

## The Authority of Scripture in the Church.

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WHETHER the authority of the Bible depends upon its message or upon its messengers is a question which perhaps unduly obtrudes itself to-day. But having been asked, it demands some attention. Though "taste and see" is a prescription of high authority which can certainly be applied to the Scriptures, their authority, though mysterious, must be sufficiently evident, from whatever source it be immediately derived, in order that the message of the book may generate faith in the hearer.

The message of the Scriptures is challenged by modern thought with an analysis which recognizes only intellectual authority, and every ground of orthodox faith claiming to rest upon the Bible is examined with the apparatus of historical and literary criticism by its inquisition. A specialized ecclesiastical school of modern thought, on the other hand, offers in the authority of the Church a security to the message through the successive qualification of messengers, and proffers this authorization as one of the mysteries of the Catholic faith. Thus the breaches in the harness of traditional beliefs made by the darts of criticism are to be covered with the ample vesture of the Church and the credal formulas reassume their apparent force. This authorization "per bearer" is a product of devotion to ecclesiastical precedent; an antiquarian ideal of original purity is thus created in the clerical devotee, somewhere in the Middle Ages, a long way short of Apostolic simplicity, and is not dissimilar to the enthusiasm evoked in the breast of an architect by the artistic perfection of a Greek or Gothic style. This appeal to the authority of precedent, when pursued through all the delays of process, lies with St. Paul's civil cause at the court of Rome.

The spiritual and experimental theology which was both the outcome and essence of the Reformation derives fruit-

fulness from the deeper roots of its faith in the supreme authority and freedom of the Scriptures. The fashionable neglect of the study of the Protestant controversy with Rome by the theological schools is dangerous, because an important testimony to the primary basis of security and fruitfulness in religion is not explored and penetrated, and the necessity of the Word of God as the first requisite of spiritual independence and life is not perceived.

The Reformers, in their struggle with the hitherto unchallengeable claims of the Church, had been compelled to take up a position external to Rome upon a foundation which is no more a negative Protestantism than is the Bible itself. The Reformation was more than the religious phase of the Renaissance, and ultimately became a witness not only against the corruptions of the medieval Papacy, but of the distinctive and essential truth of the authority of God's Word and of freedom of conscience. It may be admitted that the Counter-Reformation in the second half of the sixteenth century practically healed the moral sickness of the Papacy in the first half, and that the continuance of Protestantism thereafter was mischievous if it was merely a corrective force. In spite of initial reluctance to separate from the Church of Rome, in spite of anathemas and persecution, the investigation of the authority at the foundation of a superstructure so full of failure, when effectually commenced, did not cease until a satisfactory footing had been laid upon the authority of the Scriptures. The Reformation issued in the assertion of this supremacy over all other, and the Reformers rebuilt the wall upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, having the true corner-stone of Zion rather than the vicarious one of Rome.

The appeal of the Reformed Church of England is to this determining authority in Holy Scripture, for it is the ground of all repudiation of doctrines, practices, and claims, from the initial document of 1533 down to the royal declaration prefixed to the articles in 1628. This was drafted by Laud, and concludes : " that all curious search be laid aside and these disputes

shut up in God's promises, as they be generally set forth to us in Holy Scriptures and the general meaning of the Church of England according to them." The present form of clerical subscription, which Bishop Gore elects to interpret as a liberating formula, cites the Word of God only as the test of the doctrine of the Church of England, and necessarily agrees with the Ordinal which conditions all authority by a persuasion and determination that is entirely loyal to Scripture.

The Thirty-nine Articles stand in direct antagonism to the decrees of Trent, which co-ordinate Scripture and ecclesiastical tradition, a position echoed in the platitude, "The Church to teach and the Bible to prove." The Articles assert that the Word of God is sufficient to determine all that is requisite to the one way of salvation, to warrant the creeds—that which warranteth being greater than that which is warranted—to qualify a Church, to limit its authority, and to rule the decisions of Councils. The same proof of Holy Writ is taken to condemn doctrines such as the invocation of saints as repugnant, while "the plain words of Scripture," "our Lord's ordinances in the Gospel," and St. Paul's sayings, are brought to bear on the meaning and methods of the Sacraments. The characteristic symbol of the ministry at consecration and ordination is the delivery of the Bible, not the chalice, and to it the resolution of all obstacles to "the unity of true religion" is referred.

It is a clear deduction that for the Church of England authority resides in the Scriptures. No other claim is allowed to compete with this, and its own formulas have effect only "according to them." The denial by the Church of Rome of authentic catholicity to its ministry, and consequently of validity to its Sacraments, is immaterial to a Church protesting and submitting to the supremacy of God's Word, and to this position the Church of England by its history and documents is confined. The uncovenanted mercies, perhaps, do not after all happen to those who hold their title-deeds in scriptures; but what will be the refuge of those whose prescriptive rights are disputable, and to whom the Vicar of Christ says, "I know you not"? If the Church of

England does not rest upon agreeableness to the Word of God, and it is obvious that she is denied agreeableness to Rome, without one or the other resource, by what is this stray Church to be authorized? From the Catholic East to the Orthodox West no appeals lie, and unauthorized singularity and schism are dangerously alike. Without Catholic sanction, in mistrust of the Reformation principle of the sufficiency of Holy Writ, will the Church of England follow some of her modern guides into the negative Protestantism of the critics? In resisting the supremacy of the Scriptures from opposite points of view, the critics and the Vatican are strangely at one, and it is a singular portent that there are Anglicans willing to submit to the dictation of a rationalistic criticism, and yet swallow the camel of Roman Catholicism. But while in "a Protestant-minded country" authoritativeness is contingent upon agreeableness to God's Word, the Church of that country is secure.

But the question must now be asked whether the foundation which to the Reformers was as a hard flinty rock is of the same texture to us. Is this well-worn rock proving, after all, only a laminated sandstone, incapable of withstanding perpetual storm, denudation, or of sustaining loads which are *contra-naturam*? Our rock is not as their rock if it resolves under critical analysis into constituent elements of sand or clay. Is the Bible to-day only a natural specimen of great interest for the investigation of its formation, owing to the fossils which lie embedded in its soluble aggregate? To bear the weight superimposed upon the Bible by the Reformers and by the Church of England, the rock foundation must needs be an outcrop of eternity, though in the field of time, of imperishable certainty for foundation or anchorage amid the uncertainties of human speculation; a fulcrum affording to the religion based upon it the strength of revelation.

The security of this once indubitable foundation is therefore the immediate question. Has the supremacy of the Scriptures of the Old Testament diminished under criticism into the substance of a convention? Does their primacy only hold good

in a comparison with similar compilations, and has their special and unique authority for the determination of that which is final in religion vanished silently away?

The altered value which present-day teaching in the Church allows to Bible authority is shown by the proposals in Convocation to limit the scope of the Ordinal declaration of unfeigned belief in all the Canonical Scriptures of the Old Testament. Dr. Gore regards much in the Old Testament, and Dr. Sanday much in the New, as requiring the explanation that myth, legend, and poetry, may be presumed where historical truth used to be assumed. With reliance on St. Augustine's maxim as to the interrelation of both Testaments, the assertion may be ventured that Dr. Gore's defence of the New Testament miracles must qualify Dr. Sanday's doubts of those of the Old, and the latter's hesitation to accept any miracle which is temporarily conceived to be unscientific may invalidate the conclusions of his Bishop. Where is the authority to determine these positions and obtain the perfect understanding which both desire, and upon which unfeigned belief can rest?

It is not necessary to deal separately with the conclusions of modern Historical or Textual Criticism where both invalidate the original position of the Church of England relating to Scripture; it is obvious that where these results have the force of truths they are the rediscovery of facts which were also true in the days of the ministry of our Lord and His Apostles, but it is essential to ask if the use made of these true facts by the Great Teacher was not only authoritative, but fair and candid. Does He corroborate the true views of the Creation story, the Flood, the Patriarchal lives, the giving of the Law, and the Prophetic voices? Did our Lord express views upon the Old Testament which the clergy can now be properly urged not to withhold any longer from their flocks? Does His example support the exclusion from the Lectionary or Psalter of Scriptures supposed to lack historical or moral authority?

The answer to such questions cannot lie anywhere between relative and absolute truthfulness. Kenotic limitations cannot

attach to the Lord's post-resurrection converse with those whose understandings He opened that they might understand how authoritative were all things that were written in the Law, Prophets, and Psalms, concerning Him. These Scriptures were made by Him to bear witness to fuller truths than the monotheism and nationalism on which the Jews relied. The secret in the sacred documents, which underlay the perpetuation of the nation, was the hope of the promise made of God unto the fathers. This had been identified and revealed when He told the authorities of that Church, "If ye believed Moses, ye would believe Me, for he wrote of Me; but if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe My words?"

The criticism which attenuates the essence of the prophetic testimony and character of the Old Testament withdraws faith, necessarily, from simple reliance on the omniscience of the Lord to place it on the science of modern theologians. Unless the personal authority of Christ can be distinguished from that verity which He induced His followers to attach to the words of the Scriptures, the dilemma must be faced, On whose authority do you unfeignedly believe all the Canonical Scriptures of the Old Testament? On that of the Son of God or on that of the critics? Will not the reply of Paul be accepted, "Yea, let God be true, and every man a liar."

That the Scriptures possess the infallibility imputed to them by Jesus is a formula which waives aside what is otherwise undefined as to the extent and quality of inspiration and canonicity. He is the Key which proves the authority of the Lock; and while we continue to know in part, we can be sure that full reliance on His infallibility cannot violate the righteousness of any intellectual conviction.

The Spirit of Truth at Pentecost also attested the authority of the Scriptures, for the Apostolic foundation of the New Covenant was laid on that made with the fathers. The doctrine of Peter, Stephen, Paul, or Apollos, of the writer to the Hebrews and of John the Divine, rests on those things which God showed by the mouth of all His prophets. Without the authority of

the Old Covenant, Christ and the New are unrelated to the Divine plan. It might at first appear that the authorization of the New Testament cannot be as emphatic as that which Christ personally bore to the older Scriptures; but this is not the case. The record of Him who spake as never man spake has primarily a unique value and implicit authority. This is akin to, but greater than, the record of Moses and the Prophets. Christ gave an explicit attestation to these records which does not allow their authority to be questioned, and the Holy Spirit's outpoured presence similarly provides an explicit attestation of the revelation of Christ in the Gospel. The broad issue is that the word of Christ places the Old Testament beyond the reach of derogation by human authority, and that the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart does the same for the New. The mission of the Comforter is not only as the Remembrancer of the record of the Saviour's life and teachings, but also to elucidate and apply them to the Church. His effectual action upon the obedient conscience creates and develops a faith in the Gospel which, without turning fictions into facts, gives truths the force of realities. This is the authoritative witness of the Spirit of God to the reality of Christ, to that fact which is the burden of the New as well as of the Old Testament; and while these Scriptures exist the Person of the Son will not be without the authoritative witness on earth of the Holy Ghost. John, witness and Divine, describes the possession of "an unction which teaches concerning all things," and enunciated its effect in not uncertain language: "We know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know Him that is true; and we are in Him that is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life." This confession of Jesus as Lord by the Holy Ghost, by fulfilling the Divine purpose of the Scriptures, manifests their authority. In the conflicts of the Church Militant, in the stress of intellectual criticism, in the doubt-laden atmosphere known as modern thought, He seals, comforts, and secures the faith which admits His authority to fulfil the assur-

ances of Christ to doubting and troubled disciples. The Holy Spirit, who spake by the Prophets, has spoken also in the record of the Apostles and Evangelists, for the new witness of the Christian Church is to the same fact of the Son of God. The sanction of the whole Bible is the verity of Christ. To Him the Old Testament witnessed, and to Him personally it was authoritative and true. To Him the New Testament witnesses, and by the ministry of the Holy Ghost becomes the Gospel of our salvation. Christ is alike the Object of the Former and the Subject of the Latter Covenant. The status of the New, therefore, is similar to the Old; both are the "testimony of Jesus."

The authority of the Scriptures being intrinsic and attested by the witness of the Holy Spirit, any investigation of the operations of the Providence which formed and sealed up the canon of the New Testament would not affect the substance of the books or their eventual authority, and would now be too belated to be conclusive. The human instruments of this canonizing Providence were doubtless the Churches of Christ, which are related to the structure of the New Testament as the Jewish Church was to the Old. That Church had an unchallenged and unique succession from the fathers, and was the Divinely-appointed witness and keeper of Holy Writ, and upon this ground presumed to an authority to limit its use and interpretation. With this assumption over Scripture our Lord's ministry was in constant opposition, and that Church ultimately vindicated her ecclesiastical authority over the Scriptures by fulfilling them in crucifying Him. The inheritors of the New Testament have in their turn assumed a similar authority, and by it have killed prophets and stoned them that were sent, and it was through fiery sufferings like their Master's that the Reformers based themselves upon the supremacy of Scripture over the Church.

The Word of God is not bound. The Church as a witness and keeper is not an authorized gaoler guarding the ingress and egress of an imprisoned ambassador, for the inherent spirit of the Word has continually vindicated an effective supremacy over



the power of the Keys and of the Keeper throughout the history of the Church.

It is, however, a common assumption that the Bible, and particularly the New Testament, is a record which belongs to the Society of whose origin and institutions it bears witness. We are told that it was manifestly our Lord's purpose to found a Society, and not merely to provide materials for a book—a presupposition which is held to govern all theories both as to the authority and interpretation of this book of the Society. Some interesting results follow this reversal of the position which the formularies of the Church of England assign to the Scriptures. The primacy is transferred from the Bible to the Society. The Society becomes the truth which the record attests, and the Old Testament having been transferred from the elder Society to the younger, the whole Bible is possessively and actively the word of the Society, and only in a secondary sense, derivatively and passively, the Word of God. The assumption which induces such conclusions depends upon the identification of the Society of Authorization. The use of the indefinite term Society, instead of the Scriptural equivalent Church, is more ingenious than just. It appears to sweep away the cobwebs in order to resume the idea of a simple and primitive fact, but it imports a notion of proprietorship, if not of copyright and rights of translation. The difficulty is thus shirked of the existence of rival Societies or Churches having conflicting standards of interpretation and authority. If the Bible belongs to one Society, which of all of these is Micah's mother, and who are Danites? The problem of the Society is greater than that of the Book; and if the testing of the Society is by its catholicity and orthodoxy, from whence are these standards to be derived if not from the Word of God?

If it could be granted that an historic identity by succession exists, it would not dispense with the necessity of an external examiner to assure that the Society witnessed consistently with its Scriptures. Then, the deciding factor must be the consistency of the Society with its Scriptures. If this Society,

justifying its claim to authority over the Bible by its integrity and holiness, is the Catholic Church known to human history, nothing but blind ultramontism would prefer its eccentric record to that exercised by the Bible as a witness to the truth of God. It is indeed necessary to the theory of the Society's primacy to avoid exactness in its description and escape identification with the Papal Society, whose inconsistent witness occasioned both the Reformation and the necessity of the clear statement of the authority of Scripture which characterizes the Church of England.

The New Testament describes multiple Churches on earth of the Seven Spirits of God, having an identity of faith and calling, but in need of prophetic warning against apostasy ; but no organized Society capable of defining the canon or of authorizing the Scriptures can be discerned in the Bible.

This unsatisfactory and complicated theory can be dispensed with in view of the broadly simple and larger inversion that the Society is the product of the Word, not the Word the property of the Society. The Church of God is that blessed company who take His Word as the authorization of their faith, and who by it are knit by invisible but real bonds to their Head, and are known on earth by the practical symptoms and sacramental tokens of that attachment. The Church as a human society depends upon the supernatural and Divine elements in the Scriptures, and has a ministry of proclamation of their message as her vital function. Wherever experimental faith in the Gospel is working in the Church a conviction of the sanctity of the Bible, and of its integrity as the gift of the Spirit of Truth, there its ministry of proclamation will not halt for any doubt or want of inherent authority.

