Our heavenly Father, we continue in thanksgiving to You that You have seen fit to reveal Yourself in Jesus Christ and in the witness of prophets and apostles to Jesus Christ. And we bless You that this unique revelation has been reserved for the benefit of the church in Scripture. And we ask that You will establish our confidence in the veracity and the authority of Your Word. And be with us this afternoon and illumine our minds and our memories. We ask it for the glory of our Savior’s name, amen.

Well, we are taking two lectures to talk about the authority of the Bible; and last time I tried to talk about introducing the subject to talk about the reasons for accepting the authority of the Old Testament. And now I want to take the New Testament. And our view here is that Jesus Christ not only foresaw the writing of the New Testament Scriptures, parallel to the writing of the Scriptures of the Old Testament, but that He actually intended it. And that He not only intended it but that He made deliberate provision for it by the appointment of His apostles and by the gift of the inspiring Spirit to the apostles. So this will involve us thinking together about the apostles. And I need to remind you that from the wider company of the disciples of Jesus, He chose twelve and surnamed them “apostles” (Luke 6:13). So that whereas “disciple” is a title or a name that applies to all Christian believers, all the followers of Jesus, “apostle” was a title that was given only to this select few, the Twelve. Now modern research into this word (and if you want to pursue it, you couldn’t do better than look at Rengstorf’s article on apostle in [Gerhard] Kittel's famous Wörterbuch [Theological Dictionary of the New Testament]. Or if you want a more easy, perhaps, and more modern work, I would recommend a work called Supreme Authority by a Dutch Reformed writer who is dead now called Norval Geldenhuys or “heldenhays” as I believe it’s pronounced in Afrikaans) and modern research into the word apostolos indicates that it was the Greek equivalent of the shaliah of rabbinic Judaism. Now the shaliah was a special messenger of the Sanhedrin. And he was
sent to the Jewish dispersion with full authority to teach in the name of the Sanhedrin. And so complete was the authority of the *shaliah* that it was said, and this is an important little quotation, “The one sent by a person is as this person himself.” The one sent by a person is as this person himself. Well the one sent is of course *apostolos* in Greek or *shaliah* in Aramaic.

Now Jesus knew this of course, and the argument is that He deliberately chose this title for His apostles in order to indicate the nature of their mission and their authority. They were His *shehihin*: His personal delegates, His ambassadors, virtually you might say, His plenipotentiaries. And to these twelve apostles He later added Paul and conceivably one or two others like James, the Lord’s brother, the author of the letter of James in the New Testament. But in any case, it was a very small body, a very closely restricted number. And the word *apostolos* is used almost exclusively in this sense in the New Testament. Perhaps I could pause there and say there is one verse in which *apostolos* is applied to all Christians, and that is John 13:16–17 where, after the foot washing, Jesus says “Truly, truly I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent (*apostolos*) greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them” (RSV). And that is a general sense in which every Christian is an *apostolos*, just as he is a servant sharing in the apostolic mission of the church. So that as Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, I’ve sent you,” the whole church is apostolic in the sense that it is sent out into the world on its mission.

There is also on one occasion the use of the word in 2 Corinthians 8:23 when we read of certain people who are the apostles of the churches, that is, people who are sent out by the churches on a mission; and this would correspond to what we call missionaries. That’s 2 Corinthians 8:23. But in the great majority of cases in which the word is used, it is restricted to the Twelve and Paul, and, as I say, one or two others. These are not apostles of the churches but apostles of Christ. Now I want to develop this thesis and suggest to you that the apostles of Christ had a fourfold uniqueness. There are four ways, at least, in which they are unique and set apart from everybody else.

First, they had a personal appointment and authorization by Christ. That is, He Himself personally chose the Twelve and authorized them. He gave them authority to preach and teach in His name. Thus, in Luke 6:12–13 we are told that Jesus chose twelve. He did the choosing. They were personally selected by
Similarly, it was He who apprehended Saul on the Damascus Road and personally commissioned Him as the apostle to the Gentiles so that in Acts 26:17 you have the phrase “ego apostolos”*: I apostle you. I send you or I make you an apostle (Christ speaking to Saul of Tarsus [Acts 26:17]). Paul certainly laid claim to such a personal appointment by Jesus when he not infrequently defended his apostolic authority particularly for example in Galatians 1:1 where he says, “Paul an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead.” And that is a claim that his apostleship had not been given him by a group of men like the other apostles, the Jerusalem apostles, or even by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father. And in nine out of thirteen of his epistles, he uses the phrase at the beginning of the letter, “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ” either by the will of God or by the command of God. So Paul is conscious, you see, of this appointment by God through Jesus Christ to the apostolate. So there is the first uniqueness: a personal appointment and authorization by Christ.

Secondly, their second uniqueness is an eyewitness experience of Christ. You will perhaps know the phrase in Mark 3:14 that “he appointed twelve, to be with him, and to be sent out to preach.” But they couldn’t be sent out to preach unless they were with Him. So He gave them unrivaled opportunities for three years in the public ministry to hear His words, to listen to His teaching, to see His mighty works in order that they might bear witness to what they had seen and heard. And in the upper room in John 15:27, He said, “You also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning” (NKJV). They’d been with Him; they’d been in His company; they’d seen His works; they’d heard His words. They had this eyewitness experience of Jesus that qualified them to be apostles. Now when a replacement for Judas was under review in the first chapter of the book of Acts, the condition of eligibility for the apostolate was described by Peter. It was (I’m quoting now from verses 21–22 of Acts 1): “One of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John . . . must become with us a witness to his resurrection” (RSV). So there you see the qualification was that whoever was to be chosen in place of Judas had been with the rest of the apostles. At least he’d accompanied them. He’d seen the mighty works of Christ. He’d heard His teaching in order that he might bear witness supremely to the resurrection, but also to the earthly career of Jesus. And then they prayed that Jesus would show them which He had chosen “to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from Him.
which Judas by [his apostasy had declined]” (verse 25).

Now you may ask, and rightly, well how then did the apostle Paul qualify? He lacked the experience, which the other apostles had had during the three years of public ministry. Although some people argue—and I think it’s an attractive argument—that the particular three years that Paul was given in Arabia (you remember after his conversion he went away to Arabia for three years), that during that period in Arabia he was alone with Christ and that it was, as it were, a compensation for the three years that he had missed in the actual earthly ministry of Jesus. But apart from that, although he lacked that experience that they had had, he did have a resurrection appearance. Now we know that it took place after the ascension, and it was unique in that respect. But Paul added himself to the catalog of those who had seen the risen Lord (1 Corinthians 15:8). He says, “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” So Paul lists the Damascus Road experience as the last of the resurrection appearances although it didn’t take place during the forty days.

Now this resurrection appearance, this objective appearance of the risen and ascended Lord to Paul was part of what qualified him for his apostleship so that he could say in 1 Corinthians 9:1 (a very important verse), “Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” And if he hadn’t seen Jesus, he wouldn’t have qualified as an apostle. And this of course is one major reason why the apostles had no successors and why there are no apostles of Christ in the church today. There could not be in the nature of the case they were eyewitnesses of the historic Jesus. So their first uniqueness was a personal appointment and authorization by Christ, and the second was an eyewitness experience of Christ. Incidentally, James the Lord’s brother had it. For in 1 Corinthians 15:7 we’re told that He appeared unto James. He had a resurrection appearance of his own.

Thirdly, they had an extraordinary inspiration by the Holy Spirit. Now obviously, all Christian people receive the Holy Spirit as a gift. The indwelling Spirit is the distinguishing mark of the Christian. But we would want to claim for the apostles an inspiration of the Spirit, which was altogether extraordinary. And I will argue this in the “Upper Room Discourse” in which Jesus made repeated promises about the coming of the Paraclete, the Spirit of truth, who would lead the apostles into all the truth, etcetera. Now these promises have been quite improperly applied as referring primarily to the church of later ages. These are popular verses, for
example, for the Roman Catholic Church, who claim “He will lead you into all the truth” means that Christ has given to the Catholic Church a certain magisterium, a certain authority to interpret the Scripture and to teach infallibly. These verses are also implied improperly by liberal Protestants, sometimes by Pentecostals, who claim an inspiration of the Spirit, which is almost tantamount to infallibility, and what they teach is the truth because they’re inspired by the Spirit to teach it. And didn’t Christ promise the Spirit to lead them into all the truth? And the liberal Protestant enthrones his own reason and takes this verse as the basis of it.

Now I would want to say that all those—Catholic, liberal Protestant, and Pentecostal—are disgracefully improper interpretations of these verses in John 14 and 16. And I will try and argue it with you that a balanced interpretation of these verses, which sees them in their context—which is, I suppose, the major principle of biblical interpretation, that you interpret the text in the light of the context—must apply these verses in the first instance to the apostles who had gathered round Jesus in the upper room while He was speaking. He was closeted with the Twelve. Judas had left, but the others were there. And it is to them that He was speaking in the upper room. Now I will argue it with you in this way. And let’s listen to the crucial verses. Take John 14:25–26, and ask yourself as I read the verse to you, what is the identity of the word you in that pronoun? “These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you. But [the Paraclete], the Holy Spirit, . . . will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” The word comes five times. Or John 16:12–13, “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.” Now surely on any balanced and reasonable principles of biblical interpretation, this “you” must be the same group of people throughout. The identity of the “you” cannot change in the middle of the sentence. So that when He begins by saying “these things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you,” He is obviously referring to the Twelve who had listened to His teaching while He had been with them for those three years. So when He goes on “when the Spirit of truth comes,” “he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you,” it must be the same identity. The same group of people whom He has taught, the Spirit will continue to teach and will remind. Again when He says, “I have many more things I would like to say to you, but you can’t bear it.” You’re so stupid, and you’re so obtuse that you cannot receive any more of My teaching at the moment. But “when the Spirit comes, he will supplement
what I’ve taught and will bring my teaching to its fulfillment.” Again, the “you” must be the same people. It must be the apostles.

So Jesus recognized that His teaching ministry to the apostles was incomplete, and He added that He would send the Holy Spirit to complete it. So the Spirit would have with the apostles this double ministry: (a) He would remind them of what Jesus had taught them, and (b) He would supplement it by leading them into all the truth, which Jesus had not been able to speak to them because they’d been unable to receive it, but further truth which God intended them to understand. So the Spirit’s ministry with the apostles was both a reminding ministry and a supplementing ministry. And we would say that the primary fulfillment of these promises is in the writing of the New Testament, the reminding ministry in the Gospels, and the supplementing ministry in the Epistles. I would be willing to defend that interpretation against anybody, even the pope himself if only he were here visiting Trinity.

Well that brings me to the fourth uniqueness of the apostolate. The first is their personal appointment and authorization by Jesus. The second is they had an eyewitness experience of the historic Jesus. The third is they had an extraordinary inspiration of the Holy Spirit which Jesus gave them. And fourthly, they had a supernatural power to work miracles.

Now it’s perhaps relevant to take you back again to Mark 3:14–15 where we’re told that Jesus chose “twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them forth to preach, and that they might have authority to cast out demons.” And here there is the threefold thing. He didn’t only send them out to preach, but they had to be with Him before they were qualified to do that, and He would give them authority to work as exorcists to cast out demons. Now here I want to suggest that the main function of miracles throughout Scripture is to authenticate a fresh stage of revelation. We began to talk about this in the interaction in the Overseas Missions Institute last week. And I’d like to talk a little bit further about it that the Bible is not a book of miracles. The Bible contains miracles, records of miracles. But it is not itself a book of miracles. And there are large tracts of biblical history in which no miracles are recorded. And the most striking example of this, as I may have mentioned last week, is John the Baptist, whom Jesus said was the greatest human being who had ever lived. Of those born of woman, no man was greater than John the Baptist. But the fourth evangelist, John, specifically says that John the
Baptist did no miracles. So the God of the biblical revelation is not a God who is continually and regularly performing miracles. God is no more a God of miracles than the Bible is a book of miracles. God has performed miracles, maybe still does. The Bible records miracles. But miracles are no more a regular function of God than they are a regular feature of the Bible. That is, the great God of the Bible is the living God of nature, not of super-nature. And by very definition, miracles are “abnorms” rather than norms. And the major activity of God is in the natural order and not in the supernatural. So that the God of the biblical revelation, the living God, is the God who makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust, the God who feeds the birds of the air and clothes the lilies of the field, who gives us life and breath of all things, and is active in the processes of nature and of history.

But when you look at the miracles in the Bible, you find that they come in clusters; and they cluster particularly around Moses the lawgiver, that is the plagues of Egypt. God gave Moses and Aaron the rod by which miracles were wrought in order to demonstrate the superiority of the revelation given to him to the religion of the gods of Egypt. So they cluster around Moses, the plagues, the crossing of the Red Sea, the manna, etcetera. Second, they cluster around Elijah, Elisha, and the prophets; thirdly, around Jesus Christ Himself in the gospels; and fourthly, around the apostles. Now one of the great statements of this theme is in Hebrews 2:3–4 where we’re told with regard to “so great salvation,” that “it was first declared by the Lord.” “It” there being of course the gospel of salvation. It was first declared by the Lord, that is, the Lord Jesus. “It was attested to us by those who heard him,” that is the apostolic eyewitnesses, “while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his own will” (RSV).

Well now, there the purpose of the miracles is that they were a divine authentication, God bearing witness by signs and wonders, a divine authentication of the witness of the apostolic eyewitnesses. Jesus spoke the gospel first, the apostolic eyewitnesses attested it, and God further authenticated it by these signs and wonders. Now Paul says the same thing in 2 Corinthians 12:12. He says, “The signs of a true apostle were performed among you in all patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.” So Paul refers to his miracles as the signs of a true apostle. And the book of Acts is rightly known as “the Acts of the Apostles.” It is an account of what Jesus by the Holy Spirit continued to do
and to teach through “the apostles whom he had chosen” (Acts 1:1–2), so that when the new converts, we read, continued in the “apostles' doctrine and fellowship” (Acts 2:42), Luke immediately adds in verse 43, “Many signs and wonders were done through the apostles.” Through the apostles (in Acts 5:12) again, “Many signs and wonders were done through the hands of the apostles.” And there are only two exceptions to that, namely, Stephen in Acts 7 and Philip in Acts 8 are both said to have performed miracles. And they were both in some sense apostolic delegates in that they were appointed to their particular ministry by the laying on of the hands of the apostles. But whatever you may think of those two exceptions, let us at least see that the book of Acts is the “Acts of the Apostles,” and Luke distinctly states that it is through them that the miracles were performed.

So to sum up this fourfold uniqueness of the apostles, they had a special, personal appointment and authorization by Jesus. They had an eyewitness experience of the historic Jesus, an extraordinary inspiration by the Spirit of Christ, and a supernatural power to work miracles. Now this unique authority given to the apostles was recognized in the early days. And I want to suggest to you a threefold recognition or perhaps a fourfold recognition by Christ, by the apostles themselves, by the early church, and by the reformers.

First, by Christ, well I’ve already really talked about this. But I just want to mention that in giving them authority and in sending them out to teach, Jesus added “He who hears you hears me, he who receives you receives me, and he who rejects you rejects me.” In other words, He understood that in sending them out in His name and with His authority, people's response to them would be their response to Christ. That’s particularly (Matthew 10:40), that’s recognized by Christ.

Second, their authority was recognized by the apostles themselves. That is, they had a self-conscious apostolic authority. And we find them not only conscious of the authority that Christ had given them, but we found them exercising it. Thus, they give authoritative teaching, and they expect the churches to receive it. Let me give you some examples: 2 Thessalonians 2:15, “Stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter.” So here are certain apostolic traditions passed down by the apostles to these churches; and they are to stand firm in them and to hold them fast whether they heard them orally by the apostles or whether they read them in
the apostolic letters. Then they required their letters to be read publicly. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 5:27 Paul says, “I adjure you by the Lord that this letter be read to all the brethren.” It’s got to be read publicly to the whole church when it assembles. Or again in Colossians 4:16, “When this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea.” They expected their letters to be read in public.

Then again they issue commands and expect them to be obeyed. Let me read you from 2 Thessalonians 3, “We command you brethren in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” that you do this and that. Again, “Even when we were with you, we gave you this command.” And again, “Such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ.” And again, “If any one refuses to obey what we say in this letter” [vv. 6, 10, 12, 14] note that now. And we say to ourselves, who is this who is issuing commands and expecting obedience? This is certainly not the language of any minister in the church today. It might be the language of the pope who believes that he can issue instruction with infallibility and ex cathedra. But it’s certainly not the language that you hear from the pulpit today. We don’t issue commands, and we don’t expect obedience. But the apostles did. Or then again, Paul spends a great deal of time, particularly in the letters to the Galatians and the second letter to the Corinthians, asserting and defending his apostolic authority against those who challenged it. He declared, for example, that both his mission and his message were neither from men nor from himself, that he had not arrogated this authority to himself, but through Jesus Christ. “My gospel,” he said, “is not man’s gospel. I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ.” That’s again Galatians 1:11–12. And he claims that his word is God’s Word, that is, “The message that we preached to you, you did not receive it as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually works in those who believe” (1 Thessalonians 2:13). And he claimed as we have already seen, that the very words in which he communicated this message were words taught by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:13). And to me the most remarkable of all is Galatians 4:14 (that I quoted yesterday in the “Pastoral Epistles” course) when he says that when he arrived in Galatia, he arrived in some condition of physical infirmity. The theory that Sir William Ramsay, I think, first suggested is that he caught malaria in the swamps of Pamphylia in the first missionary journey, that when he climbed then up onto the mountainous plateau of Galatia—and visited Pisidia and Antioch and Iconium, Lystra, Derbe—when he arrived there he
was sick and that his sickness had disfigured him in some way, seems to have affected his eyesight. He says to them “if you could have plucked out your eyes and given them to me, you would have done,” which suggests that something was wrong with his eyes. But in spite of this disfigurement, he said, “You didn’t scorn me. You didn’t despise me. You received me as an angel of God and as Christ Jesus” (Galatians 4:14).

Now in my own thinking, that is, I think, the most remarkable statement of any apostle in the New Testament regarding his authority. He says “You received me as if I was an angel, and you received me as if I were Jesus Christ Himself.” Now he doesn’t immediately rebuke them. He doesn’t say to them, what on earth were you thinking about? You’ve got no business to do any such thing; fancy giving me deference as if I were Jesus Christ. He doesn’t rebuke them at all. He accepts it. He said, you were quite right to do so. I came to you as an apostle of Jesus Christ. I came in the name of Christ and with the authority of Christ as a plenipotentiary of Christ, so you received me as Jesus Christ. For my teaching is His teaching.

Well I’ve concentrated on Paul, but you can find similar statements in John, for example, in 1 John 4:6, listen to this extraordinary thing: “We are of God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and he who is not of God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.” Well now no ordinary Christian can say that. The “us” is the apostolic plural. It’s the plural of apostolic authority. But anybody who is of God listens to us. He submits to our apostolic authority. And if he doesn’t submit, then he’s not of God. And this is the way you can tell between the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error. Or think of 3 John, the third letter, verses 9 and 10 about Diotrephes “who likes to put himself first [and] does not acknowledge my authority.” Here is the apostle John speaking again with this self-conscious apostolic authority.

So this apostolic authority was recognized first by Christ; second, by the apostles themselves; third, by the early church. And the early postapostolic church had a far clearer understanding of the uniqueness of the authority of the apostles than the modern church has. I’m going to give you just one or two examples. Take Ignatius. Now Ignatius was the bishop of Antioch at the beginning of the second century AD; and he wrote his various letters around about 110 AD. He wrote a letter to the Romans, a letter to the Trallians, a letter to the Ephesians, a letter to the Magnesians. And I daresay, you’ve read some of them, and they
include phrases like this. Here is one quotation, “I do not as Peter and Paul issue commandments unto you. They were apostles. I am but a condemned man.” Now Ignatius was a bishop in the church of God, and Ignatius is really our first testimony to the monarchical episcopate, the beginnings of it at the very start of the second century AD. But although he believed himself to be a bishop in the church of God and had some authority as a bishop, he deliberately distinguished himself from the apostles. He said, I am not an apostle.

Clement says something very similar to the Corinthians. He says, “The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was sent forth from God. So then Christ is from God and the apostles are from Christ. Both, therefore, came of the will of God in the appointed order.” Polycarp says something very similar to the Philippians. “Let us, therefore, so serve Him [Jesus] with fear and all reverence as He Himself gave commandment, and the apostles who preached the gospel to us and the prophets who proclaimed beforehand the coming of our Lord.”

Now when you go on a little bit into Patristics, and you find Irenaeus, for example, and Tertullian doing battle with the various heretics that had arisen in the end of the second century and around about the year 200 AD, you find that they appeal to the authority of the apostles. I give you one example from Tertullian’s The Prescription Against Heretics. “We Christians are forbidden to introduce anything on our own authority or to choose what someone else introduces on his own authority. Our authorities are the Lord’s apostles. And they in turn chose to introduce nothing on their own authority. They faithfully passed on to the nations the teaching which they had received from Christ. So we should anathematize even an angel from heaven if he were to preach a different gospel.” Now here you see is Tertullian’s clear idea, clear concept of the unique authority of the apostles of Christ.

Now when you move on again into the third and the fourth centuries and the days when the New Testament canon was beginning to be settled, and of course a lot of the books of the New Testament canon were accepted without any question from the beginning. There were only a few books that were controversial. But while the New Testament canon was being fixed, the test of canonicity was apostolicity. It was: Does this book come either from the pen of an apostle or from the circle of the apostles or with the imprimatur of the apostles? Now this was the question. Now granted, it is to some extent a controversial
matter as to how one or two books got in and why some were left out. Yet nevertheless we need to be clear that this was the test of canonicity. It was apostolicity understood not strictly as apostolic authorship but apostolic authority. For example, Mark, one of the four evangelists, was known not to have been one of the Twelve and known not to have been an apostle. But Eusebius quotes Papias in his fourth-century *Ecclesiastical History* in saying that Mark was writing the memoirs of the apostle Peter; and it is known of course the close association that Mark had with Peter as Luke had with Paul. So they were apostolic men. They moved in the company of the apostles. What they wrote came with the imprimatur of the apostles.

Now Oscar Cullmann is arguing today, and very effectively, that the very fact that the early church saw any need to determine the New Testament canon is itself very important. They specified which books formed the canon; and at a certain period, they closed the canon because they drew a line between the apostles and the postapostolic period. Let me quote from Cullmann. In his famous book *The Early Church*, there’s a chapter called “The Tradition.” Listen to this,

> The infant church itself distinguished between apostolic tradition and ecclesiastical tradition clearly subordinating the latter to the former, in other words, subordinating itself (the infant church) to the apostles’ tradition. The fixing of the Christian canon of Scripture means that the church itself at a given time traced a clear and definite line of demarcation between the period of the apostles and that of the church, between the time of foundation and that of construction, between the apostolic community and the church of the bishops, in other words, between apostolic tradition and ecclesiastical tradition. Otherwise, the formation of the canon would be meaningless.

Well so much then, thirdly, for this authority recognized by the early church. It was recognized by Christ. It was recognized by the apostles themselves. It was recognized by the early church. And fourthly, it was recognized by the Reformers. And the Reformers recovered this concept, this understanding of the unique authority of Christ and of the apostles of Christ. And I’ll give you only one example from Luther, which comes as a matter of fact in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount where he applies possibly with an unnecessary restriction, “You are the light of the world as a ministry entrusted primarily by Jesus to his
dear apostles.” Luther goes on, “They are to instruct souls and guide them to eternal life. Thus Jesus subjects the whole world to the apostles through whom alone it (that is the world) should and must be enlightened. All the people in the world: kings, princes, lords, learned men, wise men, holy men have to sit down while the apostles stand up. They have to let themselves be accused and condemned in their wisdom and sanctity as men who know neither doctrine nor life nor the right relation to God.” I like that idea, don’t you, of all these kings and people sitting down while the apostles stand up. That is, they’ve got to submit to the authority of the apostles of Jesus.

Well there is a fourfold recognition of this unique apostolic authority. So then, because of this authority that Christ gave the apostles, the argument is that if we want to bow to Christ’s authority, we’ve got to bow to theirs. Because he who hears the apostles hears Christ, and he who rejects them rejects Christ. So we cannot possibly treat the apostles of Jesus in the cavalier manner in which many modern, liberal, radical, secular theologians do so. Very fashionable. I could quote you a number of examples where they say, for example, well Paul and Peter and John were first-century witnesses to Christ, and they were fine guys in their day. But I’m a twentieth-century witness to Christ, and I’m just as good as they are. And this idea, you see, of putting ourselves on a par with the authority of Jesus Christ is just plain ridiculous. There is no man or woman in the church today, and never has been since the apostolic age finished, who has anything like the authority that Jesus Christ gave to the apostles in those early days. So we must hold on to their uniqueness in their historical knowledge of Christ, in their personal authorization by Christ, in their inspiration by the Spirit of Christ. In these ways their teaching is permanently normative and regulative for the church of every age. So let me summarize the argument so far and then spend my last ten minutes in drawing some deductions and conclusions.

The summary of the argument is that:

1. The Lord Jesus Christ endorsed the authority of the Old Testament.

2. The Lord Jesus Christ made deliberate provision for the writing of the New Testament by appointing and equipping His apostles so that both the Old Testament and the New Testament bear the stamp of Christ’s authority.
If, therefore, we would submit to Jesus Christ as Lord, we must submit to the authority of Scripture. For the authority of Scripture carries with it the authority of Christ. Now that’s the argument. And I myself believe that this evangelical view of Scripture is irrefutable if you accept the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Now some deductions and conclusions. I want to suggest to you various ways in which this submission to the authority of Scripture, that is so essential for us as preachers—and this of course is why I’m taking the subject in a preaching course—is a very healthy and a very beneficial thing. And I’ve got four or five deductions, if I have time to get through them.

One, it is the way of freedom. Submission to the authority of Scripture is the way of freedom. Now I know of course that there are many people who would affirm the exact opposite. They would tell you that submission to the authority of Scripture brings you into intellectual and moral bondage. But we would want to argue that to say that is to misunderstand the nature of freedom and that we mustn’t set authority and freedom over against each other as irreconcilable opposites. Take morals. Bonhoeffer said, “When Christ calls a man, He bids him die.” And that is true. The Christian is called not to give free reign to his appetites and to his passions but to deny himself and to follow Christ. And the Christian is assured that in the very act of losing himself by submission to the authority of Christ, he finds himself. In other words, the true freedom of finding yourself and your own identity comes through losing yourself in submission to the authority of Christ. It’s the beautiful paradox of Christian living and Christian dying. It is by dying that we live, by losing ourselves that we find ourselves. That’s morals. Take doctrine. What’s true of moral freedom is equally true of intellectual freedom. Many people suppose that intellectual freedom is identical with free thought. That is to say, with liberty to think and believe absolutely anything you want to think and believe. And sometime last week I think I quoted C. S. Lewis’s phrase about the “tyrannous noon of revelation” as opposed to “the twilight of free thought.” But this isn’t true intellectual freedom. Let me put it like this. To believe nothing is to be in bondage to meaninglessness. To believe lies is to be in bondage to falsehood. True intellectual freedom is to be found in believing the truth and living it. It’s only when you believe what is true—whether about nature or about God or about another person or about yourself or about anything else—that you’re free. If you believe lies about yourself, you’re in bondage to falsehood. You’re not free. You can only be free when you believe the truth about
anything. Archbishop Michael Ramsey, [then] present Archbishop of Canterbury, in a lecture before the University of Cambridge a couple of years ago, spoke of the Christian’s intellectual freedom in these terms. He says, “The Christian creed involves a certain yoke of specific belief. That is true. We are confined in our belief by this yoke that Scripture, the creed, places upon us. Nevertheless, it is also a means of intellectual liberty. It frees you into the large room of the family of Christ’s followers across the ages. There is a timelessness about such a faith. It is not first century or sixteenth century or twentieth century. And it can free you from one of the most horrible of tyrannies, the dominance of the contemporary.” I think that’s a fine statement.

So Jesus bids us take His yoke upon us and learn from Him. And as we take upon us Christ’s yoke of instruction, we do what the Jews did with regard to the Torah (the Law). The Jews referred to the Torah as a yoke. They took upon them the yoke of the Torah. Jesus says, “Come to me [and] take upon you my yoke,” and “my yoke is easy” [Matthew 11:28–30]. And when we take upon us the yoke of Christ, we learn from Christ. So that discipleship, Ernst Kasemann of Tubingen writes in his little book Jesus Means Freedom, “Discipleship is a perpetual apprenticeship in the school of Jesus. And as we submit to the yoke of Christ’s teaching authority, we find not bondage but rest unto our souls.”

Now perhaps I can pause a moment and tell you I think I’ve just made a decision while talking to you that I’m not going to try and hurry through these four or five deductions, because I think they’re too important for me to hurry through. So I’ll go on until I reach five minutes to three. But then I think I’ll go on if you don’t mind tomorrow and finish it then.

But let me just, I don’t think I have said this to you before. I may have done, I don’t know. But I find it increasingly beautiful that in those lovely verses at the end of Matthew 11 when Jesus says come unto Me, and so on, He repeats His phrase “you will find rest unto your souls” twice. He says, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, . . . and you will find rest for your souls” (NKJV). So He promises rest twice. But the beautiful thing is—it’s another example of the beautiful balance of the Bible—is that the first time He promises rest is through losing our own burden. You come to Christ heavy laden, heavily burdened. And you come to Christ laboring, that is laboring under a yoke that chafes upon your neck. So you are likened to oxen who are burdened and under
this chafing yoke. And Jesus Christ lifts the burden, and He eases the yoke. And He gives us rest when we lose our burden of sin and guilt and so on. But then He says, “Now take My yoke upon you. . . My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.” You lose your burden when you come to Christ, but then you take His burden upon you. You lose your yoke, its ease, you take Christ’s yoke upon you. And when you take Christ’s yoke upon you, again you find rest unto your soul. Our burden is heavy. Christ’s burden is light. Our yoke chafes. His yoke is easy. But we find rest both in losing our own and in gaining Christ’s. I believe this is so important in the world today. And I’ve proved it again and again in my own experience that it’s when I’m prepared to submit to the yoke of Christ I seek to do this every day. It’s one of the meaningful verses to me in my own devotions every morning to put my neck under the yoke of Christ and to think of myself as an ox that needs constantly to be broken in, and not to kick against the goads like Saul of Tarsus, but to submit, put my neck under His yoke, that is under the authority of His teaching both intellectually and morally. And I can only say to you that I believe what He said is true, that when you take His yoke upon you and learn from Him, you find rest unto your soul. That is the way to find liberty, the way of freedom. Thank you.