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The authority of Scripture in recent debate

John Goldingay

THE publication in 1958 of Dr J. I. Packer's *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*¹ was an important early landmark of the post-war renaissance of evangelical scholarship. This forceful restatement of the basis of evangelicalism found immediate acceptance as the 'Warfield' for its generation, a position it retains. Debate on the authority of Scripture has gone on, however, and (against the background of a summary of the evangelical position) I want in this article to look at some recent non-evangelical approaches to this question, and then to make some responses to them.

The evangelical doctrine

All Christians acknowledge the supreme authority of God and His Christ—but how is that authority mediated? Where do we find God's truth? There have been three *loci* of religious authority; they may be held in combination, but among them there has to be some kind of hierarchy. These *loci* are Scripture, the church and its tradition, and human reason; the giving of ultimate priority to the first may be called the evangelical view, to the second the catholic, to the third the liberal. The question is, which is right?

The authority that Jesus acknowledges, the place where He hears God speaking, is the Scriptures: they are the basis of His theology, His self-understanding, His personal life, His ethics, His teaching. What Scripture says, God says. This attitude comes out in all sources and strata of the Gospels.

But perhaps Jesus was obliged consciously to accommodate Himself to the attitudes of His day, or was He bound unconsciously to share the mistaken assumptions of His day? The doctrinal implications of such a position are extremely far-reaching, for we are speaking not even of a minor factual error, but of a misapprehension at the foundation of His life and teaching. But in fact it was not inevitable that Jesus spoke this way, for even then there were equivalents to the catholic and liberal positions which He could have taken. On the one hand the Pharisees accepted the oral law as well as the torah, on the other the Sadducees cut down the canon to the Pentateuch and refused to believe (for instance) in the resurrection. Jesus rejected both these positions and maintained an equivalent to the evangelical one: the torah, prophets and writings (that is, the entire written Bible as it existed in His day),

but no post-biblical traditions, were the authority He acknowledged.²

Retrospectively, then, Jesus stamps the Old Testament with His authority; the apostles also accepted it. Further, Jesus prospectively validates the New Testament by commissioning the apostles to propagate His truth and by giving them the Holy Spirit to guide them into the truth—the New Testament being the deposit of their, and their associates', ministry. Only the apostles' 'Tradition' is binding on the church.

There can thus be only one answer to the question, 'Where does the Christian find God's truth?' The scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the authority to which both the church and her traditions, and reason and its theories, must bow.

Some recent studies

Dr Packer wrote his book during the 'biblical theology movement', which flourished during the two post-war decades. At the heart of this movement, as he notes,³ was a contradiction: it sought to take the Bible seriously for theology, but did not accept the Bible's own understanding of its inspiration. It could not live with this tension for ever; the question was, which way would it jump? In the event, theology has moved away from a 'biblical' to a more 'philosophical' approach. But during this time the World Council of Churches has been debating the question of the Bible, especially in connection with the Faith and Order conferences at Montreal (1963), Bristol (1967) and Louvain (1971). The British perspective is reflected in the works I shall be referring to below: Dennis Nineham's paper 'The Use of the Bible in Modern Theology' (1969),⁴ Christopher Evans' collection of essays *Is 'Holy Scripture' Christian?* (1971) and James Barr's more systematic *The Bible in the Modern World* (1973).⁵

Nineham and Evans ask the radical question whether the creation of the New Testament was in fact an act of God at all. Both refer to a suggestion by R. H. Lightfoot (the Oxford New Testament scholar under whom Nineham studied) that the production of the first Gospel was 'the first serious failure of nerve on the part of the infant church'⁶ or that the writing of the Gospels was a sign of the operation of original sin in the church—the Christian gospel being essentially a living, preached message, it can

only be killed by the attempt to capture it in written words, to encapsulate it in a book. 'Scripture represents the worldliness of the church and tradition points to its supernatural origin and basis'⁷—not the other way round. In fact the very idea of a 'holy book' is of doubtful compatibility with the New Testament faith, which 'abolished the category of the holy except as applied to God himself', having no equivalent to other religions' holy places, priestly caste and sacred rites.

Why then did the notion of Scripture become important in the church? Certain books came to be precious to it, and then 'we have the case of something precious being bolstered by false claims in the effort to make it out to be more than it is'; and the trouble is 'the accursed mystique of "apostolicity", from Papias and Irenaeus to Cullmann'.⁸ Unfortunately, 'almost all statements of apostolic authorship made by the early Christian writers would be at least heavily queried, and probably dismissed, by a great many modern scholars, and if the word "apostolic" is to be used of the New Testament at all it can only be in (a) very diffused, if not Pickwickian, sense'.⁹

James Barr begins his book—after reviewing 'how we reached our present situation'—by analysing the problems, as he sees them, of the traditional categories by which we have understood the doctrine of Scripture. Among these, the idea of authority is difficult in a day when the word has inherent pejorative overtones—it suggests 'authoritarian', the attempt to impose revelation. It is, however, also used in a 'soft' sense—the Bible speaks with authority, it carries conviction.

But, more fundamentally, Barr declares that 'the locus of the authority question has shifted. The critical question is no longer "What was said back then?" but "What should we say now?"'¹⁰ It is all very well to establish (supposing it can be done) that prophets or apostles were declaring this or that truth in their time. But we live in very different times, so their message may not help us.

Nineham, too, stresses the time-conditioned, occasional nature of the biblical writings: they are addressed to particular, and distinctive, cultures. Why should we assume that the answers to our questions about truth are likely to be found in material from such a different world? The writings that came to be regarded as Scripture were not seeking to express timeless truths or to give a balanced account of the whole of Christian doctrine. Why should we assume that every passage ought to have some contemporary meaning? Why should we assume that Paul never indulged in a phrase which in a more sober moment he might have regretted (Nineham instances 1 Thes. 2:16)? Can we anyway expect to understand these documents, responses to long-gone situations as they were? Indeed why in principle should it be the case that if you ask what is the Christian position on anything, it is assumed that the answer will come by reference to the past—whether to the Bible or to tradition or to the historical Jesus?¹¹

How then *are* we to know what to believe? Where does God speak? Nineham, while granting that 'it is only as you go back to the Bible that you regain your balance',¹² will not have the Bible set up as a criterion of Christian truth. The church has no external norm. In fact in practice she ascertains the truth by being 'engaged in a dialogue with herself'.¹³ She is the community that owes its existence to God—thus 'the community is the revelation—or at least the locus or source of revelation'.¹⁴

Barr (whose background is Presbyterian, not Anglican like Nineham and Evans) wrestles for a way of giving the Bible and the events of Old and New Testaments more significance than Nineham would. He believes that the resources for the churches' liberation lie here.¹⁵ His 'basic assertion' about the Bible is that 'the status of the Bible is something implied in the structure of Christian (and of Jewish) faith' in that 'Christian faith is faith structured upon a certain basic model of the understanding of God. The fundamental model was "first worked out and decisively appropriated" in the Old Testament. That model was reaffirmed, restated, and reintegrated in Jesus. Christian faith is faith which relates itself to this classic model. The God in whom Christians believe is the God who was known in the Bible; the Jesus in whom they believe is the Jesus of the New Testament'.¹⁶ Thus, although there is no clear distinction in type or date between canonical and non-canonical works, the demarcating of certain books makes sense because these give classic expression to what the faith is—for 'Christian faith is not whatever a modern Christian may happen to believe . . . but faith related to Jesus and to the God of Israel. The centrality of the Bible is the recognition of the classic sources for the expression of Jesus and of God'.¹⁷ This does not mean they are necessarily supremely inspired or infallible—they are in fact men's response to their experiences rather than God's revelation; not so much Word of God, Barr whimsically puts it, as 'Word of Israel, Word of some leading early Christians'.¹⁸

There is much more in Barr's book; he is always thought-provoking and has a knack of being, in successive sentences, miles away from an evangelical position and then illuminating within this very perspective, but from his own distinctive angle—and he shows an unusual concern to understand the evangelical position before disagreeing with it.

Responses

The classic evangelical approach to authority seems to me still basically valid, but some of the questions are now set up in a different way, and areas have been opened up that we need to explore if the Bible is to speak fully to us and to our generation.

1. *A priori* arguments for or against this attitude or that are bound to be inconclusive. By this I mean that we cannot argue that there *must* (logically? psychologically?)

morally?) be a *locus* of final authority somewhere, the sole question therefore being which of the only three candidates that have been nominated is rightly designated as such. We may think it likely that God, as a God of love, truth and power, would reveal His truth, and that in an efficient way; and also that, because God is a person and language is close to being the heart of person-ness, He would reveal the truth by speaking. But it could also be said on the other hand that 'the universal human desire for an infallible authority is no guarantee that God has seen fit to provide one'.¹⁹

The sword is two-edged, however; *a priori* arguments will not do against the doctrine of authority either. Modern man's difficulty with this notion does not establish whether it is theologically inaccurate. One needs here to 'relativize the relativizers'.²⁰ It may be twentieth-century man who is wrong in refusing to bow before any authority. Theology's final criterion cannot be what he can swallow.

It will, no doubt, nevertheless be unwise, in seeking to commend the faith, to sound authoritarian, and the phrase 'authority of Scripture' may ring misleading bells. In actual fact, I doubt if Evangelicals have ever understood the idea of Scripture's 'authority' in an authoritarian way. Packer's own chapter on 'Faith' makes it clear that commitment to Scripture is a response to what faith *sees* (not to what it cannot see but acknowledges under pressure); and he himself elsewhere caricatures the 'authoritarian' idea—'God is in heaven, and you can't catch him—now open your mouth and swallow the creed'.²¹ And, I think, if you asked the average Evangelical why he takes the Bible so seriously, he would explain this not in terms of Scripture's tyrannical hold over him, but as his free response to the dynamic of its message and as the result of his daily proving its ability to speak to him.

And yet the point also remains true that ultimately man is required to bow before God even when he cannot understand or has difficulty in accepting what God says. Indeed a distinguishing mark of a conservative Evangelical (as opposed to one of some other position which seems quite near to it) is that he takes the Bible seriously when it says what he doesn't like (for instance on universalism or the position of women). Paul Helm, in a review of Barr's book, suggests that 'what prevents Barr approaching (a conservative evangelical) position more closely . . . is his desire to reserve the right to pass an unfavourable verdict on whatever a fair exegesis of Scripture would lead one to suppose God says'.²²

2. It is notable that modern works do not attempt to dent the claim that Christ treated the Old Testament as authoritative Scripture. Evans indeed notes that 'Christianity is unique among the great religions in being born with a Bible in its cradle'.²³ It is perhaps odd that there is no attempt to think theologically about the fact that Jesus Himself set so much store by the Old Testament. Is an embarrassing fact being brushed under the carpet? If

it were brought out into the open, I think it would be approached honestly by the admission that it only indicates how Jesus Himself was but a man who makes mistakes like other men. Even He is not an absolute. Thus if the person of Christ does not validate the Old Testament, His acceptance of the Old Testament casts doubt on His person. This seems to me to remain the heart of the problem that the Bible presents for modern theology; and Jesus' attitude to the Old Testament remains the heart of the reason why the person who has been grasped by Christ cannot get away from the authority of Scripture.

The fact that admittedly the *New Testament's* authority, which most Christians find it easier to accept, is actually harder to vindicate, is amusing to one whose job it is to teach the *Old Testament*. Perhaps New Testament scholars can rehabilitate the argument from apostolicity—some research suggests that the apostles were the authorized bearers of the Jesus 'tradition', like the disciples of a rabbi; but this view has not carried conviction. Nevertheless the argument that faith, to be Christian, must be related to Jesus, demands reference to the testimonies included in the *New Testament*. Indeed, beyond that, Jesus' own attitude clearly enough establishes the canonical principle, that the records of what God has said, the interpretations of what God has done, and so on, were God-given and were meant to be permanent guides for His people; and it would surely require indications to the contrary if the same pattern were not to apply in connection with the climactic act of revelation and salvation in Christ.²⁴ Matthew thus carries on naturally from Malachi.

And if the canonical principle is accepted, then we all need to keep going back to the Bible to regain our balance, to keep subordinating our traditions to the Tradition—as the post - *New Testament* church was seeking to do in recognizing a canon. Another mark of a conservative Evangelical will be his willingness to judge even his most cherished formularies and attitudes by Scripture itself, rather than vice versa.

3. Scripture's authority as our source for what God said in the time of Israel and the primitive church may be granted; but one must note Barr's point about how the *locus* of the authority question has shifted. We have become newly aware of the distinctiveness of the biblical world (as of every culture or period), and of how the biblical message speaks to the accidental particularities of the human situation at that moment. Different biblical authors speak quite different messages, even though of course underneath there is the one truth of the one God. And we have to recognize the reality of the gap that separates our situation from biblical times.

A first result of perceiving this gap is that we see that understanding the Bible is not a simple matter. We have to feel our way into the biblical world if we are to hear its message. Nineham overstates his case in describing this as an impossible task. If he were right, then no understand-

ing of Aeschylus or Shakespeare or indeed of any other human being would be possible. But a 'feeling into' as disciplined, as self-denying, and as sensitive as the empathy of the counsellor is required.

But then we have to bridge the gap we have come to perceive between us and the biblical world. In one sense this now seems a much more difficult task than we could have imagined before. We have to find the equivalent message for today to the one that was given in a particular biblical situation—and because the situation is different the message may need to be, too, if the same underlying truths are faithfully to be proclaimed. And to do this proclaiming we have to find new symbols, new language, new pictures that will have the impact on our world that the biblical ones did on theirs. But in another sense bridging the gap is easier when we take the Bible's particularity seriously. Paradoxically a real entering into the specificity of a biblical situation makes it easier to identify the basic oneness in humanity and grace between us and the men of the Bible—because we really have entered into a situation in which our God met men like us. The modern debate on 'hermeneutics' cannot be evaded if we are to let the Bible speak today.

Further, and finally, we must also acknowledge that many of the questions that we need to answer today are ones that had not occurred in biblical times, and only the most general principles can be discerned in the Bible to cover them. Thus while it may give us quite clear guidance on sexual morality (the only question is whether we will accept it!), on the ethics of space travel or the energy crisis its guidance is much more general. Now in biblical times God spoke to His people in new situations not only through the exposition and reapplication of the already given word, but also through prophets or the like to whom He revealed His new word for that moment. We need such guidance today. The period since the publication of *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God* has seen the emergence of the 'charismatic' movement and the renewal of prophecy, which has at least reminded us that God did not lose His voice when the canon was closed.

Not that the Bible becomes redundant when prophets arise—even in those areas that it does not specifically speak about. When we have prophets, we need checks on them, means of testing the spirits, and here the Bible functions as a means of identifying what is false. For the church is sinful, and it will always need Scripture to keep it on the right road.

References

- 1 London: IVF.
- 2 Cf. Michael Green's Falcon Booklet, *The Authority of Scripture* (London: CPAS, 1963), pp. 10-11.
- 3 Packer, p.158.
- 4 *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 52:1 (also as an offprint, Manchester: John Rylands Library, 1969).
- 5 Both London: SCM Press. Barr's bibliography includes the

WCC material; note especially his study outline on *'The Authority of the Bible'* in *The Ecumenical Review*, 21:2 (1969).

- 6 Nineham, pp. 197-198.
- 7 Evans, p.7.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 34-36.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 10 Barr, p.37.
- 11 These points come from Nineham, pp. 178-192.
- 12 Nineham, p.198, adopting a phrase of Edwyn Hoskyns.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p.197, this time a phrase from Barth.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p.195.
- 15 Barr, p.112.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p.115; the internal quotation is from the American theologian Gordon Kaufman.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p.118.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p.120.
- 19 I thought this quotation came from R. H. Fuller and R. P. C. Hanson, *The Church of Rome: A Dissuasive* (London: SCM Press, revised 1960), but I have not been able to locate it.
- 20 For this idea cf. Peter Berger, *A Rumour of Angels* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1971), chapter 2, e.g. pp. 57-59.
- 21 *Keep Yourselves from Idols* (London: Church Book Room Press, 1963), p.10.
- 22 *TSF Bulletin*, 69 (1974), p.23.
- 23 Evans, p.2.
- 24 Cf. Packer, pp. 66-67.

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