

THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE—SOME PROBLEMS

Definite problems are raised by consideration of the history of the formation of the canon of Scripture. They are problems which we must face, if we are to stand by any particular view of Biblical inspiration. It is not enough for us to reassert the old views; we may firmly believe that they are adequate, but we need rather to learn for ourselves what are the underlying principles. Instead of taking them for granted, we will then give them an intelligent and modern application. The liberal still believes that discussions concerning the inspiration and authority of Scripture are largely irrelevant, and if we are to persuade him that there are at least two points of view, we need to show good reasons. Above all, we need to be sure of ourselves.

1. THE RELEVANCE OF ESCHATOLOGY

With the revival of Adventism, there has been a noticeable division amongst Christian people. Silence on the subject seems to characterise the liberal, and if he speaks it is usually to stress what we know as the post-millennial view of the second coming of Christ. This is significant and suggestive of something fundamental. Once we regard the millenium as a goal, at the end of which Christ finally appears we tend to regard it as socially realisable; and there is clearly a difference between this approach and the

approach of those of us who look upon the coming of Christ as a lively hope in a godless age, and as the initiating event to a golden age. With the different eschatology there is therefore the implication of both a different *theology* and a different view of *history*. The Old Testament and the New Testament records give us a definite view of history, both by selection and affirmation, and in our consideration of the formation of the canon we must take account of the Biblical history. The formation of the canon is an historical process which bears reasonably close investigation, and our view of that process is either to be determined *within* the process or *apart* from it. Either our reasoning is to be an *a posteriori* deduction from the process itself or we are to begin with an *a priori* principle determined, it must be admitted, by our acceptance of the Biblical view, which puts the process into its own perspective. Whatever our definition of Biblical inspiration, we are committed to the latter course once we admit that there is a close connection between Biblical and Christian Doctrine. However elusive it may be to the Old Testament scholar, there is an Old Testament Theology, and to relate it to the Theology of the New Testament and a philosophy of early Church History, say up to the time of the Council of Carthage, is to attempt something which has meaning.

Arguing along these lines we ought to be able to expose the essential inconsistency of much modern thinking. The 'supernatural' approach, and the appeal to 'Scripture' does not necessarily beg the question, but we need to prove our awareness of this possibility. A philosophy of history based upon a sound and intelligent eschatology could profitably be related to a faithful Biblical Theology.

2. THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

Requested to re-think the question of the relationship between the authority of the Bible and the authority of the Church, in the light of a definite eschatology we may be pardoned for a measure of impatience. Here, it would seem, is an interruption of the happy and altogether helpful arrangement whereby Protestant scholars have dared to agree that the Bible takes priority. It would seem, however, that it is on this question that they have been least 'safe.' Harnack, for example, had noticed this 'weakness' in Lessing, and wrote of him that he,

" deals Protestantism a fearful blow in that he
" plays off the *regula fidei* against the
" Scriptures, and so approaches a fundamental
" doctrine of Catholicism "

(Bible reading in the Early Church.)

Have we a definite answer to the modern cry for a revision of the canon? What authority has the modern *regula fidei*? Can the Church, which made a decision in A.D. 397, make the same sort of decision in the twentieth century? The post-millennial eschatology with its insistence upon development and progress must find its echo in this modern cry. What kind of denial are we able to offer? It is good for us to note the workings of Divine Providence in the formation of the canon, and to insist that the Church which recognizes is not necessarily the Church which imparts authority; but is this enough? In our appeal to Scripture, the philosophy of history implied in 2 Timothy iv. 3, may supply us with the strong answers we need. The generally admitted change which took place in Church order during the first three centuries suggests to us that a measure of re-interpretation of Scripture must have been taken place during that period. The Church of Carthage must have seen some sanction for its own Church order. Whilst it is true that we are not bound to accept that particular order to the prejudice of our own interpretation of Scripture, it does not follow that we can do more than re-interpret. Our 'philosophy of apostasy' notes that the modern Church has been trying to do just this. If Rome is to be

condemned because her re-interpretation has involved a setting aside of the final authority of the Scriptures in favour of the Church, Protestantism is doing no less harm by its claim, whether implicit or explicit, to have the right to re-determine canonicity. Rome may extend the range of doctrines 'essential to salvation' but the liberal Protestant tends to restrict that range, and neither process is valid. We may well ask where is the Church to compare in 'completeness' with the Church before Carthage. Our modern divisions are of such a nature as to make the discovery of the true Church an impossible task. A fully comprehensive ecumenicity will not give us completion, even though it may be said that completion is to be found within. The particular doctrinal and ecclesiastical manifestations of membership of the Body of Christ are unequally weighted. We may remark on the fact that the Church nearest to Christ in time, and by our thesis nearest to Him spiritually, has tended to accord the highest authority both to Old Testament Scripture and to the Words of the Lord through His apostles. Whatever apostolic authority can mean now, the conclusion that it meant a great deal then, cannot be escaped.

Perhaps it should be noted that a 'philosophy of apostasy' or catastrophic eschatology does not rule out significance for Church history. If we cannot support the concept of social conversion through the gradual coming of the Kingdom, we can yet believe in the temporal manifestation of the Kingdom within society, in anticipation of its full realisation at the coming again of Christ.

3. PERSONAL ASSENT

The connection between recognition of the authority and the canonicity of Scripture would appear to be both historical and necessary. Any appeal, therefore, to the 'witness' of personal assent to the authority of Scripture must have implications for canonicity. If we have difficulty in assigning authority to the modern 'Church,' it would appear that consideration of the 'witness' of personal assent will lead us yet further into the realm of conjecture. What can only be legitimately regarded as the subjective approach, has obvious weaknesses. Historically, it has been fruitful in heresy, and Rome has taken pains to draw our attention to this. It is interesting and significant to note how heretics have selected and emphasised the importance of certain writings. Marcion, including only the 'Pauline' epistles in his canon, is the classic example from among the early heretics. Of more recent times we can note how Bauer was forced to deny the authenticity of all references to the existence of a friendly relationship between Paul and the 'Twelve,' by his theory of 'conflict.' Even those who profess complete submission to the authority of Scripture have been guilty of selecting. Luther's emphasis upon 'Justification by faith' led him to assign an inferior position to the Epistle of James. This may be well known, but we must confess that we all tend to have our preferences and that few have been faithful in declaring the "whole council of God." Does this, however, render the appeal to personal assent wholly inadmissible? Clearly, if our assent is derived from the Holy Spirit's witness with our spirit, then it has a peculiar authority; but this is not to identify all private judgment with the Holy Spirit. Our assent must be more than merely personal, and this movement from the particular to the universal is effectively and irrefutably achieved through the influence of the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that the question of what is and what is not the Holy Spirit's leading has been solved. We are tempted to feel that a formal definition is impossible. In practice, however, we have to confess that we have arrived at our convictions concerning the authority and inspiration of the Scriptures through a process of submission. Our decision to submit has been personal, but we have surrendered our right to private judgment. This is not inconsistent with free thinking, but the content and bias of our thinking is determined. The strength of our position is to be found in this very fact, because it is built upon a Biblical theology which suggests that man's refusal to obey the truth is a far greater problem than his inability to discover it. Barth's emphasis on this need to submit to the 'Word of God' should have led him to abandon the right to determine how far the

Scriptures can be said to contain that Word. The man who submits does not begin with a *regula fidei*, but by his very submission is open to the influence of the Holy Spirit bearing witness to the truth of that which was first committed to the Church. With Luther, we must be in dissent from all who, in theory or in practice, ask us to accept their judgment in the place of a submission to the authority of Scripture.

CONCLUSION. THE MODERN SITUATION

It has only been possible to touch very lightly upon the problems raised by consideration of the formation of the canon. Enough, however, has been said to indicate a possible line of approach in answering these problems; or at least the inadequacy of the modern answers has been indicated. Confirmation of the Biblical eschatology is to be found in the bias of modern scholarship, which prefers the purely historical approach in its consideration of the formation of the canon; reserves the right to determine canonicity; and identifies the Holy Spirit with its subjective rationalism. This is the bias of "natural wisdom" which is not necessarily to be identified with any and every liberal thinker. It has been well said that the Bible is better read 'on our knees' than in the study, and when we are despised by those who claim that we are only able to read in this fashion, then that is our 'Cross,' for we cannot dissociate ourselves from the 'offence' of the Gospel. It should be possible, however, for us to read the Bible 'on our knees' in our studies. The writings of Calvin reveal this great Biblical theologian to be both theologian and man of God. Let us hope that such a phenomenon is still possible.

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