

## THE DOCTRINE OF THE BIBLE.

BY THE REV. W. H. GRIFFITH THOMAS, D.D.

SOME time ago I read these words in an English paper :—  
Amid the blows of thought that confuse and stun us, many are taking refuge in some form of religious infallibility which tries to shift personal responsibility for faith on to some authority—external, rigid, and final—on which we can unhesitatingly rely. With some it is an infallible Bible, a doctrine which seems to imply that God spoke directly to men in the days when the Bible was being written, but that He speaks so no longer ; all that we can authentically know of Him is to be found in the pages of a Book to which no word has been added for long centuries. If that were the final truth about the Bible it could only have the effect of driving God to a distance from man and making Jesus Christ a dim historic figure whose work was completed in the far-off past. Moreover, it would reduce the revelation given us in the Bible to a mere historic interest and deprive inspiration of any real meaning, for “there cannot be a revelation given once for all in the fulness of its meaning.” Even though our Lord declared Himself to be the full and final revelation of the Father, He taught His disciples that they would need the continuous guidance of His Spirit in order to recognize the full meaning of His Person.

As these statements represent a position held to-day by very many, it may perhaps be useful to make a few comments on them from the Evangelical point of view.

1. The writer speaks of the way in which many to-day are turning towards some authority on which we can unhesitatingly rely. I do not think it is quite fair to speak of those who turn to “authority” as trying to “shift personal responsibility for faith.” The need of some authority is not surprising when other departments of life are considered. Authority rules in all realms, and it is surely not to be wondered at if man feels his need of authority in regard to the soul and things spiritual. A recent writer has called attention to the way in which authority obtains in architecture ; the square, the plumb-line, and the foot-rule attest their own authority over architect, builder, and labourer. The writer adds that it would be serious to imagine a plea for liberty on the assumption that the square, the plumb-line and the foot-rule were only of the dead past and that henceforth human

consciousness would be sufficient to establish levels and shapes and outlines.

2. This authority is described as "external, rigid, and final," but there is a manifest confusion in the association of these three epithets. Years ago Sabatier wrote a book entitled *Religions of Authority and the Religion of the Spirit*, a title which expresses an utterly false antithesis, because it is at least conceivable that a religion of the spirit in the sense of the Holy Spirit can and would be a religion of "authority." In the same way when the writer of the above words unites the three terms, "external, rigid, and final," he is guilty of a serious fallacy, because our supreme authority is the Lord Jesus Christ, and while He is not "external" He is certainly "rigid and final" as an authority. It would be well if we could at once and for ever get rid of the antithesis so often stated between objective and the internal, because Christ as our authority is at once our indwelling Master and an absolutely objective authority.

3. It is said that the doctrine of an infallible Bible "seems to imply that God spoke directly to men in the days when the Bible was being written but that He speaks so no longer." But does God speak to us to-day exactly as He spoke to men in the days when the Bible was being written? Is it not absolutely true that "all we can authentically know of Him is to be found in the pages of a book to which no word has been added for long centuries"? I have always thought this represented the mere alphabet of Evangelical truth. Would the writer or anyone else to-day make the claim that St. Paul made that what he wrote were the commandments of the Lord (1 Cor. xiv. 37; 2 Thess. iii. 14). Is there anything known to-day in regard to spiritual truth which is not "found in the pages" of that book? If so, what is it?

4. It is said that if this were the final truth about the Bible "it could only have the effect of driving God to a distance from man and making Jesus Christ a dim historic figure whose work was completed in the far-off past." The writer is here guilty of an obvious *non sequitur*, because the revelation in the Bible includes that of the Holy Spirit who makes Jesus Christ real to those who receive Him and thus effectually prevents Him from being "a dim historic figure." The statement does not make clear the distinction which is so often drawn between the "Jesus of History" and the "Christ of Experience."

5. It is also said that such a view as the writer opposes " would reduce the revelation given us in the Bible to a mere historic interest and deprive inspiration of any real meaning." It would be interesting to know precisely what the writer means by " revelation " and " inspiration." The words quoted (I wonder from whom) that " there cannot be a revelation given once for all in the fulness of its meaning " entirely begs the question. We are told that the faith was " once for all delivered to the saints " (Jude v. 3). But those who are firm in their belief in such a complete revelation are equally clear that " its fulness of meaning " is a matter of gradual realization. There is all the difference in the world between additions to the faith and fresh combinations and interpretations of an already completed faith. Wherein lies the distinctiveness of the New Testament if it does not enshrine " a revelation given once for all " ? Why do we regard the New Testament as unique when compared with other books ? How is it men like Gwatkin (see his *Early Church History*) point out that the fundamental difference between the New Testament and the best Christian literature of the second century is one of the proofs of unique inspiration ? Is there not a vital difference between the Spirit of Inspiration as seen in the New Testament and the Spirit of Illumination as seen in the succeeding ages of the Church ? The Holy Spirit revealed the body of truth in the Apostolic age, and since that time the same Spirit has been shedding fuller and fuller light on the truth then given. John Robinson of Leyden gave expression to this position in the well-known words addressed to the Pilgrim Fathers. He charged them that " the Lord had yet more light and truth to break forth from His Holy Word." In this utterance he showed that we are to expect more and more knowledge, but it will always be " from His Holy Word " as the sole source from which the " light is to break forth." Herein lies the distinction between the static and dynamic in Christianity. It is fallacious in the extreme to place these two ideas in antithesis, for Christianity is at once static and dynamic.

6. The writer goes on to speak of our Lord teaching His disciples their need of " the continuous guidance of His Spirit in order to recognize the full meaning of His Person." This is of course strictly true in regard to those earliest disciples and the result is seen in the Acts and Epistles, where " the meaning of His Person "

is developed in a way that was impossible until the Spirit had been given at Pentecost. But I submit that to take these words as they stand and apply them to to-day is incorrect, for we are not on a level with those disciples. All that the words can mean is expressed by the distinction already drawn by the Spirit of Inspiration and the Spirit of Illumination. Otherwise we should be involved in a theory of development which is not fundamentally dissimilar from that of Newman. Development is natural, necessary and legitimate, but it must always be in essential harmony with Apostolic germs, or else the growth is not true but parasitic.

The whole statement is characteristic of that aspect of modern thought which tends to make man's mind the source, seat, and criterion of authority. In a book recently published these words occur :—

“ Since the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is accessible to us only through the Scriptures, there must be Scriptural proof for every proposition in Christian dogmatics ; but a proposition is not Scriptural because passages can be quoted in its support. It is Scriptural because it issues with inner necessity or consequentialness from the believing surrender to the revelation of God to which the Scriptures bear witness.”

On this view the source of Christian truth is not the Scripture considered alone or even Scripture regarded as predominant, but is found in a sort of harmony between Scripture and our religious conceptions and convictions. How these two are related and which is the more authoritative, the book does not say, but the principle stated is clearly one of essential subjectivity without any guarantee of objective reality.

Another quotation from the same book reveals the same attitude :

“ The material of dogmatics cannot be obtained from the Scriptures by *purely exegetical, historical investigation*, though such is essential, New Testament theology yields as such no Christian dogmatics. Dogmatics seeks not only to understand what is given in the New Testament in its historical actuality, but to win a judgment as to : with what *right* and in what *scope* faith may and must recognize a real revelation of God in what is narrated concerning Jesus Christ, and how correct was the understanding of the revelation by the New Testament witnesses.”

And so I maintain we must continue to assert the objective validity, the unique character, and the supreme authority of Scrip-

ture. If this is called "religious infallibility," be it so, because many of us hold that it is unthinkable that in the spiritual realm God has left us without the authority for accurate knowledge and genuine experience which we know He has given in other walks of life. It is surely much easier to believe that God has given us the Scripture as an infallible guide than that He should have left us to the discordant voices of men and the variableness of human consciousness.

There is scarcely any tendency of the present day more persistent than that which is implied in the extract given above, that of finding the seat of authority within man himself, as though the consent of the mind is the foundation of certitude. Reason and experience are valuable and necessary as the means of distinguishing the claims of authority and also as the recipients of the truths of revelation, but this is something altogether different from a claim to be the source or seat of authority itself. As Butler showed long ago, no authority can be legitimate which subverts or stultifies reason, and the right of verification is the bounden duty of every man, but if there is such a thing as reality independent of our mind, it is obvious that human consent cannot be the basis of truth, for certitude only comes as the result of accepting and experiencing the reality outside ourselves. The difficulty with reason lies not merely in its normal human limitation, but in its serious defects through sin. It cannot analyse sin and certainly it has never found out the way of escape from the guilt and power of evil. To regard reason, therefore, as autonomous is to deny the existence of objective reality. Man's consciousness cannot create; it only weighs and then accepts or rejects what is offered. The true idea of authority is that which is not against reason but in accordance with it, and for spiritual life the supreme authority is the Divine revelation of Christ embodied in the Bible.

The modern tendency to fix the seat of authority within is liable, as I have pointed out, to the fatal error of pure subjectivity, unless it is constantly safeguarded by the consciousness of a true objective element in knowledge. For this reason I do not hesitate to repeat, because of its vital importance, that the idea of the terms "objective" and "external" being identical is wholly incorrect, for since the ultimate authority is Christ Himself we can see at once that though Christ is dwelling in us, He is not thereby

identical with us. He is the Divine revelation mediated through Scripture and applied by the Holy Spirit, and as such He is at once objective and subjective, external and internal.

I will close by expressing my strong opinion that the extract which I have quoted reveals no conception of Evangelical truth concerning Scripture, but is nothing else than a reminder of that modern quagmire which is associated with human consciousness as the criterion of truth. There is perhaps no principle which is more needed at the present day than that which is stated and involved in the doctrine of Article VI; the uniqueness, the sufficiency, the supremacy and the finality of Scripture for Christian doctrine and life. And it is not too much to say that if Evangelical Churchmanship is not clear, convinced, and constantly firm on this point, it has no defence either against Romanism or Modernism.

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#### SCHWARTZ OF TANGORE.

SCHWARTZ OF TANGORE. By Jesse Page, F.R.G.S. London : S.P.C.K. 7s. 6d. net.

There are probably many missionary-hearted people to whom Christian Frederick Schwartz is only a name, and we are indebted to Mr. Page for the patient research work that lies behind this readable biography of a really great missionary. He has indeed given us not only a full-length portrait of Schwartz, but in his first chapter, "How Christianity came to India," he has given us a careful outline of early Christian effort in India, and in another chapter we find a biographical sketch of another notable missionary, Bartholomew Ziegenbalg, born in 1683, "a born pioneer, undaunted in courage, fertile in resource, patient and yet full of inspiration, with a remarkable gift of organization," and who died at the early age of thirty-six, worn out with his labours. Schwartz was born in 1726 and died in 1798. In the course of Mr. Page's narrative many things emerge. We are reminded of the splendid service rendered by the venerable S.P.C.K., which appropriately publishes this memoir. Then, of course, there are bits of Indian history recorded, troubles over the succession of native rulers, hostility on the part of some British administrators, and controversy with Roman Catholics; but the outstanding figure is that of Schwartz, patient, persevering, and untiringly energetic and with fine spiritual ideals. It is good that his wonderful work should be redeemed from oblivion.