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THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE: THE ATTITUDE OF THE REFORMERS

IT MUST be remembered that the word "Reformation" means a "re-formation"—a making anew of what already exists. There was no new Church made at the Reformation. It was a return to the Apostolic model as laid down in the Holy Scriptures. The fair face of the Church of the first century had come to be marred and deformed in the course of time, and all that the Reformers aimed at was to return to the simplicity of worship and purity of doctrine which prevailed in Apostolic times. They found in the Bible the most authoritative description of what the Church was then, and they naturally took it as their guide.

The Church in the early centuries accepted unquestionably the divine authority of the Holy Scriptures. Up to the time of the Reformation this authority had never been questioned but there had grown up side by side with the authority of the Scriptures another two kinds of authority: (1) the authority of the Church itself as an Interpreter of Scripture; and (2) the authority of Tradition. So great had the authority of the Church as an interpreter of Scripture become, that the idea was general that Councils could not err, and when Luther suggested they could the Roman Church dignitaries were scandalised. At that time, the doctrine of papal infallibility had not been settled and it was a debatable question whether General Councils were subject to the Pope or the Pope to General Councils; but on one thing they were clear, that the voice of the Church was authoritative in the interpretation of Scripture with "the unanimous consent of the Fathers". It did not trouble them that there was no such thing as the "unanimous consent of the Fathers", and so the Church spoke with an authority really above the Scriptures.

In the second place, the influence of Tradition had become very great. It was not exalted into an official dogma of the Church and placed on an equality with the Bible until the Council of Trent, after the Reformation, but already its effect on the thinking of the Church was enormous.

Thus it was that, although the Roman Church recognised, as it still does, the authority of the Holy Scriptures, nevertheless,

in practice, Scripture was subordinated to the authority of the Church itself and placed on a level with tradition. The result was that doctrines, ceremonies and practices were officially recognised in the Church which would have been repudiated in the first three centuries when the one and only norm was the Word of God as written in the Holy Scriptures.

As a moral and spiritual force the Roman Church had become well-nigh impotent. The disease was apparent to all. In convention after convention the matter was debated, and resolutions adopted to impose a stricter discipline, and improve the moral tone of the Church. These resolutions were futile, for the evils increased rather than diminished. These, as far as England is concerned, are clearly set forth in the bold and famous address of John Colet, Dean of St. Paul's, to Convocation in 1512, five years before Luther nailed his Theses on the Church door at Wittenberg. Colet's remedy was to apply Canon Law more rigorously, especially to the Bishops, who were setting a bad example. Throughout Europe the need for reform was seen everywhere, but how carry out reform when the very authorities of the Church were the worst offenders?

The Reformers from the beginning appealed directly to the authority of the Scriptures and not to Pope or General Councils. Thus Luther in 1521 before the Diet of Worms, when asked to retract, offered to retract anything he "may have uttered beyond the authority of Scripture" and declared that "the Word of God" was "the greatest thing in heaven and on earth, and which we all must reverence". This is typical of the Reformation attitude in general—it was a return to the position of the Early Church, recognising the Bible as the Word of God and our ultimate authority.

It was William Chillingworth who first coined the expression:

"I tell you, the Bible, and the Bible alone, is the religion of Protestants. Show me anything in this Book and I accept it without question."

The declaration has been objected to, but it enshrines a great truth, and it is all the more striking when we recalled the history of the man. Born in 1602 at Oxford, he embraced Catholicism in early life through the influence of a Jesuit. He went to Douay in France, and was asked to write an account of his conversion to Romanism. While engaged in studying the evidence, he became convinced that Protestantism was right,

and soon became involved in controversies with Roman Catholics, and wrote a book, *The Religion of Protestants a safe way to Salvation* (1637), in which he demonstrated the sole authority of the Bible. In the Civil War he sided with Charles I and took a prominent part, dying in 1643 as a result of his sufferings in the siege of Arundel. His ecclesiastical affiliation as an opponent of the Puritans makes his defence of the Bible as the sole authority for Protestants all the more striking and shows how this Reformation principle must have taken a firm hold when a divine of the Cavalier party, and an intimate friend of Lord Falkland, would thus contend for it.

I. PRE-REFORMATION PERIOD

Before examining in detail the attitude of the Reformers to the Holy Scriptures, let us, first of all, glance at the work of the Reformers before the Reformation, and I shall take the liberty of quoting freely from Dorner's *History of Protestant Theology*. The Waldensians, simple, honest, and candid people, he says, were "the first to re-establish the connection with historical primitive Christianity, and to diffuse the taste for it". For them the Bible was, as in the Early Church, the very Word of God, and they received it with joy, and learned that it was "a lamp unto their feet and a guide unto their path". Their most notable work was that, as Dr. George P. Fisher says, "wherever they went they kindled among the people the desire to read the Bible". In the twelfth century their influence in Southern France and Northern Italy became great, and they passed even into Holland, and by the middle of the century had come to England, especially Kent.

We find the same loyalty to the Bible in Wickliffe and his followers in England in the fourteenth century as existed among the Waldenses in the twelfth. Lechler in his work on *Wickliffe and his English Precursors* says:

"Before everything else, Wickliffe holds up the truth that the preaching of the Word of God is that function which subserves, in a degree quite peculiar to itself, the edification of the Church; and this is so because the Word of God is a seed."

Wickliffe, like the men of the Reformation, maintained that the Bible should be taken in its plain sense without fancy interpretations. Thus, in discussing the doctrine of Transubstantiation, he declares:

“ But, by the grace of God, I will keep clear of the heresy which teaches, that if the Pope and Cardinals assert a thing to be the sense of Scripture, therefore it is ; for that were to set them up above the Apostles.”

This means that the ordinary Christian is entitled to understand the Bible according to its clear meaning no matter what claims ecclesiastical authority may make.

Elsewhere he writes in his Tract, *Objections to the Friars*:

“ Also the rule thereof is most perfect, since the Gospel in its freedom without error of man, is the rule of this religion.”

His work in making the first complete translation of the Bible into English was epoch-making. A chronicler writing before 1400 complained that Wickliffe had made the Bible “ an affair of the common people, and more accessible to the laity, including even the women who are able to read, than it used to be to the well educated clergy. The pearl is now thrown before swine and trodden under foot ”. In spite of the bitter hostility met with, the translated Bible was eagerly sought for. As there were no printing presses it was very expensive and men were known to pay a load of hay to read it even for an hour. Wickliffe and his Lollard preachers brought the Gospel to nobles, tradesmen, peasants, and all classes, and many showed their devotion to the Word of God by dying in its defence in the frightful persecution which seemed to wipe their testimony from the land; but in reality it lived on in the souls of many waiting for a better time.

It found a lodging-place in both Scotland and Bohemia—in the former country producing the Lollards of Kyle who profoundly influenced the religious history of their nation, and in the latter producing John Hus and the great movement which centuries of persecution could not destroy in the secret hearts of his race and which is today vigorously manifested in the evangelical movement of the Czech people. Of this movement, Dorner says again: “ The Holy Scriptures continued always to be their ultimate authority; there they strengthened their reformatory power, which had already manifested itself even in the matter of organisation.” He maintains that this Biblical movement of the Waldenses, Lollards, and Husites “ contributed mightily to the diffusion throughout Christendom of the principle—as an incontrovertible and operative axiom—that the Church must submit to be tested by the Holy Scriptures ” (op. cit., Vol. I, p. 68).

It has never been properly realised how far the Bible was circulated among seekers after the Truth long before the days of

Luther. Investigation will show there was a translation of the Bible into German a hundred years before Luther, and that before the beginning of the sixteenth century there were many editions. There were also translations in France, Bohemia, Poland, and Holland; and partial translations in Spain and Denmark. These publications of the Bible in the vernacular, especially with the introduction of printing, helped greatly to prepare the way for the Reformation in spite of the ban on the reading of the Scriptures by the laity.

II. LUTHER

Much discussion has arisen in recent times as to Luther's attitude to the Bible, and it has become the fashion in some quarters to regard him as one of the first rationalistic critics of the Scriptures. Let us notice, then, first of all, some statements in which he emphatically holds forth the Bible as the very Word of God, and then let us examine some statements which might seem to be contradictory of his general position.

The whole of Luther's theological system depended on his acceptance of the Scriptures as the Word of God. The Bible is for him "particularly the book, writing and word of the Holy Spirit". Köstlin gives this declaration from Luther:

"I will not waste a word in arguing with one who does not consider that the Scriptures are the Word of God: we ought not to dispute with a man who thus rejects first principles."

His acceptance of the exclusive authority of the Scriptures was basic to his system, and on this principle he based his rejection of the authority of the Pope, and his declaration at Leipsic and Worms that Councils may err, as well as many other expressions of his views.

Dorner (Vol. I, pp. 244f.) quotes Luther as replying to those who argue from the Scriptures in favour of a doctrine of works rather than of free grace. The Reformer declares somewhat unwisely:

"Since Christ Himself is the treasure whereby I am bought and redeemed, I care not the slightest jot for all the expressions of Scripture, to set up by them the righteousness of works and to lay down the righteousness of faith. For I have on my side the Master and the Lord of Scripture, to whom I will keep, and I know He will not lie nor deceive me—and let them go on in their hostile cry, that the Scriptures contradict themselves!"

If one knew only these words from Luther it would be natural to think that he disparaged Scripture and relied only

on some mystic contact with Christ. This is an example of certain rash and unguarded statements which he made without thinking of the logical consequences should they be taken at their face value.

In the case under consideration, he saves any possible misunderstanding by adding immediately:

“At the same time it is impossible that the Scriptures should contradict themselves, save only that the unintelligent, coarse, and hardened hypocrites imagine it.”

This statement is clear enough and should ever be kept in view when we come across assertions that Luther disparaged or denied the divine inspiration of certain parts of the Bible. “It is *impossible* that the Scriptures should contradict themselves.” This expresses his true attitude and to deny this means discrediting some of the most important statements he ever uttered.

It is the case, however, that Luther ascribed to the different books of the Bible different degrees of doctrinal value; and like certain other Reformers he took what we might call a central core of the Scriptures which he used to assess the value of the other parts. This he did because he placed in the forefront of his system the doctrine of Justification by faith and salvation by free grace. His own sense of guilt and pardon through faith in Christ was so great that he concentrated on this as the central content of the Scriptures—the most important part. At the end of his preface to the New Testament, Luther writes:

“From all this canst thou now form a right judgment concerning the various books, and decide which are the best. For the Gospel of John and the Epistles of St. Paul, especially that to the Romans, and the first Epistle of St. Peter, contain the true kernel and marrow of all the other books . . . these are the books which show thee Christ, and teach all that it is needful and well for thee to know, even if thou shouldest never see or hear any other book or have other teaching. In comparison with them the Epistle of James is a right strawy (i.e. of dry straw) epistle, for it has nothing of the evangelical manner.”

One cannot but be surprised that Luther should refer in this way to the Epistle of James but at the same time certain critics have made a somewhat unfair use of these words. Protagonists of the view that the Word of God is contained in the Bible, but that the whole Bible is not the Word of God, have pointed to these words of Luther. For them the Word of God is contained in the Scriptures just as a certain quantity of pure wheat may be contained in a bag made up to a good extent of chaff. The problem, on this view, is to decide which parts are the real Word

of God and which are not. It is not too much to say that this is the greatest problem facing the modern liberal theologian. It was no problem to the Apostolic Church, or the Church of the first three centuries, nor was it any real problem to Luther and the other Reformers in spite of a few appearances to the contrary. It can be shown that Luther did not mean to suggest that the Epistle of James should be completely rejected as uncanonical. It deals largely with the question of good works and has little of Luther's central idea of Justification through faith in Jesus Christ alone. By comparison, he regards it as inferior to the parts of the New Testament he mentions, but that cannot be taken as proving that he thought it to be absolutely of no value. He calls it a "strawy" epistle, but straw has decided values of its own. The flock would no doubt prefer the green and luscious pastures he commends to them, but that does not mean that straw has no value at all.

Even of James's Epistle Luther says:

"I admire the Epistle of James, though it was rejected by the ancients, and still hold it as good."

Again he says:

"I cannot then place it among the true Capital-books; but I will forbid no one to place and elevate it as he pleases; for there are many good sayings in it."

He takes much the same attitude to Hebrews, Jude, and the Apocalypse. By comparison with what he regards as the kernel of Scripture, he regards them as inferior, but he does not reject them out of hand from the Canon.

No thinking Christian can deny Luther's general thesis that some parts of the Scriptures are more precious than others, although one could wish he had expressed himself in somewhat different words. Someone has well said of his own experience that he had found some parts of the Scriptures like a dry and desolate land—sterile lists of names and apparently dead records, which provided no food for his soul. Then, all at once, he has been amazed to find a desert shrub ablaze with God. Some parts of Scripture are more precious, but every part has some value—or at least the possibility of being of value to someone under some condition or other.

Luther erred in concentrating too much on certain aspects of the Scriptures to the exclusion of others, but this was due to the circumstances of his life story and the great debates and

conflicts in which he had to engage. He referred to the Epistle to the Hebrews as a book "which contains some knots", but he recognised that "it expounds in masterly wise its chief article—the priesthood of Christ" (Köstlin). He made some scathing references to the Apocalypse as "an obscure and uncertain book" and hesitated to accept it as either apostolic or prophetic. Later on, however, he came to view it in a better light. When, therefore, these hasty comments of Luther are thoroughly weighed, and compared with his general system, we may confidently accept the statement of that erudite theologian, the late Professor W. P. Paterson of Edinburgh University, who in examining this question said in his book *The Rule of Faith* (Appendix E):

"The presupposition of Luther's theological thinking was that the Bible is the Word of God, given by revelation of the Holy Spirit, and that it alone transmits and proves the truths of revelation."

Luther had to contend against two extremes—on the one hand the Roman Church which stressed so much the supreme authority of the Church, and on the other hand the Anabaptists who maintained they had the Spirit of Christ to teach them and so did not need the Bible. He met these two extremes by appeal to the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God, and prevailed over both, which shows where his strength lay.

The late Principal T. M. Lindsay says in his *History of the Reformation* (Vol. I, p. 453):

"All the Reformers of the sixteenth century, whether Luther, Zwingli, or Calvin, believed that in the Scriptures God spoke to them in the same way as He had done in earlier days to His Prophets and Apostles. They believed that if the common people had the Scriptures in a language which they could understand, they could hear God speaking to them directly, and could go to Him for comfort, warning or instruction; and their description of what they meant by the Holy Scriptures is simply another way of saying that all believers can have access to the very presence of God."

For these men, the Bible was a book where they heard the very voice of God "speaking in love to man, and the voice of the renewed man answering in faith to God". It was thus a living book, not merely a storehouse of spiritual laws. It was not, then, as is so often said, a mere transference to a Book of *the same kind* of Infallibility as had dwelt in the Mediaeval Church in Popes and Councils. For the Reformers, the Book contained life, for God Himself spoke to them in it. It was not merely a matter of laying down a series of laws or presenting so many lifeless dogmas.

According to Luther the simplest Bible stories are of priceless value because they show how God dealt with His people in past ages. The Bible is full of living, personal and very human details of God's servants. Thus we see these men, declares Luther, "girded, crowned, and clothed with divine light, that is, with God's Word".

III. ZWINGLI

Zwingli, the great Reformer of Switzerland, although he differed from both Luther and Calvin on many points, was yet in substantial agreement with them on the question of the authority of the Bible. It was the Bible which led him to peace with God, and so, says Dorner, "he assigns the Scriptures a unique position". He declared that

"The Scriptures come from God, not from man; and even that God who enlightens will give thee to understand that the speech comes from God. The Word of God is to be held in the highest honour and to no word is such faith to be accorded as to it" (Dorner, Vol. I, p. 287).

Although he rejected the canonicity of the Apocalypse, he was one of the very first in the Reformed Church to see the need for a dogmatic declaration as to the theological place of Scripture. Hence, his view was inserted in the First Helvetic Confession in 1536 although he had died in 1531. This declares:

"Canonic Scripture, the Word of God, given by the Holy Spirit and set forth to the world by the prophets and apostles, the most perfect and ancient of all philosophies, alone contains perfectly all piety and the whole rule of life."

It has to be noted that the standard here set forth by Zwingli is "Canonic Scripture", i.e. the books of the Bible received in the Canon which are precisely those now accepted in our Bibles. This, he declares, is the Word of God. This alone contains what is necessary for true piety, and for a guide in life to the Christian. He thus ruled out Tradition, which was accepted by the Roman Church. While the Lutherans also rejected Tradition, they did not at first see the need for such a declaration as this of Zwingli, and only in 1576 did they declare in the Torgau Book, and in 1580 in the Formula of Concord, that

"The only standard by which all dogmas and all teachers must be valued and judged is no other than the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and of the New Testaments."

Under the influence of Calvin every one of the Reformed Churches adopted substantially the declaration of Zwingli, and

so we have the supreme authority of Scripture set forth in all the Reformed Churches of Switzerland, France, England, Holland, Scotland and other countries. Thus we have it in the Geneva Confession of 1536 (Article 1); the First Helvetic Confession of 1536; the French Confession of 1559 (Articles 3-6); the Belgic Confession of 1561 (Articles 4-7); the Thirty-nine Articles of 1563 and 1571 (Article 6); and the Scots Confession of 1560 (Article 19) drawn up under the guidance of John Knox. Principal Lindsay says that in these Confessions

“The Reformers had before them not simply the theological desire to define precisely the nature of that authority to which all Christian teaching appeals, but the religious need to cling to the divinely revealed way of salvation and to turn away from all human interposition and corruption. They desire to make known that they trust God rather than man” (*History of the Reformation*, Vol. I, p. 468).

The attitude of Zwingli to this question of the supremacy of the Holy Scriptures is all the more remarkable when we remember that he was by far the most radical thinker among the Reformers and the one whose spirit approximated most to that of the Modernist Theologian of to-day. He and all the framers of the Reformed Confessions felt the imperative need for a standard of reference, a supreme divine authority outside of themselves to which they could appeal. They found that authority in the Holy Scriptures. There was no need to adduce elaborate arguments in favour of that authority. All Christendom accepted it. The only thing necessary was to show that this was the one and only authority, and so they exposed the Roman Catholic error of trusting in Tradition, and in the decisions of Popes and Councils. They called Reason to their aid to do this, and practically all appealed to the witness of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer as a proof of the authority of the Bible which itself condemned the other two kinds of authority recognised in the Roman Church.

Those who prepared these Reformed Confessions, and their statements on the supreme authority of Scripture, simply went back to the position of Christ and of the Early Church. They found an objective authority and so were saved from the confusion which has characterised Modern Theologians who have been so largely at the mercy of subjective criteria within the mind of the individual thinker, who thus flounders about, without rudder or compass, on an uncharted sea. We gratefully acknowledge that

this is not so much the case now as it was in the days before Karl Barth and the New Calvinists appeared on the scene.

Luther, too, as we have seen, acknowledged this objective authority although, perhaps, not quite so emphatically as the Reformed Churches. We feel it is an error to write as does a recent author:

“ Thus, we are asked to accept such and such books as the Word of God because Luther’s religious experience—not the religious experience of the whole of mankind, nor of the whole Church, nor of the whole body of Lutheran Christians, but Luther’s—commended them to him as such. . . . In fact, instead of an objective religion we find a blank subjectivism, heavily, but not impenetrably disguised.”

Such a statement would have been repudiated by Luther himself as well as by all the Reformers. As we have already seen, he did accept certain books as normative because of their clarity in presenting Christ as the propitiation for our sins, but he did not object completely to the other books as uncanonical in spite of certain unwise observations which he made on their comparative inferiority. He accepted, indeed, the practice of the Mediaeval Church in which he was born, and so appealed constantly and confidently to Scripture in general with the consciousness that no theologian, Catholic or Reformed, would dispute the validity of his appeal to Scripture, for it was an authority implicitly accepted by Christians for ages before he was born and not depending in any way upon his own individual feelings. We consider, therefore, it is incorrect to charge Luther with having a religion of “ blank subjectivism ” as is done in the recent book we have referred to. The best refutation of this charge against Luther is found in his own words:

“ When God sends His Holy Gospel to us, He deals with us in two ways. In the first place, externally; in the second place, internally. Externally He deals with us through the spoken Word of the Gospel, and through corporal signs, such as Baptism and the Sacrament. Inwardly, He deals with us through the Holy Spirit and faith, with other gifts; but all in due measure and order, so that the external things should and must come first, and the inner ones come afterwards and through the external ones; so that He has resolved to give no man the internal things except through the external, and He will give no one the Spirit or faith without the external Word and sign which He has appointed ” (*Against the Heavenly Prophets* [Luther’s Works, Erlangen Edition], Vol. XXIX, p. 208).

Here Luther expresses unequivocally his view, which was shared by all the Reformed Churches, that it is, to quote the late Dean Wace, “ an unalterable ordinance of God that spiritual life and

Salvation, and the faith which lays hold on them, are bound up with the use of the Word of God, and of the Sacraments which were instituted by Christ ". The very continuance of the Church depends, according to Luther, on these external ordinances of the Word and Sacraments. So much for the " blank subjectivism " of Martin Luther. Well would it be for the Church of to-day had it as little subjectivism as he.

IV. JOHN CALVIN

Calvin did more than any other man of his epoch to clarify the thought of the Reformed Church as to the authority of the Scriptures, and his influence greatly affected the Confessions drawn up by the various Churches which professed his faith in different countries.

His views on this question did not differ materially from Luther except that he expressed them more logically, and realised more fully the importance of an assured confidence in Scripture as the basis of his whole theological system. He avoided the rash statements made by Luther as to certain parts of the Bible and his declarations on the authority of Holy Writ are far more consistent and uniform than were those of the German Reformer. His attitude to the Epistle of James is typical:

" There are certain even at the present day who do not think it worthy of authority. Still, I willingly embrace it without doubt, because I see no sufficiently good reason for rejecting it."

He would say the same of 2 Peter and Jude.

There was no need for Calvin to elaborate his doctrine of Scripture at length, for its authority was taken for granted by Catholics and Protestants—so much so that the Lutheran Augsburg Confession did not think it necessary to mention the subject.

Calvin, however, sought to prove that the authority of the Bible rested on solid ground. The Reformers had shattered the authority of Popes and Councils which formerly had guaranteed the authority of the Scriptures themselves as the very Word of God. Now it was necessary to find other grounds for this faith in the Bible. Calvin saw clearer than most that the Church must have some authority to appeal to unless disorder and chaos are to prevail and the faith of men is to be shattered. Hence he strove to prove that in the Bible we have the final court of appeal in

all matters of doctrine and Christian practice, the very voice of God speaking to His people. In his *Institutes*, Chapter vi, he adduces various reasons for believing in the divine origin of the Scriptures. He discusses such questions as the manifestation of God in nature which, wonderful though it is, nevertheless is not sufficient—hence the need for a revelation. He insists that God's revelation was preserved and handed down from generation to generation. This Word of God is absolutely necessary for men if they are to guide their steps rightly through the labyrinth of this world. Only thus can superstition be banished. While God reveals Himself in the glories of nature—in the sky and sea; thunder, wind, tempest, etc.—it is only in the Scriptures that we really get to know Him savingly. While we do not receive the Scriptures on the authority of the Church, yet the Church has had an important place in guarding and handing down these oracles of God. The very nature of the Bible in the Law, Prophecies, and Gospel, proves that it must have come from God because it so far surpasses all other writings. If we only look at it with clear eyes it subdues our presumptuous opposition. Such are some of Calvin's reasons for believing the Bible.

He declares that he could produce sufficient reasons in favour of the divine authority of the Scriptures to "stop the obstreperous mouths" of the "craftiest despisers of God". He could "put down the boastings which they mutter in corners, were anything to be gained by refuting their cavils". He could "maintain the Word against gainsayers but it does not follow that this would forthwith implant the certainty which faith requires in their hearts". The only thing which can do this is the testimony of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of men. Full credit will not be given to the words of God in the heart until they are sealed "by the inward testimony of the Spirit". This same Spirit, who taught the prophets, convinces the regenerate that their words are true. Scripture carries its own evidence along with it, but the full conviction of its truth comes through the Spirit who, in a way superior to human judgment, gives us perfect assurance "that it comes to us by the instrumentality of men, from the very mouth of God". Calvin's attitude, then, is that Nature and Reason can supply us with perfectly good arguments to prove the supreme authority and divine origin of the Scriptures, but, in the last resort, only the Spirit of God working in the heart will really lead the unbeliever to accept this. Anyone

who knows how you can overwhelm a sceptic with arguments and he yet remain of the same opinion, can understand this point of view of Calvin.

Historians and commentators have sometimes given the impression that Calvin based entirely his acceptance of the Scriptures, as the Word of God, upon the testimony of the Spirit in the heart. When one reads the *Institutes* for oneself one sees at once what a fine case Calvin makes out for the rationality of our confidence in the Bible, although it is only the work of the Spirit which can really convince the unbeliever.

One factor which strengthened Calvin's faith in the authority of the Bible was the great effect it produced when its study was revived. In a letter to Cardinal Sadolet, he reminds him of the wonderful transformation which had been effected through the teaching of the Scriptures. Even enemies of the Reformation had to acknowledge this, and it had altered even the preaching of the Roman Church itself (*Calvin's Tracts* [Calvin Translation Society], Vol. I, pp. 59f.). In a *Confession of Faith* drawn up for the Reformed Church of France, he says the Bible is that "on which alone our faith should be founded, as there is no other witness proper and competent to decide what the majesty of God is, but God Himself". In his *Brief Confession of Faith* he refers to "the sacred Scriptures, to which nothing can, without criminality, be added, from which nothing can be taken away" (*Calvin's Tracts*, Vol. II, p. 133).

For us, one of the most interesting facts is the manner in which he recognised the existence of various readings among the ancient manuscripts from which we have derived our version of the Bible. In spite of the scanty materials at the disposal of scholars then, he frankly faced up to certain differences in the texts of various MSS. and realised the possibility of faulty translations, and knew well that the Vulgate had inaccuracies. Such discoveries did not upset him and they need not upset us. Anyone who knows anything of the hundreds of ancient MSS. and versions on which our translations are based, knows of the existence of various readings showing some discrepancies between manuscript and manuscript. They do not need to alarm us in the least. Philip Schaff, Chairman of the American Revision Committee of the Scriptures, and one of the greatest Biblical scholars of his day, said of the variations in the text of the New Testament: "Not more than fifty are really important for some

reason or other; and even of these fifty not one affects an article of faith or precept of duty which is not abundantly sustained by other and undoubted passages, or by the whole of Scripture teaching" (*Companion of the Greek Testament and English Version*, p. 179).

Dr. Hort, joint Editor with Dr. Westcott of their famous edition of the Greek New Testament, said of the variations in texts: "The amount of what can in any sense be called substantial variation is but a small fraction of the whole residuary variation, and can hardly form more than a thousandth part of the entire text." This is the opinion of one of the greatest authorities who has ever lived. No one has suggested that these variations have in any way affected one single article of the Christian faith or any single principle of Christian conduct. If Calvin were alive to-day he would be entirely satisfied with this result based on sound Textual Criticism, and we may well thank God that we have the Scriptures to-day so very near to the actual words which were written by those "holy men of old" who spoke "as they were moved by the Holy Ghost". We have nothing to fear, but everything to gain, from sane, scientific textual criticism of the Bible.

V. REFORMED CONFESSIONS

With the passing of the years, the tide is turning, and it is becoming clearer, once again, that we may confidently accept still the views on Holy Writ held by the Early Church, by the Reformers, and the framers of our great Confessions of Faith.

Let us look for a moment at two of these:

(1) *The Thirty-Nine Articles*. Article VI declares:

"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."

Again, Article XX runs:

"It is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything that is contrary to God's Word written . . . Wherefore, although the Church be a witness and a keeper of holy Writ, yet, as it ought not to decree any thing against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce any thing to be believed for necessity of Salvation."

So great is the authority conceded to Holy Scripture that the most venerable traditions of all—the Creeds—are declared

by Article VIII to be accepted only because they are according to Scripture.

Throughout the Articles one controversial point after another is accepted or rejected according as it is allowed or disallowed by Scripture.

(2) *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. This Confession declares *inter alia* on the subject of the Scriptures:

- (a) "Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the Books of the Old and New Testaments. [Then follows a list of the Canonical Books.] All which are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life" (i. 2).
- (b) "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men" (i. 6).
- (c) "The Old Testament in Hebrew . . . and the New Testament in Greek . . . being immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical; so as in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them" (i. 8).

The teaching of the Thirty-Nine Articles and of the Westminster Confession of Faith represents the outcome in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries respectively of the mature consideration of the Reformers' doctrine of Scripture by the greatest divines in our land.

The views thus expressed were not only substantially accepted in the Reformed Confessions of Faith already enumerated, but likewise in the Augsburg Confession of the Lutherans (1530); The Formula of Concord (1576, 1584); The Ten Conclusions of Berne (1528); the Second Helvetic Confession (1562); The Heidelberg Catechism (1563); the Canons of the Synod of Dort (1619); the Savoy Declaration (1658); the Confession of the Waldenses (1655); and the Baptist Confession (1688).

In such company, we certainly stand in a goodly fellowship. It has been well said that if ever there was a case in which stress might be laid on the famous canon of Victor of Lerins, *Quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*, it is surely in regard to this matter of the authority of the Holy Scriptures.

Let it be observed, in conclusion, that in the greatest Confessions of the Reformed Church (as in the magnificent statement by the Westminster Divines) no attempt was made to declare *how* God inspired the writers of His Holy Word. They

are content to state that the Scriptures were given " by inspiration of God " and are thus entirely reliable and authoritative. Let us take the Bible in the same way, with all confidence, without presuming to enquire *how* God operated on the minds and souls of servants who wrote under the guidance of His Holy Spirit.

Some have weakened our case by venturing to enter into a description of these secrets which are not revealed to us. The fact that God filled the hearts of men with His Spirit and inspired them to write His divine Word does not mean that they became " automata " or lost their own personality. Their writings reveal the contrary; and surely we may say that never are men more truly men than when working under the impulses of God's Spirit, for it is then they are most like what God intended them to be when He made man " in His own image ".

It is not the manner in which God inspired those holy men which concerns us, but the work which they produced for all to see. It is here in our hands and any thinking person can see that no body of men, however great, could ever have produced this wonderful Book unless guided from on high. It is *The Book*, and the accents of the Most High are still ringing through it, and thousands upon thousands even to-day are proving for themselves that it is the very revelation of God because it brings them to Him through Jesus Christ of whom the Scriptures testify.

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