

Theology on *the Web.org.uk*

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes.
Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit
or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the
copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the
ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the
links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbadshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Editorial

IN the new atmosphere of good will that prevails between the Roman Catholic Church and those who are now designated as "separated brethren" the importance of studying, attentively and without prejudging the issue, the official documents which have been promulgated by the Second Vatican Council can hardly be exaggerated. Unless we are content to be governed by ignorance or sentimentality, this is a matter of plain common sense. Moreover, in view of the ecumenical emphasis of the Council, it is a duty we owe to those who wish to regard us as brethren. Of these documents, none deserves our attention more than the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, the theme of which is concerned with an issue that was of crucial significance in the dispute of the sixteenth century and still is so today, namely, Holy Scripture and the message of the Gospel. The intention of this document, it should be noted, is neither to retract nor to reconsider the pronouncements of the past, but rather to affirm the dogmatic continuity of Vatican II with both Vatican I and Trent. Its goal may be described as comprehensively ecumenical—"that the whole world may believe". Thus the Preface to this Constitution declares that, "following in the footsteps of the Councils of Trent and of First Vatican, this present Council wishes to set forth authentic teaching about divine revelation and about how it is handed on, so that by hearing the message of salvation the whole world may believe".

It should not surprise us to find that there is a considerable amount of common ground between us on this subject of revelation, for this has always been the case. We draw attention, for example, to the affirmation that God's revelation of Himself has its focus in Christ, the Word made flesh; that the divine plan of revelation is realized by both deeds and words which have an inner unity; that throughout the history of His people God manifested Himself prior to the coming of Christ, and in this manner prepared the way for the Gospel down through the centuries; that the Christian dispensation, "as the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away, and we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ"; and that the obedience of faith, which is the proper response to this revelation, "by which man entrusts his whole self freely to God", can be shown only if it is preceded and assisted by the interior help of the Holy Spirit (I, 2-5)*.

The divine inspiration of Holy Scripture is asserted without equivocation: "Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit . . . the books of both the Old and New Testament in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because, having been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 20 : 31 ; 2 Tim. 3 : 16 ; 2 Peter 1 : 19-21 ; 3 : 15-16),

* In the references which are given the Roman numerals indicate the chapters and the Arabic the paragraphs or sections. The latter run on without interruption throughout the document.

they have God as their author". This does not call in question the genuineness of the authorship of those human agents whom God employed in the writing of Scripture, for He made use of their personal faculties and abilities, "so that, with Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted". The conclusion is drawn that, "since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation" (III, 11).

With reference to the interpretation of Scripture, it is insisted that the interpreter "should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words". This involves, among other things, due regard for literary forms and cultural background. Respect for the unity and coherence of all Scripture, in accordance with its divine origin, is another important principle of interpretation. This is the principle of "the harmony which exists between the elements of the faith" (*analogia fidei*): "since Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted according to the same Spirit by whom it was written, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly brought to light" (III, 12).

The permanent worth of the Old Testament is firmly maintained. "The plan of salvation, foretold by the sacred authors, . . . is found as the true word of God in the books of the Old Testament: these books, therefore, written under divine inspiration, remain permanently valuable". The principal purpose behind the giving of the Old Covenant was "to prepare for the coming both of Christ, the universal Redeemer, and of the messianic kingdom". Although it is true that the books of the Old Testament contain some things which are "incomplete and temporary", nevertheless they show us "true divine pedagogy", providing as they do "sublime teachings about God, sound wisdom about human life, and a wonderful treasury of prayers". Indeed, "in them the mystery of our salvation is present in a hidden way". A famous dictum of Augustine is echoed in the declaration that "God, the inspirer and author of both testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New" (IV, 14-16).

The admonition is given that "all the clergy must hold fast to the sacred Scriptures through diligent sacred reading and careful study", with the explanation that "this cultivation of Scripture is required lest any of them become 'an empty preacher of the word of God outwardly, who is not a listener to it inwardly'" (a direct quotation from Augustine). Further, Bible study by the laity is emphatically encouraged: "This sacred Synod earnestly and specifically urges all the Christian faithful . . . to learn by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures the 'excelling knowledge of Jesus Christ' (Phil. 3 : 8)" (VI, 25). For this purpose, "easy access to sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful", that is, by means of translations into the vernacular

(VI, 22). "And let them all remember", it is very properly added, "that prayer should accompany the reading of sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together; for [quoting from Ambrose] 'we speak to Him when we pray; we hear Him when we read the divine sayings'" (VI, 25).

There is no question of the Roman Catholic Church's *magisterium* or "teaching office" being set aside. Though it would seem that the reins are to be held less tightly than hitherto, yet even scholars and theologians are not to be given a completely free head. Exegetes and other students of sacred theology, "working diligently together and using appropriate means, should devote their energies, *under the watchful care of the sacred teaching office of the Church*, to an exploration and exposition of the divine writings" (VI, 23; our italics). Versions made available for the use of the laity "are to be provided with necessary and fully adequate explanations so that the sons of the Church can safely and profitably grow familiar with the sacred Scriptures and be penetrated with their spirit" (VI, 25). This insistence on submission to the teaching office of the Church is based on the assumption that "the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ" (II, 10).

It is at this point that we must take issue with the Roman Church's doctrine concerning the binding authority of its teaching office. The assurance, indeed, is given that "this teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously, and explaining it faithfully by divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit" (II, 10)—and we have no wish to deny that the Church of Christ, especially through its ministry, is entrusted with a teaching task of vital importance—yet this doctrine creates a problem by introducing a second, even though secondary, authority alongside that of Scripture. It is, of course, in conflict with the Protestant principle of the *perspicuity* of Scripture, which is also demonstrably a biblical principle (cf., for example, Ps. 19 : 7ff.; Luke 16 : 31; 2 Tim. 3 : 15ff.), with which is linked the corollary that the teaching office belongs properly to the Holy Spirit who fulfils this office in the believing heart of every Bible student quite independently of any human instructor or interpreter, valuable though the latter may be. This leads to the further rider that even the youngest Athanasius and the least academic layman has a right and even a duty to challenge the teaching of pope and bishops, of professors and exegetes, if he believes it to be contrary to the teaching of Holy Scripture.

If it is really true that the Church's teaching office is not above, but under, the Word of God, then the conclusion we have just mentioned should be inherent in and acceptable to that teaching office; but it is a conclusion which the Roman Church is as yet unwilling to draw. The reason for this is that the doctrine of the teaching office or *magisterium* is closely bound up with the doctrine of the apostolic succession of bishops. The doctrine of the Church as the extension of the Incarnation is accompanied, at least implicitly, by the doctrine of the

extension of Christ as the Head of the Body by means of bishops and pre-eminently of the pope, in such a way that the teaching office becomes absolute and beyond challenge, and finds its ultimate logic in the dogma of the infallibility of the pope when he speaks *ex cathedra*.

This means, in turn and in effect, an extension of the Word of God which makes nonsense of the *Canon* of Holy Scripture by which the universal Church has claimed to be ruled, leaving open and uncertain what was by definition closed and finally authoritative. Here we have a clue to one of the main reasons why the Roman Catholic Church finds the postulation of tradition as a source of revelation co-ordinate with Holy Scripture a necessity. Thus the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* states quite explicitly that the Church "has always regarded the Scriptures together with sacred tradition as the supreme rule of faith, and will ever do so" (VI, 20), and that "sacred theology rests on the written word of God, together with sacred tradition, as its primary and perpetual foundation" (VI, 24). In one place, indeed, and quite understandably in view of what has already been said, a third factor is added to these two, namely, the teaching office : it is clear, we are assured, "that sacred tradition, sacred Scripture, and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others" (II, 10). Quite manifestly, all this is in line with the position which was defined four hundred years ago at the Council of Trent, whose *Decree on the Canonical Scriptures* (Fourth Session, 8 April 1546) declared :

. . . Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, promulgated the Gospel first by His own lips, and then commanded it to be preached through His apostles to every creature as the source of all saving truth and moral discipline. (The Council) recognizes also that this truth and discipline is contained in written books and in unwritten traditions which, received by the apostles from Christ's own lips, or transmitted as it were from hand to hand by the same apostles under the dictation of the Holy Spirit, have come down to us. Following the example of the orthodox Fathers (the Council) receives and venerates with an equal reverence and sense of piety all the books of the Old and New Testament, since the one God is the author of both, and also the traditions themselves pertaining not only to faith but also to morals, as dictated either by the lips of Christ or by the Holy Spirit, and preserved in the catholic Church by continuous succession. . . .

In an article of unusual interest entitled "Commentary on *De Revelatione*" and published in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (Vol. 3, No. 1, Winter 1966, pp. 1-35), the Roman Catholic scholar George H. Tavard is at pains to point out that it is clear in the light of modern research "that the Council of Trent had not intended to divide the Revelation into two distinct, partial, and independent sources, Scripture and Tradition, but rather that it wished primarily to express the unity of both in their common source, the Gospel". This explanation may be welcomed as unexceptionable (and it enjoys wide currency in Roman Catholic circles today) so long as there is no conflict or disharmony between Scripture and tradition : for nobody wishes to dispute the existence and the inevitability of tradition in the life of the Church. Two branches of authority originating from the same root must relate either to two different and distinct spheres, in which case

there is no danger of conflict, or, if they relate to the same sphere (as is the case with Scripture and tradition), must so harmonize that there is in fact but a single authority. This harmony is guaranteed by maintaining the supremacy of the authority of Holy Scripture in conformity with the classical Christianity of all ages, including, we do not hesitate to say, that of our own church. Thus in affirming that "the Church hath power to decree rites or ceremonies and authority in controversies of faith" Article 20 adds the important proviso that "it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything that is contrary to God's Word written"; and similar admonitions are given with respect to the authority of general councils and the traditions of the Church (Articles 21 and 34).

But it is precisely at this point that the Roman Catholic explanation of the harmony between Scripture and tradition breaks down, and demonstrably so—not least in the characteristic complex of Rome's sacerdotalism and mariolatry. It was this manifest conflict between tradition and Scripture, or, in other words, between tradition and the Gospel, that made the Reformation a necessity. Indeed, it must be said that Father Tavard's implied distinction between Scripture and the Gospel is thoroughly uncatholic. It is a matter of fact, of course, that in the Roman Church, as he points out, "the decisive factor, which actually creates Tradition by giving it the ultimate form of doctrine, is the *magisterium*"; but that the *magisterium* can err, and has erred grievously in modern times without regard for the sanctity of biblical teaching, is glaringly demonstrated by the papal promulgation of the unevangelical dogmas of Mary's immaculate conception and assumption. Regrettably, the issue over Scripture and tradition seems to be little if any nearer to solution in our day than it has ever been. It continues to be an issue of crucial significance. In fact, the question of the authority of Scripture as the Word of God can never cease to be the determining question in all discussions and negotiations, whether between church and church or between the Church and the secular realm, for on the authority of Scripture as the Word of God, and harmony with that authority, the authenticity of everything else in the life and teaching of the Church depends. In other words, Christians need to be reminded today no less than in the past of the importance of treating Scripture seriously as the *canon*, or rule, to which all must conform, or to which nothing must be contrary.

The present situation, however, is far from being static. There is the new atmosphere of good will, to which we referred at the beginning of this editorial, and this in itself is a great gain. In this atmosphere we find, as we have seen, that there are important and potentially fruitful areas of common ground revealed in the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, notably (over against the humanistic and demythologizing tendencies of some contemporary scholarship) the unhesitating assertion of the historical character of the life, person, and teaching of Jesus as portrayed in the four gospels (cf. V, 19) and (over against those who propound the view that revelation is by deeds and not by propositions) the declaration, already mentioned, that the "plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity" (I, 2), and, finally, the new-found desire to promote the study of the Bible

among the laity and biblical preaching from the pulpit (VI, 21, 22, 25). The theological situation within the Church of Rome is by no means as uniform and uncomplicated as some people imagine it to be. It too is a church tortured by tensions and confronted by crises. Yet, as Father Tavard observes, "the continuing dialogue which is advocated by the Decree on Ecumenism should find great encouragement in the Constitution *De Revelatione*"—but, for our part, the fulcrum of that dialogue, in relation to which alone a true balance is to be found, must never cease to be God's revelation of Himself and His will in Christ Jesus, of which Holy Scripture by itself is the record and witness.

P.E.H.
