But I answer that the testimony of the Spirit is superior to reason. For as God alone can properly bear witness to his own words, so these words will not obtain full credit in the hearts of men until they are sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who spoke by the mouth of the prophets must penetrate our hearts, in order to convince

13 Calvin, I.vii.4.
14 Calvin, I.vi.2.
15 Calvin, I.vii.1.
16 Calvin, I.vii.4.
us that they faithfully delivered the message with which they were
divinely entrusted.”

Herein, Calvin establishes a bi-fold work of the Spirit. The Spirit that gives birth to scripture is also seen to be at work in bringing assurance to the heart of the reader. Henk van den Belt, while working chiefly on the earliest edition of the Institutes and comparing it with the work of Heinrich Bullinger, noted that, whereas Bullinger mainly connected the work of the Spirit with the initial inspiration of scripture, Calvin affirms both initial inspiration as well as the witness of the Spirit in the acceptance of the authority of scripture.

As Calvin continues,

… those who are inwardly taught by the Holy Spirit acquiesce implicitly in scripture, that scripture, carrying its own evidence along with it, deigns not to submit to proofs and arguments, but owes the full conviction with which we ought to receive it to the testimony of the Spirit. Enlightened by him, we no longer believe, either on our own judgment or that of others, that the scriptures are from God; but in a way superior to human judgment, feel perfectly assured – as much so as if we beheld the divine image visibly impressed on it – that it came to us, by the instrumentality of men, from the very mouth of God. We ask not for proofs or probabilities on which to rest our judgment, but we subject our intellect and judgment to it as to transcendent for us to estimate. …because we feel a divine energy living and breathing in it – an energy by which we are drawn and animated to obey it, willingly indeed, and knowingly, but more vividly and effectually than could be done by human will or knowledge … I say nothing more than every believer experiences in himself, though my words fall far short of the reality.

Throughout these quotations, the “self-convincing” (autopistos) aspect to the authority of scripture is noted by van den Belt. Such terminology is also present in the work of Bullinger but van den Belt insists that it was Calvin who effectively linked

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17 Calvin, I.vii.4.
18 van den Belt, 317.
19 Calvin, I.vii.5.
autopistos firmly to the work of the Spirit. In doing so, it allowed him to free theology entirely from the authority of the institutional church and extra-biblical tradition. Thus, says, van den Belt, “From the beginning, Reformed theology related the authority of scripture to pneumatology.”

Calvin thus exhibits a very high view of inspiration and scripture within his writings. Scriptural authority is seen to lie above and beyond that of the church and its worth is deemed to be founded in God himself whose word it is. In the words of Bernard Reardon, for Calvin, scripture was “the unfailing source of a knowledge whereby truth is established and error identified and refuted.” In 1551, Calvin’s understanding and love of scripture was such that he wrote that he hoped to give the rest of his life to the study of it.

2.3 John Knox and biblical precedent

We turn now to the thought of John Knox who steered developments in the Church in Scotland and, through that, the Scottish Presbyterian movement that became influential in Canada. Knox was a slightly younger contemporary of Calvin, born in Haddington, East Lothian c.1513/14. As a boy, he probably went to grammar school in

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20 van den Belt, 310-324.
21 van den Belt, 324.
22 Reardon, 176. Again, with reference to an argument with Castellio about the Song of Songs, MacCulloch writes, “Calvin was determined to defend the canonicity of the Song of Songs; his theology was based on the principle that God’s revelation of his Word was definitively contained within the Bible, and, unlike Luther, he was not prepared to pick and choose where the Word was best expressed within the Bible’s covers. The Bible was God’s to define, however unpromising the sensous lyrics of the Song of Songs might seem.” MacCulloch, Reformation, 241. William Bouwsma, however, suggests that Calvin followed Augustine (De Doctrina Christiana) in recognizing areas where scripture could not speak authoritatively. He also understood that scripture was not self-interpreting. In practice, Calvin draws on early Christian thinkers, especially Augustine in support of his interpretations. Thus, it is not just scripture, for Calvin; he also values tradition, at least in the sense of some early Church Fathers. This appreciation for the early Fathers is generally common to the Protestant movement as a whole (see MacCulloch, Reformation, 250). William J. Bouwsma, Jean Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait (Oxford University Press, 1988).
23 Reardon, 177. Reardon quoted Calvin, Opera (Corpus Reformatorum), XIV.37.
his hometown but we know he studied theology at the University of St. Andrews. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1536 and converted to the Protestant movement in the early to mid-1540s. During the early 1550s he worked among reformers in England but fled to continental Europe shortly after the rise of Mary Tudor to the English throne. He travelled to Geneva, Zürich and Frankfurt, before settling into a brief preaching ministry in Geneva. During his time in Europe, he interacted with Calvin and other reformers who may have had some influence on the faith that he brought back to Scotland in 1559. From then, he successfully led and guided the reform movement in Scotland until his death in 1572.24

Unlike Calvin, we have no specific treatise from Knox on scriptural authority. However, a cursory reading of selected writings reveals that he was in essential agreement with the high view of scripture that many reformers took. In the preface to the Scottish Kirk’s *First Book of Discipline* (1560), he and his colleagues affirm scriptural authority by suggesting that Christians avoid practices not approved in scripture and not reject those that God’s word specifies.25 Under the opening “Head,” of the same work, the words of 2 Timothy 3:16 are affirmed and the scriptures are said to contain, all things necessary for the instruction of the Kirk, and to make the man of God perfect.26

25 John Knox et al., “Preface,” *The First Book of Discipline* (1560), in *The Works of John Knox*, ed. David Laing. 6 vols (Edinburgh: James Thin, 1895), Vol. II.183-260. The text reads, “Most humilie requyring your Honouris, that as ye luke for participatioun with Christ Jesus, that nather ye admitt ony thing quhilk Goddis plane word sall not approve, nather yit that ye sall reject suche ordinances as equitie, justice, and Goddis word do specifie: For as we will nott bynd your Wisdomes to oure jugementis, farther then we be able to prove the same by Goddis plane Scripturis.”
thrust is apparent in *The Scots Confession* (1560). Therein, Knox *et al.* ground the authority of scripture in the belief that they ultimately come from God. They write:

> As we believe and confess the scriptures of God sufficient to instruct and make perfect the man of God, so do we affirm and avow their authority to be from God, and not to depend on men or angels. We affirm, therefore, that those who say the scriptures have no other authority save that which they have received from the Kirk are blasphemous against God and injurious to the true Kirk, which always hears and obeys the voice of her own Spouse and Pastor, but takes not upon her to be mistress over the same.27

Knox’s high view of the whole of scripture is evidenced in his strong prophetic preaching. His frequent use of the Old Testament prophets to preach about sin and judgment resulted in sermons that were often so sharp and literal that James Melville commented on one he heard Knox preach in St. Andrews, c.1571. Melville wrote, “In opening up of his text, he was moderate the space of an half hour; but when he entered to application, he made me so … shudder and tremble that I could not hold a pen to write.”28 Melville’s feelings illustrate Richard Greaves’ assertion that Knox’s sermons were given with such confidence that it could only be attributable to the strong faith he had in biblical authority.29

A key part of Knox’s programme in Scotland was to rid it of all “religion” that had no biblical precedent. Knox felt that the mediaeval church had grievously erred by adding practices that were of no salvific or godly value, nor were they mandated by scripture. Thus, at various times, Knox opposed kneeling at the sacrament because he could find no prescription for it in the Bible. In like manner, he rejected much clerical

29 Greaves, 3.
raiment, priestly chastity, observation of fasting days, prayer for the dead, keeping holy days of saints, the feasts of apostles, martyrs, virgins, Christmas, Circumcision, Epiphany, Purification. He states, “Because in God's scriptures they neither have commandment nor assurance, we judge them utterly to be abolished from this realm; affirming further, that the obstinate maintainers and teachers of such abominations ought not to escape the punishment of the civil magistrate.”30

Knox was, in fact, so rigorous in aligning Christian faith with biblical precedent that it drew the attention of other reformers. John Calvin wrote to Knox in 1561, imploring him to temper his attitude, to use discretion, and tolerate various ceremonial things that might benefit faith, even if they had no positive warrant in scripture.31

Seemingly undeterred, Knox continued his programme and his influence was so widespread that even the popular Western festive season of Christmas drew only muted attention in Scotland for hundreds of years. With little biblical precedent, it was downplayed by The Church of Scotland and, unlike the practices of other countries, Christmas Day did not become a national holiday in Scotland until 1958.32

As Knox continued, the authority of church councils and early Fathers was even subject to the same test. Whereas Knox appreciated the early doctors of the church and heartily commended them when he perceived they were following scripture; where they

32 In the personal experience of this writer, the muted tone of Christmas celebrations was still to be felt even in the early 1980s during which time I was engaged in postgraduate studies at The University of St. Andrews. This has changed more recently as the church’s influence has waned and influence from the rest of Britain and the American media has grown.
strayed, they were rejected. He was consistent, however, and did not preclude his own work from the same test. In The Scots Confession, Knox et al. wrote:

If any man will note in our Confession any chapter or sentence contrary to God's Holy Word, that it would please him of his gentleness and for Christian charity's sake to inform us of it in writing; and we, upon our honour, do promise him that by God's grace we shall give him satisfaction from the mouth of God, that is, from Holy scripture, or else we shall alter whatever he can prove to be wrong.

Likewise, the civil authorities were not immune from his position. Civil powers were to be followed, according to Knox, only to the extent that they “did not command things contrary to scripture, the ultimate authority.” This position was formulated so strongly that Knox articulated a doctrine of resistance to civil governments when they commanded ungodly things or proved idolatrous. According to Greaves, by 1558, he was calling for the overthrow of idolatrous sovereigns, using the biblical precedent of Jehoida’s campaign against Athaliah as a key. So far was civil authority subordinate to biblical authority that tyrannicide itself became not just a viable option but a Christian responsibility.

On a more positive note, the perceived value of scripture led Knox to urge all to read the Bible. He encouraged individuals and families to read devotionally during the week, and recommended weekly assemblies for the discussion of scripture beyond

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33 Knox, “The First Head,” The First Book of Discipline, in The Works of John Knox, II.183ff. cf. VI.194. I thank my supervisor, Stuart Macdonald, for pointing out that Knox only quoted the early Fathers in The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women (1558).
34 “Preface,” The Scot’s Confession. Here Greaves notes a similarity to The First Confession of Basle (1534) which again reveals the extent that scripture was influencing reformers from early years. Greaves, 1980. Perhaps, in light of Knox’s stance, van den Belt is correct in saying, “From the very beginning Reformed theology intended to free scripture from all external authority, either of the church or of human reason.” van den Belt, “Editorial,” Journal of Reformed Theology Vol.5, no.3 (January, 2011): 243.
35 Greaves, 12. To some extent, Knox benefited from the fact that James VI was in his infancy and youth during this time. The relationship between ecclesiastical authorities and civil authorities that would develop in Scotland was more complex than we need to get into here. See MacCulloch, 378-82.
36 Greaves, 12.
regular acts of Sunday worship.\textsuperscript{37} Like many reformers, he believed that God had given human beings a gift that could be understood by all who sincerely engage it with the Spirit’s guidance.\textsuperscript{38}

2.4 Thomas Cranmer: scripture above all

It has often been said that the Reformation in England was more akin to an act of state than the result of religious dissatisfaction.\textsuperscript{39} Yet, to regard it solely in those terms would be a mistake. Changes in the late mediaeval period and influence from continental Europe led to a degree of readiness among some in England for the changes brought about by Henry VIII and the English Parliament.\textsuperscript{40}

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer has been called England’s reformer \textit{par excellence} and, among other things, his high view of scripture dictated the direction he took.\textsuperscript{41} According to Maurice Elliot, the loss of his first wife in childbirth in 1515 had a significant influence on Cranmer. In the midst of grief, he found catharsis in the pages of scripture and, Elliot believes, this fostered an on-going love of the Bible throughout his life.\textsuperscript{42} It is readily seen in a number of directions he took. When Cranmer became a university examiner in 1526, for instance, he insisted that undergraduates not take their

\textsuperscript{37} Scripture reading was a key to education in \textit{The First Book of Discipline}.
\textsuperscript{38} With Calvin he assumed, but did not stress the role of the Holy Spirit in revealing its authority and truth. Greaves, 21. MacCulloch notes how Calvin also expected and encouraged Reformed congregations to know their Bibles. MacCulloch, \textit{Reformation}, 247.
\textsuperscript{39} In contrast, the Scottish reformation was driven by Protestant clergy. MacCulloch, \textit{Reformation}, 379.
\textsuperscript{40} Reardon, 240. Cf. Duffy. See, above, note 4 in this chapter.
\textsuperscript{42} He similarly notes that when Cranmer and fellow reformers languished in prison awaiting the disputation on their doctrine, they read the New Testament to each other to strengthen morale. Elliott, 2.
degrees until they were thoroughly conversant with scripture.\(^{43}\) In a similar vein, he, along with Thomas Cromwell, moved to have *The Great Bible* placed in every church in the nation. Likewise, it was Cranmer who produced the calendar of daily readings for the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer* and he is generally credited with penning the Church of England’s *Articles of Religion*, the sixth of which states, “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.”\(^{44}\)

Cranmer wrote of the importance and value of scripture in the Preface to *The Great Bible*. He writes,

> How should a man work his feat, or get his living without the tools of his trade? Of like mind and affection ought we to be towards holy Scriptures. For as mallets, hammers, saws, chisels, axes, and hatchets, be the tools of their occupation, so be the books of the prophets, and Apostles, and all holy writers inspired by the holy ghost, the instruments of our salvation. Wherefore, let us not stick to buy and provide us the Bible, that is to say, the books of holy Scripture; and let us think that to be a better jewel in our house than either gold or silver.\(^{45}\)

A similar tone is found in the first homily of *The First Book of Homilies* that is also attributed to Cranmer.\(^{46}\) The text begins:

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\(^{44}\) *The Book of Common Prayer* (Cambridge University Press, 1960). It should be noted that Cranmer moved away from the style of late medieval, allegorical biblical interpretation and associated scholastic preaching in favour of humanist exposition “according to the pure sense and meaning thereof.” Apparently this was what Henry VIII preferred. MacCulloch, *Cranmer*, 114. MacCulloch cites a letter that Cranmer wrote to Latimer in the early 1530s.


\(^{46}\) MacCulloch attributes four of the twelve homilies to Cranmer; specifically, those dealing with scripture, salvation, faith, and good works. These, MacCulloch thinks, were the topics Cranmer deemed most important for the reformed church and they have similarities to a surviving set of notes that he assembled on the topic of justification. MacCulloch, *Cranmer*, 372.
To a Christian man there can bee nothing either more necessarie or profitable, then the knowledge of holy scripture, forasmuch as in it is conteyned GODS true word, setting forth his glory, and also mans duety. And there is no trueth nor doctrine necessarie for our iustification and euerlasting saluation, but that is (or may bee) drawne out of that fountaine and Well of trueth.\textsuperscript{47}

Revealed within the foregoing is the perception that the chief end of human beings is the care of their eternal well-being. For Cranmer and others, sinful humanity finds its justification and salvation in Christ and the truth of God on these matters is deemed to lie in scripture. As is inferred in the Church of England’s Sixth Article, no other truth or doctrine from any human source, including the papacy and Church Councils, is necessary for salvation. Thus, and in line with the title of the homily, Cranmer strongly encourages everyone to read and imbibe God’s holy word:

Let vs night and day muse, and haue meditation and contemplation in them. Let vs ruminate, and (as it were) chew the cudde, that we may haue the sweet iuice, spirituall effect, marrow, hony, kirnell, taste, comfort and consolation of them (Psalms 56.4). Let vs stay, quiet, and certifie our consciences, with the most infallible certainty, trueth, and perpetuall assurance of them. Let vs pray to GOD (the onely authour of these heauenly studies) that wee may speake, thinke, beleeue, liue and depart hence, according to the wholesome doctrine, and verities of them.\textsuperscript{48}

Together with other evidence, Elliott writes of Cranmer’s perspective, It cannot be doubted that Thomas Cranmer believed in the supreme authority of the Bible. At a relatively early age, he had discovered the secret of its riches and the persuasion that this insight afforded him

\textsuperscript{47} Cranmer, \textit{A Fruitful Exhortation To The Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture}. The Books of Homilies were affirmed for their godly and wholesome doctrine, by Article XXXV of the Church of England’s \textit{XXXIX Articles of Religion}. The Homily reveals further the value of scripture in the words, “If it shall require to teach any trueth, or reprooue false doctrine, to rebuke any vice, to commend any vertue, to giue good counsell, to comfort or to exhort, or to doe any other thing requisite for our saluation, all those things (sayth Saint Chrysostome ) we may learne plentifully of the Scripture. There is (sayth Fulgentius) abundantly enough, both for men to eat, and children to sucke. There is, whatsoeuer is meet for all ages, and for all degrees and sorts of men. These Bookes therefore ought to bee much in our hands, in our eyes, in our eares, in our mouths, but most of all in our hearts. For the Scripture of GOD is the heauenly meat of our soules (Matthew 4.4), the hearing and keeping of it maketh vs blessed (Luke 11.28), sanctifieth vs (John 17.17), and maketh vs holy …

\textsuperscript{48} Cranmer, \textit{A Fruitful Exhortation}. 
became the governing factor for all his subsequent theology. As such he was a typical reformer. The great goal of Cranmer’s life was to share the scriptures, as he had come to know them, and to ensure that their newly reconstituted place at the heart of both church and state might continue long after his personal influence was gone.\textsuperscript{49}

While Cranmer and other English reformers viewed scripture as ultimate authority, they were not nearly as stringent on the need for all things to be brought under biblical precedent and were more conciliatory toward conservative opinion.\textsuperscript{50} In matters of church order and ceremonies they were more open to the recognition of the power of reason and the authority of the early Fathers than some of their compatriots, especially those north of the Scottish border.\textsuperscript{51}

2.5  \textbf{John Wesley: a passion for scripture and “the quadrilateral”}

Unlike Calvin, Knox, and Cranmer, Wesley lived in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. The struggles that led to reform, the inquisitions, disputations, and martyrdoms, were things of the past. The later context had its own concerns, however, and any reading of Wesley, \textit{inter alia}, must view his work through the lenses of: the early stages of the Enlightenment, Wesley’s perception that the broader English Church had now strayed, and Wesley’s Arminian theological slant. In the midst of his prolific writings, nonetheless, one again finds a great love of scripture. Wesley held scripture to be as authoritative as did any of the reformers before him. In the Preface of his “Sermons on Several Occasions,” he outlines his passion for scripture,

\textsuperscript{49} Elliott, 8.
\textsuperscript{50} MacCulloch emphasizes the conciliatory nature of \textit{The Book of Common Prayer}. He states that it was conciliatory to conservative opinion on vestments and the use of candles, for instance, although the original intent was to make more progressive changes later. MacCulloch, \textit{Cranmer}, 410ff.
\textsuperscript{51} Reardon, 248. I thank Alan Hayes for pointing out that the role of scripture and matters of church order and ceremonies is complex. See the Preface to the 1549 Prayer Book and the essay, “On Ceremonies.” Also, see MacCulloch, \textit{Cranmer}, 383, regarding the banning of Candlemas candles, Ash Wednesday ashes, and Palm Sunday palms.
I am a spirit come from God, and returning to God: just hovering over the great gulf; till a few moments hence, I am not more seen! I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing, the way to heaven: how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way; for this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book! O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri*.\(^{52}\)

When it comes to his thought on the derivation of scripture, Wesley writes,

It may be observed *that*, the word of the living God, which directed the first patriarchs also, was, in the time of Moses, committed to writing. To this were added, in several succeeding generations, the inspired writings of the other Prophets. Afterward, what the Son of God preached, and the Holy Ghost spake by the Apostles, the Apostles and Evangelists wrote. This is what we now style the Holy Scripture: this is that word of God which remaineth forever: of which, though heaven and earth pass away, one jot or tittle shall not pass away. The scripture therefore of the Old and New Testament, is a most solid and precious system of Divine truth. Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess. It is the fountain of heavenly wisdom, which they who are able to taste, prefer to all writings of men, however wise, or learned, or holy.\(^{53}\)

Herein, Wesley minimizes the human aspect of the origin of scripture. He sees it very much as originating with revelation and we can note the phrases, “The word of the living God” directing the patriarchs, “the inspired writings of the other prophets,” Christ’s preaching, the Holy Spirit’s speaking “by the apostles.” Scott Jones suggests, therefore, that for Wesley, “Revelation is … a faithful rendering of the message God gave to human beings. The messengers faithfully transmit what they were given and act as conduits of

\(^{52}\) John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions* Vol.1 (1746), preface, in *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984 - ), Vol.1 §5: 104-6. This edition is hereafter written as *Works* (BE). Wesley, of course, does not mean by “*homo unius libri*” that he reads only one book. He read widely and was a scholar. By the phrase, he infers, simply that the Bible was a work like no other. It was unapproachable in terms of its insight into God, salvation, and eternal life. See Randy Maddox, “John Wesley – “A Man of One Book,”” in Joel B. Green and David F. Watson, eds. *Wesley, Wesleyans, and Reading Bible as Scripture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 3-18, 277-280.

the divine message.”

God is thus considered “the author” of scripture and this means that for Wesley the content is assured and authority certified. So much is this the case that even in those passages in which Paul states, “I have no command from the Lord,” Wesley deems there to be a “level” of inspiration at work, a “divine light” that delivers the treasure of God. This high view of inspiration, according to Jones, led Wesley to believe unquestionably in the infallibility of scripture.

Intriguingly, Wesley was also a textual scholar who was not averse to engaging in text critical work to determine the best possible text. He used the standard scholarly tools of his day and owned, or had access to, a number of manuscripts as well as the best critical text, the 1734 work of Bengel. In his *Explanatory Notes*, he makes numerous corrections to the King James Version; yet, Randy Maddox notes that Wesley’s critical studies were limited. Whereas Thomas Hobbes, Richard Simon, and Benedict Spinoza were applying critical analysis and challenging traditional assumptions about authorship and historicity, the response of many 18th century Anglican scholars, including Wesley, was defensive. He retained traditional assumptions about text and authorship and was unwilling to accept the possibility of error in the text.

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56 Jones, 25. In a letter from 1776, Wesley wrote, “I read Mr. Jenyns’s admired tract, on the “Internal Evidence of the Christian Religion.” He is undoubtedly a fine writer; but whether he is a Christian, Deist, or Atheist, I cannot tell. If he is a Christian, he betrays his own cause by averring, that “all scripture is not given by inspiration of God; but the writers of it were sometimes left to themselves, and consequently made some mistakes.” Nay, if there be any mistakes in the Bible, there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth.” *Journal*: Wednesday, July 24, 1776.
Wesley very much encouraged his followers to devote themselves to the Bible. He deemed that one could not be a good theologian or Christian without being a good student of the Word. He felt that the scriptures effected Christian living, words, actions, and “tempers” which Wesley defined as the fundamental character disposition. Sinful actions and words, he believed, flowed from corrupted tempers and thus sin needed addressing at deep levels. Maddox points out that for Wesley, a recovery of holy tempers occurs with attentive reading of scripture such that scripture reading becomes a means of grace as the Spirit works in the heart of the reader.

In recent years, there has been much discussion on Wesley’s view of authority and a so-called Wesleyan quadrilateral. It is often thought that Wesley posited scripture, tradition, reason, and experience as equal sources of authority. In this regard, Scott Jones has done Wesleyan scholarship a great service by clarifying Wesley’s understanding of the terms and adding a fifth potential authority for Wesley, namely, the Church of England. Jones correctly notes that the fourfold view of authority is not directly attributable to Wesley and that the way many today understand the terms of the quadrilateral is anachronistic. Wesley, for instance, was sceptical of tradition in general terms. In his work, Popery Calmly Considered, he noted how Roman Catholics understood tradition to be those points of faith and practice handed down in the church.

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60 Maddox, “The Rule…” 32.

61 See below § 4.4.

62 Jones, see ch. 3 & esp. 62ff.

from generation to generation.\textsuperscript{64} Many of these, thought Wesley, had no scriptural precedent whatsoever. Similarly, when it came to the general works of the great doctors of the church, he had an appreciation for the post-apostolic Fathers but believed the Church quickly fell away from a pure Christian faith. Again, with many reformers he least trusted mediaeval works.\textsuperscript{65} Thus, according to Jones, any attempt to view broad tradition or even catholic tradition as a whole as authoritative for Wesley is a gross misrepresentation.\textsuperscript{66}

With regard to reason as an authority, Wesley lived in the early years of the Enlightenment. Although in many ways he was an advanced thinker, he understood reason, not as Descartes or Locke would have it, but as referring to what was reasonable and that which the common, sensible person would understand.\textsuperscript{67} He further defines reason in terms of true apprehension, judgement, and discourse, believing that it was something used in common life and was necessary for the understanding of scripture. By itself, however, he believed that reason was unable to lead a person to God. Thus, according to Jones, for Wesley, reason must always be informed by scripture.\textsuperscript{68}

With regard to the Church of England, it comes as a surprise to some that the founder of Methodism never parted from the Church of England.\textsuperscript{69} He held in high

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\textsuperscript{65} Jones traces the development of Wesley’s thought even with respect to the early Fathers. Early in his career, Wesley used the writings of the early Fathers at a level almost on par with scripture. Over his career, however, he came to realize that Christianity had fallen away from its purist form even in the apostolic age. Naturally, then, he laid less emphasis on the work of the early Fathers in his later thought unless they were seen to be in agreement with scripture. Jones, 81ff. See also, Maddox, “One Book,” 15.
\textsuperscript{66} Jones, 64.
\textsuperscript{67} The reader may wish to examine Wesley’s sermon entitled: “The Case of Reason Impartially Considered,” in \textit{The Works of John Wesley}, Vol.VI, 350-360.
\textsuperscript{68} Jones, 67ff.
\textsuperscript{69} Unlike some of his followers. In America, Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury helped establish and were the first bishops of a new denomination. The Methodist Episcopal Church held its initial conference in
regard the work of the early reformers and considered the English church especially in its infancy to have been the purist form of Christianity existing. He felt that *The Articles of Religion, The Book of Common Prayer, and The Homilies* together presented as godly a doctrine as was possible. He challenged the church to return to the documents that every Anglican priest had subscribed allegiance to.\(^{70}\) Again, however, Jones notes the subordination of these to scriptural authority.\(^{71}\) The same can be said of Wesley’s use of experience. Wesley held experience to be valuable for understanding and providing assurance of scriptural truth. In reaching his distinctive understanding of sanctification, for instance, observation confirmed for him that sanctification was an act of God at a point of time in contrast to the process that other theologians envision sanctification to involve. An appreciation for experience, likewise, led to the understanding that the acts of justification and sanctification may occasionally occur simultaneously in a person’s life.\(^{72}\) Wesley, thus, would use experience to inform his reading of scripture, but he also required the biblical text to support what he experienced. With his high regard for the

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Baltimore in 1784. Wesley’s followers in England did not separate from the Church of England until after Wesley’s death.

\(^{70}\) Jones, 91.

\(^{71}\) Jones, 92. He quotes Wesley’s *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* (London: W. Strahan, 1745). Therein Wesley states “It was not quite clear to me that the Canon he cited was against extemporary prayer. But supposing it were, my plain answer would be: “That Canon I dare not obey; because the law of man binds only so far as it is consistent with the Word of God.” Wesley, *Works*, XI.186.

\(^{72}\) These instances are from the memory of the writer deriving from studies done some years ago. Unfortunately, I have been unable to relocate the references in Wesley’s *Works*. Through personal correspondence, Randy Maddox has kindly pointed me to relevant accounts in Wesley’s *Journal* (23 June 1761), *Works* (BE), 21:331; and *Journal* (6 Aug. 1762), *Works* (BE), 21:384. In addition, Professor Maddox mentions the “Letter to Miss March” (27 June 1760), *Letters* (Telford), 4:100. The point being made is also supported by the work of Scott Jones’ section on “Wesley and Experience,” Jones, 94ff. See especially p.100 where he delineates an instance in which Wesley commented on the experiences of those that felt the work of the Spirit in their lives in terms of physical manifestations. Wesley is here firmly guided by scripture saying, “The utmost I could allow, without renouncing both scripture and reason, was that some of these circumstances might be from God (though I could not affirm they were), working in an unusual manner, no way essential either to justification or sanctification; but that all the rest I must believe to be the mere, empty dreams of an heated imagination.
Bible, it would have been impossible that experience would ever trump, or lead him to question, a scriptural principle.

It is evident that Wesley draws on a number of influences to inform his reading of the Bible. Scott Jones points to a qualified, “quintalateral” group of authorities utilized by Wesley. One wonders, however, given Jones’ work to show that four of the five elements are all subject to the one (scripture), whether we can truly point to a Wesleyan-Quintalateral or, as others pose it, a Quadrilateral? While Wesley may have been a broad thinker who utilized tradition, reason, and experience, he fell firmly into broad Protestant tradition; he had one true authority, the authority of scripture. Indeed, Albert Outler, who initially coined the phrase, “the Wesleyan quadrilateral,” in 1964, later wrote that he wished he had never used it. He disliked the way it was being misconstrued into an “equilateral” and that had not been his intent. 73 We will return to this topic in chapter four with regard to the United Church’s use of the quadrilateral.

2.6 Summary:

In this chapter, we set out to survey the views of scripture held by Calvin and Knox from the Reformed tradition, and Cranmer and Wesley from the English Church traditions. While their views were certainly more complex than we have had opportunity to describe in this context, 74 what has been said provides an overview of general attitudes toward scripture among the reformers. A number of common themes have arisen, the

74 See §2.1, above, note 5. Luther, at times, stood above scripture as judge of what was truly sacred word. Additionally, interpretation was an issue for reformers and many utilized the thoughts of early Church Fathers. Later, Wesley knew of differences between Greek manuscripts and engaged in critical textual analysis.
most significant being the evident appreciation for the word of God and the recognition of its authority in all matters of faith and practice. The source of that authority is commonly affirmed to lie, not with the approval of the church, but with God himself. Some reformers wrote explicitly of God’s authorship of the text, while others inferred something similar using the language of inspiration, revelation, and the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is said to have inspired the creation of the sacred word and bring understanding and assurance to the reader that it is the very word of God. Indeed, the perceived power of this word was such that all people were encouraged to read and engage it for the betterment of their lives and to direct them toward a blessed eternity.

Other commonalities involve a general suspicion of the following: doctrine and practice deriving from the mediaeval church, claims of knowledge deriving from the Spirit alone, the value of human reason (unaided by scripture), and papal or conciliar decrees. For the reformers matters of faith and practice were subject to the judgment of scripture and they sought to reform the church using the Bible as their guide. Knox, in particular, is noted for his stringency in terms of seeking biblical precedent for all of church and Christian life.

Time and thought do not stand still, however, and since the days of the Reformation and Wesley, great philosophic and theological advances have been made. We move on now to describe the developments and difficulties posed by the Enlightenment, modernism, and postmodern thought.
Chapter 3

Authority and Scripture in Modern and Postmodern Worlds

“Authority is not a concept which has fared well in the modern period.”
Richard Bauckham

3.1 From Enlightenment to modernism

The period known as the Renaissance witnessed the growth of education, literary skill, and the study of the humanities (history, poetry, grammar, rhetoric etc.). Along with other factors, these formed the seedbed for the questioning attitudes and independent minds of the reformers. The Reformers were not free thinkers, however. As we have seen, they replaced the authority of the Church with the authority of God in scripture. On-going political changes in Europe aided their causes as the power of the Church and papacy receded in some jurisdictions. It was not long, however, before other forms of authority were questioned as senses of human autonomy and independent reason grew. A new age was dawning with what scholars have termed, the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment is generally held to have begun in the mid-17th century in the aftermath of the Thirty Years’ War. It spanned the remainder of the 17th and 18th centuries and was primarily an intellectual movement that included significant developments in epistemology. Superstitious aspects of mediaeval life were cast aside,

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2 Other factors may include the growth of technology and, significantly, the printing press.
human reason was elevated further, and significant developments were made in, *inter alia*, science, philosophy, society and politics.

The thought of René Descartes (1596-1650), and his interest in the root of knowledge, is generally deemed to be the beginning of the Enlightenment transformation. Descartes held that sense perception was not enough. Too often, he thought, it was subject to error and illusion. Thus, Descartes looked beyond external ways of knowing and began to approach every experience with suspicion and doubt. Methodical doubting led him to question everything, even his own existence. He was moved, however, by the fact that he did doubt and proposed that the act of doubting, in and of itself, proved his existence. He, thus, penned the well-known phrase, “*Cogito, ergo sum*” (I think, therefore, I am). Inner reason, intellect, and logic brought Descartes to this understanding and he deduced that internal, rational thought was the foundation of true knowledge. This foundation was applied to his understanding of the external world and marked a shift in authority away from external elements in favour of the autonomous judgment of the rational mind. Although, Descartes continued in his Catholic faith (though not without moments of questioning), an important piece of the groundwork had been laid which would eventually alter perceptions of Church and biblical authority.

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5 Hence the derivation of the term, “Rationalism.”


7 The summary of Descartes derives from a number of sources including Lose, 8-10; Scott, 11-24; and Callum Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians* (Pearson/Longman, 2005).
In contrast, the empirical method of John Locke, David Hume and others was founded on the basis that rational ideas derive directly from sense perception and external data. Locke rejected the notion that innate ideas were available within the human psyche and in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* he suggested that the human mind was “a blank slate” waiting to be filled with sensory experiences.8 It was these along with subsequent human reflection (reason) that he considered the source of human knowledge. Locke’s insights precipitated the fuller notion of empiricism which, according to Callum Brown, sought to acquire knowledge through “an apparatus of human observation, experience, testing of authenticity, verification, corroboration, and presentation for judgment (or peer review) by others in a value free form.”9 Empiricism thus became the basis of the scientific method and the concept of public knowledge, through the repeatable experiment, was deemed a reliable foundation for all knowing.10

Locke’s epistemology was significantly different to that of Descartes. David Lose comments, however:

While apparently starting at opposite ends of the philosophical spectrum, both rationalists and empiricists held fast to the conviction that some indubitable “first truths” or “universal foundations” could (indeed must) be discovered upon which to ground all knowledge. That is, whether by introspection or observation, both variations of the quest for certainty sought to pierce through the superstition they charged had governed earlier ages and find some indubitable epistemological touchstone.11

Momentous change was in the air and philosophers like Immanuel Kant were encouraging others to utilise their own intelligence and make themselves the judge of

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9 Brown, 25, cf. 13, 16.
10 Scott, 15.
11 Lose, 10.
truth. Traditional authorities, both institutional and intellectual, were being questioned and, eventually, this would include religious authorities. Over time, knowledge of the physical world would be deemed pure knowledge, while knowledge of the metaphysical was more suspect, less “knowable,” and reliant on faith. Scientific knowledge, thus, came to be valued more highly than theological knowledge and, in time, the prized methodologies related to the study of physical sciences found their way into other academic fields, including the humanities and the developing social sciences.

The inherent changes, methods, and freedoms of the Enlightenment brought many advances in knowledge, technology, and life. Human reason and the personal autonomy to think freely were, according to Bernard W. Anderson, “the two cardinal virtues” of what became modernism. By the early twentieth century, with faith in human potential, many thought that humanity was moving onward to ever-greater things. In the words of David Lose, there was “optimism that by the enlightened application of reason, humanity might eradicate disease and suffering, establish a basis for just and moral behaviour, foster personal and social liberation, and subdue nature for the good of all people.” It was a “heady” age.

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13 Bauckham, 6.
15 Lose, 1. The reader will note that this is a very brief survey of the development of Enlightenment thought. For the purposes of this paper, it is not necessary to go into the thought of the Romantic era or the Realism that followed it. The intention is to convey the basis for modern scientific thought that so influenced life in the twentieth century and became the object of postmodern critique.
3.2  Modernity, authority, and the Bible

As Enlightenment thought influenced science and other academic disciplines, its effects were eventually felt in the fields of theology and biblical studies. By the 19th century, if not before, a reasoned and “scientific” approach was beginning, for instance, in textual studies. Increased archaeological endeavours were providing a plethora of partial, and some full, manuscript discoveries. Reasoned scholarship began the difficult process of judging the manuscripts. In the twentieth century they were attributed to textual families and significant criteria were developed to help scholars determine earlier from later sources and more original from less original texts.\(^{16}\) The new discoveries and scientific study led to a superior, eclectic Greek text of the New Testament. This has, of course, some differences with the received texts utilized by the translators of the earlier King James Version of the Bible. The alterations in text, improved knowledge of ancient Hebrew and Greek, and the proliferation of modern English translations have challenged some individuals’ understanding of what is *logos*.\(^{17}\)

Detailed study of the biblical text also helped increase understanding of the development of traditions and sources of the Gospels. With regard to the latter, the early part of the 20\(^{th}\) century witnessed significant development in understanding the relationships between Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Careful and meticulous study examined the order of the texts, terminology, and groupings of material among other

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\(^{17}\) A useful example of the results of improved knowledge of Hebrew may be found in the last verse of the familiar, Psalm 23. The “eternal” language utilized in the translation of the King James Version and others, is corrected in the *New Revised Standard Version* to, “And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.” Here an improved knowledge of Hebrew has brought out a truer English rendering of the Hebrew text. In many ways, the textual work was a continuation of work begun by 15\(^{th}\) century humanists.
things to establish the now broadly accepted two-source theory. Matthew and Luke, it was found, composed their Gospels primarily using the Gospel of Mark and an unknown source “Q” (for the German, Quelle) as sources. Further study identified material deriving from other potential sources as well as Matthaean and Lukan redactions.

About the same time, biblical historians were being influenced by changes taking place in the general field of history. Biblical historians began to look at biblical texts as historical works and examined them as they would any other form of ancient literature. With presuppositions suspicious of the supernatural and miraculous (because they could not be proven or examined empirically), many biblical accounts were labelled myth and legend. Additional historical difficulties were noted where biblical accounts fail to coalesce with archaeological or external historical source evidence. Even between different biblical texts, some incongruities have been noted. The differences, for instance, between the accounts of the Canaanite conquest between Joshua and Judges is intriguing. Likewise, differences between Samuel-Kings and the Chronicler’s version of events in the monarchic era not only raise historical questions but, again, theological questions related to inspiration and authority.

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21 Joshua, for instance, indicates a decisive and quick contest of Canaan whereas Judges reveals a much more ponderous and drawn out campaign in which the Israelites struggled for control. One of the simplest examples of historical issues between Kings and Chronicles is in the use of numbers related to battles. A cursory survey of the footnotes in the New International Version’s text reveals differing numbers of those
significant historical issues have been raised especially with regard to the Lukan and Johannine traditions. In addition, perceived anachronisms in these and other New Testament materials have led many scholars to assert that much of the Gospel material derives not from the time of Jesus but from the early Church. This has led to enormous and plentiful reassessments of the life of Jesus over the past century.

While many more aspects of modern approaches to the Bible, deriving from thought originating with the Enlightenment, could be mentioned here, enough has been said to gain the sense that the results of critical scholarship have had significant influence on perceptions of the Bible’s veracity and hence authority. Of the modernist context and its assessment of Scripture, Brian Walsh wrote,

This culture was confident in the inevitability of human progress and maturity beyond the superstitions of past “mythical” cultures. Therefore, any notion of the abiding authority of such an ancient text was an infantile anachronism at best and a cowardly failure to exercise one’s autonomy at worst. … In the context of such a buoyantly self-confident culture, the Bible did indeed seem like an archaic monument. Subjected to the scrutiny of universal reason the text was either demythologized by left-wing modernists attempting to salvage a kerygmatic core of religious

slain in several battles by David, for instance. The Chronicler appears to aggrandize David to a great extent and extends his military prowess by using greater numbers of opponents slain.

24 See, for instance, E. P. Sanders, The Historical Figure of Jesus (London: Penguin, 1993).
truth, or construed as an inerrant text of propositional truth by right-wing modernists trying to beat the enlightenment at its own game.26

3.3 The rise of postmodernism

For a generation and more now, it has been suggested that western culture has moved beyond modernism into a postmodern era.27 The philosophical impetus for postmodernism is generally connected with the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) on semiology. Saussure is considered the father of contemporary linguistics and semiotics. His study of signs led to the realization that signs are not just words, but may also be images and anything else that provides a message to another. More importantly, he questioned the relationship between a sign and its concrete reality, dividing “signifier” (word/image) from the “signified” (the learned, mental conception of the “object”), and the “signified” from the “referent” (its real object). Saussure determined that signs themselves were arbitrary; any word, sound, or image could represent an object. Callum Brown clarifies this by suggesting that there is nothing in the signifier, “mouse,” for instance, that represents the referenced animal. This is evidenced in the fact that other signifiers close to the word, “mouse” (house, louse, douse etc.), have little in common with the small animal (mouse). Similarly, other small rodents bear signifiers quite unrelated to the sign, “mouse;” evidenced in terms like, “hamster,” or “rat.” Thus, Saussurian thought posited that “language is characterized by an arbitrary link between

26 Brian J. Walsh, “Reimaging Biblical Authority,” Christian Scholar’s Review 26,2 (Winter 1996): 206-220. From a more philosophical perspective, Scott states, “Appealing to the Bible is wrong, in the eyes of many modern people, because the Bible or its interpreters and not the individual self are being viewed as the final authority.” Scott, 17.
27 Some suggest we are now even beyond postmodernism, a post-postmodern era.
signifier and signified, and subsequently an arbitrary link between signified and its object.”

In suggesting this, Saussure brought a level of uncertainty to what individuals can know. In opposition to modernism, which deemed that reality could be known and quantified, Saussure’s work left a gap between signifier and signified, and signified and the referent (reality). The gap was picked up by other scholars and applied to other academic disciplines. Brown states,

> From the 1920s, other linguists were de-coupling signs from the objects they referred to (the referents), transforming many academic disciplines. At the very root of all knowledge, all learning, all academic subjects and all education is language. Words are our very trade. You listen to language in lectures, you read it in books, and you write it in words and signs in emails, text-messages, letters, essays and exams. Saussure’s work undermined the certainty of a connection between a word and a thing, making the link conditional and equivocal. Meaning and the sign separated, leaving many academics with no absolute, scientific certainty that a signifier related to a specific signified through an agreed sign.

One of the main principles of postmodernism, deriving from Saussure’s work is that reality is thus unrepresentable. When it comes to the study of history, for instance, modernist approaches assumed that events occur, can be discovered, analysed, and recorded in a neutral fashion by a skilled historian. With the gap between sign and object or, in this case, event, the value of all historical work is brought into question. This was pushed further by Michel Foucault (1926-84) who, building on Saussure’s thought, doubted the possibility of neutrality and the ability of an observer to construct an unassailable account of reality. With regard to the latter, Foucault argued that because the world is made up of infinite events, big and small, the human capacity to understand

28 Brown, 35f.
29 Brown, 37.
30 Brown, 7.
and state reality is limited. Indeed, a historian can never truly replicate the full intricacies of relationships and events. Furthermore, with regard to neutrality, signs are deemed to be building blocks in the constructions of what humans think reality is. The ordering of these signs is socially constructed in the *langue* or *episteme* of a given culture. The ordering is normative for that time and place and is part of the broader myth system of that culture. Associated with these constructions are complex and hidden meanings which cannot properly relate the reality and myth system of another time and place. Neutrality is, therefore, impossible because observers are too imbued and influenced by their own culture’s discourse and structures to be able to state accurately those of another.

Foucault developed a complex view of the system of human knowledge. In an abbreviated form, he held that the sign is the basic unit of the system in a culture. A group of signs are brought together into a statement in such a way that unwritten linguistic rules dictate the possibilities for the grouping of signs and the grouping is deemed to affect meaning. Where a statement becomes significant, it can be approved by a professional body and enter into general discourse. These become ‘factual’ and ‘obvious’ within the culture group. In turn, groups of discourses enter into the massive body of knowledge and understanding that is the knowledge system, the *episteme*, of a particular culture and period. The *episteme* and discourse are supported, according to Foucault and postmodernists by a complex system of elites such as the state, the scientific

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31 Brown, 46.
32 Does this set the bar too high for historians? It would seem that what is demanded is an impossible recreation of an event, which can never happen as time has moved on.
33 Brown, 47.
34 Brown, 60ff.
establishment, and the church among others. Postmodernists assert that the discourse related to an episteme is difficult to overcome. It is its own disciplinarian, enforces norms, and creates meaning and reality. Roland Barthes (1915-1980) applied this understanding to a study of culture and the durability of bourgeois, imperialist-capitalist culture. Barthes suggested that the dominant system of knowledge and associated discourse serves to normalize the current situation such that a culture’s language and episteme are more useful than force to maintain the status quo. He further suggests, “instead of the world determining the order of our language, our language determines the order of the world.”

An interesting, anecdotal example of this may be observed in various aspects of life in the sub-culture known as The United Church of Canada. The strength of the United Church’s liberal tendencies and social justice commitment are well known. The denomination prides itself in its sensibility, tolerance, and progressive stances and sets itself apart, at least in the minds of some, on those grounds. It has been interesting for this observer on several occasions, however, to witness in Presbytery or Conference settings, how a more “conservative” voice is drowned out by other voices declaring, “But, we are the United Church!” or “That is not the United Church.” When uttered, those words have a disarming power. They silence debate and although undefined, appear to be understood by all in the various courts of the Church.

35 Brown, 37ff.
36 Brown, 42.
37 It is significant how recent this understanding of the United Church is. In chapter four, below, we will see that the United Church was traditionally Protestant, a liberal, evangelical denomination until the 1960s.
38 Perhaps, therefore, even an ostensibly postmodern body develops its own langue, or discourse, which has its own structures and powers within it. Yet one may ask if the foregoing United Church practice is actually more of a modernist move rather than a postmodernist and pluralist one. Some would argue that
As postmodernist thought progressed and was applied to various disciplines, other factors developed. In literary studies, the idea of authorship altered. The concept of the *episteme*, and the notion that language was subject to cultural constructions, meant that it was difficult to be truly creative. Indeed, Foucault noted that creative freedom was probably only possible at the lower levels of the system of knowledge, i.e. that of forming statements.\(^39\) As one moves through the knowledge system toward discourse, society itself, or the dominant class within it, becomes the author and discourses are thought to exist before any “author” circulates them; what is written depends largely on the pre-existent mythological systems within the *episteme*.\(^40\) Thus, literary studies turned away from attempts to discern who the author was and his/her intention. The discourse became all-important and interest shifted to the reader. The reader’s context and the act of interpretation gained significance. Necessarily, a multiplicity of interpretations was affirmed.

The effects of contextuality, differing backgrounds, and culture on understanding, along with the capabilities of a reader, suggest to the postmodern that no authoritative interpretation can exist.\(^41\) Views and interpretations are deemed never to be complete and are always open to alteration as new knowledge and perspectives are attained. Foucault noted that assumptions and understandings even alter over time and, through a number of diachronic studies on perceptions of insanity, punishment, sexuality, the medical clinic, and humanity’s sense of self, he determined that “reality” was subject to change and was

\(^{39}\) Brown, 62ff.  
\(^{40}\) Brown, 60ff., Lose, 23.  
\(^{41}\) Brown, 7.
more a matter of perspective than an unchanging absolute. Any perspective may be
accepted at a certain juncture because of the approval of a governing authority or power
but it is still a perspective, subject to change, and is thus not reality. It is not too great a
leap to recognize that this leads to a suspicion of all claims to have an authoritative
perception and postmoderns are equally suspicious of the powers and structures that
support those perceptions.

Postmodernism is necessarily, therefore, dubious of all truth claims. Whether one
begins with a Saussurian separation of sign and signified or takes up the thought of later
conceptions that language is socially constructed and affected by one’s context and
episteme, the postmodern world is marked by uncertainty, relativism, and pluralism. The
suspicion of all truth claims has necessarily, then, affected perception of metanarratives
and all grand stories. Given the impossibility of reality lying behind such narratives and
the instability of meaning, all grand stories are reduced to myth. Postmoderns are not
saddened in the face of such loss, however, as they find most modern and pre-modern
metanarratives morally unsound, inherently violent (as powers sought to maintain status
quo), and elitist (they marginalized groups such as Jews, Muslims, non-white persons,
homosexuals, and women). They are content to replace them with, to quote Lose,

42 David Lose, 23. An illustration of changes in perceived “reality” diachronically in the same culture may
be found in the US government’s assessment of the Islamic Shiite group. A certain “reality” was presented
during the 1979-81 hostage crisis in Iran. While another was apparent in the early 1990s and 2000s related
to nearby Shiites in Iraq. In the former situation, the Shiites were demonized while, in the latter, they were
highly valorized in the face of a “fiendish,” Saddam Hussein. Notwithstanding the possibility of political
motivation, similar differences in other historical assessments tend to suggest to postmodernists that a
reconstruction of reality is impossible.

43 Terence E. Fretheim, “The Bible as Word of God in a Postmodern Age,” in The Bible as Word of God in
a Postmodern Age, ed. Terence E. Fretheim & Karlfried Froehlich (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 84. Brian
Walls of Certainty: Towards a Critique of Postmodernity and Education, eds. Ian Lambert and Suzanne
Mitchell (Sydney: Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, 1997).
… a heteronomous dissensus of competing claims and voices, where no one idea or voice is privileged over the rest. Instead of an ordered, centred structure, one discovers an undulating and ever developing sense of reality that shifts in response to changing perceptions and convictions. … Thus, rather than seek a universally valid rationality by which to legitimate competing truths-claims, postmoderns tend to call for pragmatic, ever-local determinations of the good, the true, and the beautiful, thereby shifting the process of legitimation to local, rather than global” level.  

3.4 Postmodernity, authority, and the Bible

While there are many more facets to postmodernism, perhaps enough has been said to indicate that it has had a significant effect on how individuals view matters of truth and authority. In the words of Lose,

In one fell swoop, postmodernity has severed the connection between language and its referent, divested history of its purely academic character, banished the pretence of objectivity from the sciences, betrayed the lie of social progress, and killed the authors of literary texts. It has in short irrevocably altered our intellectual landscape. … In a time when, as Yeats penned, “things fall apart” and “the centre cannot hold,” truth, like beauty, seems increasingly to be in the eye of the beholder, and proclamation of a message that claims both ultimate and universal significance seems a dicey venture at best.

Robin Usher & Richard Edwards take this further when they say that, “Postmodernity … describes a world where people have to make their way without fixed referents and traditional anchoring points. It is a world of rapid change, of bewildering instability, where knowledge is constantly changing and meaning ‘floats.’”

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44 Lose, 17. One wonders if the “ever-local” inevitably means that truth, beauty, and meaning are solely in the eyes of the beholder? Logic would require that the “ever-local “ must be reduced inevitably to the autonomous individual alone.
45 Postmodernism has also been associated with, for instance, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstructionism, and postcolonialism. Fuller discussions of these is not critical for the purposes of this thesis.
46 Lose, 1,2.
Several significant losses are inferred in these quotations. The first is the loss of a concept of universal truth. In the postmodern environment there is no possible truth in absolute form and no foundation from which to judge the veracity of any truth-claim. At the risk of being repetitive, this view was founded initially in the decoupling of the relationship between sign and object in semiology and was carried further by those who viewed language as a social construction removed from reality. As Anderson notes,

Postmodernists emphasize the human role in creating a “world” by means of language. This world is a creative projection of the knowing self or the society to which one belongs. There is no such thing as a “real world” (beyond or outside our linguistic perspectives); we live in a “constructed world,” a “work of art” that is continually being created and recreated through the use of metaphor and anthropomorphic expression. Truth is not absolute in this view, but is relative to a particular language world.\(^{48}\)

“Truth” is thus a human construct distinct from reality in a necessarily pluralist world.

In such an environment authority is either lost or is limited to the perception of the autonomous individual. The ultimate end is epistemological nihilism and claims like those of scripture become words in a sea of words.

Second, with the loss of truth and reality, it is no great surprise that postmodernism rejects grand stories and the metanarratives that infuse them. Among them, the grand story of the Bible: the biblical tale of creation, fall, redemption and consummation is held to lack universal significance.\(^{49}\) In a pluralistic world, whether metanarrative or not, scripture becomes one proclamation among many with no more authority or value than others.\(^{50}\)


\(^{49}\) Anderson goes on to ask if Christianity can truly surrender the conviction that Jesus Christ is “the way, the truth, and the life?” 9.

\(^{50}\) Walsh, “Education…,” 6.

\(^{50}\) James Smith, however, argues that Jean-François Lyotard’s suspicion of metanarratives is primarily related to their legitimating appeal to a universal reason. Smith states that a work such as, Homer’s
Third, postmodernity necessitates the loss of anything akin to “revelation” as it is commonly known by Christians and, specifically, a sense of the Bible as revelation. In traditional Christian terms, God is thought to be revealed through the text of the Bible. In the postmodernist sense, however, texts are merely “the material manifestation of a multiplicity of signs, discourses and structures. All three occur only within a text.”\textsuperscript{51} In texts, signs attain meaning from their relationship with other signs and these give materiality to discourse. Discourse, meanwhile, is a knowledge located in structures of langue and culture. Brown follows Saussure’s perception saying, “Textuality is the quality of the non-real. That is, it is composed of many signs, each of which is not a signified, and a signified that is not the referent (the object) but only a concept of it. A text excludes “the real thing” or, as Jacques Derrida said, “There is nothing outside of the text.”\textsuperscript{52} If one accepts Derrida’s thought here, it is inconceivable that any text could convey revelation in the sense of any reality of, or about, God. The scriptures are not, then, revelation; at best they function as a witness to revelation and that in a less than authentic sense depending on how broadly one sees the gaps between signifier, signified, and object. There is, thus, no possibility of a pure stream of revelation or truth about God in Derrida’s thought or the postmodern framework. Texts such as scripture are denied authoritative status and reduced again to “voices” in a pluralistic world.

\textit{Odyssey}, though a grand story, is not a metanarrative that concerns Lyotard because it is but a proclamation, revealing the customs of a culture in narrative form. According to Smith, Lyotard thus distinguishes between a knowledge gained by rationalist or empirical means and a narrative-knowledge. Smith views the Bible as narrative proclamation, suggesting that it ought not be classified as a metanarrative worthy of suspicion in Lyotard’s terms. Smith’s point aside, however, the grand, biblical story would still lack universal significance for the postmodernist. James K. A. Smith, \textit{Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault to Church} (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 65.

\textsuperscript{51} Brown, 94.
\textsuperscript{52} Brown, 94f.
In spite of these issues, some biblical and theological scholars have embraced postmodernism and see value in it. Several have outlined how elements of postmodernism have aided hermeneutical theory and positively altered critical approaches to the study of the biblical text. Terence Fretheim, for instance, has affirmed the new methods of interpretation, which have taken scholarship beyond historical models and revealed neglected aspects inherent in the text related, *inter alia*, to wisdom, creation, women, and the oppressed. He is intrigued by Reader-Response Criticism which has elevated the role of the reader and the act of reading. Meaning, he opines, is not just in the texts and author, but is “created in the act of reading.”\(^{53}\) With postmoderns, Fretheim denies objectivity in interpretation and reminds us how pre-understandings, predispositions, and context affect how a reader understands. The associated acceptance of plurality of readings, while unnerving conventional understandings of authority, is thought by Fretheim to be valuable and may even enhance the authority of the Bible. He believes that it opens the text up to more comprehensive revelatory potential, helps relieve anxiety about “getting it right,” dilutes the control of academic and ecclesiastical powers, and, in its diversity of interpretation, appeals to more people.\(^{54}\)

Walter Brueggemann, likewise, shows appreciation for the postmodern worldview. Brueggemann rejects a direct biblical authority and replaces it with the power of the Bible to call liberated and liberating communities into existence. He states, “Authority has to do with issues of authorization, i.e. how, in a pluralistic world like ours, concrete communities can be authorized to live, act, and hope in a manner which may at times oppose the accepted norm, a manner which can be justified neither scientifically

\(^{53}\) Fretheim, 87.
\(^{54}\) Fretheim, 93-96.
According to Robin Scroggs, Brueggemann hereby “sweeps away all traditional approaches to the authority of the text, denies any primacy of propositional truth in discussions, and puts the evidence for biblical authority in the Bible’s power to create and empower communities. The burden of proof, thus resides in the communities authorized by the Bible.”

Scroggs himself has heard the tenor of postmodern thought and has chosen to reject “authority-language” altogether in favour of the Bible functioning as a “foundational” document. He states, “I propose … that we forthrightly give up any claim that the Bible is authoritative in guidance for contemporary faith and morals.” He goes on to suggest that in the public sphere, it should be viewed as a human document with “no legal authority to determine our ‘now’.” Yet, in using the term “foundational,” he suggests that the Bible be allowed to define Christianity in basic terms as the writings of Marx must define what it means to be a Marxist. Christianity, he thinks, cannot mean whatever one wishes it to be. As a foundational document, the Bible is something that elicits belief, is viewed with utmost respect, yet is open to being dialogued with. In taking this approach, Scroggs may have circumvented the issue of authority but has left us with an uneasy balance of viewing the scriptures with respect alongside other forms of wisdom and authority. How one ranks the various influences (authorities) is open to question and may not be easy to determine.

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56 Scroggs, 22. Scroggs questions Brueggemann’s logic. In asking, “What sort of community justifies the claim that the Bible is authoritative?” Brueggemann suggests it is a community of obedient practice – those that provide energy, courage, and legitimacy for action against the destructive tendencies embedded within our civilization. Here, however, the criterion is essentially a contemporary judgment, there is nothing that truly justifies this type of community to be an authority-giving community. Scroggs, 22.

57 Scroggs, 23.
The responses of more conservative scholars toward postmodernism have been broad. Middleton and Walsh, and Grenz and Franke, engage postmodernism and appreciate elements of it. They reveal openness to diverse viewpoints (pluralism) and affirm that postmodernism has opened the door for a renewed Christian mission. In the contemporary environment, equality and pluralism suggest that Christianity no longer need feel oppressed or ridiculed, it can be a respected part of a multiplex society. Middleton and Walsh, after a helpful description of postmodernism, reveal a scripture that borders on postmodern in itself. For them, the God of the oppressed, comes to the aid of people in bondage, individuals who are marginalized and struggling: the widow, the orphan, and those who have experienced injustice. For these individuals especially, the Bible offers a far-reaching, transformative hope. The evident ties with postmodern themes, however, are perhaps to be looked upon as surface ties. They are not, for Middleton and Walsh, evidence of deep, structural similarities between biblical faith and postmodernity and they reject postmodernism’s rejection of all grand stories. Walsh would later write that in the face of postmodern culture Christians must proclaim their story. They must, he says, “have the audacity to proclaim the liberating story of God’s redemption of all creation. This means we must tell and live that story in such a way that it puts the lie to the postmodern critique of all metanarratives as inherently violent.”


59 Middleton & Walsh, 87ff, 172ff.

60 Walsh, Educ., 6f. Elsewhere, in spite of a willingness to work with postmodern culture, he reveals a traditional view of the Bible’s relation to God. He writes, “I will take it as a given that the Bible is not only inspired by God but that it is also meaningful to speak of God as the ultimate Author of the Bible.” Walsh, “Reimaging Biblical Authority,” 210.
Postmodernism also has its detractors in the theological community. A. J. Conyers, contends that, like its predecessor (modernity), postmodernity is fundamentally anti-gospel. Conyers reaches this conclusion in seeing Foucault and Derrida, not in terms of critics of modernity, but as individuals attempting to save modernity by throwing overboard elements of it while saving the core. The core, Conyers defines as, “not individualism *per se*, but the individual without God – the autonomous individual. And it is not a rationalism *per se*, but a rationalism that is capable of making human beings autonomous.” Postmodernity is loyal to these aspects of modernity, says Conyers, “while posing as its critic.” For the obvious reason that it begins with the individual without God, Conyers thinks that postmodernism can never be used as a template for the gospel.

N. T. Wright likewise rejects postmodernism through a critical response to its suggestions about constructions of reality, its denial of truth, and its pluralism. Wright maintains that it is possible to uncover truth and historical reality at reasonable levels. Others, such as David Scott, reject postmodernism outright. After a brief discussion of the postmodern challenge to biblical authority, Scott simply states, “Fortunately, for Christian faith, the Bible’s authority resides not in the Bible itself but in the God to whom

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Brian McLaren likewise reveals significant engagement with postmodern culture in his trilogy beginning with, *A New Kind of Christian*. McLaren without mining philosophical postmodernism is quite open to pluralism, uncertainty, exploration of variations of truth and practice, and letting autonomous individuals think broadly about faith. While culturally effective, his openness does tend to undermine the authority of scripture and at times one is left to wonder what grounds his own modified, evangelical beliefs.

62 Conyers, 303.
63 Conyers, 303.
scripture witnesses. And that God establishes God’s own authority through the Bible and the Church, despite the finitude and fallibility which mark all things creaturely.”

3.5 A brief critique

Many approaches are evident in the secular and Christian academic worlds toward postmodernism. The approaches themselves suggest that the authority issue is complex with some feeling that they can embrace postmodernism, others embracing it in part, while yet others reject it outright. This writer’s understanding of Christianity is such that he has to agree with scholars like Richard Bauckham who maintains that postmodernism is less hospitable to the Bible’s claim to truth than modernism. Additionally, it is not at all clear that postmodern thought is entirely helpful in its views. The following is offered by way of critique.

As one reads postmodernism thinkers, the logical end of the presuppositions and ideas seems to go nowhere but fragmentation, meaninglessness, and nihilism. The decoupling of sign and object, for instance, has led to the denial that reality and truth are representable in human language and thought. While recognizing the arbitrary nature of signs (signifiers) as they relate to the signified (the mental conception of the referent), one wonders if the distance perceived to lie between the signified and its referent (real object) is as great as some postmodernists believe. Many postmodernists utilize Saussure and make that distance so great that there is little or no relationship. Yet, is it necessary to go that far? Is it possible to view the signified as an adequate approximation of the referent? Experience shows that if someone points and yells, “mouse!” most people

65 Scott, 24.
66 Bauckham, 8.
know from an early age that they should not expect to see an elephant. The sign provides a basic reality from which individuals can live and act. Of course, the one who yelled may not know the difference between a mouse and other small rodents, but the category “mouse,” yelled for all to hear, is enough to convey to others something akin to a mouse and they will act accordingly. In the real world, people live with approximations, possibility, and plausibility all the time and, perhaps, that is enough.

This thought may be applied to the work of historians. Whereas postmodernism would suggest that reality is so diverse and great that a historian can never hope to record all associated with a particular event, the first question that must be asked is, “Have postmoderns set the bar too high?” Are they suggesting that reality is only conveyed by a total recreation of an event? Do they, thus, set up an impossible standard, if for no other reason than the fact that time has moved on and will have altered elements within any reconstructed reality? Perhaps, however, historical approximations of what occurred are all that are needed in order to comprehend the past, and to live and learn from it. Of course, these approximations may be reworked as new evidence arises, but the inability to recreate the totality of an event, does not necessitate that all careful, historical writing be deemed meaningless or erroneous. Indeed, it seems that too often postmoderns rush to suggest that failure to grasp the totality of reality is no reality at all.

When we apply the same argument to textuality, one may question whether it is ultimately true that there is nothing beyond the text. Could a text approximate reality well enough for us to live by? Allan Megill warns against “the dangers of denying all reality that we ourselves have not created.” He concretizes the problem that Derrida’s deferral of meaning causes and states, “If one adopts, in a cavalier and single-minded
fashion, the view that everything is discourse or text or fiction, the \textit{realia} are trivialized. Real people who really died in the gas chambers at Auschwitz or Treblinka become so much discourse.”\textsuperscript{67} Perhaps again, the perceived distance between text and reality is overdone and texts can convey enough that we understand reality in an essential form.

Finally, it must be pointed out that the perceived loss of universal truth and notion of pluralism in postmodern thought are equally troublesome. Both fall upon their own swords. When it comes to truth, it is incredibly easy for the philosophical novice to proclaim, “There is no truth!” Logic would demand the response, however, “Is that, in itself, true?” Similarly, when one thinks through the postmodern penchant for pluralism and its denial of overarching truths, it becomes difficult to accept postmodernism as an overarching truth. One may ask, what makes the postmodern view of the world and reality and texts and signs true? Furthermore, why is it a better explanation of things than other worldviews and grand stories? In a completely pluralistic world, there are no grounds for determining an answer, let alone the value of postmodernism itself.

These critiques aside, it is evident that much of Canadian culture has taken on significant aspects of the postmodern worldview. In spite of inherent difficulties, pluralism, suspicions of truth claims and grand stories, and the autonomy of the individual are all part of current culture. Along with late modernist views, these have affected religious beliefs, acceptance of authority (including biblical authority), and in terms of Church are perhaps part of the various factors that have led to the widespread decline of the Church in the West. In the last few pages, a limited critique of a foundational element of postmodernism has been offered, suggesting that perhaps there is

less distance between sign and object than is commonly thought and that it is possible for language and text to carry enough reality for us to live by and learn from. It suggests that if God was indeed revealed in history, human beings could pass on enough of that reality to be meaningful. Whether, of course, one trusts the authors and accounts of scripture, however, is still a matter of faith and individual choice. Authority it would seem is still in the hands of the autonomous individual and his or her faith.

The effects of postmodernism have not only been felt in western culture, but also in the church that is a part of that culture. Many Christians, and members of the United Church among them, freely embrace pluralism, autonomy, and a hermeneutic of suspicion toward claims of truth and authority. The next chapter traces the development of United Church views on scripture and authority. In it we will see how United Church thought shifted under the influences of modernism, critical scholarship, liberation theology, and postmodernism to the point that one scholar suggests that authority for the Church has become a postmodern fluid concept, lacking a “specific and grounded epistemic centre.”

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68 Anderson, 14, 16.
Chapter 4

The Evolving Role of Scripture in the United Church

“the normative centre of authority, which for several hundred years had been firmly rooted in the Bible has … largely evaporated.” Robert Fennell¹

We now jump from the reformers and subsequent developments of thought to the specific world of The United Church of Canada that forms the immediate context of this study. In this chapter, we will seek to clarify the developing role of scripture within the Church through its denominational publications. Although the United Church is relatively young in years, it has engaged in a significant number of studies that have touched on the role of the Bible. In order to make the task manageable, however, the material studied must be limited. It is, of course, necessary to take account of the official “subordinate standards” of the church; notably the Basis of Union (1908; hereafter, BU), A Statement of Faith (1940; ASOF), and A Song of Faith (2006).² Beyond these, this study will focus primarily on the role of scripture found within documents relating to developing views of marriage, divorce, and sexual orientation. These have been chosen because the topics engendered much discussion within the denomination and, it was thought, the documents would provide good evidence of the changing approaches to

scripture over the course of the twentieth century. One additional important document for the study is *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture* published in 1992. We will examine it near the end of §4.4, below.

4.1 The early years: union and statements of faith

The United Church of Canada is the result of the merger of the Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational, and Union Churches. The possibility of union had been spoken of since the latter part of the nineteenth century, however, it was in 1904 that the uniting denominations agreed to establish a Joint Committee on Church Union. The individual denominations each designated representatives to form a statement of intent, faith, and polity that would be used to test official denominational interest in union. A lengthy, detailed and, according to Samuel Chown, harmonious process ensued, leading in 1908 to *BU*. The document was received and affirmed by the highest courts of each denomination in subsequent years. Nevertheless, due to on-going debate and division, especially within the Presbyterian tradition, the union was not formalised until 1925.

*BU* contains Twenty Articles of Doctrine. Its preface reads:

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3 The Evangelical United Brethren also joined on 1st January, 1968.
6 The appearance of harmony in Chown’s work masks underlying issues and controversies around union, particularly from those within the Presbyterian tradition. See Airhart, xviii f. and her second chapter entitled, “Controversy and the Construction of Identity.” Also, Michael Bourgeois, “Awash in Theology: Issues in Theology in The United Church of Canada,” in *The United Church of Canada: A History*, ed. Don Schweitzer (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012), 259-278. Perhaps, however, the perception of harmony was due to the passage of time before Chown wrote his history as well as the possibility that harmony was felt more within the leadership and union committee representatives of the respective denominations than among the membership of the churches at large.
We, the representatives of the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregational branches of the Church of Christ in Canada, do hereby set forth the substance of the Christian faith, as commonly held among us. In doing so, we build upon the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone. We affirm our belief in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the primary source and ultimate standard of Christian faith and life. We acknowledge the teaching of the great creeds of the ancient Church. We further maintain our allegiance to the evangelical doctrines of the Reformation, as set forth in common in the doctrinal standards adopted by The Presbyterian Church in Canada, by The Congregational Union of Ontario and Quebec, and by The Methodist Church. We present the accompanying statement as a brief summary of our common faith and commend it to the studious attention of the members and adherents of the negotiating Churches, as in substance agreeable to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures.7

In setting out the “substance of the Christian faith,” the authors sought to be true to the historic Christian faith and to each denomination’s expression of it. Difficulties were faced, for instance, with Calvinist and Arminian expressions of theology, but each denomination shared the core aspects of Protestant thought. The frequent use of the word “common” is notable in the Preface as the uniting denominations sought to set aside disagreements in peripheral matters in favour of the greater good and fulfilling Jesus’ command to be one. Thus, regarding the broad faith, they affirm continuity by stating that they “build upon the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets,”8 that they uphold the Old and New Testaments as “the primary source and ultimate standard of Christian faith and life,” and that they affirm “the teaching of the great creeds of the ancient church.” In an effort to show continuity with their individual traditions, it is specified that they hold jointly the “evangelical doctrines of the Reformation” as set forth by the individual doctrinal standards of each denomination.

7 BU in The Manual, ¶2.3.0.
8 This is a common refrain in the writings of reformers and reflects the thought of Ephesians 2:20. “The prophets” in that verse are probably to be understood as first century prophets of the gospel, cf. Eph.3:4-6; 4:7-16.
Within the Twenty Articles of Doctrine themselves, Article II, “Of Revelation” touches on scripture. It states:

We believe that God has revealed Himself in nature, in history, and in the heart of man; that He has been graciously pleased to make clearer revelation of Himself to men of God who spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit; and that in the fullness of time He has perfectly revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, who is the brightness of the Father’s glory and the express image of His person. We receive the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, given by inspiration of God, as containing the only infallible rule of faith and life, a faithful record of God’s gracious revelations, and as the sure witness of Christ.9

Article II affirms revelation in five forms: in nature, history, the heart of human beings, biblical “prophets”, and in the incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ.10 Following other Protestant denominations and the Protestant reformers, the Old and New Testaments are affirmed as “a faithful record of God’s gracious revelations and a sure witness to Christ.” They are said to be “inspired by God” and as such are the Christian Church’s “only infallible rule of faith and life.” Kilpatrick would later comment that the scriptures were hereby deemed to be “indispensable, trustworthy, and sufficient” as they instruct in faith, guide life, record the process of revelation, and bear witness to Christ.11

By today’s standards, BU represents a conservative statement of the uniting denominations’ theology. Some, especially in the years before the union was formalised, questioned whether the statement was too conservative and not reflective enough of the

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9 “Article II,” BU ¶ 2.3.2
10 Kilpatrick maintains that the first three forms of revelation are universal while scripture and the revelation in Christ are more specific and clear revelations of God’s being. Kilpatrick, 94.
11 Kilpatrick, 97f. Before leaving this section it is worth noting that Article VIII “Of the Holy Spirit,” reaffirms the brief mention of the Spirit’s role in illuminating the writers of the sacred word. It states, “We believe that He has spoken by holy men of God in making known His truth to men for their salvation.” It could also be argued that Article VIII may hint that the Spirit is involved in the interpretation of scripture when it affirms that the Spirit dwells in every believer as the Spirit of truth. Other Articles within the uniting denominations’ statements of faith make this clearer. See, for instance, sections V and VI in “Of the Holy Scripture,” in The Westminster Confession (1646), http://presbyterian.ca/resources-od/ (accessed 15th June, 2013).
spirit of the age or the contemporary theological world. One wonders, however, if a more progressive statement would have alienated some and curtailed the unifying process before it had a chance “to get out of the gate.”

In the latter years of the 1930s, The United Church of Canada sought to set forth the Christian faith again in terms more suited to its generation. In doing so, the authors of *A Statement of Faith (ASOF)* sought to be true to scripture as well as the universal church. Thus, they affirmed scripture and the subordinate standards: the Creeds of the universal church, the Confessions of the Reformed Churches, and *BU*. The statement on “The Holy Scriptures” is found in Article IX and reads:

> We believe that the great moments of God's revelation and communication of Himself to men are recorded and interpreted in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament.

> We believe that, while God uttered His Word to man in many portions progressively, the whole is sufficient to declare His mind and will for our salvation. To Israel He made Himself known as a holy and righteous God and a Saviour; the fullness of truth and grace came by Jesus Christ. The writings were collected and preserved by the Church.

> We believe that the theme of all Holy Scripture is the redemptive purpose and working of God, and that herein lies its unity.

> We believe that in Holy Scripture God claims the complete allegiance of our mind and heart; that the full persuasion of the truth and authority of the Word of God contained in the Scripture is the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts; that, using Holy Scripture, the Spirit takes of the things of Christ and shows them unto us for our spiritual nourishment and growth in grace.

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13 At the time, debates between fundamentalists and modernists were heating up.

14 See the “Preamble,” *ASOF*. 
So we acknowledge in Holy Scripture the true witness to God's Word and the sure guide to Christian faith and conduct.\textsuperscript{15}

By today’s standards, \textit{ASOF} is traditional in scope and form, and moderate in wording. Nonetheless, there are interesting areas of continuity and discontinuity between it and \textit{BU}. First, a reference to the concept of general revelation is notably absent from \textit{ASOF}. This element was prominent in Calvin’s \textit{Institutes}, \textit{The Westminster Confession}, and \textit{BU} and it is unclear why it should be omitted in this statement.\textsuperscript{16} Second, areas of continuity with earlier tradition are evident as \textit{ASOF} makes reference to the sufficiency of scripture,\textsuperscript{17} the idea that scripture is the sure guide to faith and conduct, and the concept that the Holy Spirit persuades the Christian of the truth and authority of the scriptures. The interesting thing about these areas of continuity is that the first and third items mentioned are not directly continuous with \textit{BU}. Rather, they circumvent the \textit{BU} and derive their thought from earlier traditions. The sufficiency of scripture is prominent within The Church of England’s VI\textsuperscript{th} Article of Religion, affirmed by Wesley, as well as within \textit{The Westminster Confession}.\textsuperscript{18} The work of the Spirit to persuade and assure about the authority of scripture is found in \textit{The Westminster Confession} and Calvin.\textsuperscript{19}

Third, a number of new elements may be noted in \textit{ASOF}. These include the concept of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{15} “Article IX,” \textit{ASOF}.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} See John Calvin, \textit{Institutes of the Christian Religion}, trsl. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979 reprint (orig.1559; trsl.1845)), I.I-V. Also: \textit{WC} I.i; and \textit{BU}, II.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} The authors word the section differently than, for instance, the Anglican/Wesley Article. Gone is the Reformation context and issues with papal and conciliar decrees. The authors of \textit{ASOF} are more concerned with the progressive nature of revelation and state merely: “the whole is sufficient to declare His mind and will for our salvation.”
  \item \textsuperscript{18} The Church of England, XXXIX Articles of Religion, Article VI. This Article is the same as Article V of Wesley’s XXV Articles sent to the American colonies for the people called Methodists. http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content.aspx?c=L4KmN1LlhH&b=5068507&ct=6466481&notoc=1 (accessed 12\textsuperscript{th} June, 2013). They are also printed in Chalmers, Appendix 3, 296. Also see, \textit{WC}, I.vi.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} \textit{WC}, v. Calvin notably states, “… those who are inwardly taught by the Holy Spirit acquiesce implicitly in scripture, that scripture, carrying its own evidence along with it, deigns not to submit to proofs and arguments, but owes the full conviction with which we ought to receive it to the testimony of the Spirit.” Calvin, I.vii.5. Cf. “Article VIII” in \textit{BU}.
\end{itemize}
God’s revelation being “recorded and interpreted” in scripture, the progressive nature of revelation, the preservation of the sacred material by the church, an attempt at describing the unifying theme of scripture, the concept of scripture being “a witness” to the Word, and the idea that the Spirit re-animates the Word in the Christian’s heart.

Two of these new elements reveal general trends affecting the United Church. First, the concept of God’s “revelation and communication” being “recorded and interpreted” is of interest. Broad developments in the fields of biblical studies and theology were being felt within the United Church at the time and these affected perceptions of revelation. Thus, unlike those who would affirm scripture in itself as revelation, the authors of ASOF took the position that “great moments of God’s revelation and communication,” are “recorded and interpreted.” In so doing, they positioned scripture one or two steps removed from revelation itself. It will be noted further that the word, “infallible” is omitted from ASOF, whereas it had been used in the BU. Scripture, while still authoritative, is now a “witness” to revelation and “a sure guide to Christian faith and conduct.” The word “witness” in ASOF is probably to be interpreted more broadly than its intent in BU especially as the effects of neo-orthodoxy were being felt broadly within the academic aspects of church life.

The influence of existentialism was also taking hold in theological circles.20 In the penultimate paragraph of ASOF’s article on scripture, the work of the Spirit may not be described in explicitly existentialist terms, yet it is apparent in the influential commentary on ASOF by John Dow. Therein Dow suggested that the Spirit takes the

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20 See Phyllis Airhart’s discussion of this era in her chapter, “The Search for a Faith for Sociable Souls,” Airhart, 102-125. Airhart deals with the fundamentalist – liberal debate along with the influences of empiricism, neo-orthodoxy, existentialism, religious naturalism, process thought, secularism, and self transformation.
ancient word, makes it contemporary, and confronts individuals in the depth of their being. This is not attained, he believes, by gaining knowledge or by reason; it is the re-animating work of the Spirit.\textsuperscript{21} He states that the Holy Spirit takes a story like that of the cross …

and involves me in it, convicts me as among those who drove the nails and flung the taunts; it strikes deeper than mere drama, a spectacle that purges me by pity or thrills me with horror: it forces me to my knees, to contrition, and to pleading; for it is not pity or horror that grips me, but guilt and shame and personal dishonour. And how to men in that plight the voice of forgiveness should come – that is beyond all reason’s explanation: it is a conviction that must be born from above by the actual operation of the gracious Spirit of God.\textsuperscript{22}

Furthermore, the Spirit’s work is deemed especially true in revealing Christ. With the Spirit, eternity breaks into readings and proclamations of the Word. Plain words become “the Word” and confront individuals with a choice. The Word of God, maintains Dow, is always to be understood as decision.\textsuperscript{23}

Thus, among others, the influences of liberalism, existentialism, neo-orthodoxy, and developments in biblical studies were being felt in The United Church of Canada during this time period. In spite of them, however, the Church continued to take a fairly moderate tone in its statement on scripture.\textsuperscript{24} Scripture is still affirmed as sufficient for

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{21} John Dow, \textit{This is Our Faith: An Exposition of the Statement of Faith of The United Church of Canada} (Toronto: The Board of Evangelism and Social Service, The United Church of Canada, 1943), 179.
  \item Dow, 180.
  \item Dow, 181. The animating work of the Spirit in the reading of scripture is not actually new. Calvin and others had noted it in the years of Reformation, albeit sans any existentialist understanding of it. I include Dow’s work here as it was widely used. For further understanding of Calvin’s position see, Henk van den Belt, “Heinrich Bullinger and Jean Calvin on the Authority of Scripture (1538-1571),” \textit{Journal of Reformed Theology} Vol.5.3, (January, 2011): 310-324.
  \item Airhart suggests that, during this time period, the church attempted to sail between its evangelical past and its liberal leanings. Airhart, 110. Kevin Flatt suggests that modernism had been operative in the theological colleges since the time of the First World War. However, he notes that there was a gap between what was taught in the colleges and what was being taught from the pulpit. Many did not publicise “private” (i.e. modernist) views and the evangelical past of the church continued to be strong especially from the perspective of the pew. Flatt, 297.
\end{itemize}
salvation, it claims the Christian’s complete allegiance, and its truth and authority are stated. It would not be until the 1990s that the meaning of scripture would be addressed again in a formal way by the denomination and we will come to that in §4.4 below. For now, however, we step back and observe how the use of the Bible in the practice of United Church developed from the 1930s on, primarily through the lens of church documents relating to marriage and sexuality. To provide some structure, we will divide the study into three, rather loose, time periods. The early period we designate as pre-1945,\textsuperscript{25} the middle period as 1945-1965, and the latter period from 1965 on.

### 4.2 Scripture in the early years (1925 - 1945)

In the years leading up to 1932, the Board of Evangelism and Social Service sought to address the nature of marriage, the issues of divorce and contraception, the need for pre-marital education, and also attempted to inform clergy decisions related to solemnizing marriages after divorce.\textsuperscript{26} The report, “The Meaning and Responsibilities of Christian Marriage,” reveals the Board struggling with scripture in the midst of pressing social realities. On the divorce issue, the teachings of Jesus given in Matthew 19:3-12 and Mark 10:2-12 are examined in some depth. The interpretative discussion discloses an acceptance of current scholarly approaches regarding the synoptic problem and the associated dating of the Gospels.\textsuperscript{27} In addition, a significantly progressive discussion for the day is evident in the Board’s willingness to contrast the thrust of the aforementioned

\textsuperscript{25} See Airhart, 127, regarding the changes that were noticeable in the United Church and Canada in the post-war era.

\textsuperscript{26} The United Church of Canada. “The Meaning and Responsibilities of Christian Marriage,” Record of Proceedings (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1932), 276-286. Record of Proceedings will henceforth be designated ROP.

\textsuperscript{27} ROP (1932), 278. See again, Streeter or Sanders and Davies.
passages with Jesus’ radical forgiveness in passages such as that of the woman taken in adultery.\textsuperscript{28} In this light, the Board is willing to state, “It is not likely that Jesus would have allowed any legalism to make him ascribe much sacredness to the form of a marriage in which there is no inner reality.\textsuperscript{29} This leads to compassionate discussions of the plight of individuals who have suffered separation and divorce. In the end, however, the Board is unwilling to argue against either the clarity of Jesus’ statement in Mark 10 and Matthew 19 or, perhaps, the views dominant to the culture of the day. In almost an about face, given the direction of the discussion, they affirm lifelong commitment, refuse to normalise divorce, and discourage clergy from solemnizing second marriages while former partners are alive.\textsuperscript{30}

“The Meaning and Responsibilities of Christian Marriage,” forms a useful base document for how the United Church, in its early days, engaged scripture. Within it, one finds a marked appreciation for scriptural authority in the midst of deep compassion for those encountering difficult life-situations. Varying biblical traditions are used in a creative discussion emphasizing Jesus’ love for the sinner but, in the end, the authors feel unable to move far beyond Jesus’ direct words in Matthew 19 and Mark 10 and the culture of the 1930s that they were a part of. In response, the 5\textsuperscript{th} General Council was, perhaps, more lenient than the reporting Board. It asked ministers to engage in due diligence when encountering requests from divorced persons to remarry. It advised

\textsuperscript{28} John 8:1-11. The openness of the Committee on social issues is apparent in the Board’s discussions of equality and respect for women, Mark 10:12, \textit{ROP} (1932), 278 & 280; its openness to contraception, \textit{ROP} 1932, 280f.; and the distinction between how the church responds to divorce and remarriage vis-à-vis how the secular state may respond, \textit{ROP} (1932), 279. With regard to the issue of contraception, it is notable that the authors engage broader, sometimes divergent, church tradition by noting stances taken by Roman Catholicism, The Church of England, and The Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America which had also been struggling with the issue. \textit{ROP} (1932), 280.

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{ROP} 1932, 179. Italics mine to clarify the referent of the pronoun.

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{ROP} 1932, 286.
declining to marry those in a relationship that had been the root cause of the dissolution of a previous marriage. In all other cases, the minister is to use discretion and seek to work within the spirit and purport of the Report. General Council, thus, did not categorically prohibit clergy from solemnizing second marriages of divorced persons.\footnote{The United Church of Canada, “Summary of Pronouncements on Divorce by General Councils of The United Church of Canada,” in Marriage Breakdown, Divorce, and Remarriage: A Christian Understanding (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1962), 93. Hereafter referred to as, MBDR.}

\section*{4.3 Scripture in the middle years (1945-1965)}

The issue of marriage continued to be studied within the church after 1932. Just after the Second World War, the “Council Report of the McRuer Commission on Christian Marriage and Christian Home (1946),” upheld the general tenor of the Fifth General Council (1932). It left decisions about the marriage of divorced persons up to the dictates of each individual minister’s conscience.\footnote{MBDR, 94.} Later, the Seventeenth General Council (1956) noted the lack of a firm policy in the Church regarding re-marriage and recommended that ministers only solemnize weddings of divorced persons where there was evidence of repentance and desire for God’s grace and guidance.\footnote{MBDR, 95.} It further recommended a new study of Christian marriage and divorce and it is to the documents associated with this study that we now turn.

The first report of the Commission on Christian Marriage and Divorce was approved by the 19th General Council (1960) and published the following year for study throughout the Church.\footnote{The United Church of Canada, Toward a Christian Understanding of Sex, Love, and Marriage, Report of the Commission on Christian Marriage and Divorce approved by the 19th General Council (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1961). Hereafter referred to as TACU.} Toward a Christian Understanding of Sex, Love, Marriage is a
thoughtful, well-written attempt to grapple with the issues from the perspective of the late 1950s. The Commission discussed the Christian understanding of marriage, responsible parenthood, education for Christian marriage, strengthening marriage and family in society, single life, and marriage failures. The small book is completed with a helpful section of data and statistics about marriage and divorce both from a Church and national perspective.

In the body of the report, the Commission adds scripture references to many points and moderately engages the Matthean and Markan passages mentioned above. Methodologically, the Commission reveals a somewhat progressive stance when it states, “A Christian understanding of sex and marriage must avoid the temptation to find its basis in isolated passages in the Bible, especially if they support literalism and legalism which Jesus denounced. The spirit of Christ as revealed in the whole of the NT is a more certain guide toward truth.” Lest anyone question their ability to define “the spirit of Christ,” they continue shortly thereafter,

A Christian statement about marriage must be in harmony with the spirit of Jesus Christ. But it is not always easy to determine exactly what this requires. Even with the New Testament itself there appear to be differing interpretations of the mind of Christ. For instance, we must ask whether he is stating an absolute moral law or setting forth an ideal for his disciples only when, according to Mark and Luke, he declares that marriage is absolutely binding. If the former is the case, it is notable as the one exception to the general rule that Jesus did not lay down laws binding for conduct.

35 By today’s standards, the report is conservative. It is, for instance, anti-abortion; it rejects artificial insemination with donor sperm; it recognizes divorce as a social issue and sees it as failure, involving suffering and sin, and having negative effect on family and societal life (TACU 4, 30ff.); and it considers homosexual expression to be sinful and deviant (TACU 14ff.). It does, however, continue the church’s pro-contraception stance for family planning. The conservative stance was widely held and accepted at the time. See Earl Lautenslager (sic), “The Marriage Partnership,” Observer, 15 April 1962, 25-27. Also, Earl Lautenslager (sic), “The Marriage Partnership, Part 2,” Observer, 1 May, 1962, 25-27. 
36 TACU, 5.
It seems more in harmony with the whole spirit of the Gospel to regard Jesus as the divine revealer of the underlying purpose and order which affect life in the Kingdom of God rather than as a lawgiver defining social precepts. He declared that the supreme law of life is that we should love God with the whole heart and soul and mind and strength, and our neighbours as ourselves. All the law and the prophets depend on this. It might indeed be simpler for us if we could cite an unequivocal word of Jesus about marriage and divorce as the absolute authority for our position. Instead, we are bound to search the whole Gospel in order to discern with insight and love the demands that his spirit places upon us for the fulfilment of God’s purpose in marriage, amid the real situations of human experience and social complexity."

The interpretive stance implicit to this statement, elevated Jesus’ love above other elements of his thought and behaviour. Potentially, it opened up a more generous attitude toward divorce and remarriage. Yet, again, while showing compassion toward those who had “failed” in marriage, the Commission maintained a traditional view of marriage and did not accept marital breakdown as something that should be normalized. The Report met with the approval of the 19th General Council in 1960. One wonders what influenced the Commission’s position. Was it the culture of the time period, the specificity of Matthew 19 and Mark 10, or were both influences felt?

In their second and final report, approved by the 20th General Council in 1962, the Commission dealt more specifically with marriage breakdown and how the church should respond. The resulting document, *Marriage Breakdown, Divorce, and Remarriage: A Christian Understanding*, is strong with many facets that include papers by well-known biblical scholars along with significant government statistical data and statements. The biblical papers include, “The Jewish Law of Divorce at the time of the NT,” (R. Yaron),

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37 *TACU*, 7.
38 The United Church of Canada, Commission on Christian Marriage and Divorce, *Record of Proceedings* (The United Church of Canada, 1960), 183-186. The *ROP*, 1960 restates some of the Commission’s approach and suggests that the Church’s need to do more to support marriages

In the body of their report, the writers utilize the papers provided by the aforementioned scholars and try to describe aspects of the social context of Jesus versus that of the twentieth century. Not only do they struggle with the text but the authors also look at their subject through the lens of tradition, notably the thought of the 16th century reformers and The Westminster Confession. From their own day, they encourage engagement in social and human sciences and what may be learned from these about feelings and frustrations of individuals with marriage difficulties. They affirm, “These new insights, too, must inform our obedience to Jesus Christ.” They, thus, recognize current social reality and the imperfections of individuals that sometimes lead to marital breakdown. After examining exceptions to lifelong marriage noted in the New Testament text, the Commission encourages the church and society to be more open to divorce when the marriage is marked by a lack of love, hatred, and situations in which the union is in fact destroyed or dead. That being said, the Commission continues to affirm the ideal of lifelong partnership as God’s intent and proceeds to offer some much needed advice to clergy who must balance many elements when determining whether or not to

\[ 40 \text{MBDR, 24.} \\
41 \text{MBDR, 25.} \\
42 \text{Matthew’s exclusion clause in Mt. 19:9 and Paul’s recognition of divorce in 1 Cor. 7:15. They also take note of Jesus’ refusal to pronounce sentence on the woman caught in adultery and his willingness to offer forgiveness (John 8:2-11). MBDR, 22ff.} \\
43 \text{MBDR, 26.} \]
solemnize marriages for divorced persons. Where there is evidence of repentance, change, and the possibility of being successful in a new marriage, ministers may be open to, but are not required to, give the Church’s blessing to new unions.\textsuperscript{44}

Significant to the two reports by The Commission on Marriage and Divorce during this middle period of United Church history is a notable, continued use of the Bible as the ultimate source of the Church’s thought. One may note, however, progression in the level of biblical scholarship from that exhibited in the earlier period. Additionally, critical perspectives, social context, insight from broader Christian tradition, and applicable new insights from the social and human sciences are all used to inform a theological position. The substantive engagement of the Bible in \textit{MBDR}, however, comes with an important methodological change as a “whole gospel approach,” which emphasizes Jesus’ teaching on love and grace, is pitted against other, more specific texts prohibiting divorce. The “whole gospel approach” is deemed to trump an individual text, regardless of its specificity.\textsuperscript{45} The Commission, therefore, while not wishing to normalise divorce and the blessing of new marriages, allows for them, particularly where there is evidence of repentance.

The 1960s and beyond brought great changes to society, particularly change related to sexual mores. By 1965, Mervyn Dickinson boldly challenged the Church’s

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{MBDR}, 27ff. The Report goes on to recognize that the church has a strong role to play in helping children of “broken” families as well as single parents. It also encourages a more forthright and better level of premarital education and counselling for couples (\textit{MBDR}, 30ff., 34, 111ff., 115-117). Finally, the Commission urges the government to appoint a Royal Commission on Divorce to alter current practices of the state (\textit{MBDR}, 113). The report was given general approval by the 20\textsuperscript{th} General Council and recommended for publication and study within the church. “Actions of the 20\textsuperscript{th} General Council,” \textit{Record of Proceedings} (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1962), 244.

\textsuperscript{45} I.e. texts such as Jesus’ prohibition of divorce in Matthew and Mark noted above. While not taking issue with allowances for divorce and remarriage, it should be stated that the methodology cited needs to take place with great care and caution. Where there are existing perceptions of biblical authority, a readiness to over-ride specific texts may be at odds with, or affect, views of that.
position on homosexuality. In the Observer, Dickinson used an argument not unlike MBDR’s approach to scripture. He stated that we no longer live “in Paul’s day,” and downplayed certain texts in favour of the ethic of love and grace that comes from Jesus.46 Again it is a “whole gospel approach,” with the added assumption that no longer living “in Paul’s day” allows the church to circumvent specific Pauline texts. This was one person’s opinion at the time and it took the Church some time to catch up, but already questions were being asked within the church as to whether ancient biblical perspectives were truly applicable to today’s culture.

It is difficult to leave the middle years without mention of the advent of the controversial “New Curriculum” in 1964. Kevin Flatt has noted that the presuppositions for the curriculum included an attempt to narrow the gap between theological colleges, the pulpit, and the pew. For years a modernist and higher critical approach toward scripture had been taught in the colleges but this had not penetrated the thought of the laity to a great extent, nor influenced what was being taught in Sunday School.47 For years United Church Sunday Schools had used a fairly evangelical curriculum; the New Curriculum, however, accepted the findings of the current scholarship on the Bible, theology, and Christian conversion. With regard to scripture, Flatt states,

At the root of the modernist approach was the emphatic conviction that the Bible was a fallible document marked by human frailties. In particular, the consensus of natural scientists and the conclusion of biblical scholars working within the paradigm of higher criticism were the twin lenses that the curriculum authors used to assess the reliability of the biblical text. Put simply, where the outcome of expert human reasoning (as determined by the practitioners of these disciplines) conflicted with the claims of Scripture, Scripture was wrong. Nevertheless, one could salvage meaning

47 Flatt, 295.
from the biblical text, despite its alleged errors and inconsistencies, by carefully extracting ‘spiritual’ or metaphorical truth from accounts that were otherwise bad science or bad history. By driving a wedge between ‘God’s word’ and the actual ‘words’ of the Bible, the curriculum authors freed themselves to determine the former apart from the confines of the latter.

The necessary corollary was the rejection of the idea that the Bible was itself God’s revelation to humanity, and therefore infallible in it teaching – a belief held by evangelicals, including many United Church members, and heretofore implied by the treatment of the Bible in the United Church curricula. 48

Flatt has outlined how the curriculum reveals suspicion about New Testament miracles and considers various aspects of the Old Testament to be mythic. Among mythic elements are the narratives of Noah’s ark, the “Red Sea” event, and the Goliath account. In the New Testament, the nativity story with its report of a virgin birth is questioned. 49 The positions of the New Curriculum fostered headlines in Canadian newspapers and in defending the curriculum, denominational leaders proclaimed that the United Church was “liberal.” In so doing, Flatt argues that they offended the evangelical wing of the denomination. 50 “Seen in perspective,” says Flatt, “the introduction of the New Curriculum was probably the most significant episode in a long and complex process of jettisoning the United Church’s evangelical past.” 51 In addition, he points out that its introduction brought about a significant decline in Sunday School enrolment in

48 Flatt, 301. Parenthesis are Flatt’s. It is apparent that Flatt is coming from a conservative theological position and it is to be questioned whether one can set apart to the degree he does, “the conclusions of biblical scholars working with the paradigm of higher criticism,” from, “the claims of Scripture.” My supervisor, Stuart Macdonald, has also pointed out that Flatt’s position on modernists includes liberal and neo-orthodox approaches under the modernist banner. He questions whether Flatt’s thoughts are accurate in terms of either of those approaches. In his favour, Flatt does alert us to the fact that the New Curriculum questions the historicity of some biblical material which was a change for Sunday School material.

49 Flatt, 294.

50 Flatt, 309.

51 Flatt, 311.
the United Church. While indeed, 1965 did mark a turning point in United Church membership and Sunday School statistics, it is not at all clear that the latter can be blamed solely on the New Curriculum. Other denominations, without the New Curriculum, also experienced declines. That debate aside, however, the New Curriculum’s stance on scripture was indicative of the critical studies being undertaken in theological colleges at the time. The approach would continue to influence United Church clergy and thought in the ensuing years.

4.4 A changing role for scripture: beyond the mid-1960s

During the rest of the 1960s and 1970s, we do not encounter significant changes in the role of scripture within denominational documents. The 1974 report of the Committee on Christian Faith, “The Permanence of Christian Marriage,” was not as bold as Dickinson in its attitude toward scripture. It affirmed a traditional understanding of lifelong marriage by deliberating much on the analogy of the relationship between Christ and the Church. God does not place a time limit on his love, the Committee suggested, and neither should we. In terms of approach to scripture, however, it was not

52 Flatt, 310.
53 See Airhart, 266. Flatt’s statistics are interesting, however, and further study on this is warranted.
54 We should, perhaps, note the varying positions taken by the United Church Renewal Fellowship (UCRF) and the United Church’s Committee on Christian Faith. In the late 1960s as the church was working on A New Creed, the UCRF affirmed a new article on the Bible, describing it as follows: “God’s objective revelation in word written, given by Divine inspiration (God breathed), is entirely trustworthy, and therefore ‘the only infallible rule of faith and life.’” (sic) United Church Renewal Fellowship, “The Editorial,” Small Voice 1, no.1 (1967): 1. This went against a report from The Committee on Christian Faith which told the 1966 General Council that after six years of study, they were unable to produce a clearly defined statement on revelation. The Committee was sure, however, that infallibility belonged to God alone, not to the human words of scripture that bore witness to God’s self-revelation. “Christian Faith,” ROP (1966), 509-511. Airhart, 275. Cf. Kevin N. Flatt, After Evangelicalism: The Sixties and the United Church of Canada (Montreal & Kingston, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queens University Press, 2013), 225ff.
significantly different than that of MBDR. In 1978, the same Committee reported to the 27th General Council on the lordship of Jesus. Within their report, biblical material was affirmed as trustworthy and necessary for the study of Jesus.\textsuperscript{56} The Committee upheld the need for the best critical scholarship, advised interpreters to appreciate the context and historical setting of the text vis-à-vis our own, and recommended that scripture be heard in its counter-cultural critique of status quo values and norms.\textsuperscript{57} Fennell takes this last thought, along with a cluster of related terms, to suggest the influence of a liberation hermeneutic as an authoritative source for interpretation in the document, \textit{The Lordship of Jesus}.\textsuperscript{58} It is notable that the work of Gustavo Gutierrez and, for instance, Jürgen Moltmann were being felt broadly within theology and other academic disciplines.\textsuperscript{59} We will see shortly, in more explicit ways, that the church was on the verge of a monumental shift in its dealings with scripture.


\textsuperscript{57} \textit{LOJ}, 17. Fennell states, however, “the tools of historical criticism are received in \textit{LOJ} as a kind of authoritative tradition. Without close, scholarly, historical attention, we are prone to inaccurate and unfaithful readings that will err and even “silence” the Bible. The authors of \textit{LOJ} asked readers to avail themselves of a tradition of trustworthy academic scholarship.” Robert C. Fennell, “How Does the United Church Interpret the Bible? Part 2: 1950s-1990s Tradition and Liberation,” \textit{Touchstone} (September, 2008): 33.

\textsuperscript{58} Fennell (2008), 36. Fennell differentiates between tradition and liberation as approaches to the interpretation of scripture (or as sources of authority for biblical interpretation). He defines liberation as “a pattern of interpretation that names oppression and disenfranchisement within and between individuals and communities, speaks out in opposition to such injustices, and imagines and works toward a hopeful future for God’s people and all creation.” Fennell (2008), 35. As sources of authority for interpretation, both tradition and liberation are found in \textit{The Lordship of Jesus}.

In 1980, the Division of Mission in Canada issued a study guide entitled, *In God’s Image ... Male and Female: A Study On Human Sexuality* (*IGI*). IGI sought to broaden the Church’s understanding of appropriate sexual choices and contains a thorough chapter on sexuality and the Bible by B. R. Bater. Bater notes the increasingly pluralistic nature of society and affirms that the Church needs to recognize the freedom of conscience of individual, faithful members. Yet, while there is a freedom in Christ, the Christian is one under authority of the Word, which testifies to Christ. As well as scripture, Bater acknowledges tradition and life experiences of the community of faith as important. These are all voices of the past, however, and he maintains that we must hear the Word today. As we do, we must take faithful account of all that the natural and social sciences reveal. He states, “The wealth of the Christian heritage has to be brought into searching dialogue with contemporary knowledge.” Bater goes on to affirm hermeneutical approaches that account for the context of both the biblical text and that of the reader, and approves of the assumption that literary records were written often by the privileged. In saying this he gives another nod to a liberation methodology and points to how feminists, for instance, have taught us to look at texts with eyes wide open. Establishing a theology for today is, thus, viewed as a great art; guided by the Spirit, one must hold in balance the various elements of Word, tradition, experience, social and natural sciences, and hermeneutics. Bater’s work suggests that the authors of *IGI* still

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60 The United Church of Canada, The Division of Mission in Canada, Study Guide: *In God’s Image ... Male and Female: A Study On Human Sexuality*, 28th General Council of The United Church of Canada (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1980). Hereafter *IGI.*
61 “Sexuality and the Bible,” *IGI*, 10-36.
62 *IGI*, 10.
63 *IGI*, 10.
64 *IGI*, 14-18.
65 *IGI*, 17.
took seriously the United Church position on the importance of the scripture. Nonetheless, it is evident that Bater’s insights are notably absent from the remainder of the study guide.66

A lengthy process of study ensued based on the study guide, *IGI*. The subsequent report from the Division of Mission in Canada was primarily worked on by a sub-committee, “A Working Unit of Sexuality, Marriage, and Family.” The sub-committee’s report was received, amended and approved by the 30th General Council in 1984 and resulted in a publication entitled, *Gift, Dilemma, and Promise (GDP)*.67

*GDP* is a wide-ranging report with a series of affirmations. In it, one sees the Church moving forward rapidly on the issues of sexuality, marriage, acceptance of divorce and diverse forms of sexual orientation. Early in the work, “the Working Unit” outlines how they think theology develops in the United Church. They state,

> Obviously, the Bible and the history of Christian thinking are critical, and experts in these must be consulted. Secondly, the work of the Spirit today as God leads us into new or deeper insights through the living experience of this generation is vital. These two criteria, church tradition and current Christian experience must be constantly tested against each other.68

The “Working Unit” continues, “In a church like this, the responsibility of the writers is to consult the Bible and the great traditions, to hear the modern voices and the testimony of experience, and prayerfully, hopefully, and perhaps fearfully, prepare their report.”69

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66 Robert Fennell holds that the lack of Bater’s insights in the rest of the Guide provide us with little opportunity to consider the normative stance toward the Bible and interpretation held by *IGI*’s authors as a whole. Fennell (2005), 205.
68 GDP, 5.
69 GDP 5. In *Sexual Orientation and Eligibility for the Order of Ministry* (1984), similar tendencies appear as theological and biblical elements are undertaken in dialogue with the experience of individuals from the gay and lesbian communities. Additionally, in that document, the authors pick up the liberation hermeneutical technique of listening particularly to the voices of the marginalized and disempowered.
Critical to these quotations is “the work of the Spirit.” The authors envision the Holy Spirit inspiring and speaking through scripture and inspiring and speaking through the experience of the community. They state explicitly, regarding the latter, “We need to hear the pluralism and diversity of moral decision-making within the church as a possible way in which God is engaging us.” Because God may be “the author” of experiences of the faithful, experience is thus set up as a competing authority with scripture. It is not explained, however, how the two are balanced should the two authorities conflict.

A further development in the process of affirming alternate authoritative material came from the Thirty-first General Council when it affirmed that the Wesleyan Quadrilateral would be the normative method for discussion and discernment at that meeting. The Council went on to state the following, “None of the four correlating factors (scripture, tradition, reason, and experience) … is to be granted any more status than the other three. Together, and in dynamic, dialogical tension, the four factors provide a fruitful model for theological reflection.” According to Robert Fennell, this was portrayed as, not only Wesleyan thought, but a recovery of United Church tradition.

Sexual Orientation and Eligibility for the Order of Ministry, Report of the Division of Ministry Personnel and Education on the ordination and commissioning of self-declared homosexual persons (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1984), 11. This document was not received by a General Council.

There has always been openness within the church to the work of the Spirit. Nonetheless, even in the second century, there was concern over where it might lead. In response to the Montanist movement, strictures were placed upon claims of the Spirit. Such claims had to be in keeping with the traditions already received in the sacred scrolls and gospel tradition. Hence, they were subject to the authority of what was broadly affirmed as written and oral tradition. This may be implied in the above quotation from GDP, 5.


Fennell (2005), 211. Parenthesis mine for clarification.

Fennell (2005), 212.
As we have already seen in chapter 2, these claims were an unfortunate misunderstanding of Wesley. Not only did Wesley uphold the ultimate authority of scripture but, as has been outlined above in §2.5, his concepts of tradition, reason, and experience were far removed from the broad manner in which the United Church and others went on to perceive them. Nevertheless, the elements of this misinterpretation of Wesley entered popular theological culture and the unique authority previously given to scripture was challenged and diluted as other authorities were elevated.

Challenges to biblical authority become even more pronounced in Toward a Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientation Lifestyles and Ministry (SOLM). This report to the 32nd General Council was published early for study and most of it was received by the General Council. As the title suggests the report focussed on issues associated with gay and lesbian persons’ involvement in ministry.

The work begins by noting that, both in society and the United Church, authority was being questioned. SOLM sought to approach its subject, therefore, with a consultative process that involved over 500 study groups. The groups were advised to rely on an interaction between Scripture, tradition, reason and experience to interpret the Bible and to seek to be guided by the Spirit and “the mind of Christ rather than the letter of the law.” Further assumptions included the notions that “Christian understanding of

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75 See §2.5 in chapter 2 above. On Wesley’s view of tradition, for instance, see Jones, 81ff. On the ultimate authority of scripture for Wesley, see Jones, Ted A. Campbell, and particularly, Randy Maddox, “The Rule of Christian Faith, Practice, and Hope: John Wesley on the Bible,” Methodist Review: A Journal of Wesleyan and Methodist Studies 3 (2011): 1-35. Cf. also Fennell (2005), 211 (note 32) and 237. In both places Fennell shows this was not Wesley’s approach. Scripture was always ultimate authority for Wesley.

76 Toward a Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientation Lifestyles and Ministry: recommendations and report to the 32nd General Council from the Division of Ministry, Personnel and Education and the Division of Mission in Canada meeting in joint session, February 19th, 1988 (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1988). Hereafter referred to as SOLM.

77 SOLM, 3. The portion in quotation marks has shown up in several reports since the early 1960s.
truth is provisional, conditional, and contextual; and that understandings be tested, validated, and made incarnate within the faith community.”

Biblical interpretation was addressed in chapter 3 of SOLM. Biblical criticism was valued and significant remarks were made on hermeneutical issues. Readers were encouraged to be sensitive to the horizons of both text and the interpreter so that interpretations not be distorted.

True reading was, furthermore, said to take place when characterized by compassion, justice, mutuality, and with a view to personal and corporate transformation. This, it was thought, best happened in dialogue and the authors advised taking particular note of voices on the peripheries of power within the church. The approach was intriguing; a participatory theology in a postmodern era utilizing hermeneutical elements familiar to liberation theology. When the various assumptions and hermeneutical concepts are brought together, they again (as with IGI) form the base for the “art” of interpretation done “in the Spirit.”

While many of these elements are open to critique, the perceived need of a participatory approach and presence of multiple authorities serves to alter the position and role of scripture. Whereas formerly, the Bible had been held as an authority above

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78 SOLM, 3. Fennell (2005), 214f.
79 During this time, Tony Thistleton’s important work, The Two Horizons was, and continues to be, popular. Anthony C. Thistleton, The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).
81 Community dialogue, for instance, brings many voices of various interpretive abilities to the table. In the pluralistic world noted by the authors, one wonders how any one interpretation may be viewed as better than another or, even, if there can be a concept of acceptable versus poor interpretation. While the authors may argue that better interpretations are worked out in dialogue and in dialogue with the broader church throughout the world, there is still an issue with how one or a community decides. Other critiques may include, again, the mis-representation of Wesley with regard to the quadrilateral, and the analogous assumption that the methodological approach is legitimized by associating it with Wesley’s name. Additionally, Fennell notes that the authors appear only to pay lip service to critical biblical thought and fail to use those methods in the document. Fennell (2005), 236. Hereafter, when Fennell is cited, it is to his doctoral thesis of 2005 unless otherwise noted.
and beyond any other, the authors of the study assume that scripture only becomes authoritative Word as opinions, understandings, and interpretations are grappled with by communities in light of other understandings. The “bottom-up” methodology is a significant departure from that of the Reformers and the church up until the 1960s or even the early 70s. In Fennell’s mind, it represents a theological-cultural shift away from a centralized, didactic, and magisterial theology toward a participatory form. A liberation hermeneutic, along with a postmodern ethos without a single authoritative centre, he asserts, has entered the life of the church.

In the midst of the debate on SOLM, it was felt, and subsequently mandated, that the Church needed to engage a further study of the authority and interpretation of scripture. A church-wide study prepared by The Theology and Faith Committee invited participants to share their beliefs. The subsequent report, *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture*, containing “the directions and convictions” that emerged from the study, was received by the 34th General Council in 1992.

Early in the document, it is recognized that for many the nature of authority itself is an issue. The authors note that, “Few things are accepted at face-value anymore – even

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82 SOLM, 16. Fennell writes, “Whereas, once the church had spoken authoritatively and directly on matters of doctrine (for instance, prior to about 1960), by the 1980s a more participatory and consultative style was in evidence, as the ‘opinions of the whole Church on faith issues were sought, heard, and considered more than had been previously expected or permitted’.” Fennell, 214 quotes SOLM, 16.
83 Fennell, 224; SOLM, 15.
84 See Fennell, 279.
86 The authors refer to a developing practice within the Church, which asks people what they think and believe. AIS, 5.
87 AIS, Preface. The study process was not unlike that of SOLM. Cf. Fennell, 252, note 30, which suggests that the change to “participatory theology” came decisively with SOLM. It should also be noted that the Committee engaged in a form of *regula fidei* by consulting and listening to feedback from The Methodist Church in Brazil and The Salvation Army. AIS, 2.
the Bible,” and that traditional assumptions about the Bible’s place and significance are being questioned. It is further noted that few Christians regularly read or study the Bible anymore and that answers to today’s complex moral and ethical questions cannot be readily drawn from its pages. In envisioning a model by which to proceed, the Committee again saw decision and theology being developed in community and from the dialogue between external and internal authorities that exist within persons as they think, reason, and act. External authorities are grouped into four broad categories reminiscent of the so-called “Wesleyan Quadrilateral;” they are, heritage, understanding, experience, and the Bible. The Committee states that, “Different points of view will, of course, place a different emphasis on each of the characteristics and may even name others. Elevated alone, each one could become a tyranny leading us away from faith. But if they are held together in creative tension, then each building block of faith is stronger.” In asking how the various authorities are to be weighed and balanced, the authors suggest the following criteria:

88 AIS, 1, 11.
89 AIS, 1.
90 See the discussion of types of authority on AIS, 7ff. Internal aspects are: thoughts, beliefs, understandings, feelings etc. These are integrated with external authorities such as, heritage, understanding, experience, and Bible, AIS, 11.
91 Fennell notes the change in terminology but understands it to be identical to the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Fennell, 251.
92 AIS, 10. It should be noted that within the participatory method, “Mutual or co-operative power is valorized, while ‘power over another is rejected and any authority that claims to be (or is held up as) absolute is questioned’.” Fennell, 256 (Fennell quotes AIS, 16). An important section of the Report asks why it is important for the Christian community to engage the Bible (AIS, 17). It is noted that the Bible is the foundational story for the church which helps shape it. Reading it under the inspiration of the Spirit, allows God’s living word to be discovered in the life of the believer (AIS, 7, 12). The authors shy away, however, from affirming any normative reading and they caution that any reading or hearing of the text is an interpretation (AIS, 12).
- God’s historic self-revelation in Jesus Christ is crucial in establishing what has legitimate authority in Christian community.  

- Legitimate authority, in every case, enhances community of the whole created earth.

- The word of God, in every case, is larger than the text of the Bible.

The Committee fully recognizes that there will be a degree of ambiguity in any group’s knowledge of Scripture and diversity in interpretation. They affirm that not all parts of Scripture are equally authoritative and confess that we are part of a heritage that has, all too often, abused the Bible by using it to create or perpetuate action and structures of oppression and domination. From the process of the study itself, however, the following six convictions arose that affirmed engagement of scripture:

1. God calls us to engage the Bible as foundational authority as we seek to live the Christian life.

2. God calls us to engage the Bible as a church seeking God’s community with all people, living creatures, and the earth.

3. God calls us to engage the Bible to experience the liberating and transforming word of God.

4. God calls us to engage the Bible with an awareness of our theological, social, and cultural assumptions.

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93 It is noteworthy that the authors do not give the Bible ultimate authority yet use the “historic self-revelation in Jesus Christ” as a criterion for weighing conflicting authorities.

94 AIS, 13.

95 AIS, 14. Here and elsewhere a liberation or post-colonial hermeneutic may be noted with language affirming, for instance, the voices of the marginalized (e.g. AIS, 17) and unjust power relations (AIS, 11).

96 One notes in the explanatory material, frequent allusions to a liberation approach. “For Christians, the Bible continues to be predominant witness to belief in God’s liberating and transforming activity. AIS, 16.

97 They continue, “Scripture cannot be faithfully engaged in isolation from the larger community of God’s people.” Communities shape us and our understandings and we must test our own personal understandings of scripture against those of the whole community (AIS, 17). Also here the committee acknowledges that scripture was used in the process of oppression in unjust ways against the marginalized and poor.

98 Note, “We believe that in every engagement with scripture we expect to hear the message of God’s liberating and transforming activity.” AIS, 17.

99 AIS, 18. In the body of the discussion, on this point, it is noted that the dominant assumption of Christianity is Western, white, hierarchical, and biased toward the masculine. We must commit ourselves to listening to others. It is when we “truly enter into conversation with others; we know that the we risk being changed by the power of God’s Spirit.”
5. God calls us to engage the Bible with a sense of sacred mystery and in dynamic interaction with human experience, understanding, and heritage.

6. God calls us to engage the Bible trusting God’s Spirit to enliven our understanding and to empower our acting.\(^{100}\)

While strongly affirming interaction with the Bible, it must be noted that the authors’ approach again has significantly altered the role and authority of scripture. Similar to the approach found in *SOLM*, the Bible is viewed as one authority among others and there is no normative reading of it.\(^{101}\) Theology is developed on the basis of asking people what they think and believe and this sets up the community as the ultimate authority; it is the community that balances the various influences that may be operative in theological discernment.\(^{102}\) In affirming this approach as a developing practice within the Church, the Committee and the 1992 General Council which approved *AIS* have stepped away from the positions of the sixteenth century reformers who held that community and conciliar decisions were valid only if in agreement with scripture.\(^{103}\)

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\(^{100}\) *AIS*, 19.

\(^{101}\) *AIS*, 10. It should also be stated that the authors see scripture being investigated in light of biblical criticism, complex hermeneutics including a liberation hermeneutic that takes account of power structures and hears the marginalized, a Reader Response approach, and pluralist assumptions. One wonders, when one considers the approach and alternate authorities, if the task of arriving at a theological judgment is unwieldy. Is it really to be expected that lay leaders would master the various approaches and take the time to investigate other sources of authority at requisite levels? While many of the thoughts associated with the foregoing elements are laudable, William J. Abraham has indicated, in relation to the so-called, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” alone, that the task of studying all the associated elements in appropriate academic depth is a difficult, if not an impossible one. We must ask, therefore, is the complicated theological task presented practical for the life of the church? William J. Abraham, “What’s Right and What’s Wrong with the Quadrilateral,” Lecture to the Canadian Methodist Historical Society, (Unpublished, 2000). I would like to thank Dr. Abraham for kindly sending me an electronic copy of this lecture that I had heard some fifteen years ago.

\(^{102}\) Fennell notes the change from theology done by one or a few scholars for the whole denomination to this, which he terms, “theology by consensus.” Fennell, 274. It must be stated, however, that lay involvement in processes such as this is not a bad thing. A great deal of adult learning goes on in situations like those espoused by *AIS*’s authors.

\(^{103}\) Fennell notes a number of dissenting voices to the approach of *AIS* in Theology and Faith Committee, (The United Church of Canada) *3 Listening to the Voices*, (unpublished, 1992), 21ff. There were questions about the lack of control or limits on inter-subjective dialogue, queries about how one determined validity and validity of each person’s perspective, etc.
wonders, does this place the church in conflict with its own subordinate standards that proclaim scripture as the primary source for Christian faith and practice?  

Furthermore, the methodology engaged by the Committee appears problematic. The Committee asked individuals to help them establish a position statement on scripture. By the Committee’s own admission, few of these people read or engage scripture, and many already question authority – even that of the Bible. The question arises, “Is it acceptable to develop theology using people whom the Committee knows to be largely non-engagers of scripture?” The fact that the report itself specifies that scripture is not optional for the Christian and speaks of it as a foundational element necessary for the development of theology suggests that the process may have had a fundamental flaw.

Before drawing this study of scripture and authority in the United Church to a close, it is appropriate to say that little more may be added from more recent publications on marriage, sexuality, and selected other materials. The resource initiated by the Division of Mission in Canada and completed by Alyson C. Huntly, entitled Of Love and Justice: Toward the Civil Recognition of Same-Sex Marriage, offers little that is new in

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104 Here, it is not suggested that the methodology is right or wrong. The attempt is merely to point to inconsistencies in the midst of this quest to uncover what the position of the church is. It should be noted also that the AIS authors may have, inadvertently, diminished perceptions of scriptural authority by affirming that few engage it any more (p.1), that answers to perplexing moral and ethical questions cannot readily be drawn from its pages (p.1), that not all scripture is authoritative for the Church (p.14), that the Bible has, in the past, been used as an instrument of power and oppression (p.14), and that any authority (including scripture) when elevated alone “could become a tyranny leading us away from faith” (p.10).

105 AIS, 1. To be sure, clergy were involved in the study as well with varying degrees of knowledge of biblical materials. The point is that a significant number, especially within the laity, are assumed by the committee to have limited engagement with scripture. This would have had a significant effect on outcomes. It should also be noted that AIS engaged in a form of regula fidei when it asked for opinions on its document from the Methodist Church in Brazil and the Salvation Army, Canada and Bermuda Territories. One wonders, however, if this made a difference. The Salvation Army response, in favour of the primacy of scripture alone, was noted but does not seem to have changed anything for the committee. The Theology and Faith Committee (The United Church of Canada) 3 - Listening to the Voices 27, 31. Cf. Fennell, 278.

106 AIS, 1.

107 AIS, 16ff., See also the critique by Fennell, 275-281.
terms of its approach. The resource’s interpretation of scripture and support-material is one-sided and thus reveals that it is not a critical document. The 2005 manual, *Marriage: A United Church of Canada Understanding*, does well in stating the United Church’s updated position on marriage. Again, however, it does not reveal critical scholarship as the authors offer differing, and sometimes mutually exclusive, perspectives on biblical passages. Even though it offers no method of discerning which may be correct, it accepts only those interpretations that allow for same-sex unions. It thus fails to live up to a truly pluralist perspective. The most recently approved “subordinate standard,” the 2006, *Song of Faith*, is now included in the *Basis of Union*. It too, while refreshing in approach, offers little that is new. To mention one element, however, the role of the Spirit is highlighted for breathing into scripture revelatory power. *Song of Faith* does not state that Scripture itself is either revelation or a record of revelation. Apparently, it becomes revelation as the Spirit moves in the faithful community.

Finally, in 2010, a study document was released to aid individuals, congregations, and Presbyteries think about the 2012 General Council remits related to expanding the *Basis of Union* to include other statements of faith such as *ASOF* (1940) and the *Song of Faith*. While not dealing with the role of scripture specifically, it is notable that the authors of *Our Words of Faith (OWF)* specify a position. They state clearly, “All confessions and statements of faith are subject to the primacy of scripture. This principle

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110 The United Church of Canada, *Our Words of Faith: Cherished, Honoured, and Living* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada: 2010). Hereafter referred to as OWF. More will be said about this below in the interview section of the case study, chapter 7.
is embedded in the *Basis of Union*: “We affirm our belief in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the primary source and ultimate standard of Christian faith and life” (*Basis* ¶ 2.0).” The same was affirmed by the 40th General Council (2009), which called for the remits. Twice in its motion to begin the remit process, it recognised the primacy of scripture above “subordinate standards.” While context and offering assurances in the midst of proposing significant change may have had something to do with the positions of the General Council and the committee behind the document, an observer may note a marked dissonance between the position of OWF and what was being said in the late 1980s and early 1990s, especially in SOLM and AIS. Can we have a scripture that is primary authority with relation to subordinate standards of Christian faith (2009), but not primary with respect to tradition, reason, experience and a host of other factors that are to be held in dialogue (1988-92)?

### 4.5 Summary:

So, where does The United Church of Canada stand in terms of scripture and authority? On the one hand, one may say that the “official” position of the denomination is found in the *Basis of Union*. *BU* contains a clear statement on scripture that keeps the Church well within the Protestant tradition. How that statement has been interpreted, however, and what occurs in the practical world of “doing” theology within the Church, has altered over time.

We have divided the foregoing study into three time periods. Although the divisions must be seen as fluid, they are broadly representative of three stages of

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111 *OWF*, ii, which quotes the General Council decision.
development in the practical use of scripture as the Church sought to deal with various issues of the day. In the earliest stage, we found a traditional Protestant statement about scripture in the *Basis of Union* and a modified, somewhat neo-orthodox, version in *A Statement of Faith* (1940). In the 1932 document, “The Meaning and Responsibilities of Christian Marriage,” we noted that the authors used scripture in a traditional, yet scholarly, fashion as it sought to deal with the various issues inherent to marriage. Even though compassion was felt toward those whose marriages had ended, the authors of the report were either not able to break with the culture of the day or were not able to circumvent direct words on divorce attributed to Jesus in the Gospels. The report, thus, discouraged clergy from solemnizing marriages of divorced individuals.

During the second period, a decline in basic knowledge of the Bible throughout the Church was noted as early as 1945 by R. C. Chalmers.\(^{112}\) In official Church studies, however, scripture was still engaged strongly using the most up-to-date scholarly methods available. This may be seen clearly in *Toward a Christian Understanding of Sex, Love, and Marriage* (1960) and even more in the second part of the study, *Marriage Breakdown, Divorce, and Remarriage: A Christian Understanding* (1962). During this period, however, we begin to see changes in that a “whole gospel,” or “spirit of Jesus,” approach, primarily focussed on Jesus’ love and forgiveness, was sometimes used to over-ride more direct passages in which Jesus opposed divorce. Other authorities also came into play as the authors encouraged engagement in the results of social and human science investigations. As a result, the doors opened somewhat with regard to views of

\(^{112}\) R.C. Chalmers, 226. I thank Phyllis Airhart for pointing out that church leaders were complaining about this even at the time of union. It may reflect a general tendency to think, “It used to be better.”
divorce and remarriage, yet, the approach continued to elevate Scripture as the main authority for Church life.

As the Church moved towards the 1980s, however, we see momentous change. With *The Lordship of Jesus* (1978), interpreters were advised to take note of the ancient context of biblical texts versus that of today. In the Study Guide, *In God’s Image* (1980), the effects of pluralism on the Church become evident and B. R. Bater wrote of bringing the wealth of Christian heritage into dialogue with contemporary knowledge from the social and human sciences. This was pushed further in *Gift, Dilemma, and Promise* (1984) as the Division of Mission in Canada outlined that theology in the United Church developed not only from scripture but as the Spirit works in the living experience of the community. God was thought to be the author of both and this raised the possibility that experience was a competing authority with the Bible.\(^{113}\)

Later yet, we saw the elevation of the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” at the Thirty-first General Council. The acceptance of other authorities equal to scripture was furthered in *Toward a Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientation, Lifestyles and Ministry* (1988) and completed by the authors of *The Authority of Scripture* (1992).\(^{114}\) During this period, the church completed a movement to a participatory, dialogical model of establishing theology. In part, the move may have been brought about by an acceptance of modern critical scholarship, a by-product of which was a perceived decline in scriptural authority. In part also, the change was influenced by a growing postmodern ethos and the popularity of the liberation hermeneutic and method. These forces entailed that, whereas initially the United Church upheld scripture and presented its truth in magisterial form, by 1992 it

\(^{113}\) GDP, 20.
\(^{114}\) AIS, 10.
had moved to a participatory form of developing theology in dialogue influenced by a number of perceived authorities. In spite of this the 34th General Council specified, “Engaging the Bible is not optional for the Christian Community,” and more recently the primacy of scripture was again affirmed by General Council and the authors of *OWF*.

One wonders, is the Church consistent?

While the foregoing has revealed an interesting picture of the development of the role of scripture in The United Church of Canada, it has been dependent on a diachronic study of statements of faith and position papers received and published by the Church. The remainder of this thesis alters the focus and seeks to understand the role of scripture in discerning theology at the ground level of church life, i.e. in the praxis of local church congregations in 2014. What follows is the result of a case study of several Toronto-area churches and, specifically, the thought and practices of their leadership Councils.

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115 *AIS*, v.
Chapter 5

The Case Study

5.1 Method and process

In the previous three chapters, we have sought to contextualize this study with a look at views of scripture and authority in the early stages of the Protestant movement, how those views have been impacted by modern and postmodern thought, and how those views have developed in the short history of the United Church. We move on to investigate the authoritative influences that actually sway decision-makers on the ground floor of church life, the local congregation and its board. The “Attending” phase of the research continues, therefore, in the form of a case study.

John Creswell defines a case study as,

a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g. observations, interviews, audio-visual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes.¹

William Myers commends the case study as the preferred methodology for most ministry based research. Its flexibility, along with the fact that it will allow us to access the kind of information we need, makes it the method of choice here.²

In designing the study, it was determined that involving three congregations would be optimal and thus, more specifically, this is a multiple, bounded, case study. The three congregations provide a degree of breadth, which allows us to get beyond the culture of an individual congregation. Moreover, together they help avoid potential embarrassment to a single church should the results be considered negative. The amount of data derived from the three is still, however, manageable for a single researcher.3

Subsequent to the University of Toronto’s Ethics Review Board approval, churches were approached for this study on the basis of two criteria. One was to consider only relatively strong churches. In an age when many mainline congregations are struggling with low attendance, a rising age demographic, and low volunteer involvement, it was determined to engage only congregations that still have signs of health and life. Second, United Church pastoral charges display great theological breadth. It was deemed wise to include congregations from both the traditional and progressive ends of the theological spectrum.

Once the initial choices were made, the researcher contacted the ministers of the congregations. Five contacts yielded three positive responses and letters of permission were sent to the chairs of the three local church Councils (see Appendix A).4 The letters outlined the intent of the study along with what would be required of the local church Council. If the Council approved participation, each was asked, first, to have its members voluntarily complete a short questionnaire at a subsequent meeting. Second,

3 The fact that the study involves only United Church congregations and a small segment of Toronto, United Churches means that we may also describe it as a case study with an ethnographic interest. See Myers, §4.2, p. 24.
4 I use the terminology, “local church,” to refer to what some call a parish or congregation. New United Church terminology refers to them as “local ministry units.” The “Council” is the governing board of the three United Church congregations under study. See above §1.1, n.2.
the Council chair was asked to call for two individuals who would be willing to be interviewed by the researcher. All three Councils approached responded quickly and positively and the study began in the Fall of 2014. More will be said about the questionnaires, interviews, and the subsequent focus group, below, in chapters 6, 7, 8 respectively.

5.2 The three Councils: a brief description

In interests of maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, the churches involved in this study will not be named and comments about them will be made in relative terms, with reference to the group. They will be referred to as Churches A, B, and C and all are congregations within the United Church of Canada. One is from the downtown area of the Toronto, another is near the city’s university community, and the third serves a mid-town community. All are traditional-Protestant in their style of worship; however, in terms of theology and approach to ministry, one may be described as traditional while the other two are more progressive. As with many United Churches, all three congregations are declining and aging but the attendance at each is such that they will all continue to run substantial ministries over the next ten years and beyond. Two of the congregations have adequate financial resources for the foreseeable future, while the third’s finances are serviceable but tight. As for membership demographics, each pastoral charge attracts individuals from various segments of society. One church attracts a number of students, but the predominant group in each is reflective of the educated, professional, middle, and upper-middle class nature of their respective locations. Toronto is an expensive city to
live in and this is particularly the case within the downtown and midtown areas.\footnote{5}{With the possible exception of the student housing that is available around the university.} The leadership of the three congregations, in particular, tends to reflect the communities around the churches, although it may also be said that most of the leaders have a strong social conscience that is indicative of many in the United Church. Each church engages in considerable social outreach programmes and contributes well to the denomination’s Mission and Service Fund.

In reporting data and trends, every attempt will be made to maintain anonymity. Apart from the churches being referred to by letters, the individuals interviewed and those that were part of the focus group have been assigned pseudonyms. It should also be noted that what is attempted here is to gain a sense of the thought of United Church lay leaders in Toronto. Due to the small sample sizes, individual congregational data will not be reported unless it is particularly noteworthy. For the most part, therefore, the data is combined and we will try to ascertain the thought of the average United Church leader in the central part of Toronto.\footnote{6}{Since the data is pooled, it may be appropriate to define the study simply as a “bounded case study.” See the quotation related to n.1 above in this chapter. The idea is an attempt to ascertain a view of United Church lay leaders in central Toronto.} We begin the reporting process with a look at the questionnaires.
Chapter 6

The Questionnaire – Report and Commentary

6.1 Introduction to the questionnaire

A questionnaire provides a quick quantitative assessment of opinion relating to the issues being researched. In this study, a questionnaire was developed to shed light on the following questions:

1. What influences Council members as they make theological decisions?
2. How do lay leaders rank those influences in terms of authority?
3. Where do Council members perceive knowledge of God comes from?
4. How comfortable or knowledgeable are lay leaders in engaging scripture?
5. What is the general view of scripture among lay leaders?

The title given on the cover page of the questionnaire (Appendix B) was broader than the thesis title. It was altered to “Discerning theology in The United Church of Canada.” The slight change, along with the order of the questions, was an attempt to uncover whether individuals would reference scripture as an influence of their own volition. The first four questions, therefore, focussed on understanding the influences on board members in a broad sense. Questions five through eight went on to reveal the more

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1 As opposed to “Scripture’s Role in Discerning Theology in the United Church of Canada.”
specific focus on the role of scripture as responders were asked about their familiarity, competence, and views of scripture.²

The chairs of the respective Councils were asked, beforehand, to briefly go over the cover page of the questionnaires with the participants prior to completion. The cover page outlined that the study sought to uncover what influenced Council members as they made theological decisions. The term, “theological” was defined, examples were given, and the respondents were asked to keep the purpose in mind as they filled out the questionnaire.³ The three Councils kindly completed the questionnaires during their October, 2014 meetings. The process yielded fourteen, thirteen, and sixteen completed questionnaires from Churches A, B, and C respectively for a total of forty-three responses. The following reports the results of the individual questions with commentary. A more advanced analysis and an attempt to summarise what has been learned will follow.

### 6.2 Report & Commentary

**Q.1** “What things influence you when you are asked to make theological decisions on behalf of the Church?”

The respondents were given a list of ten possible responses (plus a write-in, “Other,” category) and asked to assess how much each category influenced their decisions using a Likert scale as follows: 1. Never  2. Rarely  3. Sometimes  4.

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² There was no attempt to deceive in this, merely to uncover whether the subjects themselves would suggest scripture as an influence or authority without being prompted. Notice was taken of the “Guidelines for the Use of Deception and Debriefing in Research,” prepared by Dr. Dean Sharpe, Committee on Human Subjects in Research, (University of Toronto, 2009), 2, http://www.research.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/Deception_and_Debriefing_Guidelines.pdf (accessed:15th July, 2014).

³ For a definition of a theological decision, see below footnote 4, §7.3.
Frequently 5. All the time. Forty-three individuals completed the first question legibly and the results are tabulated in Table 1 below.

### Table 1. Lay leaders’ perceptions of what influences them

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Influences In Order of Importance</th>
<th>Total Responses</th>
<th>Average Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>b. Experiences in life</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>4.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>g. An inner sense or voice (conscience, spirit)</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>4.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>c. Dialogue in Christian community</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>3.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>a. Prevailing cultural values/social norms</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>3.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>f. The Bible</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>3.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>j. The opinion of the Minister(s)</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>3.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>e. Church tradition and/or theology</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>3.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>h. Sermons</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>3.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>i. Sunday School</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>2.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>d. Relevant scholarly study</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>2.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th</td>
<td>k. Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It may be noted that although there is little statistical difference between those influences ranked four through seven, the four “experiential” influences are given greater weight than those that have been traditionally associated with theological understanding in former generations. Of the experiential responses, “experiences in life” and “an inner sense” were ranked equally as the most influential, each with an average response score of 4.19 on the five-point scale. The average respondent, therefore, is influenced by these

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4 The categories of influences may be seen to be quite broad and open to interpretation. Experience, to one person, may mean the broad experience that one receives in life. To another, however, it may be a specific experience or their church experience (since the question is about what influences theology). Care must be taken, therefore, not to make too many assumptions about what is being said with each category. It is, nonetheless, hoped that the broad categories will disclose useful trends and that the interviews may shed some light on how various categories are understood.

5 The write-in possibility, “k. Other,” was taken up by four respondents who stressed that family members, discussion with others, previous church experience, and hymn texts were important influences on them. They ranked these as 5, 4, 3, & 5 respectively. We simply note these responses and keep them in mind.

B05’s response (that is: Church B, respondent 05), “discussion with others,” potentially could be added to response “c” in Table 1. However, since B05 ranked “c” as a five on the Likert scale as well as “k”, we will leave the response under “Other”.

6 We shall use the terms, “experiential” and “traditional,” as handy ways of classifying elements of the data. “Experiential” influences include: experience, culture, dialogue, and “an inner sense.” “Traditional” influences include: Bible, tradition, theology, minister, sermons, scholarship.
more than “frequently” and the scores for both “experience” and “an inner sense” are ranked considerably higher than the third and fourth categories, “dialogue” and “culture” (3.6 and 3.42 average response scores respectively).

The more traditional influences, “The Bible,” “Opinion of the Minister,” “Tradition and/or Theology,” and “Sermons,” were perceived to be virtually identical in terms of influence with average response scores ranging from 3.37-3.35. The influence of these categories was, thus, felt “sometimes,” or a little above, by the average individual. It is interesting, in light of the Reformers’ views and the official stance of the United Church of Canada (in 

As has been noted, it is not the intention to report extensively on individual churches. However, a significant variance was found in the responses to question one that serves as a reminder that each congregation has its own particular culture. Church A, the more traditional congregation, ranked the experiential influences significantly lower than the other churches with the exception of “experience” itself, which all Councils ranked similarly at approximately 4.2/5. Analogously, Church A ranked the more traditional influences, Bible, sermons, Sunday School, the opinion of the minister significantly higher than the other congregations. In fact, the total mean score for the combined responses regarding the influence of the Bible would have been significantly

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7 We must be open to the possibility that, at times, a category such as “an inner sense” may be informed by scripture or other “traditional” influences.

8 Church A’s mean score for “culture” was 3.14 vs ~3.55 for Churches B & C. The mean for “dialogue” was 3.21 vs ~3.80 for the others. And the mean for “an inner sense” was 3.79 vs ~4.35 for the other Councils.
lower if Church A had not buoyed the results. 71% of respondents from Church A designated the Bible as either a four or a five on the five-point scale for a score of 4.07. Leaders at Church A thus feel the influence of scripture “frequently” while Churches B and C feel it “sometimes,” (3.03). According to this small sampling, more progressive lay leaders are, therefore, less influenced by scripture than their more traditional peers.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that academics may wish to ponder the fact that “relevant scholarly studies” received the lowest ranking score of 2.44/5; apparently, scholarly studies rarely influence lay leaders. This may sound further alarm bells that theological work in the academy continues to be viewed as esoteric and less than accessible by the laity. Ministers may, likewise, ponder the fact that the minister’s opinion, along with sermons, are ranked fifth and seventh respectively. They too lag behind all of the experiential categories and ministers are perceived as influencing the laity only “sometimes.”

Q.2 How would you rank the things that influence you most when making a theological decision?

The respondents were given the same list of responses as in question 1 and were asked to mark only the top three, giving a “1” to the category perceived to be the most important influence, a “2” to the next most important influence, and a “3” to the third most important perceived influence. The forty-two usable responses are reflected in Tables 2 and 3 below.⁹ Table 2 indicates only the number “1” responses, the most important perceived influences. Table 3 tabulates the top three influences on individuals.

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⁹ One individual responded in an incorrect manner to questions 2, 3, & 4 and his/her responses are omitted from the average scores related to those questions.
Table 2. The most important influence on lay leaders when making theological decisions (the #1s only)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Influences</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>g. An inner sense or voice (conscience, spirit)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>38.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>b. Experiences in life</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>c. Dialogue in Christian community</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>e. Church tradition and/or theology</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>f. The Bible</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>a. Prevailing cultural values/social norms</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>h. Sermons</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>j. The opinion of the Minister(s)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>k. Other: write-in - Family</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>i. Sunday School</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>d. Relevant scholarly study</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: The top three influences on lay leaders when making theological decisions<sup>10</sup>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Influences</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>g. An inner sense or voice (conscience, spirit)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>b. Experiences in life</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>59.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>e. Church tradition and/or theology</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>40.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>c. Dialogue in Christian community</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>a. Prevailing cultural values/social norms</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>f. The Bible</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>j. The opinion of the Minister(s)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>h. Sermons</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>d. Relevant scholarly study</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Other: write-in - Family</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>i. Sunday School</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Broadly, the results may be seen to echo those of question one. If we take Tables 2 & 3 together, the responses reveal that “an inner sense or voice (conscience, spirit)” is

---

<sup>10</sup> Here the three top choices of each individual are reported and are not ranked.

<sup>11</sup> The forty-two respondents had three opportunities to choose a particular influence category. Thus, there were 126 possible opportunities to select a particular influence. Each of the forty-two responders could only put an individual category once as their 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, or 3<sup>rd</sup> prime influences, however. The percentage denotes how many responders perceived each category as one of their top three influences and reflects the number of responses as a percentage of forty-two. The top three choices were sought out by the researcher to broaden the study and get a fuller sense of the things perceived to influence theological decisions.
the category that influences lay leaders most. Most respondents, 71%, included it as one of their top three influences and 38% indicated that it was the most important influence on them.12 These results are appreciably higher than the second place influence, “experiences in life” and the categories that follow especially in Table 2.

As with Q.1, the categories we are calling “experiential,” dominate as primary influences. Together, “inner sense,” “experience,” “dialogue,” and “culture,” account for ~71% of the number-one choices for the most influential category (Table 2). When the top three categories of influence are combined (Table 3), they represent four of the top five perceived influences. “Church tradition and/or theology,” however, has crept into the top four, with 40.5% of respondents selecting it as one of their top three influences. It will be seen later, in chapter seven (interviews), that the broad category was probably primarily interpreted as “church tradition” and that it was the tradition of the local church that was the most significant aspect of how this category was understood.13

Again, the traditional categories of “Bible,” “Opinion of the Minister,” and “Sermons,” are ranked lower than the experiential categories. The Bible was ranked as the primary influence by 9.5% of United Church lay leaders and was chosen as part of the top three influences by 23.8% of respondents. The lower perceptions of influence related to “the opinion of the minister” and “sermons” may be perceived as disappointing by

\[\text{\footnotesize 12 One wonders what informs the “inner sense” category? Possibilities may include a person’s upbringing, experience, culture, church culture, reason, Bible and the Holy Spirit among others. Perhaps, the interviews will provide some explanation; however, in testing the questionnaire, one individual who has a significant understanding of the Bible said that she chose the “inner sense” category as the key influence. She stressed that although she had not put “Bible” in her top three choices, her “inner sense” was significantly informed by the Bible. Care thus needs to be taken in drawing conclusions from the responses for while scripture may not be chosen directly, it may lie in the background of other categories that are selected. It is still intriguing, however, that so many individuals would pick the more experiential category ahead of the traditional category.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize 13 The fact that it was ranked seventh in responses to Q.1 may not be a significant difference as, again, those categories ranked fourth through eighth were very close in their scores.}\]
clergy. So too, again, the responses related to scholarly studies may be disappointing to academics. The fact that Sunday School training continues to receive low scores in terms of influence is probably due to the fact that all of the respondents are well into their adult years. Additionally, the phrase “Sunday School” sometimes is associated with less than mature thought.

Q.3 What best describes where you get the bulk of your Christian knowledge from?

Again, the respondents were asked to indicate their top three choices with “1” being the most important source, “2” the next most important, and “3” the third most important source. In this question, several of the “experiential” influences were removed from the response categories in order to ascertain which more “concrete” Christian sources of influence might inform lay leaders most. The results are given in Tables 4 and 5 below.

In Table 4, we see no appreciable difference between the top sources: “Christian Community & Dialogue,” “Bible,” and “Sermons” with each chosen by approximately one quarter of respondents. The “Adult Study Groups” category was in fourth place with 12% of persons choosing that category as their chief source of influence. The other categories had minimal or no responses.

In Table 5, when the top three influences are considered together, preachers will be relieved to see that over 83% of individuals considered sermons to be one of the
Table 4. Where do lay leaders get their Christian knowledge from?
(Sources ranked #1 only)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Sources of Christian Knowledge</th>
<th>Responses Max.42</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>c. Christian Community and Dialogue</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>g. The Christian Bible</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>b. Sermons</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>d. Adult Study Groups</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>a. Sunday School</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>e. Christian Books</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>f. Theological Books</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>k. Other: write-in - Family</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>k. Other: write-in – University Courses</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>h. Films with Christian Themes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>i. Christian Television</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>j. Christian School</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Where do lay leaders get their Christian knowledge from?
(The top three sources combined)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Sources of Christian Knowledge</th>
<th>Max.42 from 126 possible choices</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>b. Sermons</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>c. Christian Community and Dialogue</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>69.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>g. The Christian Bible</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>42.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>d. Adult Study Groups</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>a. Sunday School</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>e. Christian Books</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>f. Theological Books</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>h. Films with Christian Themes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>k. Other: write-in - Family</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>k. Other: write-in – University Courses</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>k. Other: Write-in – CBC Podcasts</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>k. Other: Write-in – History Books</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13th</td>
<td>i. Christian Television</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13th</td>
<td>j. Christian School</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

three primary sources of Christian knowledge. The numbers suggest that many more get their Christian ideas from the proclaimed word than they do from the written word.

---

\[14\] It is notable that lay leaders hold that they can get Christian knowledge from scripture but do not see it as a main influence for theological decisions.
In contrast, the Bible was selected as a top three influence by 42%. The fact, however, that 58% of respondents did not choose the Bible as one of their top three, even when the range of possibilities is limited to more concrete options, is noteworthy. Regardless of its position in official United Church polity, it would seem that most United Church lay leaders understand the Christian faith principally from sources secondary to the denomination’s “primary source.”

Among other notes of interest is the fact that, again in Table 5, we see “Adult Study Groups” rounding out the top four choices, it was selected by 38% of respondents. We also note the slight rise in the estimations of Sunday School and scholarly work, if we take the category, “Theological Books,” to relate to scholarly work. More significant, perhaps, is the fact that two individuals bothered to write in the influence of “Family.” This category will be something to investigate in the interview aspect of the study. Finally, it can be noted that the experiential category left among the options, “Christian community & dialogue,” scored highly. It was designated an influence by 69% of respondents.

Q.4 Where, in your mind, does knowledge of God and God’s will primarily come from?

Yet again responders were asked to mark only their top three choices with “1” being the most important source, “2” the next most important, and “3” the third most important source. The experiential influences were put back into the list of possible

\[15\text{ These increases, however, may have been the result of the changes in options and the omission of the experiential categories.}\]

\[16\text{ Of additional note is the fact that television and film appear to have no influence as sources of Christian knowledge for United Church lay leaders.}\]
options and the results are given in Tables 6 and 7 below. Whereas question three asked, “What best describes where you get the bulk of your Christian knowledge from?” question four is an attempt to understand individual perceptions of where knowledge of God comes from. Intriguingly, the Christian scriptures received the highest response rate of #1 choices, with 26% of respondents positing that it is the prime source of knowledge of God (Table 6). When we consider respondents’ top three choices, scripture again is ranked highly (Table 7). The options, “It is in the heart,” “Dialogue in Christian community,” and “Christian scriptures” were each selected as sources of knowledge of God by approximately 55% of individuals. It is noteworthy again, given its official status in United Church polity, that 74% of lay leaders do not view scripture as the primary source of knowledge of God and 45% do not include it among the top three sources.

Table 6. Lay leaders’ perceptions of where knowledge of God is found (sources ranked #1 only)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Perceptions of Where Knowledge of God Comes From</th>
<th>Responses Max.42</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>f. The Christian scriptures</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>a. It is in the heart (inner knowledge/conviction)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>e. The Holy Spirit</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>c. Dialogue in Christian Community</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>b. It comes through Experience</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>e. Human Reason</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>g. Writings other than the Christian scriptures</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>h. Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

17 It is noteworthy also here, and more so in the responses to Q.3, that most of those who consider scripture as important, tend to place it as their number 1 influence. It receives less second and third responses than the experiential categories. Additionally, again, distinctive church cultures were notable in the responses. Church A was responsible for eight of the eleven first ranked responses in favour of scripture. Only three of the remaining 28 respondents from the more progressive churches, B and C, chose scripture as the top source of knowledge of God.
Table 7. Lay leaders’ perceptions of where knowledge of God is found
(A combination of sources ranked 1, 2, & 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Perceptions of Where Knowledge of God Comes From</th>
<th>Responses Max.42 from 126 possible choices</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>a. It is in the heart (inner knowledge/conviction)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>c. Dialogue in Christian Community</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>54.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>f. The Christian scriptures</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>54.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>b. It comes through Experience</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>47.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>e. The Holy Spirit</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>e. Human Reason</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>g. Writings other than the Christian scriptures</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>h. Other: Write-in - Prayer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although scripture’s influence vis-à-vis the others has improved from the responses to the more general questions 1 & 2, the experiential categories can be seen to again take three of the top four spots when the top three influences are included (Table 7). The experiential categories are also viewed as significant sources of knowledge of God.

In this question “The Holy Spirit” was also added as an option. The fact that 19% of respondents viewed the Spirit as the prime source of knowledge of God and ~36% viewed it among their top three choices, is significant. Certainly, a case could be made for its inclusion as an alternative in questions 1-4 in any future study.

Interestingly, seven individuals (~17%) chose “Writings other than the Christian scriptures” as one of their three top sources of knowledge of God. Of these, three of the seven also selected the Christian scriptures as sources of knowledge, suggesting that they are open to finding God in various sacred forms of literature. That four of the seven who chose this category did not select Christian scripture among their top three sources, perhaps suggests a negative view of the Bible on their part.

When we compare question four (Where do people believe knowledge of God derives from?) with question two (What influences people in their theological
decisions?), there is a possible dissonance between lay leaders’ beliefs and praxis. Almost 55% indicated that the scriptures would be one of their top three sources of knowledge of God yet, in practice, only 24% include scripture among their top three influences when actually making theological decisions (cf. Tables 3 & 7). One would expect a positive correlation between two. We cannot, however, make this point too strongly as the options given for both questions differ and thus alter the variables. Additionally, Q.4 had only eight options plus a write in response versus ten options and a write in response in Q.2. It is to be expected that each option would, therefore, be selected more frequently barring extensive use of the write-in category.

Q.5 How familiar are you with the Christian Bible on a personal level outside of Worship Services?

![Chart 1: Familiarity & Engagement of the Bible](chart)
The forty-three respondents were asked to circle the statement that best reflected their familiarity and engagement of the Bible. The results may be plotted as above in Chart 1. It may be readily seen that most responders circled either option “c” or “d.” When we separate the response categories according to the degrees of “familiarity” and “reading,” levels of familiarity and readership may be given as follows.

**Levels of familiarity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Familiar (a+b+c+g)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>58.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Familiar (d)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Familiar (e+f)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Levels of readership**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regular readers (a+b)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasional readers (c+d+g)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>67.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little or no reading (e+f+g)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most lay leaders claim, therefore, to be familiar with scripture and to read it occasionally. Unfortunately, the word, “familiar,” and the phrase, “read occasionally,” can have broad connotations and the precise practices of the respondents are not immediately apparent. We will rely on the ensuing questions and interviews to shed light on what “familiar” and “read occasionally” may mean. The fact, however, that very few indicated that they did not engage scripture at all suggests that the anecdotal account that gave birth to this thesis (above, p.1), cannot be generalized. Only a small minority of this sample, 4.6%,

---

18 Those who chose the “Other” category wrote in the following: 1. Familiar but hardly read – past study. 2. I’m between b & c. 3. Familiar with it but never read it.
19 All who chose the write-in category, “g,” claimed to be familiar with the Bible.
20 One of the “Other” responses indicated that he/she read occasionally, two indicated that they did “little or no reading.”
indicated that they never read the Bible outside of worship services. A further 14% indicated that they “hardly ever read it.”

**Q.6** How competent do you feel in using the Christian scriptures in order to make theological decisions on behalf of the Church?

The responders were asked to circle one of five possibilities and the results are plotted on Chart 2 below.

![Chart 2: Perceptions of Personal Competence in Using Scriptures to Make Decisions](image)

It is intriguing that of the forty-three individuals who filled in the questionnaire, only two claimed a reasonable competence with scripture. Thirty, or ~70%, indicated that they needed help and dialogue. Eleven, or 25.6%, said that they would defer to other Council members or the minister on theological matters. This suggests, when we take responses “c,” “d,” & “e” together, that 95.3% of respondents either need help with scripture or would defer to others. It would seem that the occasional reading and familiarity that most

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21 This represents “f” plus one write in response.
22 This represents “e” plus one write in response.
claimed in Question 5 should not be viewed as leading to reasonable degrees of independent competence with scripture.

Q.7 How competent do you feel most other members of your Board are at using scripture to make theological decisions on behalf of the Church?

As with question six, responders were asked to circle one of five possibilities and the results may be seen in Chart 3 below. This question was added because some of the literature on data gathering suggests that individuals may be more honest about others than they are about themselves.23 The question, thus, asks the respondent to act as an informant about their peers. Interestingly, in this case, the responders were more generous in assessing others than they were of themselves.

![Chart 3: Perceived Competence of Other Board Members’ Ability to Use Scripture to Make Decisions](chart3.png)

It can be seen that seventeen, or 39.5% (a+b), think that most would be competent and able to use scripture effectively in making theological decisions. Twelve, or 27.9%

---

(c), believe that only a few Council members are competent, while 14, or 32.6% (d+e), suggest the Council members need help or would defer to the minister. If we include option “c” in a broad, “lesser competence” category, however, it may be suggested that 60% believe that the Council may need help and dialogue because only a few are competent (c+d+e). While 60% is a substantial number, it is still far short of the ~95% who felt that they themselves needed help and dialogue in question 6.24

**Q.8 Which of these statements best describes your view of the Bible?**

The respondents were asked to choose between five options or a write-in response. The results are given in Chart 4.25

![Chart 4: Views of the Bible](chart.png)

---

24 It will be seen in chapter 7, below, that some of the interviewee’s were decidedly more negative about whether their peers on Council were competent in using scripture or even engaged it at all. The “informant” element was more pronounced and in line with expectations in that context.

25 The one respondent who chose, “Other,” indicated that his/her choice was a mix of options “c” and “d.”
With regard to the options, the first tends toward an evangelical perspective on scripture. The second represents a view associated with neo-orthodoxy and one that was widely held in the United Church in the early and middle years of the twentieth century. The third option aligns with a postmodern, pluralist view. The fourth affirms a human origin for scripture but may allow for serious spiritual reflection. The fifth option tends to downplay spiritual significance altogether, aligning the Bible with other ancient, mythical literature.

We see immediately in the chart, a definite endorsement for option “d” with almost 47% of United Church lay leaders viewing scripture as a human work relating human experiences of God. If we consider options “a” and “b” as more traditional claims about the Bible, and options c+d+e as more progressive, 37.2% of the lay leader participants take a traditional view while almost 63% see it as one truth among many, a human work, or myth. The predominant position is notably far from the view of scripture held by the Reformers and even from the United Church’s own official statements. The formative, *Basis of Union*, it will be recalled, referred to scripture as “the primary source and ultimate standard of Christian faith and life,” which was “given by the inspiration of God,” and contains “the only infallible rule of faith and life …”\(^{26}\) *A Statement of Faith* takes a broader view referring to the Spirit’s work in persuading human beings of “the truth and authority of the Word of God contained in the Scripture.” It goes on to affirm it as, “The true witness to God’s Word and the sure guide to Christian faith and conduct.”\(^{27}\)

These works are, of course, from the earlier years of the twentieth century. The positions espoused by the predominant group of respondents are more reflective of the more

\(^{26}\) *Basis of Union*, ¶ 2.0, 2.2.
\(^{27}\) Article IX, *ASOF*. 
critical academic views of scripture taught by the United Church in the later years of the
twentieth century (responses d & e) and, to some extent, the views of postmodern culture
(response c).28

6.3 Further analysis

Q.8 vs Q.2

The responses to the questionnaire were plotted on a Microsoft Excel spread sheet, which allowed for a deeper analysis by comparing responses to one question with those of another. We may ask, for instance, “How do those with traditional views of the Bible rank scripture as an influence in theological decision-making?” Microsoft Excel allowed for the extraction of responses to question two from those who took traditional views of the Bible in question eight (responses a+b).29 See Tables 8 and 9 below.

The sample size is small at sixteen individuals, yet the results are intriguing because the primary perceived influence of those with traditional views of scripture is, surprisingly, “an inner sense.” It is, nonetheless, notable that scripture ranks higher for this group than the general responses to question two (Table 3, above) and is a close second to “an inner sense.” Perhaps equally surprising is the fact that other “traditional” influences, such as “the opinion of the minister” and “sermons,” are not ranked higher by this group. One might assume a correlation between Bible, sermons, and a minister’s

28 As with several other questions significant differences were seen in individual church responses. For instance, 10 of the 16 total responses related to the traditional options were from church A alone. Only 4 of the 27 responses in the progressive options were from that congregation. Again, individual church cultures are apparent.

Question 9 asked if the respondents had any comments about how theological decisions are made in their Church Council or in The United Church of Canada? Only a few respondents commented and none were significant or helpful to this study.

29 I would like to thank Virginia Flintoft, a member of my Ministry Base Group (a requirement of the Toronto School of Theology Doctor of Ministry program), for prompting me and helping immensely with the intricacies of Microsoft Excel.
views but the responses do not affirm this. “Experience” and “dialogue” rank ahead of these other traditional influences yet the experiential influences do not appear to dominate as was found in the general responses to questions one, two, and four.

When we look at the responses to scripture itself as an influence, the data suggests that having a more traditional view of scripture only moderately correlates with whether one perceives it to be the top influence (25% of respondents), or among the top three

Table 8. The prime influence on those with traditional views of scripture (Q.8 a+b vs Q.2; the #1 ranking only)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Responses Max.16</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>g. An inner sense or voice (conscience, spirit)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>f. The Bible</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>e. Church Tradition &amp; Theology</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>c. Dialogue in Christian Community</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>b. Experiences in Life</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>j. Opinion of the Minister</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>h. Sermons</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>a. Common Cultural Values</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>d. Relevant scholarly study</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>i. Sunday School</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>k. Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9. The primary influences on those with traditional views of scripture (Q.8 a+b vs Q.2; the top three rankings combined)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Influences</th>
<th>Responses Max.16 from 48 possible choices</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>g. An inner sense or voice (conscience, spirit)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>f. The Bible</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>56.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>e. Church Tradition &amp; Theology</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>b. Experiences in Life</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>c. Dialogue in Christian Community</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>j. Opinion of the Minister</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>h. Sermons</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>a. Common Cultural Values</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>d. Relevant scholarly study</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>i. Sunday School</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>k. Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
influences in decision-making (56% of respondents).\textsuperscript{30} That 56% indicated the latter, however, means that those with traditional views of scripture are twice as likely to choose scripture among their top three influences than the average lay leader (24%, Table 3, above).\textsuperscript{31}

When we look at the responses to question 2 of those with more progressive views of scripture the results are given in Tables 10 and 11, below. The results appear predictable and reveal that the group is heavily influenced by options within the experiential category. “An inner sense” and “experience” are by far the most important influences cited, followed by “culture,” “church tradition/theology,” and “dialogue.” The appearance of “church tradition and theology” in this grouping is probably again due to high levels of respect for tradition and the tradition of a local congregation within this segment of society.\textsuperscript{32}

The extremely low perceived influence of the scriptures is noteworthy. While foreseeable that no one in this group ranked scripture as the prime influence, the fact that scripture received only one of seventy-five possible responses for the top three influences is significant. This, in combination with the fact that “sermons” and “the opinion of the minister” were also ranked low, may be something of a concern to the Church since this grouping represents approximately 63% of lay leaders polled. In spite of the possibility that experiential options such as, “an inner sense,” may have a degree of residual Christian thought within them, one wonders what grounds and keeps leaders and their

\textsuperscript{30} If we look at the small group of five persons who had the more evangelical view of scripture, “ultimate truth and God’s Word,” a similar pattern emerges with Bible and “an inner sense” tied, with both the primary influence and top three influences revealing this. We may, perhaps, have expected a larger tilt toward the Bible within that group in particular but this is a very small sample.

\textsuperscript{31} It is still striking that 43% of those who hold to a more traditional view of scripture do not reference it as one of the top three influences on them when making theological decisions.

\textsuperscript{32} Cf. Table 18, below, and the discussion, in §7.4.
decisions within a specifically Christian frame of reference. In addition, it is to be remembered that in United Church polity, only lay people vote in the local church Council or in general meetings of the membership.

**Table 10. The prime influence on those with progressive views of scripture**
(Q.8 c+d+e vs Q.2; the #1 ranking only)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Responses Max.25</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>g. An inner sense or voice (conscience, spirit)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>b. Experiences in Life</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>c. Dialogue in Christian Community</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>e. Church Tradition &amp; Theology</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>a. Common Cultural Values</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>h. Sermons</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>j. Opinion of the Minister</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>k. Other - Family</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>d. Relevant scholarly study</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>f. The Bible</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>i. Sunday School</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 11. The primary influences on those with progressive views of scripture**
(Q.8 c+d+e vs Q.2); the top three rankings combined)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Influences</th>
<th>Responses Max.25 from 75 possible choices</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>g. An inner sense or voice (conscience, spirit)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>b. Experiences in Life</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>a. Common Cultural Values</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>e. Church Tradition &amp; Theology</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>c. Dialogue in Christian Community</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>j. Opinion of the Minister</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>h. Sermons</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>d. Relevant scholarly study</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>f. The Bible</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>k. Family</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th</td>
<td>i. Sunday School</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

33 The one write-in response C03 and the incorrect responses to Q.2 by participant B09 have been omitted from these calculations. Thus the Tables 10 & 11 are based on 25 responses only.
What we have found when comparing views of scripture with perceived influences is that higher views of scripture moderately correlate with viewing it as a main influence when making theological decisions. Notably, for that group there is also a similar moderate correlation to viewing the experiential influences as important. When it comes to those with more progressive views of scripture, there was a strong negative correlation between a progressive view and seeing scripture as an influence in decision-making. For this group a strong positive correlation exists between a progressive view of scripture and perceiving the experiential options as influential.

Q.5 v. Q.2

A comparison of responses to question 2 in light of responses to question five allows us to analyse how the groups of individuals who read the Bible regularly, occasionally, and rarely, viewed those things that influenced them when making theological decisions.

It is, perhaps, surprising that only 33% of regular readers of the Bible will choose scripture (column “f”) among their top three influences. The figure is slightly lower for occasional readers of scripture (30%) and drops to 0% of those who engage scripture rarely or not at all. Regular and occasional readers of scripture are most likely to view “an inner sense” (col.g), “church tradition and/or theology” (col.e), and “experience “(col.b) as their top three influences. There is, therefore, only a limited correlation between claiming to read scripture and ranking it among the key influences that affect theological decisions on behalf of the church. The level, in the low 30% range for regular and occasional readers, is only slightly higher than the 24% of the general responses to
Table 12. How readers, occasional readers, and non-readers of scripture perceive the top three influences on them when making theological decisions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q.5 Options</th>
<th>Regular Readers 5 a+b (max. 6)</th>
<th>Occasional Readers 5 c+d (max:27)</th>
<th>Non-Readers 5 e+f (max: 8)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a 17%</td>
<td>b 50%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b 50%</td>
<td>c 33%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c 33%</td>
<td>d 0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d 0%</td>
<td>e 4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e 4%</td>
<td>f 67%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f 67%</td>
<td>g 33%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>g 33%</td>
<td>h 83%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>h 83%</td>
<td>i 17%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>i 17%</td>
<td>j 0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>j 0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question two. Thus, it is clear that regular or occasional reading of the Bible correlates less with viewing it as a key influence than having a traditional view of scripture (cf. Table 9 above that shows that 56% of those with a traditional view of scripture are apt to rank it as a top three influence).

Q8 v. Q. 4

By comparing questions eight and four, we consider how views of scripture correlate with how a person perceives they find knowledge of God. The results are recorded in Tables 13-16, below. Predictably, those with traditional views of scripture cited the Bible and the Holy Spirit as the most significant sources of knowledge of God (Tables 13 & 14, 34 The options given with the question were - a: common cultural values; b: experiences in life; c: dialogue in Christian community; d: relevant scholarly study; e: church tradition and/or theology; f: the Bible; g: An inner sense; h: sermons; i: Sunday School; j: opinion of the minister(s); k: other
35 Includes one of the “8.g” write in responses – the person is evidently a regular reader and uses commentaries.
36 Includes two responses from the write in category, 8.g, as these indicated that they did not read scripture.
This is true, not only of the perceived primary source (Table 13), but also when the top three sources of knowledge of God are examined (Table 14). Of the experiential options, dialogue is viewed highly by this group but “experience,” as a category, was only selected by one of the sixteen respondents as a significant source of knowledge of God. Additionally, “an inner sense,” or in this case, “heart,” has slipped down the rankings but still is among the top three sources for 44% of the group. Interestingly, the category, “writings other than scriptures,” was chosen by almost 19% of the group. Some within it are evidently broad enough thinkers that they believe that knowledge of God can be found in other written sources as well.

When we consider those with progressive views of scripture (Tables 15 & 16), it is immediately apparent that the experiential categories are perceived to be greater sources of knowledge of God. The categories, “In the heart,” “experience,” and “dialogue” are the primary sources cited by this group. The most significant disparity

Table 13. The primary source of knowledge of God for those with traditional views of scripture (Q.8 a+b vs Q.4; the #1s)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Responses Max.16</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>f. The Christian scripture</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>56.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>e. The Holy Spirit</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>a. In the heart (an inner knowledge &amp; conviction)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>d. Human Reason</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>h. Other - prayer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>b. Experience</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>c. Dialogue in Christian Community</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>g. Writings Other Than Christian scripture</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

37 Question 4 was the first time that a category for the Holy Spirit was placed as a potential response and the support for it both here and in general (Table 7) suggests that future study ought to include it as a possible response to questions. This is also the first time “reason” as a category has been given as an option. In order to allow all parts of the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral to be influences or sources, it too could be utilized as a regular option in future studies.
Table 14. Sources of knowledge of God for those with traditional views of scripture: derived from their top three responses (Q.8 a+b vs Q.4)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Responses Max.16 from 48 possible choices</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>f. The Christian scripture</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>81.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>c. Dialogue in Christian Community</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>56.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>e. The Holy Spirit</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>56.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>a. In the heart (an inner knowledge &amp; conviction)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>d. Human Reason</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>g. Writings Other Than Christian scripture</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>h. Other - prayer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>b. Experience</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 15. Primary source of knowledge of God for those with progressive views of scripture (Q.8 c+d+e vs Q.4)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Responses Max.25</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>a. In the heart (an inner knowledge &amp; conviction)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>c. Dialogue in Christian Community</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>b. Experience</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>e. The Holy Spirit</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>f. The Christian scripture</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>d. Human Reason</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>g. Writings Other Than Christian scripture</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>h. Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 16. Sources of knowledge of God for those with progressive views of scripture: the top three sources combined (Q.8 c+d+e vs Q.4)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Responses Max.25 from 75 possible choices</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>b. Experience</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>a. In the heart (an inner knowledge &amp; conviction)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>c. Dialogue in Christian Community</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>f. The Christian scripture</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>d. Human Reason</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>e. The Holy Spirit</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>g. Writings Other Than Christian scripture</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>h. Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
vis-à-vis the traditional group is seen with the “experience” category, which was chosen as one of the top three sources by only 6% of the traditional group (Table 14), but by 72% of the progressive group (Table 16).

“The Christian scriptures” as a source of knowledge of God is also a category that reveals significant divergence. Within the traditional group, 56% chose scripture as their prime source of knowledge of God (Table 13) versus only 8% of those who hold progressive views of scripture (Table 15). As one of the top three influences 81% of the traditional group chose scripture (Table 14), whereas, only 40% of the progressive group make that same choice (Table 16). These results may be predictable, however, the fact that 40% of the group that has progressive views of scripture sees it as an important source of knowledge of God is noteworthy. This is a much more positive result than the comparison between questions 8 and 2 above. There we noted that, in practice, only one person (4%) viewed scripture as an influence on their theological decision-making (Table 11, above). Here, 40% of the same group view scripture as a significant source of knowledge of God. One would expect a correlation between influences on theological thinking and perceptions of sources of knowledge of God.\(^{38}\) Perhaps, however, this reveals an area in which the church may encourage consistency between belief and practice.\(^{39}\)

\(^{38}\) This must not be pushed too far, however, as the options for responses changed between questions two and four. Additionally, with less options available in question four, it is likely that certain categories would have higher rates of response. That said, however, the trend is worth further investigation.

\(^{39}\) Compare the fact that 81% of those with traditional views of scripture view scripture as one of the top three sources of knowledge of God with the fact that 56% view scripture as one of the top three influences on them as they make theological decisions. Cf. Tables 14 and 9.
Other comparisons

Similar studies were undertaken comparing questions 8 and 5 and comparing questions 8 and 6. The former revealed that those with traditional views of scripture tended to be occasional readers of scripture outside of worship services. Those with progressive views engaged scripture slightly less often. In terms of familiarity, predictably, those with higher views of scripture tended to perceive themselves as slightly more familiar with the Bible than did those who viewed the Bible in more human terms. The latter study (Q.8 & 6), compared views of scripture with perceptions of competency. Due to the high percentage of individuals who claimed to need help and dialogue to understand scripture (Q.6), there was no appreciable difference in perceptions of competency between the more traditional and more progressive groups.

6.4 What have we learned?

As we close this chapter, it is worth summarizing some of the significant things we have learned. First, when Toronto, United Church, lay-leaders were asked about what influences them in making theological decisions, it was significant that the experiential sources dominated responses. Overwhelmingly, it was found that respondents selected “an inner sense” and “experience” as primary influences with “dialogue” and “culture” as secondary, ahead of any of the more traditional influences.\textsuperscript{40} Furthermore, when responses to question two were compared with those of question eight, it was found that even among those with more traditional views of scripture, “an inner sense” was still deemed the primary influence, slightly ahead of scripture. For the 63\% with more

\textsuperscript{40} See responses to Q.1 & 2 especially. Also Q.4 where experiential elements were chosen as three of the top four sources of knowledge of God.
progressive views of the Bible, experiential influences dominated. For most United Church lay leaders, therefore, the experiential elements are felt to be significantly greater influences than Bible, clergy, tradition, and sermons.

Responses to the questionnaire about scripture revealed lower than expected levels related to the influence of scripture, the respondents’ perceived competence in using scripture, and their valuations of scripture. With regard to the influence of scripture, question two revealed that only 9.5% of those surveyed viewed the Bible as the primary influence on them when making theological decisions. A somewhat larger group, 24%, viewed it as one of the top three influences. This leaves 76% of lay leaders who view it as a lesser influence. Even when the experiential elements were removed as options (question three), 58% of respondents still did not select scripture as a top three influence for theological decision-making. 41 Likewise, when we extracted the responses of those who held more traditional views of scripture from question eight, we found that the Bible still lagged slightly behind “an inner sense” as an influence for that particular group. 42 Perhaps more surprising is the fact that 44% of those with “higher” views of scripture did not include it among their top three influences. 43

Some of the reason behind not choosing scripture as an influence is probably due to the fact that only 4.7% of those surveyed felt reasonably confident about their ability to use the Bible (Chart 2). It will be recalled that 95.3% of respondents said they would need help and dialogue or would defer to others when scripture enters into theological

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41 Although, there, “sermons” were ranked first in responses with 83% indicating it as one of their three top influences.
42 Comparison is of responses to questions 8 and 2.
43 I use the word “higher” here in a traditional sense to describe those who may view scripture, or significant portions of it, as divinely inspired. Cf. Robert Fennell understands a “high” view of scripture to be one which holds the Bible to be authoritative in itself. Fennell, 2008 part II, 31.
Perceptions of competence are, therefore, low. On a more positive note, however, it seems that we cannot generalize the anecdote that gave birth to this thesis about the lay leader who had never read the Bible. In spite of the lesser influence of scripture, most lay leaders claim to be familiar, or somewhat familiar, with it and read it occasionally (question 5).

In general, the influence of scripture is felt at significant levels by a minority (<25%) of central Toronto, United Church lay leaders. There is, nonetheless, an intriguing dissonance apparent with responses to question four, “Where, in your mind, does knowledge of God and God’s will primarily come from?” That 55% included scripture among their top three sources of knowledge of God suggests a disconnect between belief (where knowledge of God comes from) and practice (what actually influences lay leaders as they make decisions).

In drawing this chapter to a close, it needs to be stated clearly that Christianity and Christian knowledge ought not be perceived as limited to that received from scripture. For centuries the church functioned more through an oral gospel than through anything written. Countless generations believed and lived in response to the Word proclaimed (sermons, teachings, “Sunday School,” etc.), the perceived guidance of the Holy Spirit, and through simply imitating Christian leaders. The Word may, thus, exist in the heart without scripture and account must be taken of residual forms of Christian knowledge influencing experience, “an inner heart,” church tradition, culture, and associated dialogue. In an age, however, in which print and electronic forms of print are

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44 Question 6, Chart 2.
45 See Table 3 above, re: Q.2.
46 Cf. footnote 42, above, in this chapter.
47 One wonders, however, if these people were charged with theological discernment.
readily available, it is still significant that the scriptures, which are proclaimed as “the Word of God” each week in worship, have such low levels of influence on lay leaders. This is particularly the case, where the Church formally holds them to be the primary witness to God and Christ and, supposedly, vets other sources of knowledge through them.48 We move on now to the interviews in which it is hoped that some things may be clarified, including how individuals perceive categories such as “an inner sense,” “experience,” and “tradition.”

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48 One thinks again of the second century Montanist controversy when claims of spiritual insight and perceived direction of the Holy Spirit were tested by the scriptures and Gospels.
Chapter 7

The Interviews

7.1 The participants: selection and description

Instructions were sent to the three participating Council chairs requesting that they call for two volunteers from their Council who would be willing to be interviewed as part of the study. In order to attain a degree of random selection, it was determined beforehand that the first two volunteers from each Council would be accepted. This process led to four men and two women being interviewed. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and sought to clarify the following:

1. The intentional processes that Councils or individuals engage in while making theological decisions
2. The factors that influence individuals as they make theological decisions on behalf of their congregations
3. Whether scripture has a role when local church Councils make decisions
4. Perceptions of individual and corporate competency in understanding scripture
5. The interviewees’ views of scripture
6. How each interviewee perceives that he/she may know the will of God

In interests of maintaining anonymity, the individuals interviewed have been assigned pseudonyms and the description of the participants will be brief and general.

William and Fred are from Church A, Norm and Mary are from Church B, and Katherine and Jim are from Church C. Three of the six are active retirees. Of the remaining three, one is in his thirties in terms of age and two are in their early fifties. Five of the six are
university trained and hold professional designations in law, finance, or education. One has high school training and is employed in a unionized field. Their relative tenures on the church Councils vary from two to some forty years and two participants are currently serving as members of presbytery as well as being on their local church Councils. The interviews took place in October and November of 2014 in a variety of venues that were selected by the participants.

7.2 Data analysis and reporting

There is no designated pattern for processing or analysing data in qualitative studies. In this case study, the interviews were digitally recorded with the permission of the interviewees. The researcher transcribed the recordings and read the transcriptions a number of times. With each reading, notes were taken and organized around the questions that were asked. Special attention within the responses was given to comparable and contrasting elements, repetition, and agreement between participants. These were used to draw out the interviewees’ thoughts in an inductive manner.

As with the questionnaires, the order of the questions was established to move from general questions about the things that influenced the interviewees when they made theological decisions to more specific questions about the role of scripture as an influence. It was noted that the process sometimes led interviewees to progress in their thinking and go back, within the interview, to clarify thoughts on an earlier question. This was taken into account in the analysis as the researcher sought to integrate all

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1 A presbytery is the second level of governance within The United Church of Canada. It is comprised of the ministers and lay representatives from each local church within a geographic region.
2 All participants had filled in the questionnaire, however, and thus had some prior knowledge of the central thrust of the study.
responses pertinent to a given question in order to facilitate a full measure of the participants’ views.

There is no set framework for reporting data deriving from interviews in a qualitative study. Above (§7.1), however, we set out points that we hoped to gain understanding of and it seems appropriate that the report should be organized generally around those elements. At the end of the report, below (§7.7), we will ponder areas of broad agreement between participants and seek to establish a general, central Toronto, United Church perspective. This is not meant to detract from the many differences that were apparent between individuals on the topics in question. The responses, however, did offer a number of areas of general agreement, which are of significant interest.

7.3 Intentional processes when making theological decisions

Intentional processes within the local Church

At the beginning of the interviews, the phrase, “theological decision,” was clarified for the participants and they were asked if they could recall such a decision being taken by their Council. The example of the 2012 “remits” from General Council

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4 The term, “theology,” in the first place has to do with word (logos) of, or about, God (theos). Thus, when one speaks of “theological decisions,” one is speaking of significant, congregational-shaping decisions that touch on Christian beliefs and practices. These may include those decisions that have explicit moral, ethical, and faith dimensions as opposed to those that may appear to be more administrative, having to do with finance, organization, property, and the colour of the sanctuary carpet. To be sure, the latter categories may also have theological associations. Whether a congregation spends money to upgrade offices or to assist the poor would be a determination that has definite theological overtones. Not every decision made by a congregation’s Council is perceived, however, as having theological import. The words, “theology” and “theological,” are utilized here to help us distinguish between ordinary, everyday decisions (the colour of the carpet) and those that may explicitly impact Christian belief and practice. These may include, for instance, changes to Statements of Faith, changes to worship patterns, whether or not to allow gay marriages in the sanctuary, whether to allow alcohol at Church events, whether a congregation allows the use of raffles to fund events or programmes.
was given and most participants commented on it. A “remit” occurs when the United Church seeks to alter an element of its governance document, *The Manual*. In this instance, General Council was testing the will of the Church in an effort to expand the *Basis of Union* to include *A Statement of Faith* (1940), *A New Creed*, and *A Song of Faith* as subordinate standards of faith. Every pastoral charge and every presbytery within the denomination was asked to vote on the remits.⁵

To help congregations and presbytery members in their reflections, a denominational committee was tasked with forming an applicable resource document. The resulting publication, *Our Words of Faith: Cherished, Honoured, Living (OWF)*, 2010, was made available online. In it, each member of the local church session or Council was encouraged to read the material, prepare for discussion by thinking through applicable questions, and prepare to vote.⁶ According to the interviewees, each of their churches received a mailing with the study material from the national church. This material was given out to members of their respective Councils, the remit process was discussed, and a future date for discussion and vote established. Participants from Churches A and B indicated that their ministers announced the nature of the study and its import from the pulpit to the wider congregation. In one of the three, Church A, the

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⁵ Various levels of General Council remits may occur depending on the significance of the polity item to be changed. The 2012 remits were “category three” remits which dealt with changes that would potentially affect United Church belief. According to the resource document associated with the remits, “Category three remits include changes that affect the Articles of Faith, alter significantly the structures of the United Church, redefine our understanding of ministry, or alter our understanding of who is a member of the church.” When a category three remit occurs, the denomination must poll every presbytery across the country as well as every pastoral charge. It must achieve a majority vote in each level of church governance as well as in the following General Council to invoke a change. Michael Bourgeois, Connie denBok, Catherine Faith MacLean, John H. Young, *Our Words of Faith: Cherished, Honoured, Living* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2010), 4-6. Available online at: [http://www.united-church.ca/files/beliefs/statements/our-words-of-faith.pdf](http://www.united-church.ca/files/beliefs/statements/our-words-of-faith.pdf). Hereafter referred to as *OWF*.

⁶ *OWF*, 7, 8.
minister held a two-hour, educational seminar for the congregation on the remits and their meaning for the church. The minister in Church B read selected passages from *A Song of Faith* to the congregation on successive Sunday worship services in order to broaden understanding of what was being discussed. Additionally, in Church B, the discussion went on over two Council meetings before a vote was taken. In Church C, the process was kept within the confines of the Council itself.

**Intentional processes and the individual**

When it comes to individual preparation for voting on the remits, Mary admitted that she was not thorough. She said, “It was important to the church and I should’ve done more due diligence. I started reading some of the historical stuff and it wasn’t speaking to me at all. So I said that it doesn’t seem to affect me or my practice of faith. I approached it as a bit of a technicality … I did not go through the material entirely.” Katherine remarked, “Frankly, there was not much interest in the remits. We live in an overloaded world with pressing concerns and issues. The remits weren’t high on anyone’s list. There’s so much clutter that people face.” Fred admitted that he had not paid much attention to the remits either, stating,

> I thought it was something that I could take the leadership of the minister on. Expanding the *Basis of Union* seemed sensible and I didn’t pay a huge amount of attention to it … I wasn’t sure the change would be doing anything to the faith. … Things like LGBT issues are more practical, these remits, perhaps, were more theoretical. There weren’t many on the Council who were serious about them.

It was noted further that only three of the twenty-five Council members from Church A attended the minister’s seminar on the remits.

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7 Italics mine to preserve anonymity.
8 Parenthesis mine to aid understanding of what “these” referred to.
The other participants did not say much about individual processes related to the remits. Even though they each had served on their local church Councils at the time, their memories were vague or they indicated that they had not paid much attention to the remits.

**Comment**

The remits had to do with altering the denomination’s core governance and faith statement. Prior to ordination, all candidates for ministry must affirm that they are in “essential agreement” with the beliefs contained in the *Basis of Union.* Given its import, it is intriguing that changing the *Basis of Union* produced a very muted level of response and interest in this group of Toronto lay-leaders. This may be indicative of a broad disinterest in theology and/or national church issues. Katherine’s comments suggested a lack of interest in denominational concerns and the tenor of her other thoughts specified more interest in pressing, local church matters such as the survival of the church in the current cultural climate, a potential building program, and the implementation of an environmentally conscious ministry. Mary’s comments likewise revealed a disinterest in denominational concerns and divulged, perhaps, a preference for the local or personal interests. In general, therefore, while the denominational resource document had set up a significant process of engagement, individual Council members appear not to have embraced it.⁹ Perhaps, in this particular cultural climate, there is less interest in

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⁹ This was affirmed by the clergy in the focus group. They experienced similar lack of engagement in their respective churches. In addition, in the researcher’s own presbytery, the remits were all passed, surprisingly, with no discussion whatsoever. This was particularly interesting as presbytery includes all ministers within the presbytery boundaries. One would expect that they would have a greater vested interest in theological matters of this nature.
denominational affairs in favour of the local, and less interest in theology in favour of individual faith-practice and the practical concerns of the local community.

The intentional process set forth in the resource document prepared on behalf of the national church was useful. The paper set forth in a readable format all of the relevant material and suggested appropriate questions to be engaged. The authors did not shy away from scripture or theological thought, asking decision-makers first, “Does each expression reflect continuity with The United Church of Canada of previous generations, as expressed in the Basis of Union and ultimately in scripture?”

Although there was no specific question in the early stages of the interviews related to the engagement of scripture around the subject of making theological decisions, none of the participants volunteered that scripture was engaged in their individual or Council processes. Lest an argument be made from silence, all six participants, in answer to a subsequent question, stated that they had never experienced scripture being engaged at all in a Council meeting (see below §7.4).

7.4 What influences lay leaders’ theological decisions?

The influences on participants & how they rank them

The interviewees were next asked about those things that influence their thinking when called to make theological decisions. In the interview with Mary, she first brought up the influence of scripture but indicated that she did not always feel qualified to interpret it. For this, she always sought out the opinion of her minister who, she said, was

10 OWF, 7.

11 It is noted again that in Church A, the minister did hold a seminar on the remits in which theological ramifications were discussed. As mentioned, however, only three Council members were present at this congregational event so that it was largely external to Church A’s Council process.
much more aware of ancient contexts and types of literature. To help assess how the interviewees ranked the various influences, they were subsequently given a sheet of paper with question two of the questionnaire on it. In spite of initially talking about scripture, however, Mary listed, experience, minister, and culture as the top three influences on her respectively. The fact that scripture was not directly included in the top three was even more interesting due to the fact that she had already shared a significant involvement in study and lectionary groups. Thus, while not viewed as one of her three primary influences, scripture surely functions in the background of Mary’s faith and decision-making.

Norm, on the other hand, spoke of certain men and women in his life whom he greatly admired. Chief among them were his parents who had conducted their lives in such a way that other people were able to live richer lives. He hoped that, one day, someone could say that he had the same decency and offered the same service to people that his parents and a much respected member of his church Council had. If so, he continued, “I would consider my life a success.” Thus, care of others, exemplified in the lives of a few individuals, motivated Norm and seemed to be a significant part of his thinking process. When asked to rank the top three things that influenced him, Norm listed, “an inner sense,” family/people, and experience.

William also mentioned his family of origin and, particularly, a grandmother who had been a significant influence on his life-long attachment to the church. In formal deliberations, he indicated, that he would always ask, therefore, “What is best for the Church?” The three key influences that inform his decision were given as: tradition, a lifetime of sermons, and his long experience.
Fred, likewise, has a lengthy affiliation with the Church and states that he has been greatly influenced by “in-born beliefs and the culture one grows up in.” He spoke of how his family over several generations had been associated with the Church. He admitted to having many questions and uncertainties about the Faith and claimed to be, what he termed, “a Tom Harpur-kind of Christian.” He was not sure that he was qualified in theology and indicated that his tendency was to defer to the clergy on such matters. Fred listed his top three influences as ministers, culture, and experience.

Katherine acknowledged the importance of education and scholarship in her thinking. Early in life she had been greatly influenced by studies in science and education. Later, she felt that she had studied all over again in conjunction with her son’s Environmental Science degree. In addition, she acknowledges the influence of her family upbringing but ranked her top three influences as experience, a relevant scholarly study, and an inner sense.

Jim indicated that his theological decisions were influenced primarily by scripture although, he indicated, “I am not a scholar or well read.” In spite of this, during the conversation, he revealed that he had read several books on the synoptic problem, contextuality, and interpretation. In addition, he said that he had always taken an interest in “the little guy and the underdog,” and finds the same interests in the life of Jesus. Jim’s top three influences are Bible, experience, and dialogue within the Christian community to which he added, “under the Holy Spirit.”

Analysis

The interviewees’ responses to the three top influences of each individual may be plotted in a tabular form as given in Table 17 (below). The sample size is small but, as
with the questionnaires, a preference for experiential options is readily apparent.

“Experience” itself was selected as one of the top three influences by each of the six participants. The influence of culture, an inner sense, and ministers were noted by two individuals. Family/others, sermons, scholarly studies, scripture, and dialogue were noted by one individual each.

**Table 17. The top three influences on interviewees when making theological decisions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Mary</th>
<th>Norm</th>
<th>William</th>
<th>Fred</th>
<th>Katherine</th>
<th>Jim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Inner Sense</td>
<td>Tradition</td>
<td>Minister</td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Minister</td>
<td>Family/Others</td>
<td>Sermons</td>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Scholarly Study</td>
<td>Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Inner Sense</td>
<td>Dialogue</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The nature of the interview process, however, allows a researcher to gain further information about the participants, their motivations, and understandings. A nuanced understanding of the influences on individuals based on responses in the whole interview are given in Table 18, below. It will be seen that an additional row has been added to reflect specific influences or motivations that recurred in the participants’ responses. The recurrence of these elements suggested that they may be deep influences or motivations that significantly affect the participants’ thoughts even if they are not verbally acknowledged among their top three influences. It will further be noted that a slight re-ordering of influences has occurred with Fred’s responses. This was due to the fact that, later in the interview, he stressed that he would accept the minister’s position on a subject only if it agreed with what he had already thought and experienced in the past. This led to an adjustment of the categories he listed in terms of rank (cf. Table 17).
Table 18. The researcher’s revision of the top influences on the interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Mary</th>
<th>Norm</th>
<th>William</th>
<th>Fred</th>
<th>Katherine</th>
<th>Jim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>One Specific Life Experience</td>
<td>Inner Sense Of Right</td>
<td>His Church Tradition</td>
<td>Broad Experience incl. Church &amp; Upbringing</td>
<td>Broad Experience Incl. Workplace</td>
<td>Bible &amp; Related Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Minister’s Views on Bible &amp; Theology</td>
<td>Family/Respected Church Members</td>
<td>Sermons</td>
<td>Minister’s Views</td>
<td>Scholarly Studies On Environment</td>
<td>Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Culture Including Family &amp; Church</td>
<td>Broad Experience</td>
<td>Personal Church Experience</td>
<td>Broad Culture &amp; Church Culture</td>
<td>Inner Sense Informed by Upbringing</td>
<td>Dialogue/ Spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Bible; Reason; “gut” instinct</td>
<td>Finds Value in Care for Others</td>
<td>Family &amp; What is Best For The Church</td>
<td>What He Grew Up With</td>
<td>Family &amp; UCC Upbringing Education</td>
<td>Concern For “the little guy”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When we examine Table 18 as a whole, it is immediately obvious that although the participants are mature adults, most revealed that early experiences within family life and general upbringing influence them significantly. Four of the five who referenced “upbringing,” spoke of their early, or general, experience of church also as influencing their theological stances. Since the other individual, Jim, did not grow up in the church, or have parents with Christian interests, the finding is even more significant. Apparently, upbringing and early church experience are formative for those growing up in a church family. This continues to influence choices and decisions in later life.

Additionally, Table 18 reveals that the options given in the questionnaire could be understood in a variety of ways. When Mary spoke of experience, for instance, she

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12 Five or the six participants referenced family and upbringing.
13 This is a category that future questionnaires and studies should include.
thought of one particular, critical experience that has become a lens through which much of her theological thinking passes. William also interpreted the option in a relatively narrow sense, primarily thinking of the experience gained in his long association with the church. When Norm, Fred, or Katherine speak of experience, however, they were thinking more of the broad experience one gains in life. Fred and Katherine would include in that upbringing and early church experience, whereas Norm did not reference his experience of church, only that of family and other stellar individuals.

The same is true of culture. The term can be understood in terms of the influence of the broad culture or it can be understood to refer to the culture of the church or a family circle (Mary, Fred). Likewise, “an inner sense” can carry several nuances and, several times, the interviewees were asked about what may inform that category. While the question proved difficult to answer for some, Katherine and Norm alluded to the possibility of their family upbringing informing it. Finally, in this regard, when William spoke of tradition, he had in mind the specific tradition of The United Church of Canada and his local congregation. With this understanding, it is apparent that there was some linkage in people’s minds between the options: tradition, culture, and experience. Each was nuanced by different individuals to include church and general upbringing.

Mary affirmed the formational aspect of church culture when she spoke of her own personal difficulty in moving away from aspects of an, “old, miserable, rules-based faith” of her childhood and youth, to one that was progressive, flexible, and grace-filled. It took some work and a different approach to her understanding of scripture to make the change.

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14 One also wonders if his broader, private school experience influences Norm’s general mindset.
In general the findings support those of the questionnaires when it comes to scripture. Only one of the six interviewees (Jim) directly referenced scripture as an influence (Table 17). Statistical usage of the United Church’s “primary source” improves when we consider that Mary mentioned it frequently but outside of her top three stated influences. In addition, some secondary influence of scripture is surely behind William’s choice of sermons as his second major influence as well as informing Fred and Katherine’s notions of “upbringing.” Based on the questionnaires and the interviews, it is clear that a low percentage of United Church lay leaders are directly influenced by the Church’s primary authority when making theological decisions. We cannot rule out, however, that scripture has some degree of influence among a greater percentage of individuals in a less direct manner through sermons and the general life of the Church.

7.5 The role of scripture in discerning theology

Perceptions of the role of scripture in council deliberations

In an environment in which the Christian scriptures are stated to be “the primary source and ultimate standard of Christian faith and life,” one might expect that they would have a place in theological discussions.15 All six participants in this study, however, indicated that they had never experienced scripture being used as a basis of discussion in any Council process.16 William, who has been involved on the Councils of two congregations and two presbyteries over a forty-year period said, “I’ve never been in a Council meeting in which scripture has been used and debated. That would tend to be

15 The Basis of Union in The Manual ¶2.0. OWF, 5f., 10f.
16 With the exception of scripture being used for a devotional reading at the beginning of some meetings. That was dependent on the minister and is no longer the norm.
done in Bible-literalists churches.” Norm indicated that he would never use it as a basis of argument, while Katherine thought that the nature of the people on her Council entailed that they would not reference scripture during a meeting.\footnote{I took the inference to relate to the fact that her Council has many educated, senior professionals and that there may be a cultural notion that biblical discussion may be the domain of “biblical literalists,” as William stated.} Mary had never experienced a specific use of scripture but wondered if it tended to be “in the background.” Both Fred and Jim, while they had never experienced such discussions indicated that they would not mind if it were taken into account at appropriate times.

There are two caveats to the foregoing coming from Mary and Norm, both from Church B, the most progressive church of the three in this study. Not only did Mary think that scripture “may be in the background,” she also thought that occasionally, someone may make a brief quote or passing reference to a biblical story that might “colour the discussion.” Analogously, Norm, while announcing that he would never argue from scripture, said that he would not be afraid to mention “the parable of the talents,” for instance, in a discussion of finances and achieving a good return on Church investments. To clarify, his usage would take the form of mentioning a generally accepted title of a parable and assume that everyone knew the story and its implications. This, together with the fact that Norm peppered our conversation with several parable and Jesus-\textit{mashal} references,\footnote{\textit{A mashal} is a pithy saying, proverb, or parable. The plural is \textit{meshalim}.} indicates that he has familiarity with at least some of scripture and expects that others around him do as well. It is, thus, entirely possible that brief, less formal, and passing references to scripture do occur occasionally in United Church Council meetings. Based further on the interview with Norm, these references would be limited to very well-known, gospel themes: the golden rule, the greatest commandment,
“The one who has no sin, cast the first stone,” “the good Samaritan,” “love one another,” etc. A significant use or knowledge of scripture was not inferred in Norm’s comments.

It can be inferred, therefore, that the Councils of the churches studied do not engage in formal discussions around scripture as they make theological decisions. Individuals, however, may occasionally colour Council discussions with a passing reference to a popular parable or saying of Jesus. The fact that some voiced a degree of reticence toward engaging scripture in a Council setting is interesting. Two interviewees directly distinguished United Church practice from that of “biblical literalists.” One wonders if the thought implied by the widespread, pejorative usage of the phrase, “biblical literalists,” within the United Church may actually function to discourage United Church leaders from referencing their own primary source of faith and practice. None would want to be labelled “a literalist.”

**Perceptions of personal competency with scripture**

In contradistinction to responses and interpretation of the questionnaires, the individuals interviewed, for the most part, revealed that they had some knowledge of the Bible. Norm claimed to be more familiar with the Bible than most. He has also read popular books on aspects of the New Testament by Garry Wills, James Carroll, and Elaine Pagels. This gives him some knowledge of biblical criticism from which he has garnered a negative view of the Bible as a whole. Within it, however, he has noted some stellar principles and suggested, for instance, that “Jesus’ greatest commandment is the important bit, all the rest is commentary.”

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19 The researcher’s assumption was that this was a quotation of a popular axiom rather than something that had been thought deeply about.
Mary thought that she had a “medium understanding” of the Bible. She had read the Bible privately and regularly in her youth but without a great deal of understanding. In more recent years, she has been involved in study and lectionary groups and very much appreciates the input of her minister to help understand historical contexts and different types of literature. Jim also reads the Bible occasionally, mostly the Gospels, and has learned significant things from the introductions to books contained in his Study Bible. He revealed an interest in deeper study and has read several books about the Bible. At the time of the interview, he was most intrigued by a book on the Jewish nature of the gospel. Jim, however, feels that he is learning rather than competent with the scriptures. William claimed a “reasonable knowledge of the Bible” which he thinks undergirds all things in the church. He spoke of a time in the 1970s when he and his wife ran a youth group for a number of years and had to give talks to the young people. These, he said, were based on scripture, a Presbyterian curriculum, and The Interpreter’s Bible.

In spite of having read the Bible cover to cover many years earlier, Katherine felt that she was not conversant with it. She indicated that she had not found the scriptures “fetching” in her reading and thus limited its usefulness to a few sections that she described as “popular with preachers.” While not conversant enough to utilize scripture in a discussion, she suggested that if given texts to interpret in connection with a topic, she might do reasonably well. Fred claimed to be comfortable with the Bible but not competent. In the interview, he revealed some knowledge that may have derived from a lifetime of sermons but he did indicate that the Bible was not something he read outside
of worship services. For this reason, in theological matters he tended to take the leadership of the minister.

On the surface, the six interviewees revealed more knowledge of scripture than anticipated. Two of the six had read it extensively, at least four had read popular works associated with it, and all were able to reference popular parables or sayings of Jesus. All indicated some knowledge of hermeneutics or biblical criticism such as might be learned from a minister, sermon, or study group, and two had directly engaged some biblical scholarship. The impression was, however, that while Norm and others were very accepting of biblical criticism, none had yet moved toward a critical reading of the critics.20 While much of the foregoing is positive for biblical engagement, it must be said that this description telescopes activities that have taken place over many years. Only Mary and Jim seem to continue to engage the text in an on-going manner. Most developed, or are maintaining, a degree of familiarity through worship services, even if they may still pick up the odd book or magazine article about it.

An overall assessment of competence levels suggests that biblical understanding is reasonable at a popular level for four, and perhaps five, of the six participants in the study. This is not to say that they have understanding at anything approaching a scholarly level. They know, however, popular Jesus-LOGIA more so than the gospel as a whole, they are aware of Gospel material more than Paul, and are conversant with New Testament narrative much more than Old Testament. As a whole the competency levels seemed slightly higher than was revealed in the questionnaire. This may have something to do with the high education levels of those interviewed. Additionally, the willingness

20 Perhaps, however, this would be an expectation too high. Yet it is important for it impacts views on scripture among the laity.
of this group to be interviewed may stem from a broad interest in the nature of the study. They may, thus, have had greater interest than the average lay leader on their Councils.

**Perceptions of the competency of other council members with scripture**

As noted in the questionnaire section, the literature on qualitative studies suggests that individuals tend to be more honest in their assessment of others than they are about themselves. Here the questions asked of the interviewees called on them to act as “informants.”

While responses to the questionnaire surprised us, with respondents viewing the competency levels of others as higher than their own, the opposite was true in the interviews. Only Mary made a positive assessment of her peers’ competency. She felt that the majority of Council members were capable and at least two were proficient in their knowledge of the Bible. Furthermore, she indicated that several Council members participate with her in the lectionary group that she is a part of.

Mary’s counterpart from Church B, Norm, would not offer an opinion on others on the Council. William, from Church A, responded likewise but added that scripture engagement was at a very low ebb in the Church. While he did feel that a person could still be faithful without engaging the Bible directly, he lamented, “We have largely lost this undergirding of the Protestant movement.” Fred was less cautious, suggesting that three quarters of the Council do not engage scripture often or at all. “I doubt they’re reading it every morning,” he said, “Five out of twenty may do a lot; the other fifteen don’t do much more than I do.”

When it came to the participants from Church C, Katherine noted that the ministers were competent but did not feel that anyone else would ever bring scripture up in a Council.

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21 See above §6.2 regarding Q.7 of the questionnaire.
22 Which Fred admitted was little, or no, engagement with the text outside of worship.
discussion. Jim, while thinking that the Bible should be referenced in theological discussions, affirmed Katherine’s remark and suspected that there were not many who had ever read scripture. “It would surprise me if they did,” he said.

These comments are much more negative than the responses to question seven of the questionnaire. Four of the five participants who responded inferred that the majority of lay leaders did not engage scripture. The implication for at least three of the six was that few would be competent in using scripture to discern theology. Fred suggested that there was a certain culture in central Toronto that did not engage scripture. It was something to be left to the experts.23

The participants’ views of scripture

How Christians view the Bible carries implications for faith, life, and the decisions they face. Mary indicated that she thought of the Bible as the core text of the Christian faith. She would like to think that the writers’ insights are profound and assesses their inspiration as analogous to that which motivates an artist. Through attendance at church studies, she has gained an appreciation for the text and the complexity of interpretation. She is aware of the need to understand the historical context of a text but some biblical material, i.e. levitical laws, she surmises, may have made sense at the time but does not fit into contemporary culture. She, thus, views the Bible as a human book relating human perceptions of God. With the help of rationale and a critical attitude toward the text, she seeks out the core messages. Teachings such as “the golden rule” are viewed as the more valid “Word” than others.

23 Fred seemed to infer that ministers were the experts here as he had already spoken of deferring to the minister on theological matters.
Norm’s reading has taught him that the Bible is the culmination of years of collecting traditions and that the Church fought over what was going to be in and out of the biblical canon. These, together with some knowledge of higher critical issues, have led him to discount the authority of scripture as a whole. Although he may have been flippant, his comment, “a bunch of crazies wrote this crap down 2,000 years ago,” revealed something of his attitude. Norm clearly states that he does not do anything “because the Bible tells him so,” he relies rather on his inner sense of right. Within the Bible, however, he finds some powerful principles that, he says, are, “a valid articulation of something I believe … it thus becomes a hook for how I may think through a problem.” While the powerful principles within the scriptures are viewed as valuable, no notion of inspiration was verbalised.

William says that he believes in the Bible, that it undergirds everything in the church, and that it is divinely inspired. At the same time, however, he speaks of its human origins stating that it came from “very spiritually-gifted people who were moved to write.” He continues this thought by affirming that some of the Old Testament may include ancient, folk religion traditions but, he believes, the New Testament is a good source of historical information.24 In upholding it as the central source of religion in terms of learning, understanding, and spirituality, he offers the delightful statement, “It is thus highly influential but unlike the Bible-literalists, it is not something you trot out all the time.” He continued, “scripture should be the prime authority but, used as a basis of

24 William has a great interest in history and told a remarkable story about a school project he did in the early 1940s. He was studying Confederation and interviewed an elderly woman about what she remembered about it. She did not remember anything specific about Confederation, but she did have vivid memories of the Fenian raids in 1865 and 1866. William surmised that people have vivid memories of things that affect them significantly and he suggested that this is why the Gospels would have been reasonable historical sources.
reasoning, not as the final word. It is the source but reasoning and experience are needed to interpret it.”

Fred was not entirely consistent in his thought about the Bible. He referred to it, for instance as, “God’s word,” but would also speak of it as a human book that conflicts with itself. He continued, “I don’t take it as God writing it all down.” It is “a history of people’s thought,” and is important because it reveals years of religious understanding. Some of the conflict he sees in the Bible relates to the rigidity of Old Testament law versus Jesus’ theology of grace. He affirmed a greater worth for Jesus’ teaching than earlier material and seemed to give it a higher level of inspiration than other parts of the Bible.

Katherine has read the Bible cover to cover but found within it what she described as, “wheat and chaff.” In her own words,

I guess for me it is a powerful historical document that was a group of people’s best effort at trying to define what was good, and right, and guiding for us. There are deep truths there and a great power in the story. It is a collection of guiding principles, very important values and thinking. I don’t think it is ultimate truth, however. I believe it’s the best document we have for that cumulative reflection of faith but I think we’re outgrowing it. It’s not a good fit and the faster things change the less it will be a good fit … It is the best of who we are and our spirituality, let’s call it that.

There was no sense of divine inspiration in Katherine’s view of scripture. She approaches it as a human work, applies her intellect to select what is valuable within it, and is less moved by it in theological deliberation than by other sources, including good academic sources which she highlighted as being of value.

Finally, in this section, Jim referred to the Bible as “the inspired word of God,” but with certain caveats. He is somewhat aware of higher critical thought and is willing to see myth and allegory in some parts of scripture. In a discussion of Jesus’ view of
divorce, he compared specific synoptic texts on divorce with other Jesus’ sayings such as, “The one who has no sin, cast the first stone.” He sided with the latter approach but emphasized that all scripture should be taken seriously while employing experience and reason to understand it. He continued, “We should try as much as we can to get a foundation but, at the same time, we don’t want to have it as a straitjacket.”

It was clear in the interviews that each of the participants approached the text with a reasoned mind. As a group, however, they are not easy to categorize. Only Jim viewed the scriptures broadly as divine word “from above” yet he was aware of divergences within the Gospels that required choosing one text over another. William used the words “divinely inspired,” but was also willing to see ancient folk religious traditions within the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. All six participants saw the human aspect of the text, which required correct interpretation, an awareness of critical issues and the growth of traditions, and choices between competing ideas within the text. Most (Mary, Norm, (William), Fred, Katherine) were willing to set aside vast or significant sections of the Bible in favour of some core principles that they deemed to be valuable. Jesus’ sayings were reckoned to contain more of these principles than other materials.

Views of inspiration were, therefore, complex. While the two noted above referenced divine inspiration, their view of divine inspiration cannot be said to infer that the whole is infallible or that all scripture is universal truth. Mary and Katherine voiced the word “inspiration” but understood it as akin to the inspiration received by an artist or musician. Norm and Fred did not use the language of inspiration at all, although it was clear that Fred thought slightly more highly of the value of the Bible than Norm. When it

25 This applied only to some “valuable” parts of the Bible not to the whole.
comes to authority, Norm and Katherine discounted its authority either altogether or viewed it as carrying no more weight than other potential sources of spiritual inspiration or knowledge. Several (Mary, William, Jim), however, voiced that it was the core text of Christian faith and foundational in some sense for the Church, even if they had misgivings about portions of it. The views espoused by the interview group are, therefore, diverse. None, appeared willing to take the whole Bible as divinely inspired and authoritative. All participants may have entertained the idea that the Bible “contains the Word of God,” although for several this would have been limited to very small portions of the biblical text. Most tended to highlight scripture’s human origin vis-à-vis a sense of divine origin that might validate the text for them in a more significant way. As a group, they thus reveal similarity to the views espoused by those who filled in questionnaires. It will be recalled that 47% viewed the Bible as a human book revealing human perceptions of God (Q.8 option d), and 63% took a progressive view of scripture (Q.8 c+d+e).

**Perceptions of how scripture is ranked in terms of influence compared to other authorities**

Given the views of scripture just discussed, it is not surprising to find complexity in the responses to questions about how scripture ranks vis-à-vis other authorities. Katherine voiced that she did not accept the Bible as her “literal direction.” In conversation on several issues including homosexuality and divorce, she was quite willing to say, “That’s where I part company with it (the Bible),” in favour of current societal norms and scientific research. She commented further, “No one back then had the university levels of education that we have.” Norm came close to Katherine’s stance,
indicating that he would not use scripture as an argument for anything. The four other participants shied away from stating clearly that scripture could be trumped by other influences on their thinking. As a group they all essentially upheld “scripture,” albeit with significant caveats. William stated, “scripture should be prime authority but used as a basis of reasoning, not as the final word.” It undergirds everything but “reasoning and experience are needed to interpret it.” He noted that conflicting ideas within the Bible as a whole, meant that we have to “think hard.” Many times, he feels, “scripture itself will provide an interpretative option that is still faithful to the source.” The inference being that this option will align with experience or current cultural norms.

Mary spoke more clearly about this as she underlined that scripture is not to be taken at first glance. She spoke of historical context and how knowledge of it helps us move beyond, for instance, anti-homosexual stances to understand that what was really going on in Sodom was a test of ancient hospitality mores. Mary added to her contextual argument a reductionist stance whereby the many legal requirements of the Torah may be overridden by what are perceived to be the more advanced, core messages of love and grace. Similarly, Norm, in spite of a more negative attitude toward scripture, suggested that what is to be sought out are the powerful principles that lie within scripture. Both he and Fred align these principles primarily with the teaching of Jesus and give the words of Jesus’ more credibility than earlier biblical material. Ultimately, Fred believes, however, that there are many “core messages” and what one individual chooses as a “core message” is subject to what one grows up with. Thus, the core messages that he receives, for instance, are not the same as those received by “people within the Tea Party.”
We have seen already that in the early stages of the interviews only one of the six interviewees listed scripture as one of the top three influences on decision-making (above, Table 17). This in itself could lead us to say that scripture was a lower level influence for all but Jim. It was, nonetheless, noted that scripture was in the background, informing some of the categories the participants chose. When the question was asked more directly, specifically asking if scripture trumped other influences or vice versa, the responses indicated that four of the six interviewees managed to wriggle beyond the question. Essentially, they maintained a degree of biblical authority vis-à-vis other authorities by affirming two things. First, they held that scripture was to be reduced to selected, key principles, thus only small portions are deemed to be truly “Word.” Second, they affirmed that it must be interpreted by a proper hermeneutic that pays attention to historical context and ancient culture. It is not stated as such but it is inferred that when these things take place, the best of scripture, culture, experience and reason agree and no choice is necessary.26

When one analyses this further, one could argue that the individuals essentially place certain things above scripture. William, for instance, noted that reasoning and experience are needed to interpret scripture. Norm and Fred affirmed that the inner sense or culture one grows up with enabled one to select what is a key principle from the whole

26 Mary, for instance, as she thought through LGBT issues, said, “It’s not that Canadian culture is suddenly open to gays and lesbians and so the church has to be too, but I look at the core message of the scriptures and you get down to that golden rule, “do onto others as you would have them do onto you,” and think, well if my sexual orientation, which I do believe is hard-wired, is not a choice, if I’m hard-wired that way and want to express it, then what’s the problem. So, I probably see some of the Old Testament prohibitions as out-dated.” Italics mine to aid understanding Mary’s intent.
of scripture. 27 In a sense, these put experience and reason above scripture; determining what “Word” truly is. 28

The widespread willingness to accept not the whole of scripture, but a few basic principles is notable here. In itself, this tends to set aside vast amounts of the Bible from consideration as authoritative material. This practice goes beyond the intent of the Basis of Union and other broader Church Confessions or statements on scripture. 29

7.6 Perceptions of how one knows God and God’s will

The final question put to the interviewees was, “How do we know God and God’s will for the Church?” Two of the five who responded laughed as if it were impossible to answer. Two more essentially provided no answer. Of the significant responses, Mary, a reasoned and logical thinker, giggled and exclaimed, “Personally? O dear, if the Holy Spirit hit me on the head I wouldn’t recognize it.” She had experienced individuals who needed guidance and merely went into “the sanctuary” of the church, prayed and felt like they had gained an answer. “It has never really occurred to me to do that,” she said. “I hear other people say that they have felt God speaking to them or sending them in a direction, I’ve never felt that either.” She wondered if it was a heartfelt thing for some. For Mary, however, when seeking direction for the Church, she asks, “Does this feel right.” She continued, “It’s going back to feelings. I have emotional reactions. I’m not

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27 Norm, further, wanted “some sort of taxonomy” to determine what the key principles would be.
28 This is a difficult issue as it could be argued that reason, experience, and one’s cultural backdrop are a part of understanding of any text. The question would be, however, whether scripture informs reason and experience or whether reason and experience inform thoughts on scripture? The early Reformers and Wesley would affirm the former even if they are seen to rely on their culture and intelligence to understand the text.
29 It should be noted, however, that an array of understandings of scripture were around at the time the Basis of Union was formed.
sure I have spiritual reactions. Are they the same thing? … So I’ll have a gut reaction, whether or not that’s God, I’m not quite sure, but I’m going with it anyway at the moment.”

Jim, the more conservative of the six individuals, likewise laughed at the question and exclaimed, “Yikes! I guess this is where we have to rely on prayer and where all the things come together.” His prayer was always that God’s grace would help and guide the Church. One combines, however, experience, intellect, the Word, and what “one’s gut says.” He continued, “Everything comes together then you have to utilize prayer and if we get it wrong then by God’s grace we’re forgiven.” Norm thought for a moment when questioned and said, “I don’t think that we know the will of God for the church, we struggle to make the best answer that we can with all the things that we know. Rob (a respected fellow Council Member) may know the will of God for the Church, I’m quite certain that I wouldn’t. The challenge with finding key principles is that then you have to figure out how you interpret them in given situations.”

Of the responses, there was definitely a lack of assurance about our ability to know the will of God. Both Mary and Norm indicated that they would not be able to recognize the will of God. Mary spoke of a “gut reaction,” however, and something feeling right. Norm mentioned finding the best answer possible with all the things we know. Jim turned to faith-praxis in the form of prayer adding that experience, intellect, the Word and “what your gut tells you” are all part of the process. Even then, he admits, we could err. Of the responses to this question, only Jim brought “the Word” into his answer. Apart from his qualified statement, there did not seem to be a direct association of scripture with knowing the will of God.
7.7 **Toward an understanding of a central Toronto United Church perspective**

In an effort to gain an understanding of lay leaders in central Toronto United Churches, areas of broad agreement were sought. To begin with it is notable that five of the six participants are highly educated and have professional designations in law, finance, and education. As such, they are representative of the communities that they live in and are most likely in a higher economic bracket than most Canadians. Their age ranges (above §7.1) are broadly indicative of United Church congregations with a mean age of 62.5 years.

The responses to the United Church remits of 2012 indicate that while the national church set up a process and local churches took part in it, there was a lack of engagement in the process by individuals. Most respondents remarked that there was not much interest in the remits. This cannot be construed to mean that there is no interest in theology at all; several remarked about interest in “more pertinent” issues such as those dealing with LGBT issues, local church needs, and issues that directly affected their faith.30

When it comes to influences, “experience” was felt to be the greatest teacher and influence on how a person understands the will of God for the church. All six participants rated it as one of their top three influences. As with the questionnaires, the more experiential influences were again seen to take precedence. Thus, the central Toronto lay leaders tend to be more influenced by experience, an inner sense, culture, and

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30 Interest in the General Council vote on boycotting Israeli goods from West Bank Settlements was significant in many places and noted. It was mentioned that many United Church members have neighbours and friends from the Jewish community and were disturbed by the direction of the Church on this issue. Apparently some left their congregation on account of it.
dialogue than by the Bible, theology, scholarly studies, Sunday School or adult education programmes. The fact that only one of the six individuals referenced scripture as an influence suggests that it is not considered a prime influence and several suspected that there was very little engagement of scripture by other Council members. We did uncover, however, that for most, certain key principles from within scripture function in “the background” of lay leaders’ thoughts, either as something they agree with, or something they believe in and are influenced by.

While not noted specifically in the top three, the five participants who grew up with connections to church spoke of the influence of family, upbringing, and other admired individuals. As was seen in Table 18, above, upbringing and church actually impacted and informed various other categories such as experience, culture, tradition, and an inner sense. Its effect was voiced so often that future studies should include a “family” or “upbringing” category in the list of possible responses.

The individuals interviewed are an intelligent group. Each is aware and has a general knowledge of scripture. Their knowledge, however, may be limited to a number of popular texts often used in preaching. Most revealed that they have read one or more popular books about religion, theology, or elements of the Bible so that there was more of an understanding of conflicting material and critical issues associated with the text than expected. This appears to have influenced their views of scripture, its authority, and its inspiration. Among other things, this allowed for a widespread reductionist approach that rejected large swathes of biblical material in favour of selected, key principles that lie within it. It was intriguing that most also avoided the question about how the Bible ranks as an authority vis-à-vis other influences by appealing to the key principles alone. Their
argument was, unfortunately, circular. In attempting to get away from the authority issue, an inner sense, experience, or cultural upbringing allowed them to reject some biblical material and select key principles that informed them better about God and God’s will. “Amazingly,” it was found that these ideas of God coalesced with the best of culture, experience, and tradition; the very same things that influenced their selection of what was appropriate to God. It could be argued that they have created a faith and God according to their own image, preference, or culture. It may be, however, that everyone does this to a degree and this raises the uncomfortable issue of the extent to which everyone, even the person who claims a greater role for scripture, selects, interprets, and evaluates scripture in terms of their own existing values.31

Finally, there is little sense of assurance among the responders that they could know the will of God for the Church. Of those who answered the question directly, it would seem that they do the best they can with all the tools and guiding influences that are before them. Only one of the participants mentioned using the Bible in this regard but with caveats. The concept of a “holy” scripture, as a magisterial influence that directs Christians in knowledge of God, was not evidenced in the thought of most.

On the basis of the foregoing, we may say the following. The average, central Toronto lay leaders are educated and have professional careers. They may not fully engage a theological question unless it is seen to impact their lives or churches in a practical manner. When this occurs, however, they will readily dialogue with others, using, experience, their upbringing, an inner sense, cultural backdrop, and reason to

31 As Fred indicated, above, the core message within the Bible that an individual chooses is related to what he or she grows up with. The core message he receives is not the same as those within the “Tea Party.” In the next chapter, we will find one of the focus group members referring to various iterations of divine truth in scripture.
direct their thoughts. Scripture is not a primary or direct influence for most. Their knowledge of conflicts within the Bible and biblical criticism, *inter alia*, seem to have diminished thoughts of divine inspiration from above. Although views of scripture are individual and complex, as a group they consider the Bible as more a human source than divine. They will engage scripture at times and assess the material it contains for the core (perhaps, divine) principles that lie within it. These teachings of love and goodwill inform the lay leaders’ lives and culture such that the “core principles” are felt in the background of theological discussions. Scripture is never engaged, in a formal manner in their Council deliberations and in trying to uncover the will of God for the church, they do the best they can. None has the assurance that they may actually find it but they trust that, in the community dialogue, they will do the right thing.
Chapter 8

Focus Group

8.1 Purpose & description of participants

The Focus Group was established to improve validation and to gain the insight of several members of the United Church clergy on preliminary findings related to the questionnaires and interviews. A team of three was established and met in late November, 2014. As per the University of Toronto’s Ethics Review Board requirement, the clergy were unrelated to churches A, B, and C, and may be said to bring the thought of three more churches into the study.

Dennis and Charles minister in congregations within central Toronto.¹ Dennis has served his congregation for over ten years, whereas Charles is a more recent arrival in the Toronto area (eighteen months), having served in a medium-sized congregation in the suburbs for many years prior. John is a long-term minister of a congregation in the suburbs but spent the earlier part of his ministry in the city. One of the ministers is in his mid 40s, one in his early 50s, and one in his early 60s. Theologically, Dennis is more progressive than the others, John is more orthodox, and Charles claims to be in the middle of the theological spectrum. The three congregations that they serve are relatively healthy, with reasonably strong membership statistics, good on-going ministries, and each has a positive financial footing.

¹ The names of the three ministers involved have been changed to preserve anonymity.
Over the course of an agreed upon two hour session, there was a lively discussion. The questions derived from the broad trends noted in a preliminary interpretation of the data deriving from the questionnaire and interviews (see Appendix E). The focus group was recorded with the permission of the participating clergy and, again, the recording was transcribed by the researcher. On the basis of several readings and careful note-taking, the material was organized around the questions and other important discussions that took place within the focus group. Inevitably a degree of choice is involved in reporting the material. It is hoped that what follows adequately represents the discussion.

8.2 The Report

8.2.1 Council process around theological issues

In opening the meeting, the researcher explained the nature of the study, defined what is meant by a “theological” decision, and gave the example of the 2012 remits from General Council. The ministers were glad to speak about the remits and provided more information about how they were handled in their congregations.

All three ministers found that the remits were met with indifference. Dennis indicated that after they had received the material from the General Church, he had to educate his lay people in United Church polity and how the remit process goes back to the basic democratic convictions of the United Church. Overall, his Council devoted approximately one hour to the remits over two meetings. Charles revealed that he had to do the same in terms of educating about the flow of governance. His members, however, he states, “were happy to defer to the ministerial staff or presbytery reps on the issue.”

2 For “theological” decisions, see above, ch.7, note 4.
Both Charles and John took additional steps to encourage knowledge and interest. Charles focussed on *A Song of Faith* for several Sundays in his sermons. John held two meetings in which people could come and learn about the proposed changes. Both repeated several times that there was not a lot of interest in the issue. Like Charles, John also experienced deferral to the opinion of the minister on the part of the lay leaders. After the researcher noted the strong similarities between the focus group responses and those of the interviewees, Charles responded,

> Has the church become so pragmatic that they spend more time and energy discussing the colour of the carpet, or the type of interlocking brick than theology? We come to something like these remits, which, during the Reformation, may have sparked a furore in the church. Now it’s, “Let’s get this done as quickly as possible and move on to the important things.”

### 8.2.2 Where is knowledge of God found?

The next two questions put to the Focus Group echoed the thought of question four in the questionnaire, “Where does knowledge of God and God’s will derive from and where do you think your Council members think that knowledge comes from?” Charles immediately began speaking of the Bible and differences he had experienced between his former suburban congregation and his current midtown Toronto church. Several times recently, he has been approached to alter his preaching style so that there would be less biblical exposition and more application to current events. He states,

> There is less tolerance for exposition or dealing with theology or Christology in the city. They want to get directly to political implications. In my former context, the Board too was more open to the concept that you could still turn to the scripture, read the scripture, and make direct connections about knowledge of God from our scriptural tradition and the holy writings. Now it is almost like knowledge of God doesn’t originate from there any more. It originates from experience, from our culture, our

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3 Charles’ comments and the remits aside, it was noted in chapter seven that some national, theological issues garner the attention of United Church lay leaders. Some of this will be alluded to below.
climate, our particular perspective and, well, you know, we’ll maybe touch base with scripture, or, it’s more at the periphery. Now, some people may feel that it’s at the heart for them, but that’s not true for many. Many express much more openly and explicitly their uneasiness with scripture, or their arguments with scripture, or how they are unsettled with the tenets of scripture, and how they can’t believe in our scriptural tradition. There’s almost an open antagonism toward the tenets of scriptural tradition.

Dennis followed Charles’s lead and spoke of a recent study of scripture by his congregation. He said that they arrived at what he termed, “a strong inclination to privilege the traditional scriptures.” However, he noted that they are received as “a relative, not absolute presence in the life of the congregation.” They are honoured, but so is other literature such as a poem by Wendell Berry or a reflection by Thomas Merton. Scripture, he believes, is human, some of the finest human thought but it is fallible and must be approached with critical tools. God speaks through it, as God speaks through other channels and his congregation uses them all. In terms of using it in Council discussions, he echoed what Katherine said in her interview, that few members would think of turning directly to scripture in answer to a theological problem. Dennis noted, however, that knowledge of God may also come from other places and that there was a growing degree of mystical and meditative practice within his church. He stated that he could not get enough groups going along these lines and that some of the practices they engage in “corroborate some of the polyvalent images of God in the scripture.” He continued, “There is no ‘biblical’ theology, so you get to take your pick as to which iteration of the divine presence in scripture you want to find as operative.”

John said that he liked Luther’s view of the scriptures. They are “the cradle that held the baby. They are not the baby,” he continued, “but they lead us to the child.” He points out that the scriptures play a pivotal role and function as “Word” but their task is to bring us to Christ. John believes that his suburban congregation would not wish to
hear preaching from other books, as Dennis’s church; “they want to hear from scripture,” he said, “and have a high view of it.” Of course, they want it to link with life as well but the base for them is scripture. For the most part, however, he believes that his congregational members rarely engage the Bible outside of worship services. A few may read it regularly but most hear it on Sunday mornings only.

While the focus group discussions tended to drift away from directly dealing with the question, their comments revealed significant differences of opinion about where knowledge of God comes from. Charles’ immediate response to the question suggested the personal belief that knowledge of God comes primarily through scripture. John would agree and specified their role as bearing witness to Christ. Dennis, on the other hand, recognises the value of scripture to a degree and privileges it, but would not limit himself to Christian scripture. He also sees the potential for God to be found in meditative practice.

When it comes to their congregations, Dennis and his congregation seem to have similar progressive understandings of how God is known. John and his suburban congregation are equally in tune but with more traditional views of scripture. The Bible is thought to point to Christ yet, interestingly, the value given the Bible does not translate into increased engagement with it in settings other than corporate worship. Charles’s comments, on the other hand, betrayed a significant dissonance between his own view and those of some members of his congregation. The congregation appears much more progressive and find God in the experiential sources, which Charles describes as: “experience, culture, the ‘climate,’ and their own particular perspectives.” The
uneasiness, open antagonism of some, and the unwillingness to connect with scripture even in worship that Charles described was intriguing.4

8.2.3 (416) versus (905)/(705)5

Within the exchange on knowledge of God, Charles made a comparative comment about the two churches he has been a part of recently. “My previous congregation,” he stated, “had a hunger to hear what the scripture had to say and more expository preaching.” In his current congregation, he has experienced some criticism for preaching with that same style. This triggered a fuller discussion, both Charles’s former congregation and John’s current congregation are in the “905” region and both, it was indicated, have more traditional views of scripture than congregations they serve, or have served, in “416.” The group was asked to expand on the differences they perceived between “416” and “905” congregations.

Dennis picked up on the concept immediately and said, “I appreciate the “905” split, but in “705” you find another world entirely.” He continued,

United Church people in the “905” region live in a very well read environment and are probably quite interested in an approach to scripture that uses critical thought but, in rural “705”, my experience is that there’s a much less critical approach to scripture. Not that it’s theologically thought through and arrived at, it’s a received tradition that says, “This is in the Bible and that’s good enough.” I have a house in Haliburton. I couldn’t go there as a minister. I am urbanized in my theology, comfortable with critical approaches and various other literatures that shape the theology of an urban congregation. This [the “416” area] is

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4 According to Charles, “An elderly woman said, “The resurrection of Jesus is like Santa Claus. I stopped believing in Santa Claus years ago.” Charles continued by saying that it gets back to the idea that the traditional tenets of faith and even Jesus are cast aside. Another woman recently shared her disagreement with traditional Christian materials and told him, “I can barely even read the liturgy.”

5 (416) is the telephone area code for Toronto; (905) for the suburbs; and (705) for the Muskokas, Kawarthas and the areas north and east of the suburbs. The area code numbers are often used as referents to their assigned regions in Toronto-area conversations.
maybe a shade different than a “905” congregation but it’s a category different than the rural, “705” congregations.\(^6\)

Charles added, “So maybe the farther one gets away from the urban centres, the approach to scripture and knowledge of God changes. There could be, therefore, very different churches within the United Church of Canada, depending on the location, urban or rural; and there are always exceptions to the rules and different demographics across the country.”

The discussion reinforced the idea that this study is a snapshot of churches within a small geographic area in the city of Toronto. What causes the differing approaches to scripture within the regions, however, is not immediately apparent. The city is the largest in Canada. It is the largest centre of business, boasts a number of universities and colleges, and has a broad multi-cultural, multi-faith society. All of these affect the thought and worldviews of those who live in the city but through common media outlets, the surrounding regions are also affected. Further study is needed on this topic.

8.2.4 Culture above scripture, or scripture above culture?

The focus group was next asked to think about data from responses to question eight in the interviews and how their lay leaders would handle conflicting messages from culture and scripture. Essentially, “What is more authoritative?” Does scripture direct your people, or do aspects of culture?

Dennis spoke at length of how culture always trumped the Bible in his context. He spoke of how scripture had been “relativized.” Critical studies, consciousness of how ancient traditions had contextualities that are not ours, and an awareness of conflicting

\(^6\) Parentheses are mine and are added for clarification.
messages within scripture had, he thought, reduced perceptions of scripture. Scripture no longer has magisterial authority and it is now easy to trump. In his congregation, for instance, the people’s experience with the Jewish community in business and in their neighbourhoods trumps the United Church stance on boycotts. Regardless of the fact that one could ground the United Church stance biblically in the prophets, his congregation supports the allegiances of those it deems its friends. He went on to point out, however, that the local culture has “only a very loose grasp of any scripture that is involved.”

Charles implied that culture trumped scripture in his congregational context also. He agreed with Dennis about the decline in perceptions of scripture and felt that its authority had been affected negatively by, among other things, the conflicting themes within it and passages highlighting God’s justice or judgment. John offered the opinion that sometimes in his context, scripture trumps culture while, at others, culture trumps scripture. Dennis jumped in suggesting that the real issue is founded in the fact that congregations are an amalgam of cultural and ecclesial entities. Some in his congregation have told him that they are not sure if they believe in God. One commented, “I’d probably come here if it were a mosque because it’s the sacred place in my neighbourhood.” “Many associate with our churches,” he continued, “primarily for cultural or general spiritual reasons as opposed to Christian and ecclesial. It is a neighbourhood entity.” Charles commented that there were different degrees of connection for different individuals. Dennis ended the discussion with the following, “If you find in your study that scripture is not a main determinant, it could be that that is not intrinsic to scripture. In a congregation where people are there for the sake of
community, it’s not that they trust or mistrust scripture, it’s just that the character of the organization itself is based on community."

Dennis’s comment is intriguing. It indicates an acceptance of the fact that a number of members within his congregation may not hold United Church or general Christian beliefs. In other areas of the conversation, Charles indicated that he had experienced similar tendencies in his church and we must consider the possibility that there are members, and even leaders in local United Church congregations who are neither Christian nor “United Church” in any confessional sense. This would need further study but one wonders what it may entail for the direction of the church and particularly for theological decision-making. Presumably, in this scenario, the local church would lose its traditional authoritative centre. We have already encountered the possibility of such a loss in chapters four and six.7

In terms of the authority of culture versus scripture, there was general agreement within the focus group that in many instances within Toronto United Churches, culture could trump scripture. For a number of reasons, the participating ministers saw that among many United Church lay people, scripture had lost the magisterial authority it once had.8

7 In chapter four we noted how Robert Fennell had used this terminology in relation to the position of the church in the late 1980s and 1990s. Particularly in response to the United Church document, The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture. Robert Craig Fennell, Tradition and Liberation: sources of authority for the interpretation of scripture in The United Church of Canada, 1974-1992 ThD Diss., University of Toronto, 2005, 279. Cf. §9.2, below. Through the questionnaire, we uncovered that 63% of respondents had progressive views of scripture (§6.2, Q.8) and began to ponder what that might mean for local church governance since they were not at all influenced by any traditional elements when making theological decisions.

8 This cannot be generalized, however, and may not be as true of congregations outside “416” or even among Christians within a given congregation within the city.
8.2.5 Quick comments

Within the focus group, we had a brief period in which trends in the data from the questionnaire and interviews were reported and the participants were asked for quick comments. After one minute, we moved on to the next finding. The trends are in bold type below, the ministers’ responses in normal type.

a. In stating what influenced them most in theological decision-making, respondents to the questionnaire indicated a strong preference for “experiential” influences such as “an inner sense,” “experience,” “dialogue,” and “culture,” over the traditional influences like Bible and sermons. What do you think?

Dennis thought that the “soft, experiential category is a genuine theological category that’s always been there in the mystical traditions. John questioned, however, whether what is experienced in Toronto is the result of mysticism or the surrounding postmodern culture. Dennis continued by affirming the fact that our culture is “wall-papered with scripture that we learned at the cradle. It won’t be there in another couple of generations,” he admitted, “but some basic biblical ideologies still affect our lives and thinking. They are a part of the experiential mosaic and indirectly influence decisions.

b. 63% of respondents took a progressive view of scripture, that it is one truth among others, a human book, or mostly myths and legends, versus more traditional positions affirming inspiration and/or that the Bible contains the word of God.

Dennis was surprised that the percentage in the progressive camp was not higher.

Neither Charles nor John were surprised by the statistic.

c. Among lay leaders, 95% do not feel competent in utilising scripture and need help and dialogue or would defer to others in theological discussions.

Charles’s thoughts returned to the 2012 Remits, “What I found was that they would defer to the minister,” he said. John admitted that his leaders asked what he thought also. It was important to them but he was not sure that his opinion was decisive. Dennis
wondered if ministers were viewed today less as an authority on the Word and more as a teacher who would help them understand.

d. Within the interviews, it emerged that a number of the participants were somewhat familiar with higher critical methods through reading popular and popular academic works. What do you think?

Dennis noted that there’s a tendency to come at scripture with a “hermeneutic of suspicion” while not coming at Tom Harpur or Elaine Pagels with the same hermeneutic.

e. There was a great emphasis on the core principles within the Bible. Is this reductionist? Does this move away from the complexities of faith and God? One referred to the Bible as some wheat and a great deal of chaff. What do you think?

John wondered if, in a postmodern world, people get to be the master of their own identities. They resonate with a few principles in the scripture, live accordingly, and throw away the rest. He believes that this is a general mind-set of our culture.

f. With competence in scripture weak in our communities and an overwhelming reliance on the experiential influences for making theological decisions, where will this lead? Do we continue to be Protestant?

Dennis replied, “Less so, at least magisterially Protestant. There were a variety of Protestant groups from the 16th century on but, in the sola scriptura sense, we are much less so Protestant.” “Less so is correct,” opined John, “and in many places not at all.”

8.2.6 Governance model

After the “quick comment” round, the group had an extended discussion of governance. They were asked, “What does a lesser knowledge of scripture and a reluctance to deal with it directly even in theological deliberations say about the lay-model of governance of the church? Should we alter it?”
Dennis was quite specific, “Don’t go there, it is a bad direction.” He spoke of his own Board in which a significant portion of each meeting is set aside for him to bring a time of reflection and teaching to the Board. He would, thus, reflect on the issues at hand and bring an ecclesial view to the Council before a formal motion was put to them. He states, “It’s not the same as saying, you’re the minister, you make the decision; it’s help us make sound decisions.” Charles noted that his new organist had come from Anglican circles and was finding the United Church governance model an adjustment. “We would not even have had certain discussions, he said, the priest would make the ruling and everyone would fall in line.” He noted further that the United Church model was time consuming. In John’s context, he finds that many lay leaders are “captains of their own ships in business and expect him to operate similarly for the church.” He has had to repeatedly educate them in United Church governance and encourage their involvement in decisions. Dennis came back saying that he enjoyed, what he called, “The privilege of recommendation” to the Board. He is able to define an issue, make a recommendation and ask them to “go work it out.” This, he believes is as close to a CEO as our polity will allow. Within the focus group, there was general support for the democratic nature of the United Church model as it is.

8.2.7 Improving United Church decision-making

Finally, the group was asked how we might improve United Church decision-making? They did not answer the question directly choosing instead to speak to improving the United Church in general.9 Dennis spoke of some of his own academic

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9 The researcher did not redirect the question as we were at the previously agreed upon two hour mark and time to finish.
work and suggested that United Church effectiveness would be improved if we could specify more precisely our identity. We should not try to be everything to everyone but rather focus on specific things like justice and human relations.

John took a more traditional tack, saying, “First and foremost, we bear witness to gospel tradition and to Christ. He continued,

I think the scriptures play a key role for the life and the history of the church, they’ve guided the church. If we don’t have the scriptures, we have nothing else. Nobody is going to come to our building if we read the newspaper on Sunday morning and make comment about that. I see the atheist church trying that and it’s not working. There’s something compelling about the God who encounters us in Christ and the scriptures are critical to that encounter.

Both John and Charles then spoke of the need to find the common language of the day and get scriptural themes across to another generation through film or “whatever it takes.”

The comments, particularly those of John and Charles, revealed a deep concern for the future of the church. Within them there was an appreciation of scripture as key to the church’s being. One might infer that they were suggesting that not only the future of the church but an improvement in decision-making is linked to understanding scripture.

8.3 What have we learned?

The focus group discussion gave further evidence of a number of factors already discovered in the questionnaires and/or interviews. The ministers shared about their respective Council’s processes in dealing with the 2012 remits. As with others, their churches had received the material from the General Council. Two of the three ministers attempted to encourage engagement of the issues through sermons or alternate teaching
events. All three, however, reported that there was very little interest on the part of lay leaders.

The remit discussion, it will be remembered, was merely an example of a theological issue encountered by local church Councils. We are attempting to discover the role of scripture in discerning such issues. Again it was clear that none of the Councils represented by these ministers directly engage the Bible in their deliberations. John, however, intimated that it functions in the background because of small group ministries in his church. The indirect influence of scripture parallels Mary’s thoughts mentioned, above, in chapter seven (§7.5.1).

The value of scripture functioning in the background of Council deliberations, however, is not at all clear. The ministers all agreed that the Bible had lost the authority it may have had in the earlier part of the twentieth century. Charles spoke of an antipathy toward scripture among some in his congregation. Dennis mentioned that his church privileged scripture but honoured other meaningful texts as well. When we add in the ministers’ perception that culture frequently trumps scripture when disparities between the two occur, it is obvious that the focus group saw the Bible functioning with limited authority in their churches. Charles indicated that the experiential elements are the real authorities in contemporary, Toronto United Churches. Based on the questionnaire, interview, and focus group, it seems that the Bible is viewed and treated by the majority of “416” United Church leaders in a “not-so-holy” manner. The value attributed to it in

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10 These positions parallel the later position evident in United Church documents from the 1980s and 1990s and beyond. John’s suburban congregation was perceived as being more influenced by scripture such that John says sometimes scripture trumps culture and sometimes culture trumps scripture.
former generations is not there.\textsuperscript{11} When asked if this left the church outside Protestant tradition, Dennis replied that it is less so magisterially and in the \textit{sola scriptura} sense. John went further suggesting that in some cases the church was “not at all” Protestant.

This is, nevertheless, not a position that can be generalised for the United Church as a whole. The focus group dialogue unveiled significant differences not just between individuals within Toronto area churches, but between urban, suburban, and rural areas around the city. According to the ministers’ experiences, the perceived authority of the Bible is greater in congregations in the “905” area than in the “416” area, and greater still in the “705” region. The accuracy of this and reasons for it require further study.

The diminished authority of scripture among Toronto area lay leaders raised the question of governance. If one assumes that Protestantism was founded on the authority of scripture as ultimate guide, one wonders what happens when that authority is lost. In a situation in which the lay leaders knowledge of that authority and competency in it are at low levels, and where the esteem for scripture has diminished, should they continue to be charged with making theological decisions?\textsuperscript{12} Or, should another model be adopted?

As a whole, the focus group was not keen on changes to the governance model of the church. Each appreciated the democratic, conciliar system of governance and within it, the minister’s ability to recommend. One wonders, however, if it works as well as they imagine. The responses to the questionnaire indicate that the “opinion of the minister” is ranked at a relatively low level by the participants and generally below that

\textsuperscript{11} Although Dennis may say that it is sacred among other sacred texts. This, however, would be a sacredness quite different to that of the Reformers and to that of the United Church in its earlier manifestation. It is closest to a postmodern religious ideology.

\textsuperscript{12} Among other things, John has noted a lack of engagement outside worship in a congregation that holds scripture in high regard. Dennis said that his congregants only had a “loose grasp” of scripture. Charles noted antipathy and questioning around scripture in his congregation. Both Dennis and Charles know that some of their members could not be traditionally defined as Christian.
of a correspondingly low scripture. Questions arise, “Is this an adequate situation?” Is it possible for a Protestant, presbyter system of governance to function with lesser respect and competency in scripture? Furthermore, what will ground the Church as it moves forward? John suggested that without scripture there is no church; scripture is its base. Dennis, on the other hand, was more comfortable living within a sea of influences and the dialogical model of governance that is now in place. We turn now to an evaluation and pastoral response to the data obtained and the main aspects of what has arisen in the course of this study.

\[13\] See Table 3 in which it is only affirmed as a key (top three) influence by 21% of those who completed the questionnaire.
Chapter 9

Evaluation and Pastoral Response

These books … ought to be much in our hands, in our eyes, in our ears, in our mouths, but most of all in our hearts. For the Scripture of GOD is the heavenly meat of our souls; the hearing and keeping of it maketh us blessed. *Thomas Cranmer*

9.1 An overview of the report

In this study we have been attempting to clarify the role of scripture in discerning theology within the United Church of Canada. In chapters two, three, and four, we sought to contextualize the study. Chapter two highlighted the strong view of scripture among 16th century Protestant reformers. Significant thoughts included the ideas that God had “authored,” or inspired, the writings such that they were a sure, sufficient, and unique rule for Christian faith and practice. Chapter three surveyed the philosophical changes brought about by the Enlightenment, modernism, and postmodernism. Developing views of human autonomy and reason led to rationalism and empiricism and a preference for verifiable, scientific thought became the underpinning of modern thought. More recent developments spawned by postmodernism have resulted in a broad acceptance of pluralism, a suspicion of claims of objectivity and truth, and a situation in which meaning is fluid. The postmodern worldview has thus caused many to question authority in general as well as that of the Bible. In chapter four there was an examination of developing views of scripture and authority in the history of the United Church of

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Canada. The major shift in authority witnessed in the 1980s was noted and will be taken up, again, below.

In chapters six, seven, and eight, we presented the results of a multiple, bounded case study that drew on three, Toronto area, congregational Councils and a focus group comprised of three United Church ministers from other congregations within the metropolitan area. Through a questionnaire, interviews, and the focus group, we gained insight into the things that influence United Church lay leaders as they make theological decisions at the ground level of church life, i.e. the local church. Much interesting data was uncovered in the case study and there are a number of elements that could be discussed. As we continue the “Assertive” phase of the research and move toward a pastoral response, however, we will focus on the primary findings of the study.

9.2 Key findings of this study

9.2.1 Authority: a major shift in United Church practice

The contextual study in chapter four uncovered a major transition in the role of scripture as an authority in the 1980s. In the years leading up to the 1960s, and even into the 1970s, scripture appears to have had a significant, magisterial role in terms of theological discernment. When theological decisions were being made, the Bible was investigated thoroughly and the best available scholarship was valued and consulted about its meaning and interpretation. A number of factors led to changes in approach to scripture and a lessening of the Bible’s perceived authority. Among them, an

unwillingness to continue harmonizing conflicting themes within scripture produced difficult choices between one text and another. In the early 1960s, what was termed “a whole gospel approach” was affirmed in which a perceived, core aspect of Jesus’ teaching might trump a specific, less prominent, saying.  

As attitudes and perceptions continued to change, other influences began to be used to help with theological discernment. By the late 1970s, the various fields of the social sciences were considered helpful. In Gift, Dilemma and Promise (1984), group dialogue was affirmed with the thought that the Holy Spirit may inspire and speak through the community. Likewise, experience, as a source of theology, was elevated and authorised with the thought that God may be “the author” of the experiences of the faithful. In 1986, the Thirty-first General Council approved a measure that would govern theological discernment at its meetings; scripture, tradition, reason, and experience were affirmed as a quadrilateral of co-equal authorities. Changes continued with the publication of Toward A Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientation Lifestyles and Ministry in 1988. The broadly based study introduced a liberation hermeneutic asking participants to engage the quadrilateral with a view to compassion, justice, and mutuality, while hearing the voices on the peripheries of power within the

3 Broadly based themes such as the love of Jesus could, thus, override specific directions that were of infrequent occurrence in the Gospels or New Testament. Jesus’ love for sinners may, thereby, override words disallowing divorce in Mark 10:2-12. See The United Church of Canada, Toward a Christian Understanding of Sex, Love, and Marriage, Report of the Commission on Christian Marriage and Divorce approved by the 19th General Council (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1961), 5.


church. The report marked a fuller recognition of the widespread participatory method of discerning theology that was growing within the denomination. Theology was now discerned by asking people what they thought and felt. As Robert Fennell writes,

> Whereas, once the Church had spoken authoritatively and directly on matters of doctrine (for instance, prior to about 1960), by the 1980s a more participatory and consultative style was in evidence, as the “opinions of the whole Church on faith issues were sought, heard, and considered more than had been previously expected or permitted.”

As a result, group and ultimately individual opinions functioned as the arbitrators of the various authoritative sources (i.e. the quadrilateral and other sources).

The perceived changes in the use of scripture led to calls for a fuller study of its authority within the denomination. The resulting document, *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture*, affirmed the participatory process, engaged in it, and provided useful guidelines to ensure that it functioned appropriately. As with other denominational documents from the 1980s, pluralist assumptions and a liberation hermeneutic may be noted; however, the chief authorities for theological discernment were given as: scripture, heritage, understanding, and experience. These were to be held in creative tension with no one authority being elevated alone. Several useful standards of evaluation were given to help when two or more of the authorities conflicted. Among them, it is stated, “God’s historical self-revelation in Jesus Christ is crucial in

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7 Above, §4.4.
9 We must ask, when the sea of opinions are reported within the community, who decides which opinions are important and why?
10 Above, §4.4 and, The United Church of Canada, *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture: A Statement of The United Church of Canada* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1992), 10f. The similarity to the so-called Wesleyan quadrilateral is obvious even if the nomenclature has changed.
establishing what has legitimate authority in Christian community.”11 When taken with the authors’ stated conviction that scripture is not optional for the Christian community, the inference is that the participatory model of theological discernment needs a strong biblical component to function well.12 Nonetheless, while still an authority in the life of the Church, one among others, AIS confirmed that the role of scripture had changed significantly. No longer could it be said that scripture functioned as the “primary source and ultimate standard of Christian faith and life.” United Church practice, affirmed by successive General Councils, was thus at odds with its own Basis of Union. Fennell’s reflections on the position of the United Church at this time led him to write;

In AIS ... we see reflected the emergence of authority as a (postmodern) fluid concept, not attached to a specific epistemic centre. Accordingly, AIS claims that “few Christians (including United Church members) regularly read or study the Bible [ … believing that] answers to perplexing moral and ethical questions [cannot] be immediately drawn from its pages.” This underlines our argument that the normative centre of authority, which for several hundred years had been firmly rooted in the Bible (at least for the Christian West) has, by the time of the publication of AIS, largely evaporated.13

In considering the model for theological discernment some twenty-two years later, those interviewed in the case study revealed a strong preference for the participatory approach to discerning theology with its associated assumptions. There was no desire to return to former practices in which the Bible was viewed as a magisterial authority with a few experts advising the laity about what scripture said. While we shall say more about current perceptions of scripture below, in §9.2.3, one wonders if the appreciation for dialogue and the array of voices within community is as great as the

11 AIS, 13.
12 AIS, 21.
13 Fennell, 279. All parentheses are Fennell’s. The quote within the quotation is from AIS, 2.
authors of the 1980s and 90s documents intended. The resource documents, from 2004 and 2005 (see above, §4.4), presented diverse perspectives and interpretations of biblical passages. They both offered no view as to how one determines which view is correct, but went on to affirm important positions on marriage and same-sex marriage based on only one interpretive viewpoint. In a similar way, Robert Fennell noted dissenting voices in the study leading to the publication of AIS. Some individuals had spoken about the lack of control in the new model for discerning theology and about the limits of inter-subjective dialogue. The degree to which comments of this nature were heard is questionable.

A similar issue occurred with the attempt of the Church to engage in a form of regula fidei. The United Church asked the opinion of the Salvation Army among others. The Salvation Army response affirming the pre-eminence of scripture as the authority to which appeal is made in all doctrinal inquiry was noted but it does not appear to have altered the report or thinking of the Committee in any way. Together these issues bring up the uncomfortable suggestion that while the Church may affirm dialogue and hearing all voices, especially those on the periphery, there appear to be powers in place that choose which voices are heard most. Whether or not that is true, dialogue in a pluralist framework sets up a situation in which diverse and conflicting opinions are difficult to deal with. In a truly postmodern setting, methods to evaluate one person’s opinion over another are hard to come by, if not impossible. One is left with a sea of

14 See above, p.81.
15 Fennell, 278, n.110.
16 Above §4.4, n.98.
17 That is to compare and ultimately align the United Church’s position with the “rule of faith” or the position of the whole Church at large.
18 Above, §9.4, n.100. Fennell, 278, n.110 quotes The Theology and Faith Committee, 3-Listening to the Voices 27, 31.
opinion, no sure method of discernment, and a Church that, as Fennell intimates, lacks an “epistemic centre” or foundation.\textsuperscript{19}

9.2.2 Theological decisions today: the experiential influences

One of the most significant findings of the case study involved the widespread perception among lay leaders today that “experiential” influences were the strongest influences on them as they made theological decisions.\textsuperscript{20} Of those influences, “an inner sense” and “experience” itself were the most predominant categories referenced. The finding was true of most who participated in the questionnaires, the interviews, and was strongly cited in the observations of the focus group. It was surprising that even those who held more traditional views of the Bible in the questionnaire chose “an inner sense” as their prime influence, albeit with scripture as a close second.\textsuperscript{21} The widespread preferences of those with more progressive views of scripture presented some concerns, however. It was to be expected that this group, which represented 63\% of the lay leaders polled in the questionnaire, would be influenced significantly by the experiential elements. The fact that the traditional elements, Bible, minister’s opinion, and sermons, were largely absent as key influences on their theological thinking was significant.\textsuperscript{22} Since this represented almost two thirds of lay leaders in the churches studied, one

\textsuperscript{19} Fennell, 279.
\textsuperscript{20} Experiential influences were listed above as: “an inner sense,” experience, culture, dialogue in community. See responses to Q.1 & 2 of the questionnaires.
\textsuperscript{21} See Tables 8 & 9, §6.3, above.
\textsuperscript{22} Tables 10 & 11, §6.3, above.
wonders what grounds those churches and provides them with a degree of continuity with
greater Church tradition and history.23

The broader issue with experiential influences is that the “truth” they provide may
be viewed as transient, following human whim or the winds of culture. The more
conservative New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright, notes that experience itself lacks the
stability needed to function as an authority. He states,

It is … because ‘experience’ is fluid and puzzling, and because all human
beings including devout Christians are prey to serious and multi-layered
self deception… that “authority” is needed in the first place… To speak of
“experience” as an authority, is to admit that the word “authority” itself is
being dismantled, unable now to function either as “court of appeal” in the
old wooden sense or, in the more biblical sense, as “that through which
God exercises Kingdom-establishing power.”24

Wright continues,

If experience is itself a source of authority, we can no longer be addressed
by a Word which comes from beyond ourselves. At this point, theology
and Christian living cease to be rooted in God himself, and are rooted
instead in our own selves; in other words, they become a form of idolatry
in which we exchange the truth about God for a human-made lie.”25

While one could argue that experiences of God were behind what we know as scripture in
the first place,26 Wright’s warning of the fluidity and transient nature of broad human
experience deserves to be taken. It is difficult to attribute theological certainty to an
individual’s “inner sense” or experience of the divine. Only an external authority, such

23 For the importance of a degree of continuity, see Scroggs, “The Bible as Foundational Document,”
24 Wright, Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today (New York, HarperOne,
2011), 102.
25 Wright, 103.
26 The situation is more complex than this and various levels of inspiration have been attributed to scripture
by theologians. In addition, the sacred texts receive authority in a variety of ways. Jesus’ use of Jewish
sacred scrolls, for instance, provides authority for them. The Gospels perceived relationship with the
disciples provides authority for them. There is also the authority granted to the canon by the Church (a
position that the reformers rejected. See Calvin §2.2, above).
as that traditionally given to scripture or, perhaps, to the episcopacy, can keep an
individual or community from being carried wherever experiential winds may blow.

We have already alluded, above, to the similar issues that arose in the second
century C.E. with Montanus. In the sixteenth century, Church of England bishop, John
Jewel, greatly mistrusted unaided human wisdom and experience in connection with
Church Councils. Even where there were claims of the influence of the Holy Spirit,
Jewel found them suspect unless governed by scripture. He states:

For where these men bid the Holy scriptures away, as dumb and fruitless,
and procure us to come to God Himself rather, who speaketh in the
Church and in councils, which is to say, to believe their fancies and
opinions; this way of finding out the truth is very uncertain and exceeding
dangerous, and in manner a fantastical and mad way, and by no means
allowed of the holy fathers. Chrysostom saith, “There be many oftentimes
which boast themselves of the Holy Ghost; but truly whoso speak of their
own head do falsely boast they have the Spirit of God. For like as (saith
he) Christ denied He spake of Himself, when He spake out of the law and
Prophets, even so now, if anything be pressed upon us in the Name of the
Holy Ghost, save the Gospel, we ought not to believe it. For as Christ is
the fulfilling of the law and Prophets, so is the Holy Ghost the fulfilling of
the Gospel.” Thus far goeth Chrysostom.\(^\text{27}\)

One element of interest related to the experiential influences derives from the
interviews. The interview format provided opportunity to delve deeper into what may lie
behind categories such as “an inner sense” and to gain a broader understanding of how
individuals viewed “experience,” “tradition” or “culture.” Interestingly, family
upbringing and upbringing in the church were voiced consistently as important
influences. In situations where a person has had an early Christian experience, this may
function to conserve traditional aspects and understandings of church life. Potentially it

provides residual Christian memories which will, at times, maintain continuity with the tradition and the past. This cannot be generalised, however, as the strong progressive theological positions of some of those interviewed were considerably different than their early church experience.

9.2.3 Theological decisions today: the role of scripture

We learned via question five of the questionnaire that the anecdote that gave rise to this study could not be generalised; only a very small percentage of Toronto area United Church leaders do not engage the Bible.\(^{28}\) That being said, the interviews revealed that scripture had little direct influence on local church Councils and that it was not intentionally utilised in theological discussions of the congregations studied. All interviewees indicated that they had never experienced such a thing; “that would be for bible literalists,” indicated William. The focus group ministers concurred; they had not experienced a direct utilisation of scripture in Council meetings either. Two of the six interviewees indicated the possibility of indirect influence, however. One person wondered if knowledge of the Bible functioned in the background. Another pondered the possibility that a parable or Jesus-mashal may be referred to in passing.\(^{29}\)

While the indirect influence of scripture may be viewed positively by some, it is important to note that what the participants meant by “scripture” may not actually be equated with the Protestant canon. A popular knowledge of elements of biblical criticism and conflicting themes within the Bible appears to have led several interviewees to reduce scripture enough to make even Marcion blush. There was little sense, therefore,

\(^{28}\) Above, §6.2, Chart 1.
\(^{29}\) A passing reference to the parable of the talents might be made, for instance, in discussion of financial stewardship.
that the whole canon carried authority or may be divinely (from above) inspired. While opinions were complex and diverse, critical attitudes toward the text in some cases tended to limit divine Word to a few key, selected principles.

Question eight of the questionnaire and thoughts from the focus group broadly supported what was found among those interviewed. In the questionnaire, we learned that 63% of lay leaders polled had progressive views of scripture; the predominant group viewed it as a human book relating human experiences of God. One member of the focus group was astonished that the percentage was not higher while another was surprised at levels of negativity towards scripture that he had incurred in his midtown congregation. With all this said, it is not surprising that “scripture’s” influence on individuals as they make theological decisions is significantly lower than the experiential influences mentioned above. Scripture, in the practice of Toronto area churches, does not seem to function as “the primary source and ultimate standard of Christian faith.”

As noted in the last section, the authors of AIS affirmed a participatory process of theological discernment and provided useful guidelines to ensure that it functioned appropriately. Perhaps, because they had noted low levels of scriptural engagement by Church members, they exhort Christians to engage the biblical text as the Church’s “foundational” document. The inference was that the participatory model of theological discernment needs a strong biblical component to function well even if scripture no longer has the unique authority it once had in the life and workings of the Church.

Unfortunately, the relatively low levels of influence noted in the case study concerning

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31 Tables 1, 2, 3, above, pp.95, 98.
32 Basis of Union, ¶2.3.0.
33 AIS, 1, 16, 21.
scripture, along with low levels of engagement and perceived competency, suggest that this thrust of AIS has not won over many in Toronto area churches. As William stated in his interview, scripture engagement “is at a very low ebb in the Church. We have largely lost this undergirding of the Protestant movement.” The participatory, dialogical model of theological discernment may, thus, be undermined by a lack of knowledge of the Church’s “foundational authority.”

9.2.4 Theological decisions today: when culture and scripture are in conflict

We engaged this topic above in chapters seven and eight and there is no need to repeat what was said there. Nonetheless, it is important to think about whether in the United Church there is a pattern of culture trumping scripture when they are in conflict.

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34 The data from the case study is complex and the assessment of low levels of engagement with scripture is very much a generalisation. It is based on the following:

- Responses to Q.5 - most perceived that they were “occasional” readers of scripture.
- Responses to Q.6 indicated that 95.3% felt they were not competent and needed help in using scripture to make theological decisions. I used this statistic as a lens through which to view how the respondents understood the words, “occasional” readership. For many, it may be “very occasional” as several interviewees attested regarding their peers.
- The focus group clergy all viewed levels of engagement of scripture by their congregations as low.
- The interviews presented a more complex situation re: engagement. While, on the surface, more biblical engagement was apparent, the researcher wondered if the persons who had responded to the call to be interviewed were those most interested in the subject of the study and, perhaps, were more likely to be individuals who engaged scripture and theology at some level. Potentially, this would skew results in favour of engagement. Furthermore, two of the four individuals with stronger knowledge of the Bible were exceedingly negative in their assessment of its value for making decisions and they stated clearly that they would not use it in decision-making.
- In addition, five of the six interviewees indicated some engagement with scripture but, in most cases, it had been years ago. This raised the issue of telescoping readership levels such that the responses sounded better than the reality they represented. For instance, talking about preparing for, and teaching, some youth classes in the late 1960s may cover over the significant possibility that engagement over the next forty years had been very limited. Only two of the six interviewees indicated current engagement with scripture outside of worship services.
- Several interviewees (most of those who answered the question) felt that levels of engagement among their Council peers were very low.
- AIS states clearly that engagement of scripture is low, AIS, 1. This marked a perceived trend around 1990 and in the experience of the focus group members and others this has not changed.

35 Above, §7.5 & §8.2.4.

36 Here, culture is used to reflect influences on people that derive from societal culture at large as opposed to influence from scripture or a specifically Christian source such as Church life or sermons. Some may
In terms of the case study, the predominance of the experiential over traditional influences expressed by respondents to the questionnaire may argue for culture trumping scripture. In the interviews, two of the six participants held scripture in such low regard that culture easily trumped scripture for them. The majority, however, reduced scripture and Word to key principles which paralleled their own sense of right. It was a circular argument to be sure but, if their own sense of right is influenced by common culture, here again there is evidence of the import of culture over Word. The focus group provided more direct evidence as two of the participants stated categorically that for members of their congregations, culture trumped scripture; the third suggested that sometimes culture would win, at other times scripture would win.

The study of United Church documents on marriage and sexuality may add to this picture. In the 1930s, “The Meaning and Responsibilities of Christian Marriage,” revealed the Board of Evangelism and Social Service struggling with social realities. The compassion for individuals who had suffered separation and divorce was notable throughout the document and scriptural support was given. However, in the end, the Board could not break with either Jesus’ direct words in Mark 10 and parallels or they did not want to break with the strongly conservative culture of the day. They discouraged clergy from solemnizing second marriages while former partners were alive.

A similar situation may be found in the late 1950s and early 60s with the publications of Toward a Christian Understanding of Sex, Love, and Marriage and, note that our culture still has the vestiges of Christianity influencing its morality and ethics. While true, there are some things that are a part of culture that are not specifically based on scripture or Church. These may influence experience, our inner sense of right and wrong, and a person’s worldview.

37 The correlation between the experiential categories and culture is not entirely clear, however. In some cases, the interviews suggested that some of the sources of influence were fed by upbringing in the church. Church upbringing may or may not reflect culture as some see the gospel as challenging culture.
Marriage Breakdown, Divorce, and Remarriage: A Christian Understanding. Again, strongly compassionate and scripturally supportive documents, in the end, refused to normalize divorce and remarriage. When one looks at the culture and Church culture of the day, it is not difficult to see that culture would have had a profound effect on the outcome. Similar influences may be apparent in later United Church documents about sexuality, homosexuality, and gay marriage. In one document, we noted the tendency to mention, but ultimately ignore alternative, more conservative interpretations in reaching their conclusions. By the 1980s, 90s, and the first decade of the twenty-first century, the cultural context had altered dramatically. One wonders if it was the more progressive context that was the chief influence on the author and Church in those days. Again, culture may have trumped and directed interpretation of scripture. The possibilities here present an avenue for further study. Does culture always trump scripture and what does that suggest about the value placed on scripture?

9.2.5 The United Church and Protestantism

The data from the participating churches provided further evidence of what Robert Fennell termed an evaporation of the normative centre of authority for the Church. One wonders, therefore, about the place of the Church within the broader Protestant movement; is the Church still Protestant? The answer, of course, is largely

38 See §4.3, above, and Lautenschlager’s articles mentioned in n.35 of that section.
39 See, e.g., Of Love and Justice: Toward the Civil Recognition of Same-Sex Marriage and, above, §4.4.
40 I thank my supervisor, Stuart Macdonald, for pointing out the possibility that “culture wins” in many contexts.
41 Fennell, 279.
dependent on how one defines “Protestant” and what it means to be “Protestant.” If such a definition includes a degree of continuity of thought with Reformers, a high view of scripture, and a mistrust of council decisions unaided by scripture, then it would seem that the majority of participants in the case study largely function outside of Protestantism. Support for this came from the focus group. When asked if the Church was still Protestant, one replied, “Less so, at least, magisterially Protestant … in the sola scriptura sense.” Another added, “Less so is correct, and in many cases not at all.”

Continuance with the thought of Reformers some five hundred years ago, however, may not provide a satisfactory definition of Protestantism for all. Allowance must be made for change brought about by philosophical and theological progress within a tradition and much has happened over the course of the centuries. Yet, some continuity related to the “motivational heart” of the movement is necessary to avoid becoming something else entirely, i.e. “not-Protestant.” How individuals view current practice in terms of Protestantism will largely depend on how they define that “motivational heart.”

9.2.6 Church governance

Current practice of theological discernment may also raise issues related to Church governance. Within the short history of the United Church, we have noted two models for discerning theological truth. The first focussed on scripture as the primary source of theology; the second held scripture to be one source among several equal sources, but an important, foundational source nonetheless. The case study has shown

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42 A religious movement is specified here because a number of things, including political maneuverings, drove Protestantism.
43 Above, §8.2.5.
44 Note the argument of Scroggs, below, §9.3.1.
that, in practice, the experiential influences are significantly more important for United Church lay leaders than traditional influences, and revealed that most participants questioned their ability to use scripture without help. Given that the Church governance model depends heavily on the laity, particularly at the local church level, it would seem that the participatory model may be compromised. Recommendations to solve the problem will be made in the response section below, §9.3.4.

9.3 Pastoral Response

9.3.1 The authority of scripture

Wherever scripture is considered “the primary source and ultimate standard of faith and life” for the Christian, it is easy to maintain the import of engagement and knowledge of it for theological discernment. Even within the United Church’s newer model of discernment, however, the Bible is deemed to have a strong and important role in making theological decisions. For the authors of AIS, and the General Council which approved it, scripture is the conveyer of the Church’s foundational story, the predominant witness to belief in God’s liberating and transforming activity, and that which shapes the community of God’s people. It may be one of several sources of theological truth but it is a significant one and it is intriguing that, in the practice of most participants of this study, scripture is not cited among the primary influences on their thinking. In responding, it is useful to reflect on how scripture became authoritative in the first place.

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46 AIS, 12, 16.
The authority of scripture was initially seen to lie in its relationship to the revelation of God and the inimitable story of God’s dealings with humanity culminating in Jesus Christ. With regard to the latter, during Jesus’ lifetime, he came to be viewed and proclaimed as messiah and Son of God. The great hope and belief founded in his teaching, mighty acts, death and resurrection became such that it was extraordinarily important for Jesus’ followers not only to remember his teaching but also his deeds. As Rainer Riesner put it, perceptions of Jesus were such that they were “ein außerordentliches Tradierungsmotiv.” His words were viewed as “spirit and life,” a holy word which was passed on orally and kept in the memories of his followers.

Over time, some wrote down portions of the sacred oral tradition in the form of notes to aid memory but later, as the eyewitnesses and their disciples passed away,

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48 *Paradosis* translates “tradition.” Note 2 Tim. 3:14, 15. Throughout the New Testament there is a tendency to set the events surrounding Christ in the context of the Hebrew Scriptures that, while not canonized until later, were viewed as authoritative. According to N. T. Wright, “Israel’s sacred writings were the place where, and the means by which, Israel discovered again and again who the true God was, and how his kingdom purposes were being taken forward.” Wright, 34.
49 See, for instance, Mt.16:16.
51 John 6:63b. In comparison, during the first century C.E., the sacred Hebrew scrolls were a written tradition, held to be authoritative by religious Jews. According to the Gospels, Jesus himself quoted, interpreted, and preached from these texts, thus revealing their authority and continued authority for his followers. Cf. Mt.4:23; 5:17ff., 5:21ff., Lk.4:16ff.; Jn. 10:35; etc. In Mt.15:6-9, he affirms “God’s word” vis-à-vis “the traditions of the elders.” Cf. Mt.22:29.
attempts were made to safeguard the holy word at a greater level.\textsuperscript{52} The apostolic tradition was put into writing in the names of four evangelists with the Gospels reaching their final editions some forty to seventy years after Christ.\textsuperscript{53}

As the Church entered the second century, the sacred oral gospel, Gospels, Pauline corpus, and other writings from revered leaders were called upon, along with the sacred Hebrew scrolls, to combat, \textit{inter alia}, Gnosticism, Marcion, and Montanism.\textsuperscript{54} In this, their perceived authority concerning Jesus and the work of God was in evidence. Slowly, however, as the chain of oral traditionists grew from generation to generation, the written traditions from those perceived to be close to Jesus became more valued than their oral counterparts. By late in the second century, the written materials were on their way to becoming a “canon” or “rule” and were frequently quoted or referenced by the early Church Fathers as such.\textsuperscript{55} According to D. S. Russell, “These writings and the story they told were (and are) ‘unique, authoritative, and normative. The scripture is the primary tradition, and by this ‘canon’, this norm, all other traditions must be judged.”\textsuperscript{56}

A millennium and a half after Jesus, a number of Reformers sought to right the Church on the basis of the “primary tradition.” They maintained that the Church had erred and had set aside the scriptures for the authority of Pope and Church councils.

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\textsuperscript{52} Luke 1:1-4.
\textsuperscript{53} There were other Gospels but the four were deemed sacred. That there were earlier stages and editions of the canonical Gospels is a feature of Raymond Brown’s understanding of the Gospel of John. Brown posited five stages in the development of the Gospel as we have it now. Raymond Brown, \textit{The Gospel According to St. John}, Anchor Bible Commentary (Doubleday: New York, 1966), lxxxvi, and the Introduction in general.
\textsuperscript{54} See, for instance, Wright, 2, 62.
\textsuperscript{55} The Muratorian canon is from this timeframe and reveals that most of what is now in the New Testament was considered authoritative. However, the biblical canon as we now know it was not entirely settled until several hundred years later and even then a few questions have arisen, from time to time, about certain works. For an understanding of the development of the canon see, Bruce M. Metzger, \textit{The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance} (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1997).
\textsuperscript{56} Russell, 173. Parentheses are Russell’s.
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Even these, they maintained, must be subject to the tradition that had become the Bible and in its light, they reprimanded the Church for a number of perceived vices. The thoughts of several Reformers on scripture were outlined, above, in chapter two. The predominant views of key Reformers, emphasizing the unique authority of scripture, were maintained by a number of Protestant denominations and statements of faith in the ensuing years. Traditional statements on the authority of the Bible are to be found, for instance, in the Church of England’s XXXIX Articles, Wesley’s abridgment of those articles for American Methodists, and the Westminster Confession. The United Church, at its inception, proclaimed continuity with these traditions in its *Basis of Union*.

We affirm our belief in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the primary source and ultimate standard of Christian faith and life. We acknowledge the teaching of the great creeds of the ancient Church. We further maintain our allegiance to the evangelical doctrines of the Reformation, as set forth in common in the doctrinal standards adopted by The Presbyterian Church in Canada, by The Congregational Union of Ontario and Quebec, and by The Methodist Church.

The foregoing reveals the theological heritage of the United Church and insight into the development of the authority of scripture, particularly that of the Gospels and New Testament. Throughout the history of the United Church, however, there has been tremendous growth in critical biblical scholarship. Over the course of the twentieth century, in particular, much was written and learned about the growth of biblical traditions. While some of this has been positive toward the tradition, a great deal has led to questions about reliability and hence its authority. N. T. Wright, among others, has pointed to alternative views that have helped to maintain scripture’s integrity. While not condemning biblical criticism, he has stated that not all the “assured results” of biblical
criticism have been of lasting value and, indeed, some have proven incorrect. He encourages the Church and suggests that it has nothing to fear from good, appropriate scholarship undertaken by the Church’s accredited leaders.

While an agreeable position, Wright’s thought is somewhat idealistic. The Church’s accredited leaders, for instance, have not always agreed. One only has to think of positions taken by Wright himself, a recent Bishop of Durham, alongside those of one of his predecessors in that position, David Jenkins. Their positions on the resurrection are dissimilar even if both would qualify as accredited leaders. That being said, it is necessary that “accredited leaders,” in the form of scholars and clergy within confessional traditions, do a better job of addressing critical issues, especially the more radical ideas that tend to be popularised by various forms of the media. There is a need to encourage the laity about the Church’s “primary source.” While the Gospels, for instance, may not be perfect resources, they are one of the Church’s main resources, written in good faith by the evangelists, through which the Church understands what God was doing in Christ. The transmission of the tradition may be complex but the tradition has value and it is reasonable to assume, based partly on the relatively short time frame between Jesus and final editions of the Gospels, that the general tenor of it may provide a reasonable picture of Jesus and his teaching. The scriptures are the church’s writings,

57 Wright, 94ff.
58 Wright, 137ff. Here, Wright, who is Anglican, is thinking primarily of the episcopacy.
59 On Easter 1985, the news media was present en masse to hear the newly installed Bishop Jenkins outline his thoughts on the resurrection. Versions of what he said were front-page news in Britain.
60 Here I use the phrase, “accredited leaders” in a broader sense, incorporating scholars and clergy within the Protestant tradition.
61 Inevitably, such a statement, is a matter of faith. It is not without warrant, however. See also William’s story above of a woman remembering the fenian raids. Above, §7.5. n.24. In addition, it can be noted that many scholars affirm a basic continuity of the tradition with Jesus. Gerhardsson, Riesner, Dunn, and Wright have already been mentioned in this section.
all the church has, and their value and authority lie in their perceived relationship to Jesus and Jesus’ relationship to God the Father. They have been received as such for almost 2,000 years in the church and this sets both a precedent and a standard for how scripture is to be recognized. The relatively recent *Windsor Report* commissioned by the Archbishop of Canterbury states:

> Within Anglicanism, scripture has always been recognized as the Church’s supreme authority, and as such ought to be seen as a focus and means of unity. The emphasis on scripture grew not least from the insistence of the early Anglican reformers on the importance of the Bible and the Fathers over against what they saw as illegitimate mediaeval developments; it was part of their appeal to ancient undivided Christian faith and life. The seventeenth and eighteenth century divines hammered out their foundations of “scripture, tradition and reason”; in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries we have seen the ‘Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral’, in which scripture takes first place. The Bible has always been at the centre of Anglican belief and life, embodied and exemplified by the fact that the reading and singing of scripture has always been at the centre of Anglican worship.

One other factor in the church’s dealing with scripture was advocated by a number of Reformers. It may, perhaps, not make sense to modern rationalism, nonetheless, the Church has always spoken of the work and witness of the Spirit in relation to scripture. Calvin wrote of how the Spirit inspired the authors and brought assurance to those who engage it in faith that it is the Word of God. Of course, as with Wright’s critique of experience, above, certainty about the Spirit’s work is also difficult to attain. If it be allowed, however, the Spirit’s work of assuring individuals that

62 Wright, 21.
scripture is the Word of God brings a degree of authority to the text that elevates it beyond other sources of influence and authority.65

In light of these factors, and in spite of the difficulties posed by the current age and theological climate, it is difficult to imagine the church, Protestantism in particular, and The United Church of Canada specifically, existing in continuity with the past without significant interaction with scripture. Scroggs has commented that, as Karl Marx’s writings are necessary for an understanding of Marxism, the scriptures are needed for an understanding of Christianity. He writes

Marxism, presumably, cannot mean anything anyone wishes it to be, and the parameters of what counts as a Marxist expression are to be found in the foundational documents by Marx himself. Just as the term “Marxism” could not incorporate within it a laissez-faire capitalism, so the New Testament would exclude a definition of Christianity as an atheistic, self-salvational system unrelated to Jesus the Christ. What any movement “means” is always set by the parameters of its foundational document. This is in no way to try to say that the parameters set by the New Testament are “true” in some objective, transcendent sense. In the eternal scheme of things Christianity may be “false,” and a contemporary statement of what is “really real” may be “true.” My conviction, however, is that any contemporary statement, if it differs significantly from the New Testament “definition,” should not call itself Christianity.66

Robert Fennell goes further in making a point about how God speaks today. He writes, “The regula fidei of the wider Church and most of Christian history would suggest to us that scripture has a pre- eminent and unparalleled role in disclosing God to us. In fact, the Bible is most often regarded as special revelation to humanity, to compensate for our

65 We saw, above in chapter two, how Calvin posited the Spirit’s involvement to inspire both the writers of Scripture and assure the reader that they encounter the word of God. This bi-fold work of the Spirit was interestingly affirmed by the authors of AFS, 19. See also Joshua Moon’s review of Henk van den Belt, The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust. Leiden & Boston: E. J. Brill, 2008; in International Journal of Systematic Theology, 13.4 (Oct., 2011): 485-488.

inability to perceive and receive God through other means." Predominant Christian thought suggests that BU and AIS are correct in elevating scripture and exhorting the Christian community to engage scripture and make it, at least, a key aspect, if not a privileged aspect, of theological discernment.

9.3.2 A call for a new study on scripture

Within United Church documents, this study has noted a degree of dissonance and a lack of clarity on the role of scripture. One would think that the statement contained in the Basis of Union, affirming scripture as “the primary source and ultimate standard of Christian faith and life,” would govern all United Church position papers. Documents from the 1980s and 90s, however, approved by successive General Councils, viewed scripture as one authoritative influence among others with individuals or groups functioning as arbitrators of what the various influences mean for the Church. Subsequently, however, in the more recent study document, Our Words of Faith: Cherished, Honoured, and Living, the Bible was affirmed again as the primary authority for the Church. Surely the Bible cannot be “the primary source” and one among many sources of authority at the same time? For this reason, the Church needs to clarify what it means when it says that scripture is “the primary source and ultimate standard of Christian faith and life.” Perhaps, given that over twenty-five years have gone by since the Church initiated its study on the authority and interpretation of scripture, a new study for a new generation is necessary. The world and the Church have changed dramatically since the late 1980s. Canadian culture is less Christian and more secular than then and

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67 Fennell, 278.
68 See, above, §4.4.
the Church is in a much-weakened state due to an unabated decline in membership. A new statement on the Bible would bring more clarity to what it is the Church believes and stands for in this generation.

9.3.3 A call for a renewed engagement of scripture

Within the history of the United Church we have noted two models of theological discernment. It is intriguing that even the newer, participatory model, which gives scripture a reduced level of authority, still requires a strong biblical component for the model to function well. In spite of their complex, postmodern, postcolonial, liberationist views on how scripture should be analysed and interpreted, the authors of AIS state clearly, “Engaging the Bible is not optional for the Christian community.”\textsuperscript{69} They continue,

To be the Church is to take the Bible seriously as the Church’s central book and trustworthy source for hearing God’s Living Word. It is not to be treated as just one more addition on the shelf of our reference library or of ornamental significance in the home. It is essential in our seeking to be a community of and for God in our time. It is to be treated not only as an inspired book but a book that continues, through God’s Spirit, to inspire us in discerning God’s will for our lives. Furthermore … the Bible belongs to everyone, to the Church as a whole, and that it must not remain, in perception or in fact, the book of the professional minister.\textsuperscript{70}

Regardless of which model one chooses to use for theological discernment, therefore, the role of scripture within the Church is quite unique. If, as AIS says, “[scripture] is essential in our seeking to be a community of and for God in our time,” lay leaders and members need to gain a renewed sense of the value of scripture, a renewed sense of its importance for Christian faith and practice, and a renewed sense of its import in reaching

\textsuperscript{69} AIS, 21.
\textsuperscript{70} AIS, 21.
theological decisions.\textsuperscript{71} There is still a place for scripture, even if aspects of biblical criticism and postmodernism weigh on how it is read and interpreted.

When it comes to re-engaging the text, perhaps, a way forward can be garnered which would circumvent both modernist critiques and postmodern questions related to ultimate truths and reality. As Christians, is it conceivable that we may move beyond modernist presuppositions and dare to see possibilities of a unique power from beyond ourselves interacting with the world? Beyond postmodernism, can we accept the possibility that reality and truth are representable in textual and other forms in the useful approximations of reality/truth mentioned above in §3.5?\textsuperscript{72} Perhaps, when it comes to God, “approximation” is a very fitting concept, for the creator and sustainer of all things is surely beyond full comprehension. Through scripture, however, we may find windows, through which to peer and gain insight into greater realities and God. Through the windows, we may discover a broad sense of God and, because it is an approximation, the Church will need to allow more room for diversity of interpretation than it has in the past in the form of a generous spaciousness of understanding and belief. Even there, however, we may find consistent images within scripture that reveal general truths about God; a theology that comes to Christian people as they enter into the story and inhabit it.\textsuperscript{73} These would be areas of thought that the Christian community will broadly agree upon, areas that may challenge it communally, and individually, things that will give it hope and fill it with a passion for God and the world.

\textsuperscript{71} AIS, 21.
\textsuperscript{72} See also Wright’s assertion that truth can be uncovered at reasonable levels. Wright, 113.
\textsuperscript{73} It is important to “live in the land” of Scripture. In this age when researchers are aware of the importance of becoming an insider to truly understand a community, Christians need to commit themselves to entering into the biblical story and worldview. Richard Bauckham speaks of a full entering into the story such that we privilege it above all others and allow “This story to define our identity and our relationship to God and to others.” Bauckham, “Scripture and Authority,” \textit{Transformation} Vol.15 no.2 (April, 1998): 8.
Perhaps, the mainline church is already moving in this direction. Australian, Uniting Church minister and professor Glen O’Brien recognizes differing views of biblical authority but suggests that in these changing times, “The future may … lie in the ‘radical middle’ where biblical authority is recognized within the framework of a generous Trinitarian orthodoxy that allows difference of opinion within a deeply traditioned commitment to ‘God’s universal transforming love’.”

It is a world in which, O’Brien continues, “Post-liberals have discovered the value of actually preaching sermons based on the Bible and of calling people to follow Jesus, and post-conservatives have discovered that biblical criticism does not destroy but only enhances the foundations of their faith.”

First, however, it is necessary to renew an appreciation for scripture. The task of transforming long held practices and beliefs is a large one. Change is needed from the top, at denominational level, to reaffirm scripture for this generation. Change is needed in theological education, so that while scripture may be engaged critically, it may still be valued highly and with faith. Change is needed among ministers so that positive messages about the role and value of scripture are taught. Change is also needed in attitudes and decision-making bodies such that no one is afraid to speak of or engage the Word as they seek direction for the Church.

Intriguingly, AIS, has a number of helpful things to say in terms of elevating the role of the Bible. In suggesting how congregations achieve a more intentional biblical perspective in its life and work, it suggests that all Committees and Councils, or Boards,

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75 O’Brien, 183.
appoint someone to lead a biblical reflection at the beginning of each meeting. It asks Boards to explore the use of the Bible in taking action on various matters: e.g. future use of the building to include day care facilities. It asks the Session to explore the use of the Bible in the congregations worship life in preaching, drama, and story telling. To become empowered in the use of the Bible, AIS suggests setting up a special task group to explore ways to educate the Church about the history of the Bible and methods of interpretation in order that all have confidence in using scripture.\textsuperscript{76}

If the Church is to embark on this transformation of approach to the scriptures, perhaps the greatest role falls upon the clergy. Transforming levels of engagement, familiarity, and competence are not easy tasks but they begin with the minister’s own passion for God and the Word. Clergy in the United Church are charged, in their ordination liturgy, with a ministry of Word, sacrament, and pastoral care. Most ordination liturgies reflect a theological age when “Word” was linked directly with scripture and it is, thus, an obligation for clergy to value “the Word of God” and hold it before their congregants.\textsuperscript{77} The case study suggests that there is an opportunity for transformative ministry in this regard; a ministry that will ultimately help the Church discern the will of God, maintain its traditional ties with the Protestant movement, and better inform local Church council practice.

Perhaps it is the latter that will be most difficult to change. Within the bounds of this study, it was found that no direct engagement of scripture ever took place within

\textsuperscript{76} AIS, 21ff. This cannot be made too complex and unwieldy for the lay person, however. The amount of background that the authors of AIS assume necessary to read scripture is not practical for most lay persons. See, above, footnote 96 in ch.4.

\textsuperscript{77} Here there is awareness of newer definitions of Word within AIS. The authors suggest that Word is always greater than the text of scripture and refer to “the living Word” that comes as people engage scripture from their own cultural and personal lives. AIS, 7, 13.
Council discussions.\textsuperscript{78} Two interviewees directly stated, and others hinted, that direct scripture engagement would be against the culture of the Council or its Council members. Two others referenced a fairly widespread notion among United Church people that direct engagement with scripture would be something “biblical literalists” do. It was evident that at some point in the Church’s history, being “United Church” was set off against being a “biblical literalist,” and there is now almost a fear of doing anything that may link one with the pejorative understanding of the latter phrase. The situation demands a process of re-education to overturn deep cultural assumptions about the Bible and its engagement. Yet, it is something that must occur for not every reading of scripture is a “biblical literalist” reading. Furthermore, no Christian should fear engaging the book that is the prime source of the Church’s faith and life; nor should it be summarily excluded for cultural or other reasons. If scripture is to function, even in the foundational role mentioned in AIS, it should be engaged readily and without stigma.\textsuperscript{79}

\textbf{9.3.4 Suggestions related to governance}

In §9.2.6, we mentioned the fact that the lower influence of scripture and lower levels of competency among lay leaders compromise the functionality of the conciliar governance model of the church. Whether one establishes theology on the grounds of the older or newer models of discernment, scripture is still a strong component in the process of reaching decisions. Since, in the focus group, we discovered that no appetite for a change in the conciliar governance model exists, it is imperative that lay leaders be encouraged to rethink the value of scripture along with their engagement of it. An

\textsuperscript{78} This was the case in the remit process, even though the denomination developed material that encouraged local Councils and presbyteries to compare the material to scripture. See OWF.

\textsuperscript{79} AIS, 19.
increased engagement of it would go a long way to ensuring that the governance model functions well.

A change of this sort, however, may not occur overnight and perhaps the following suggestion would assist local church practice in the interim. When a theological issue arises, there are usually some lay leaders, a minority according to the case study, who are better equipped and more interested in theological discernment than others. It would be useful to enlist their help, have them study the matter and make a recommendation to the Council. Within United Church polity, this might take place in two ways. One involves Council electing “a Commission” to deal with the specific issue.\(^{80}\) In this instance, polity demands that the Commission’s decision is binding and for some that may not be deemed desirable.\(^{81}\) The second possibility, for those congregations that have embraced the Council model, is to return to the Official Board and Session model. It is the Session’s duty within the United Church to look after the spiritual affairs of the congregation and, if staffed appropriately, it could well look after theological concerns as well.\(^{82}\) The Session itself is a part of the Official Board and, as a sub-committee of that structure, is able to make a recommendation without the recommendation being binding. To be sure, for those congregations that have moved to “Council” models of governance, the Council itself is already charged with looking after the spiritual concerns of the congregation.\(^{83}\) However, the case study suggests, again, that only a minority of Council members may have particularly theological interests or be equipped to deal with them. The suggestion is to place the heavy-lifting involved in

\(^{80}\) *The Manual* § 7.5.2.

\(^{81}\) *The Manual* § 7.5.2b.

\(^{82}\) *The Manual* § 5.9.1 ff. & § 7.4.

\(^{83}\) *The Manual* § 7.4.1.
theological decisions in the hands of those among the Council members who are most interested and most able to deal with them. There are those within the Protestant tradition, however, who long for a time when the whole Church, and especially the leadership, would reflect the passion of Wesley and say, “O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri.*” At that point, the governance model may function as it was intended to function.85

### 9.4 Postscript

This study is what Clemens Sedmak referred to as a “little theology.” As a “little theology,” it reflects a particular situation, takes into account particular circumstances, and takes it’s starting point from local stories and concerns.86 While, the study and outcome may primarily have ramifications for the limited demographic of the three churches investigated, it is hoped that the information gained may reveal patterns from which the Church at large may learn. Wherever similar patterns are noted, whether within the United Church or in another Protestant denomination, it is hoped that this study may help. The Church and scripture are so intertwined that we cannot properly have one without the other. In the midst of this age, it is still important for the Church to be the Church and for its leaders, if not all Christians, to be familiar with God’s past revelation and interaction with humankind. Only with this understanding can the Church

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84 John Wesley, “Preface,” *Sermons on Several Occasions* (1746). Again, Wesley does not mean by *“homo unius libri”* that he reads only one book. He read widely and simply infers that the Bible was a work unlike any other, unapproachable in terms of its insight into God, salvation, and eternal life.

85 Notwithstanding issues associated with individual interpretations.

step out into the world with good news. As the words of the Anglican Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent advocate:

   Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.87

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Appendix A – Basic form of letter to Church Councils

Dear Council Members,

I am a minister at one of your neighbouring congregations. Over the past few years I have been engaged in a doctoral program at the Toronto School of Theology and as part of the thesis, I am seeking the help of three United Church Boards or Councils.

Sometimes Boards are asked to deal with an issue that has theological consequence. This study seeks to clarify how we discern theology in the local congregation. An example of such an issue would be the call to vote on the Remits from General Council last year, which sought to expand the founding documents of the Church, *The Basis of Union*. I am particularly interested in what influences lay leaders and their group decisions.

The study, I believe, would not be too onerous for your Council. It would involve a brief questionnaire to be completed, if possible, during a Council meeting in the Fall, 2014 (probably a ten minute exercise). It would also involve interviewing two volunteers from the Board at a convenient time in the late Fall. The interviews would be for approximately one hour. The questionnaires and interviews will all be treated confidentially and any reporting will be anonymous.

The study is, I believe, an important one for the life of the Church. It is hoped that it will shed further light on what goes on at the ground level when congregations face a theological issue and provide opportunity to evaluate that in light of the broader Protestant movement. I am interested in how we know the will of God for our congregations. Hopefully, the study will lead to suggestions that will better inform Board practices and I would be glad to share the results with you once the dissertation is completed.

I would very much appreciate it if you would participate in this study and look forward to hearing from you. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at david.mcmaster@mail.utoronto.ca.

Very best wishes,

The Rev. David McMaster

The supervisor of this thesis is Dr. Stuart Macdonald, Knox College, University of Toronto, s.macdonald@utoronto.ca. The research has been approved by the Ethics Review Board, University of Toronto, ethics.review@utoronto.ca.
Discerning Theology in The United Church of Canada

As part of a Toronto School of Theology doctoral thesis, I am attempting to clarify how local Church Councils make theological decisions on behalf of their congregations.

When I use the word, “theological,” I am thinking about decisions that may impact Christian belief and practice as opposed to decisions of a more ordinary nature, such as, “What colour of carpet will be put in the new Sunday School room?” In the past, Councils have had to think through issues such as: changes to Statements of Faith, changes to worship patterns, whether or not to allow gay marriages in the sanctuary, whether to allow alcohol at Church events, or whether a congregation allows the use of raffles etc. to fund events or programs. As you go through this questionnaire, it might be helpful to recall a theological issue faced by your Board in the recent past and what influenced you in your decision.

The questionnaire is confidential and the reporting of data will be anonymous. The data will be used only for the above named research project and when the dissertation is completed all data and questionnaires will be destroyed in accordance with University of Toronto protocols.

Many thanks for taking the time to fill out this survey.

The Rev. David McMaster
1. What things influence you when you are asked to make theological decisions on behalf of the Church? Circle a number where the following scale applies: 1. Never 2. Rarely 3. Sometimes 4. Frequently 5. All the time

   a. Prevailing cultural values/social norms 1 2 3 4 5
   b. Experiences in life 1 2 3 4 5
   c. Dialogue in Christian community 1 2 3 4 5
   d. A relevant scholarly study 1 2 3 4 5
   e. Church tradition and/or theology 1 2 3 4 5
   f. The Bible 1 2 3 4 5
   g. An inner sense or voice (conscience, spirit) 1 2 3 4 5
   h. Sermons I have heard over the years 1 2 3 4 5
   i. The things I learned in Sunday School 1 2 3 4 5
   j. The opinion of the Minister(s) 1 2 3 4 5
   k. Other (please specify): 1 2 3 4 5

2. How would you rank the things that influence you most when making a theological decision? (Mark only the top three from the following list, using “1” for the most important source for you, “2” for the next most important, and “3” for the third most important source)

   - [ ] Common cultural values
   - [ ] Experiences in life
   - [ ] Dialogue in Christian community
   - [ ] A relevant scholarly study
   - [ ] Church tradition and/or theology
   - [ ] The Bible
   - [ ] An inner sense or voice (conscience, spirit)
   - [ ] Sermons I have heard over years
   - [ ] The things I learned in Sunday School
   - [ ] The opinion of the Minister(s)
   - [ ] Other (please specify)
3. What best describes where you get the bulk of your Christian knowledge from? (Mark only the top three from the following list, with “1” being the most important source for you, “2” the next most important, and “3” the third most important source)
   - Sunday School
   - Sermons
   - Christian community and dialogue
   - Adult Study Groups in the Church
   - Christian books
   - Theological books
   - The Christian Bible
   - Films with Christian themes
   - Television (Christian programming)
   - Christian School
   - Other (please specify)

4. Where, in your mind, does knowledge of God and God’s will primarily come from? (Mark only the top three from the following list, with “1” being the most important source for you, “2” the next most important, and “3” the third most important source)
   - It is in the heart (an inner knowledge and conviction)
   - It comes to us through experience
   - It is found in dialogue within the Christian community
   - Human reason
   - The Holy Spirit
   - The Christian Scriptures
   - Writings other than Christian Scriptures
   - Other (please specify)
5. How familiar are you with the Christian Bible on a personal level outside of Worship Services? (Circle the most accurate statement for you. Please be honest)
   a. I am very familiar with it, I study it in depth
   b. I am familiar with it, I read it regularly
   c. I am familiar with it, I read it occasionally
   d. I am somewhat familiar with it, I read it occasionally
   e. I am not very familiar with it, I hardly ever read it
   f. I don’t read it at all
   g. Other (please explain briefly)

6. How competent do you feel in using the Christian Scriptures in order to make theological decisions on behalf of the Church? (circle one)
   a. Very competent
   b. Quite competent
   c. I need help and dialogue
   d. I am not competent and would defer to a Board member who knows more than me.
   e. I would defer to the minister on theological issues

7. How competent do you feel most other members of your Board are at using Scripture to make theological decisions on behalf of the Church? (circle one)
   a. All are very competent
   b. Most are competent, a few are not
   c. A few are competent, most are not
   d. We need help and dialogue
   e. Most defer to the minister on theological issues

8. Which of these statements best describes your view of the Bible? (circle one)
   a. The Bible is ultimate truth and is God’s Word
   b. The Bible contains truth and God’s Word
   c. The Bible is a truth, one among many, and may include God’s Word
   d. The Bible is a human book that relates human experiences of God
   e. The Bible is mostly ancient myths and legends
   f. Other (please specify)

9. Do you have any comments about how theological decisions are made in your Church Council or in the United Church of Canada?
Appendix C – Interview Protocol and Questions

Interview Protocol and Questions:

Topic: Discerning Theology in United Church decision-making?

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Briefly describe the project, go over the consent form and the voluntary nature of participating, thank the interviewee for being willing to participate.

Warm up questions and demographics:

How many years have you served on your Church Council/Board?¹

☐ less than one year; ☐ 1-5 years; ☐ 6-10 years; ☐ 11-20 years; ☐ over 20 years

What is your approximate age:

☐ under 35; ☐ 36-50; ☐ 51-65; ☐ above 65 years

What is the highest level of education you have achieved?

☐ High School; ☐ College; ☐ Undergraduate; ☐ Masters; ☐ Doctorate

What do you do? Current employment or, if retired, main employment in the past.

¹ Have you enjoyed it? What was the most interesting thing you debated?
Questions:

1. Think of a recent theological decision that your Church Board has made; please tell me about it and outline any steps the Board took to think through the issue and come to a decision?

   Prompting questions (if needed): Did you discuss the issues as a Board or in small dialogue groups? Was the issue first discussed by a Committee before it reached the Board? Was there a focus group or information session as a separate event, outside of a regular Board meeting? Did someone present the problem and/or give direction as to how to proceed? Was adequate time and information given to reflect on the matter? Was the minister involved? How? How long did it take to reach a decision (multiple meetings)?

2. Did you yourself take intentional steps as you prepared to make a theological decision on behalf of your congregation?

   Prompting questions (if needed): Did you read anything? Study the question in depth? Pray for wisdom?

3. What major influences affect your thinking when it comes to making a theological decision?

   Prompting thoughts: Here I am thinking about prevailing culture or social norms, the tradition of the local congregation, experience, reason/logic, relevant scholarly studies, Scripture, a broad theological truth such as love – such that you ask, “What is the most loving thing?” a trusted Board member’s opinion. Would the Minister’s opinion influence your decision?

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2 When the word, “theological,” is used, it is concerned with those decisions that may impact Christian belief and practice as opposed to decisions of an more ordinary nature such as, “What colour of carpet will be put in the new Sunday School room?” In the past, Councils have had to think through things such as: changes to Statements of Faith, changes to worship patterns, whether or not to allow gay marriages in the sanctuary, whether to allow alcohol at Church events, or whether a congregation allows the use of raffles etc. to fund events or programs.

3 Alternatively, if the interviewee cannot think of one, ask what happened when the Board was asked to approve the Remits from General Council concerning expanding the United Church’s Basis of Union. Alternatively, if the interviewee was not present for that scenario ask the interviewee to read a pre-prepared paragraph outlining a scenario where the Church Board is forced to deal with a situation in which a beloved minister has publicly disavowed God and Christian faith, yet wishes to remain in his/her role as minister. Some in the congregation believe the minister must leave, others do not and the Board must decide whether to invite Presbytery to evaluate the minister’s ability to continue to function in a role where one of the duties is to maintain the peace and harmony of the congregation. The interviewer would discuss how the interviewee would perceive the Board handling that process.
4. How would you rank the things that influence you most when making a theological decision? (Provide a pre-prepared sheet of paper with the following possibilities – ask the interviewee to mark the top three, with “1” being the most important source, “2” the next most important, and “3” the third most important source). Ask the interviewee to discuss his/her choices.

- Common cultural values
- Experiences in life
- Dialogue in Christian community
- A relevant scholarly study
- Church tradition and/or theology
- The Bible
- An inner sense or voice (conscience, spirit)
- The Holy Spirit
- Sermons I have heard over years
- The things I learned in Sunday School
- Adult Study Groups in the Church
- The opinion of the Minister(s)
- Other (please specify)

5. Do you think that Scripture has a role in Board discussions about theological issues?

Have you ever engaged Scripture formally or informally as a part of your Board process? If so, please describe? In the case of the imagined scenario - Do you think the Board would engage Scripture formally or informally in an attempt to reach an answer?

6. Describe your level of comfort in using Scripture. Do you feel competent to engage it and reach a level of understanding about a theological issue?

If so, describe how have you become familiar with Scripture? Do you read it regularly? Occasionally? Not at all? If the level of familiarity with Scripture is moderate-weak, what things have given that familiarity? Sermons? Sunday School? Television? Films - such as Roma Downey’s recent film: The Son of God or Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ.
7. Reflect on the Board members you know … Do you think that other Board members engage Scripture when making a theological decision? Would other Board members be able to use Scripture effectively in decision-making when a theological issue arises? Are they familiar and competent enough with it to use it well?

8. How would you resolve an apparent conflict between resources/authorities used to inform a decision? (The fictitious issue above Q.1. might pit Scripture and tradition against doing the most loving thing and even labour laws – would any particular influence/authority trump other authorities?). Discuss particularly how you would rank Scripture in relation to other influences when making decisions. Where “authorities” conflict would Scripture trump the other “authorities” or could cultural norms, for instance, trump Scripture?

9. Describe your view of the Bible?
   Sub-question: Would any of the following describe your view of Scripture? It is ultimate truth and is God’s Word? It contains the Word of God? It is one truth among many? It is a human book that relates human experiences of the divine? It is mostly myth and legend?

10. Some have suggested that The United Church of Canada has moved in the past 30 years from a view in which Scripture was preeminent, ultimate authority for life and faith in the Church, to one in which it is one of a number of authorities to be studied and held together in dialogue within a community. Which do you think is more helpful and theologically correct in the 21st century?

11. How, in your mind, do we know God and the will of God for the Church?

12. Do you have anything to add that may help me understand how you reach decisions on behalf of the Church?

Thank the interviewee for his/her willingness to participate.

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4 Paul, for instance, suggests that women ought to be quiet in Church (1 Cor. 14:33ff. During the 20th century, this was trumped by our culture’s view of the value of women along with alternate texts in Scripture that affirm women.
Interview Consent Form: Discerning Theology in the United Church of Canada

Dear Participant,

I am one of the ministers at Timothy Eaton Memorial Church. As part of a Toronto School of Theology doctoral thesis, I am attempting to clarify how local Church Councils make theological decisions on behalf of their congregations. I am particularly interested in what influences Council members as they think through such issues to find the will of God. The following information is provided to help you decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time. Should you choose to do so, any information or data deriving from your participation will be destroyed.

The interview which you are participating in will be recorded and transcribed solely for the work of the researcher. Only he will have access to the data and it will be protected in accordance with University of Toronto standards. Confidentiality and anonymity will be preserved at all times. For the purposes of the writing phase of the research, participants will be assigned pseudonyms. Subsequent to the thesis being received and examined, all recordings and transcriptions will be destroyed. I would be happy to share the findings of the research with you after the research is completed. I may be reached at david.mcmaster@mail.utoronto.ca. Please do not hesitate to ask any questions about the study either before participating or, during the time that you are participating.

There are no known risks and/or significant discomforts associated with this study. The expected benefits associated with your participation are as follows: a greater understanding of the practice of discerning theology in local United Churches, an evaluation of that in light of traditional Protestant practices, and an evaluation of the church governance model. It is hoped that the study will also lead to suggestions that may transform how we uncover the will of God in congregational life.

Please sign your consent with full knowledge of the nature and purpose of the procedures. A copy of this form will be given to you to keep.

_________________________________  ________________________
Signature of Participant                        Date

_________________________________  ________________________
Signature of Researcher                       Date

J. W. David McMaster, University of Toronto, Sole Investigator, Supervisor, Dr. Stuart Macdonald, s.macdonald@utoronto.ca. The research has been approved by the Ethics Review Board, University of Toronto, ethics.review@utoronto.ca.
Appendix E – Focus Group Protocol & Questions

- Thank the ministers for agreeing to be a part of this study.
- Explain the nature of the study fully using the cover page of the questionnaire (Appendix B)
- Go over the consent form and, if they are comfortable with it, ask them to sign it.
- Indicate that I am very interested in their individual thoughts – ask that they not let another’s point of view here detract from voicing their own perspective and to be aware that one thought may inspire other thoughts in the other members of the group.

1. Initial Questions:

1. Warm up question – to get the group thinking about theological decisions at Council/Board level. Think back to the 2012 Remits General Council regarding expanding the Basis of Union: what process did you engage in your own congregation? What was the level of engagement by the laity?

2. Where does knowledge of God and God’s will derive from in your mind?

3. Where do you think your Board members think knowledge of God comes from?

4. How would your Board members resolve conflicting influences coming from culture and scripture? Does culture trump scripture or scripture trump culture?

2. Quick comments based on findings in the Questionnaires and Interviews (allot one minute to each finding).

1. When it came to stating what influenced them most in theological decision-making, responses to the questionnaire indicated a strong preference for “experiential” influences such as “an inner sense,” “experience,” “dialogue,” and “culture,” over the traditional influences like Bible and sermons. What do you think?

2. 27/43 take a non-orthodox view of scripture describing it as human, one truth among others, myth. What do you think?
3. 41/43 say they need help with scripture or defer to others in a theological discussion. What does this infer?

4. In the interviews, it came out that a number of the participants were somewhat familiar with higher critical methods through reading popular and popular academic works. What do you think?

5. There was a great emphasis on the core principles within the Bible versus the “chaff.” Is this reductionist? Does this move away from a complexities of faith and God?

6. Are we still Protestant? With competence in scripture weak in our communities and an overwhelming reliance on the experiential influences for making theological decisions, where will this lead? Do we continue to be Protestant?

3. Closing Questions

1. What does a lesser knowledge of scripture and an unwillingness to deal with it directly say about the lay-model of governance of the church? Should we alter it?”

2. What does this suggest clergy and leaders in the church should do in the future? What should we aim at? How can we improve theological decision-making?
Appendix F – Focus Group Consent Form

Dear Participant (Focus Group-Clergy),

As part of a Toronto School of Theology doctoral thesis, I am attempting to clarify how local Church Councils make theological decisions on behalf of their congregations. I am particularly interested in what influences Council members as they think through such issues to find the will of God. The following information is provided to help you decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time. Should you choose to do so, any information or data deriving from your participation will be destroyed.

Data for this study will be collected from interviews, a brief questionnaire, and a focus group of clergy. The Focus Group will take approximately 90 minutes and you have been approached as a member of the Order of Ministry of the United Church of Canada ministering in the Toronto area. The Focus Group interaction will be recorded and the discussion transcribed solely for the work of the researcher. Only he will have access to the data and it will be protected in accordance with University of Toronto standards. Confidentiality and anonymity will be preserved at all times. For the purposes of the writing phase of the research, participants will be assigned pseudonyms. Subsequent to the dissertation being received and examined, all recordings and transcriptions will be destroyed. I would be happy to share my findings with you after the research is completed. I may be reached at: david.mcmaster@mail.utoronto.ca. Please do not hesitate to ask any questions about the study either before participating or during the time that you are participating.

There are no known risks and/or significant discomforts associated with this study. The expected benefits associated with your participation are as follows: a greater understanding of the practice of discerning theology in local United Churches, an evaluation of that in light of traditional Protestant practices, and an evaluation of the church governance model. It is hoped that the study will also lead to suggestions that may transform how we uncover the will of God in congregational life.

Please sign your consent with full knowledge of the nature and purpose of the procedures. A copy of this form will be given to you to keep.

__________________________  ______________________________
Signature of Participant                  Date

__________________________  ______________________________
Signature of Researcher                   Date

J. W. David McMaster, University of Toronto, Sole Investigator; Supervisor, Dr. Stuart Macdonald, s.macdonald@utoronto.ca; the research has been approved by the Ethics Review Board, University of Toronto, ethics.review@utoronto.ca.
Appendix G – Thesis Proposal
Scripture's role in discerning theology
in The United Church of Canada

A Doctor of Ministry Thesis Proposal
Submitted to the D. Min. Program Committee
Toronto School of Theology
Final Draft - 31st July, 2014

By
J. W. David McMaster
Student Number: 995831186
Knox College, University of Toronto
The following Doctor or Ministry Thesis Proposal is set out in accordance with the guidelines of the Toronto School of Theology’s Doctor of Ministry Handbook (2011).

1.a. **Background, Ministry Base, Context of Applied Research:**

The United Church is the result of a merger in 1925 of Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational, and Union Churches.\(^5\) It is the largest Protestant denomination in Canada, but along with other mainline churches, has been in significant decline since the mid-1960s. The Church has evangelical and social-gospel roots yet is perceived now to be the most “liberal” of Canadian denominations. Over the past forty years, it has forged new and sometimes provocative paths on a variety of social issues; affirming, for instance, homosexual rights, the ordination of homosexuals, and gay marriage before any other denomination and, in the latter case, before the Government of Canada.

The study that is proposed in this paper will focus on three United Church congregations. Contextual information about the three congregations will be included in the dissertation itself, suffice it to say that, for now, the Churches are being selected with a view to theological diversity and the basic culture of the congregation.\(^6\)

1.b **Research Interest**\(^7\)

In 2010, I organized a series of lectures for the congregation I serve entitled, *The Bible in the Church Today*. A number of professors from nearby theological colleges were invited to speak on issues related to their field of research, how the Bible informed

\(^5\) In 1968, the Evangelical United Brethren also entered union as a result of its American “cousins” joining The Methodist Church in The United States to form The United Methodist Church.
\(^6\) It seems redundant to include contextual information about my own congregation and role again in this context. These have been outlined numerous times throughout the D.Min. process, including the Comprehensive Examination. They will be fully incorporated into the proposed dissertation.
\(^7\) The terminology of the section-headings in this proposal is drawn, with slight modifications, from the Doctor of Ministry Program Handbook, ¶5.6. Toronto School of Theology, April, 2011, p.42ff.
them, and how they saw scripture informing life and thought in the local church. After one of the lectures, a senior member of the congregation came to me and uttered these words, “David, I’ve never read the Bible, probably never will, but these lectures are most interesting, well done.”

The individual probably did not realize the issues that his statement raised as I encouraged him to read even a little of the Bible. The issues were exacerbated by the fact that this person was on the Church Council and Council functions as what once was called, The Session; at times The Session/Council is called to make theological decisions on behalf of the congregation. Chief among the issues was that of authority. Scripture has historically been elevated in Protestant tradition to a position of ultimate authority. If the Bible is not read, however, what exactly is authoritative for this particular individual when he makes decisions on behalf of the local congregation? I wondered, further, how widespread this Council-member’s practice was. Is it true of the laity within the congregation in general?

The issue may go beyond this congregation, however. A colleague in ministry in the United Church informed me that she had come across a similar problem at General Council level. Several years ago at a General Council, she asked a presenter calling for a boycott of Israeli goods what biblical and theological reflection the committee had done in preparing their report. After some equivocation, the response was, "Is this a theological document?" My colleague interpreted the response to mean that they not only

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8 In the United Church context, the laity are the voting members of the Church Council or Board. Clergy are non-voting members.
9 General Council is the highest court of The United Church. The courts are, the membership of a local congregation, Presbytery, Conference, and General Council.
had not engaged in theological or biblical reflection but, further, it had not occurred to
them that it might be appropriate.

Toronto School of Theology’s Doctor of Ministry programme requires that each
student establish a Ministry Base Group (MBG). In my case the MBG is comprised of
five members of the congregation. They are an active, educated, and theologically
diverse group of individuals. At our first meeting, I brought up the topic of my study in
light of the two anecdotes above. Responses included: “David, why does this surprise
you?” “I would be very surprised if more than a few Council members ever read the
Bible.” “That’s why I actually took the Bethel Series Bible course when I became Senior
Officer (Chair of Council). I hadn’t a clue about the Bible.” Another, more conservative
voice said, “David, this is what I’ve been talking about for years. We need to get people
into God’s word and it seems very few read it.”10 The anecdotes and the responses of my
MBG suggested the possibility of a significant disparity between current United Church
practice and the role of Scripture in the historical Protestant tradition.

2. Thesis Proposal: A Statement

In broad terms, the proposed study will seek to come to a clearer understanding of
Scripture’s role in discerning theology within The United Church of Canada.11 In
approaching the study, one avenue of research will focus on an examination of Scriptural
authority in Protestant tradition and, particularly, within the official documents of The
United Church of Canada (see below, page 9f.). The major portion of the study,

10 MBG meeting March, 2012.
11 In question form it would read, “What is the role of scripture in discerning theology in the congregational
life of The United Church of Canada?”
However, will involve a detailed Case Study of three Toronto-area, United Church congregations in an attempt to ascertain what informs theological decisions at the ground level of church life.”

Foundational to this is the question of authority and what grounds Christian lay persons as they seek to uncover the will of God in congregational life.

When we look to past practice, one of the Protestant movement’s most revered thinkers, John Calvin, recognized a general knowledge of God from the natural world. He strongly affirmed, however, that a deeper knowledge of God and his ways could only derive from the Scriptures. Indeed, the Scriptures were affirmed by all the reformers as they sought to go beyond papal and conciliar authority and correct a Church that was perceived to have erred. Some have opined that the Reformers replaced the Pope with a “paper-pope,” as Scripture took on a unique role in matters of faith and practice within Protestant tradition. Its authority lay in the assumption that God was its essential author and all Christians were encouraged to read and imbibe its wisdom.

The practical study is outlined below in section 4. The term, “theology,” in the first place has to do with word (logos) of, or about, God (theos). Thus, when one speaks of “theological decisions,” one is speaking of significant, congregational-shaping decisions that touch on Christian beliefs and practices. These may include those decisions that have explicit moral, ethical, and faith dimensions as opposed to those which may appear to be more administrative, having to do with finance, organization, property, and the colour of the sanctuary carpet. To be sure, the latter categories may also have theological associations. Whether a congregation spends money to upgrade offices or to assist the poor would be a determination that has definite theological overtones. Not every decision made by a congregation’s administrative Board is perceived, however, as having theological import. The words, “theology” and “theological,” are utilized here to help us distinguish between ordinary, everyday decisions (the colour of the carpet) and those that may explicitly impact Christian belief and practice. These may include, for instance, changes to statements of Faith, changes to worship patterns, whether or not to allow gay marriages in the sanctuary, whether to allow alcohol at Church events, whether a congregation allows the use of raffles etc. to fund events or programmes.

In the United Church, it is the lay people who are the decision makers for the congregation. Clergy are non-voting members of Councils and Boards.


Calvin, I.vii.-vii. II Tim.3:15ff.

For the authorship of Scripture, see Calvin, I.vii.4. Encouragement for all to read Scriptures is evidenced in numerous writings of the time. Among them, Thomas Cranmer, “A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Scripture,” in *The First Book of Homilies*, 1547. Bishop John Jewel, *The Apology for
Notwithstanding the influences of the Enlightenment and Modernism, the Reformers’ approach was broadly affirmed in the Protestant tradition, at least until the twentieth century. Those who helped bring about the union of Churches in Canada can be seen to align with that when, in the preface to *The Basis of Union* (1908), they wrote,

We, the representatives of the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregational branches of the Church of Christ in Canada, do hereby set forth the substance of the Christian faith, as commonly held among us. In doing so, we build upon the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone. We affirm our belief in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the primary source and ultimate standard of Christian faith and life.\(^\text{17}\)

Article II of *The Basis of Union* pushes this further when it declares that the Scriptures are, “given by inspiration of God, as containing the only infallible rule of faith and life, a faithful record of God’s gracious revelations, and as the sure witness of Christ.”\(^\text{18}\) One of the founding fathers, T. B. Kilpatrick, would later write that the Scriptures were hereby deemed “indispensable, trustworthy, and sufficient” as they instruct in faith, guide life, record the process of revelation, and bear witness to Christ.\(^\text{19}\)

The United Church of Canada thus began its journey with a traditional, Protestant understanding of scripture. It was deemed that God and God’s ways were revealed in

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\(^\text{18}\) *BU*, Article II. The Manual ¶ 2.3.2

Scripture and that the Bible was the ultimate authority for Christian faith and practice.\textsuperscript{20} In this light, the Scriptures seem necessary to Church, Christian life, and decision-making, yet, the anecdotes above suggest otherwise; that Scripture may currently not be as valued or utilized as it has been in the past.

The proposed Case Study will, therefore, seek to gain more evidence of current practice as local Church Boards make decisions, particularly those of theological consequence. It will attempt to understand any intentional processes that Boards go through when they face such decisions. Second, it will seek to uncover the things that influence Board members when making decisions (e.g. prevailing cultural norms, tradition, reason, experience, Scripture, social scientific studies, the word of a respected Minister or lay person etc.).\textsuperscript{21} Third, where Scripture is utilized, an attempt will be made to understand the extent of that usage and how capable lay leaders feel in their ability to use it. Finally, it would be worthwhile knowing, where varying influences (authorities) are acknowledged, how those are ranked as influences. If, for instance, prevailing cultural norms influence the decision-making process, is Scripture perceived as having an ultimate authority that can trump what culture teaches, or, does culture trump understandings of Scripture? Positions on these will reveal much about how, practically-speaking, scripture is used and valued within the several congregations. In addition, it will clarify how individuals in the early 21\textsuperscript{st} century perceive that they attain knowledge of God and God’s will for the Church.

\textsuperscript{20} It should be noted that there was some diversity of opinion at the time of union with some calling for a more modern position in light of current biblical and theological work in seminaries and colleges.

\textsuperscript{21} Of course, some will argue that prevailing norms affect us, whether we acknowledge them or not. Here, the interest is in what is consciously acknowledged and practiced.
3. Theoretical Framework and Assumptions Involved in the Study:22

A number of fields of research impact a study of this nature. Biblical Studies is a rich field that has developed considerably since the Reformation. At the ground level, internal biblical evidence has traditionally led Christians to attach substantial authority to scripture. Even after distinguishing itself from Judaism, the Church continued to uphold the Jewish sacred scrolls as sacred and valued Torah as a source of wisdom.23 It never doubted the words of Psalm 1, “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night.”24 Jesus was considered the Church’s “only teacher,”25 and Matthew suggests that he continued to view Torah and Nebi’im as authoritative. It is stated, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.”26 Perhaps one of the most quoted passages in the New Testament reveals the thought of the first century church on this matter:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,

22 The main theoretical fields that I will address in this study are associated with Biblical Studies, History, and Philosophical developments. Theology comes into play also and one could spend much time addressing theories of inspiration and authority of scripture. While it is hoped that the basics of that field will come out in association with the other areas investigated, I will not be engaging in a thorough theological study of inspiration and authority of scripture.
23 Here Torah, as “law,” is to be defined in its narrowest sense, as the sacred scrolls, the so-called books of Moses, Genesis – Deuteronomy.
25 Mt.23:8.
26 Mt. 5:17, 18.
so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.\textsuperscript{27}

Here the value of scripture is linked with divine inspiration wherein lay its authority for the Church. This was especially affirmed by its later Protestant wing.

More recent academic studies, while they have expanded knowledge of the text and its background considerably, have also served to undermine the authority that Scripture is deemed to have. Aspects of historical criticism, source criticism, literary criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, reader-response criticism, to name but a few, have elevated estimations of the human aspect in the authorship of Scripture. As scholars have uncovered the use of sources, historical inconsistencies, and literary creativity, \textit{inter alia}, they have weakened perceptions of divine involvement and unavoidably Scripture’s professed trustworthiness. Some of this has filtered down from the academy into pulpits and popular press and has, thus, influenced the thinking of Christians. Early enthusiasm regarding the various critical approaches, however, has often waned as the critics themselves have been critiqued. Later scholars have frequently noted that some approaches themselves involved assumptions and presuppositions that are not always fool-proof. In the end, approaches to Scripture in the academy have become quite varied and influenced by individual preconceptions and faith-stances.

Some gifted-scholars are able to maintain relatively high views of Scripture, while others negate it altogether. If aware, the person in the pew often does not know what to do with the apparent confusion and relies heavily on faith and/or the word of a trusted authority, sometimes a Minister.

\textsuperscript{27} 2 Tim. 3:14-17
A second field that impacts this study is that of history. In an attempt to contextualize the current practice, an historical study will be undertaken of views of Scripture at the time of the Reformation, the Wesleyan revival, as well as developments in views over the course of The United Church of Canada’s history. The Reformers views will be examined because they set the stage for how Scripture would be viewed in Protestant tradition. The Wesleyan view is also important, as the Methodist Church was the largest body to enter into The United Church of Canada. Finally, even though United Church has existed for a relatively brief eighty-nine years, the denomination has been productive in writing and developing its views. Specific official denominational documents on Scripture will be examined as well as those related to marriage and sexuality. The latter theme has been chosen because of the more progressive stance that the United Church has taken on these issues. It is felt that if approaches to scripture altered diachronically, evidence of that would be more readily apparent in these documents. Preliminary work on United Church position papers has already shown a significant alteration in how the Church values Scripture. From the 1960s – 1990s, the Church moved from a magisterial view of Scripture as ultimate authority, to a view in which Scripture is one authority among others (reason, tradition, experience, input from social science fields etc.). In some cases it is stated that the authorities are to be held in tension in communal dialogue with no one authority viewed as greater than another. This will be explored fully in the dissertation.

Third, and closely aligned with a historical study are the philosophical shifts of the last 500 years. All have had their effects on how Scripture has been perceived. Critical to the success of the Reformation was a rise of individual autonomy vis-à-vis the
That same autonomy brought changes, later, to the broader culture as the period known as the Enlightenment took root. Significant developments occurred in epistemology through the rationalism of René Descartes (1596-1650) and the empiricism of John Locke (1632-1704), David Hume (1711-1776) and others. These set the stage for great advances in knowledge through reason, experience, and the repeatable, scientific experiment. Knowledge of the physical world was hereby separated from that of the metaphysical world and individuals began to focus more on what was deemed pure knowledge, i.e. knowledge of our world and its processes. Those things that could be proven by reason, logic, and observation came to be valued more highly than the “knowledge” of faith. Brian Walsh indicates that modernist culture became confident in “the inevitability of human progress and maturity beyond the superstitions of past “mythical” cultures.” He continues, “Any notion of the abiding authority of such an ancient text as the Bible, was an infantile anachronism at best and a cowardly failure to exercise one’s autonomy at worst.”

The last fifty years or so, have seen even greater change with the ascent of what has been termed postmodernity. Postmodernism is generally traced to Ferdinand de Saussure’s study of signs. De Saussure posited an epistemological distance between an individual’s mental image of an object, the signified, and the object itself. This decoupling of signs from their objects brought uncertainty to what could truly be known

and was picked up by Foucault, Derrida and others in the twentieth century and applied to
other academic disciplines. An awareness developed that reality was un-representable.
The postmodern mind is therefore dubious of claims of authority and truth. In the words
of David Lose, postmodernism is marked by,

A heteronomous dissensus of competing claims and voices, where no one
idea or voice is privileged over the rest. Instead of an ordered, centred
structure, one discovers an undulating and ever developing sense of reality
that shifts in response to changing perceptions and convictions. ... Thus,
rather than seek a universally valid rationality by which to legitimate
competing truth-claims, postmoderns tend to call for pragmatic, ever-local
determinations of the good, the true, and the beautiful, thereby shifting the
process of legitimation to local, rather than the global level.32

There are obvious ramifications for the Bible and biblical authority with this
approach. With truth and reality becoming the creative projection of the individual or
community to which one belongs, there is little room for Scripture’s authoritative claims
and the loss of anything akin to revelation as traditionally defined by Christian theology.
Scripture, as any text, becomes “the material manifestation of a multiplicity of signs,
discourses and structures.”33 Texts are viewed as unreal; as Jacques Derrida said, “There
is nothing outside of the text.”34 Scripture, as text, can thus never be, or convey, a pure
stream of revelation or truth about God in the postmodern framework. Scripture is
reduced to a few voices among a sea of voices in a pluralistic world.

While postmodernism is open to significant critique, and a modernist, scientific
worldview remains strong for many, it is evident that much of Canadian culture has been
impacted by elements of a postmodern worldview. The culture may not always be

32 Lose, 17. One wonders if the “ever-local” inevitably means that truth, beauty, and meaning are indeed
solely in the eyes of the beholder? Logic would require that the “ever-local” must be reduced inevitably to
the autonomous individual alone not the local community which many postmodern thinkers champion.
33 Brown, 94.
34 Brown, 95.
consistent in its thought or application but pluralism, suspicions of truth claims and grand stories, and the autonomy of the individual may all be noted within current worldviews. These have affected religious beliefs, acceptance of authority (including biblical authority), and understandings of God. Evidence of this in the United Church’s official document, *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture (AIS)*, led Robert Fennell to write,

In *AIS* … we see reflected the emergence of authority as a (postmodern) fluid concept, not attached to a specific and grounded epistemic centre. … the normative centre of authority, which for several hundred years had been firmly rooted in the Bible (at least for the Christian West), has, by the time of the publication of *AIS*, largely evaporated.³⁵

While postmodernism has influenced many in Western culture, and notwithstanding the value of postmodernism in some areas, the approach is not always convincing.³⁶ Many Christian thinkers still have room for ultimate truths and for a gospel that stands authoritatively over and above culture. Within a culture that largely rejects words like “authoritative,” Robin Scroggs has interestingly maintained that the Bible must function as a “foundational” document. Scroggs insists that as Marx’s writings must be foundational for anything we call Marxism, so the Bible must be foundational for Christianity.³⁷ In saying this, Scroggs does not wish to impose Scripture as an “authoritative club,” or put Christian faith into a small theological box; he does, however,

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³⁶ I will critique postmodernism in the dissertation itself. Postmodernism has been helpful, for instance, in causing greater awareness of contextual presuppositions and issues.
³⁷ Scroggs, “The Bible as Foundational Document,” *Interpretation* 49/1 (1995), 21f. With the use of the term “foundational” vis-à-vis “authority,” Scroggs is attempting to allow a degree of flexibility in interacting with the text. On the main point, however, it seems that the church needs something to ground it, otherwise it, itself, becomes postmodern and fluid and perhaps open to a critique similar to that imposed on the Montanists of the second century.
give scripture a central position in establishing what it means to be Christian. Of course, the extent to which one views Scripture as word of God or inspired by God, will greatly affect the manner in which one deals with Scripture and the authority one gives it among other authorities and influences.

It is a central conviction of this researcher that Scripture has significant import for the Church in terms of its Faith and practices. Church tradition, from the beginning, has given it a unique place and it is difficult to imagine the Church without it. Indeed, while the extent of its authority may be debated, Scripture seems, intrinsically, to have a necessary role in any process to know God or God’s will. This was reaffirmed recently in Anglican tradition by the Windsor Report (2004) which states, “Within Anglicanism, scripture has always been recognized as the Church’s supreme authority, and as such ought to be seen as a focus and means of unity.”

It is recognised, however, that positions such as these are in themselves statements of faith. In the practical study, which is outlined below (§ 4), efforts will be made to be as objective as possible in hearing and reporting views on Scripture and the factors that inform decisions in congregational Boards. The prime interest is to clarify how individuals discern theology in that context.

4. Action Research Component: A full statement of the proposed project

Overview:

To reiterate, the main question is, “What is the role of scripture in discerning theology within The United Church of Canada?” Specifically, the study seeks to clarify the role of Scripture when congregational Boards make decisions of theological consequence. In broad outline, the study will follow the practical method set out by Whitehead & Whitehead in their book, Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry. The Whiteheads posit a threefold process at work in studies of this nature. The first phase, “Attending,” is defined as thinking about a problem or issue in light of those things that affect and influence life in a ministry situation: religious tradition, experience, and culture. The second, “Assertion,” is the drawing together of the varying elements of the Attending phase through dialogue. The third stage, “Pastoral Response,” moves from dialogue to decision, evaluation, and action.

In the Attending phase, as has already been mentioned, the context of the issue that arises from the anecdotes noted above in § 1b will be set forth with a view to the authority of Scripture in the Protestant tradition, United Church tradition, and current culture. It continues with a Case Study of what happens when local Church Boards encounter theological issues. A questionnaire and six interviews will be utilized to shed further light on the factors that influence individuals who sit on Church Boards, as well as

39 See n.8 above, p.4.
41 Whitehead & Whitehead, 13.
focus on how Scripture is valued and/or utilized to address issues that shape the life or faith of the congregation.

The Assertive phase will involve an in-depth analysis of the data. Initial findings will be presented to a focus group of United Church clergy in a manner that maintains the confidentiality of the previous round of respondents. The ensuing dialogue will help validate and clarify interpretations as well as provide new data to be included in the study.

In the “Pastoral Response” phase, conclusions and recommendations will be proposed based on the analysis of the data and consideration of the limits of the research. It is hoped that the suggestions may improve and inform decision-making and theological discernment at local levels (see below p.22ff).

The Case Study Process

Returning to the Attending phase and, specifically, the Action in Ministry component, the main question will be investigated via a Case Study. William Myers commends this methodology as the preferred form for most ministry based research. Creswell defines the Case Study as:

a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g. observations, interviews, audio-visual material, and

42 These clergy will be unrelated to the Churches interviewed. See the section, “Focus Group,” below. 43 Within Myers’ terminology, my research would be classified as a Case Study with an “ethnographic interest,” i.e. the study has to do with a specific culture or sub-culture. William R. Myers, Research in Ministry: A Primer for the Doctor of Ministry Program. 3rd. ed. (Chicago: Exploration Press, 2000), §4.2, p. 24.
documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes.\textsuperscript{44}

Following the advice of my Ministry Base Group, the project will take the form of a multiple-bounded study in order that the results are not potentially embarrassing to any one congregation.\textsuperscript{45} At the time of writing, three United Church ministers and Board Chairpersons have agreed to act as “gatekeepers” to their congregations and it is hoped that formal permissions from Boards will be forthcoming shortly.\textsuperscript{46}

The Churches have been selected on the basis of two criteria. One is to engage only relatively strong Churches. In an age when many mainline congregations are struggling with low attendance, a rising age-demographic, and low volunteer involvement, it was determined to engage congregations that still have signs of health and life. Second, the United Church has great socio-economic and theological breadth. It was deemed wise to include congregations from both the traditional and progressive ends of the theological spectrum, as well as ensure diversity in socio-economic levels of congregations.

Sources of Data: Interviews

As indicated, the Case Study will seek data from three principle sources: interviews, a questionnaire, and a focus group. The interviews will involve a minimum of two Board members from each of the congregations involved in the study (six

\textsuperscript{44} John W. Creswell, \textit{Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches}, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage publications Inc., 2007), p.73. I settled on Case Study approach due to the flexibility of the method as well as ruling out all other qualitative methods as inapplicable to the nature of my study.

\textsuperscript{45} They felt that there was some possibility that very few who sit on their Church Board engage Scripture at all. Thus in order to remove potential embarrassment from the study of a single congregation, a study of several congregations would be preferable.

\textsuperscript{46} Permission letter sent to Boards is in Appendix D.
interviews in total). Together they will provide data on what influences United Church congregations in their theological decisions as well as any intentional procedures they may go through in reaching them. In an effort to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the responders all data will be reported in aggregate. Participants will not be named and due to the small sample size from each congregation, no attempt will be made to report findings for the individual participating congregational Boards; rather, results will be reported at a “collective-congregational” level.

Subsequent to Board approval of participation in this study, the Lead Ministers of each of the three congregations will send out an email to Board members inviting them to participate as an interviewee (Appendix E). A deadline for responses will be set and the first two volunteers from each Board will be accepted for the interviews with a third designated as an alternate. I will make myself available to all invitees to answer questions by email or telephone. In the event that volunteers are not initially forthcoming, the Lead Minister and the researcher will consider asking individuals directly. If this occurs, consideration will be given to achieving a breadth of perspective based on an individual’s overall involvement in worship, church life, and theological bent.

The interviews will take the form of what has been termed “the semi-structured interview.” The semi-structured interview is useful in its ability to ask and derive data from open-ended questions. The flexibility of the process allows participants to communicate their personal realities, thoughts, and feelings in a more detailed manner than, for instance, a questionnaire provides. It also allows for improved responses as the
The interviewer may ask follow-up questions, seek clarification, and generally probe beyond the superficial.47

The interviews, themselves, will be conducted in spaces conducive to privacy and where interruptions will not take place. They will be conducted in places that are safe and familiar to the participant. Conceivably, this could be in a room or office in the participant’s own church building. Each participant’s preference for the venue of the interview will be utilized where possible and providing it does not put the interviewer at risk.

The interviews will begin with the consent process. In accordance with University of Toronto guidelines, a consent form outlining the general nature of the study will be given to the interviewee in advance.48 The consent form (Appendix C) will thank the interviewee for their participation, provide assurance of confidentiality and anonymity, seek permission to record the interview, and provide further assurance that recordings and transcripts will be used solely in connection with the study itself. Subsequent to the dissertation being written and approved, all data will be destroyed. All paper based data will be shredded and electronic data, audio or text, will be erased.

In setting up the interviews, and in order not to unduly influence responses, it is intended only to share the general aim of the study as: Discerning Theology in Local Congregations of the United Church of Canada. As the interview proceeds, the focus on how scripture is utilized in decision-making will become apparent and more will be shared specifically about this at the end of the interview. There is no attempt to deceive

47 Chris Barker, Nancy Pistrang, Robert Elliot, 6.
here, merely to uncover whether the subjects themselves would suggest Scripture as an influence or authority without being prompted. Notice has been taken of the “Guidelines for the Use of Deception and Debriefing in Research,” prepared by The Committee on Human Subjects in Research, University of Toronto.49

As an interviewer, the intent is to be alert, mindful, and receptive to what is shared. As much as possible, it is the researcher’s job to be neutral in asking questions and receiving responses. Clarke Moustakas recommends attempting a level of *epoche*, in which judgment and personal bias are suspended.50 It is my hope to achieve this with a time of silent reflection prior to each interview during which I will rehearse personal biases and assumptions, and remind myself to endeavour to truly hear the respondent.

In the interview processes, I will seek to uncover:

- the extent and nature of any intentional processes that church Councils/Boards engage in when making decisions of a theological nature,51
- the extent to which individual board members themselves enter into the Board process or engage in their own personal processes when making decisions of a theological nature.
- what influences decision-makers (tradition, experience, reason, culture, academic work such as social science).
- the extent to which Boards or individual decision-makers engage the scriptures as a part of their decision-making process.
- how Scripture is ranked vis-à-vis other authorities in decision-making.
- how competent decision-makers feel about their ability to engage and interpret scripture.
- how the interviewee perceives levels of Scripture usage or literacy among other Board members. Here the respondent acts as an “informant.”52

51 See above n.8.
The full Interview Protocol and Questions are attached below, Appendix A.

**Questionnaire**

Questionnaires can provide a quick quantitative assessment of opinion related to the issues being researched. A brief questionnaire has been formulated and each participating Church Board has been asked to take ten minutes in their September or October, 2014 Board Meeting to allow Board members to fill it out. I will attend the Board meeting, briefly outline the study, answer any questions, emphasize that completion of the questionnaire is completely voluntary, hand out the questionnaires (Appendix B), and leave the room to allow Board members to complete the form and place them in an envelope provided. Completed questionnaires will be collected prior to the beginning of the business meeting. If necessary Board members may complete the questionnaire during the week following the meeting and leave it in the church office or fax or scan and email it to me directly.

The aim of the questionnaire will be to get a brief, but broader response to some of the objectives outlined in the previous section. Specifically, to assess what influences Board members as they make theological decisions, how they rank those influences in terms of authority, whether or not they engage Scripture in the process of decision-making, and how comfortable or knowledgeable they are in engaging Scripture. The questionnaire will help both broaden the study and provide assistance in triangulation (validation).

Focus Group

After the data has been analysed, a focus group consisting of the clergy from congregations other than the participating congregations will be convened. Preliminary results of the interviews and questionnaires will be outlined and they will be asked for their opinions and help with understanding. Throughout the process, the anonymity and confidence of the first six interviewees will be maintained. I will ask the clergy to address only general trends that derive from the data or, if a specific statement is utilized, no name will be attached to the respondent’s statement. The approximately 90 minute discussion will be recorded and should afford more data with which to understand and interpret the data already attained. Topics to be discussed and questions related to the data will be determined later as they will arise out of the first round of data itself.

Data Gathering, Protection, and Analysis

The first round of data from questionnaires and interviews will be collected over the months of September and October 2014. The Focus Group will occur in late November, 2014. Digital recordings of the interviews and the later focus group will be transcribed by the researcher and held confidentially on a digital recording device and encrypted computer memory sticks. They will be stored and locked in a fire-proof box and handled in accordance with the requirements of the University of Toronto.

53 Consent form for this will be established in accordance with University of Toronto guidelines and will contain similar elements as those discussed above in the context of Interviews. See above, note 39.
the dissertation is written up and accepted, all data will be destroyed in accordance with the same requirements.

All data including transcriptions, researcher notes from interviews, and official church reports will be examined, read and re-read with a mindfulness that is attentive to the local life of individuals, congregations, and the broader church. In moving into the Whiteheadian, “Assertion” phase of the research, an inductive method of analysis will help draw out various layers of meaning. This will loosely follow Robert Traina’s inductive method of textual analysis. Traina’s method attempts to draw out of the text rather than read-into the text any preconceived notions of the interpreter. In observing, the researcher looks for contrasts, comparisons, repetitive items, continuities, generalizations and particularities among other literary elements. These will inform the coding process.

Aligning with Whiteheads’ “Pastoral Response,” the application stage follows interpretation and seeks to apply what has been learned to pastoral life and pastoral roles. What is learned will be compared to the historical patterns within the Church and evaluated. It is hoped that comparisons and contrasts between the context and current practice will produce suggestions for direction of future ministry and education within the church.

**Validation**

The forms of validation that will be utilized in this study are as follows:

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55 Mindfulness is a particular thrust of Clemens Sedmak’s work, 2002, p.2.
57 Traina, 50.
- Triangulation: Import of categories/coding and interpretation will be aided by multiple attestation from a variety of sources (the various interviewee responses), and across methodological sources (questionnaires, interviews, and field notes).
- Member checking: the clergy focus group will help interpret the initial data findings.
- Supervisory and Peer Review. My supervisor and a member of my doctoral cohort will offer interpretive advice.

**Outline of the Action in Ministry with Approximate Timeline**

- June 2014 - Preliminary approvals from supervisor re: Thesis Proposal. Get tentative approval from congregations to participate in the study. Formulate Questionnaire and Interview Protocol and Questions.
- Summer, 2014 - Begin to write up the initial, contextual part of dissertation based on previous coursework.
- September/October 2014 – Data gathering: Questionnaires and Interviews
- September - November 2014 – Transcribe audio files, review data review, analyse, preliminary write-up.
- November, 2014 - Focus Group.
- December, 2014 – Transcribe Focus Group audio file, re-engage data in light of Focus Group, analyse Focus Group Data.
- January – Mar 2015 - Write up Action in Ministry section of thesis, compare/contrast with historical/cultural sections and develop conclusions/uses of findings.

5. Ethics Review Board

A University of Toronto Ethics Review is forthcoming for this project.

6. Risks and limitations of study

The study will involve a questionnaire with approximately 30 – 40 Board member respondents, interviews of six Board members, and a focus group of three – five clergy.

The size of the sample while useful tends to limit the generalizability of findings and inferences. Along these lines, it is helpful to remember that this study and form of
research is akin to what Clemens Sedmak refers to as a “little theology.” Little theologies, he maintains, arise in concrete occasions in response to specific needs or questions, and attempt to find God and God’s presence within the local context. What derives from doing local theology is thus limited in significance and may not easily be generalized to other scenarios and contexts. The very term, “little theologies,” suggests that the researcher should state his/her findings with a measure of humility, not inferring too much (nor perhaps, either, too little). There is, nonetheless, value in the study, in the sense that what is reported from the collective of three churches may not be too far away from what occurs in other congregations. Careful reporting and inferences ought make the findings transportable to other situations and may provide direction in ministry for a much broader spectrum of churches.

I have designed this study to protect the privacy of all participants and ensure that there is a very low risk of breach of confidentiality. No other risks are apparent. The data itself, however, is derived from individuals and is necessarily personal and idiosyncratic. Barker, Pistrang, and Elliot warn of potential risks to the research as the respondents’ views may bear little relationship to “reality.” They can be forgetful and not always truthful. Additionally, they warn about interviewer bias. While it is the duty of the researcher to attempt to overcome the latter, it is hoped that the numbers of respondents and other validation methods will mitigate against individual respondent difficulties such that a reasonable snapshot of what is going on in local United Church congregations will be attained.

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59 Barker, Pistrang, Elliot, pp.2ff.
7. Projected outcomes and contributions of this study:

Given the anecdotal evidence already encountered (§ 1b above), along with the affirmation in United Church document, *Authority and Interpretation of Scripture*, that few Christians read or study the Bible anymore; my hunch is that direct scriptural engagement by lay people in United Churches is not strong.\(^6\) If the analysis provides more evidence of this, it will allow us to make the point with more clarity, as well as detail current perceptions of the Bible and levels of competency. Furthermore, the research should offer insight into what other influences/authorities affect individuals in their theological decisions. This data may then be used for reflection purposes. It may be asked, for instance, whether current practices or perceptions of what is authoritative are helpful and/or theologically sound?

If the evidence follows my hunch, at the very least, it should allow the whole church to consider what it teaches about the value of Scripture. Since there are no Christian bodies that set aside Scripture entirely, a lack of, or limited engagement on the part of the laity provides opportunity to reaffirm Scripture as something valuable and formative for Christian life and decision-making in the Church. The study may encourage clergy and lay teachers to be more intentional in educating those under their care.

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\(^6\) AIS 2. See discussion in Fennell 279, who argues that *AIS* showed that the normative centre of authority in the United Church, which had been firmly rooted in the Bible, had largely evaporated. It had altered into a postmodern, fluid concept unattached to any epistemic centre.

As I write this (17\(^{th}\) May, 2014), I just had a conversation with a woman who is investigating the Christian faith. She has attended two small group studies, has many questions, and told me that she is reading the Bible from the beginning to end. She said, “I am surprised at the others in the small group, they are Christians but they told me they do not read the Bible.”
Here, the agreement may end, however, as the extent of what is taught will probably be dictated by faith and presuppositions. Given the theological breadth of the United Church, there may be no clear position on Scripture for the whole Church. In more conservative circles, Scripture is deemed authoritative in an ultimate sense and this will dictate an approach that strongly affirms the divine inspiration of the text. While seemingly straight-forward, lay leaders will need guidance in many matters, such as: why the Church follows the so-called, moral law of Scripture but not the whole law, and why some parts of Scripture have been overridden by cultural progress (e.g. attitudes toward women and their participation in the life of the Church)? Things are no less difficult in more progressive theological circles where Scripture is deemed as one authority among others. Here, guidelines are needed to balance the major influences that individuals encounter and significant help is needed in terms of what to do when such influences or authorities provide conflicting answers to certain questions. The role of the Holy Spirit that is often referred to in this regard, needs clarification.

The more progressive theological position may also need to consider what truly grounds it. The words of Robert Fennell, as he worked through the implications of the United Church document, Authority and Interpretation of Scripture, are significant.

In Authority and Interpretation of Scripture … we see reflected the emergence of authority as a (postmodern) fluid concept, not attached to a specific and grounded epistemic centre. …This underlines our argument that the normative centre of authority, which for several hundred years had been firmly rooted in the Bible (at least for the Christian West), has, by the time of the publication of AIS, largely evaporated.61

If Fennell is correct, one wonders whether the Church, sans foundation, has essentially moved beyond historic Protestantism, perhaps, into a position that might be termed post-

61 Fennell, 279. Parentheses are Fennell’s.
Protestant. Such a position should be specified clearly as to what it is and how it functions.

Finally, there may be implications in this study for Church governance. In presbyter systems, the laity are technically and ideally the voting members of local congregations and Boards. If in our pondering, Scripture is deemed to have a measure of authority for the Church, and if there is no change in levels of Scripture engagement by the laity, it suggests that the laity cannot properly address theological issues. Should theological matters, therefore, be left in the hands of “the experts” (clergy, theologians)? In many cases this may already be occurring as it has been observed that frequently, in theological matters, the Minister’s opinion carries the vote. Perhaps, the governance model should be altered to coincide with reality.

It is my hope that the ensuing investigation will reveal that scripture is being engaged more than my hunch suggests. Failing that, however, it may provide an opportunity for the church to ponder, state its position clearly and, perhaps, recover something that has been both precious and valuable as it seeks to know God’s will for the current age. The opportunities for reflection and transformative ministry abound.

(The Bibliography and Appendices of this Proposal have not been attached as a more advanced form of them have been attached to the body of the thesis above. The Appendices have been set in a different order in the thesis but may be readily found through the Table of Contents, above p.vi)