

The Lausanne Covenant—2 The Authority and Power of the Bible

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[p.320]

Professor Bruce contributes the second article in our series discussing the successive paragraphs of The Lausanne Covenant. Paragraph 2, the subject of this commentary reads:

2. THE AUTHORITY AND POWER OF THE BIBLE

We affirm the divine inspiration, truthfulness and authority of both Old and New Testament Scriptures in their entirety as the only written word of God, without error in all that it affirms, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice. We also affirm the power of God's word to accomplish his purpose of salvation. The message of the Bible is addressed to all mankind. For God's revelation in Christ and in Scripture is unchangeable. Through it the Holy Spirit still speaks today. He illumines the minds of God's people in every culture to perceive its truth freshly through their own eyes and thus discloses to the whole church ever more of the many-coloured wisdom of God. (II Tim. 3: 16; II Pet. 1: 21; John 10: 35; Isa. 55: 11; 1 Cor. 1: 21; Rom. 1: 16; Matt. 5: 17, 18; Jude 3; Eph. 1: 17, 18; 3: 10, 18).

I. THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE

The first sentence of the statement on 'The Authority and Power of the Bible' bears all the marks of having been put together by a committee, various members or sections of which had their own favourite formulae for expressing the evangelical doctrine of Holy Scripture. Readers who are acquainted with current tensions and debates within the evangelical community (especially in North America) may guess why certain words were included: the resultant impression is one of pleonasm, as inspiration, truthfulness, authority, inerrancy and infallibility are all mentioned. (The suspicion has indeed been voiced that the phrase, 'without error in all that it affirms', implies that Scripture may err in matters which it does not affirm, but to which it alludes incidentally; this, however, is probably unwarranted, for the compilers of the statement do not appear to have had any such distinction in mind.) But three important facts are stated: (a) that Holy Scripture is 'the only written word of God'; (b) that it is given by 'divine inspiration'; (c) that it is 'the only infallible rule of faith and practice'—these three facts being stated (d) about the 'Scriptures in their entirety'.

(a) *The only written word of God.* God has spoken—that is, he has revealed himself—'in many and various ways' (*Heb. 1: 1*). So far as concerns the special revelation recorded in the Bible, he has 'spoken' in creation and providence, by calling the universe into existence and maintaining it in being; he has spoken in mighty works of mercy and judgment; he has spoken in the words of his servants the prophets and in the wisdom of the sages; and 'in these last days he has spoken to us in his Son' (*Heb. 1: 2*), in whom his earlier forms of self-disclosure have been fulfilled. As the unique record of this on-going revelation, Scripture is justly designated 'the only written word of God'; it has an even more valid title to this designation because of the unique witness which it bears to Jesus Christ, in whom the eternal word of God became incarnate 'for us men and for our salvation.'

It is not only divine revelation that is recorded in Scripture. The revelation was given in the course of history, and enough of the historical setting is usually recorded to show the contemporary relevance of the revelation. If the historical setting is not of the essence of the revelation, it is of great value for the understanding of the revelation—how great may be gauged from the difficulty experienced in interpreting a revelation detached from any ascertainable historical setting, like the shepherd oracle of *Zech. 11: 4-14*. At times, however, the historical record itself is presented as part of the divine revelation, when its significance is made plain in advance or in retrospect by prophetic exposition—one may think in this regard of the Israelites' departure from Egypt, of the deliverance of Jerusalem from Sennacherib, of the Judaeans' return from the Babylonian exile. Some of these episodes, especially the first, are so presented as to unfold a pattern of redemptive action which recurs from time to time in the life of the people of God and is consummated in the saving work of Christ.

But in addition to the divine revelation in its historical setting, the Biblical record has much to say about the response of those to whom the revelation came—a response, it might be, of faith and obedience, but too often of unbelief and rebellion. The former kind of response may serve as an example to be followed, but even the latter is recorded for a useful purpose. The Israelites who had experienced God's delivering mercy in the exodus and his fatherly care in the wilderness were guilty of successive acts of disobedience, but 'these things', says Paul, 'happened to them *typically*' (RSV 'as a warning'), and 'they were written down for our instruction', to enforce the lesson: 'let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall' (*1 Cor. 10: 11, 12*).

The response of faith and obedience finds preeminent expression in *The Psalms*. Here men and women relate their experience of God's dealings with them either in testimony to others or in thanksgiving to God. God is not here speaking to human beings: they are speaking to him or about him. Yet, since God makes himself known to his people in the experiences of daily life, their acknowledgment of how they came to know him in these experiences is an important means of divine revelation, as is evident from the way in which the people of God in

[p.321]

subsequent generations to this day have found in the Psalms a congenial vehicle for their own testimony and thanksgiving. In fact, the capacity of many of the Psalms, composed at an early stage in the progress of revelation, to accommodate sentiments and experiences belonging to the age of fulfilment, in one Christian generation after another, is no mean evidence of their divine inspiration—of their being prompted by the same Spirit of God as indwells and directs the followers of Christ.

(b) *Given by divine inspiration.* Divine inspiration is the activity of the Spirit of God. Divine inspiration plays a part in the account of the formation of man, when the Creator is said to have 'breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being' (*Gen. 2: 7*). But when it is predicated of Scripture, the reference is more particularly to the role of the Spirit in the ministry of prophet, psalmist and sage, those men who, in the words of a late New Testament writing, 'spoke from God' as they were 'moved by the Holy Spirit' (*2 Pet. 1: 21*).

That men so moved were conscious of this activity of the Spirit is plain from the Old Testament record. The prophet Micah, knew himself to be 'filled with power, with the Spirit

of the LORD, ... to declare to Jacob this transgression and to Israel his sin' (*Mic. 3: 8*). The 'sweet psalmist of Israel' could claim: 'The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me, and his word is upon my tongue' (*2 Sam. 23: 2*). And Elihu justified his intervention in the dialogue between Job and his friends on the ground that 'it is the spirit in a man, and the breath of the Almighty, that makes him understand' (*Job 32: 8*).

But, from the perspective of the New Testament writers, it is predominantly the prophets who are in view as recipients of this divine inspiration. It was this that made them such effective witnesses in advance to Christ and his saving work, when 'the Spirit of Christ within them' foretold 'the sufferings of Christ and his subsequent glories' (*1 Pet. 1: 11*). It was by this same power that the apostles in their turn spoke, 'in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit' (*1 Cor. 2: 13*)—not least in their ability to demonstrate that the Messiah to whom the prophets bore witness was identical with the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth.

In bearing their own witness to Jesus as the Christ, the apostles were conscious that they spoke not by their own authority but by the authority of the Lord who had commissioned them to be his witnesses. The New Testament may be regarded as the written deposit of the apostles' witness, whether directly or indirectly. (Luke, for example, was not himself an apostle or an eye-witness, but we are indebted to him for our knowledge of much that 'Jesus began to do and teach' during his Palestinian ministry and continued to do and teach by his Spirit in the apostles.) The ultimate authority to be discerned in the New Testament is the authority of Christ as Lord, mediated by the Spirit.

The first proof-text adduced at the end of our statement, *2 Tim. 3. 16* ('All scripture is inspired by God...'), ascribes divine inspiration not only to the prophets and their words but to the Old Testament record itself—the 'sacred writings' with which Timothy had been familiar from his childhood. This ascription of divine inspiration to the record may be related to a tendency in the New Testament documents to treat even the narrative setting of the Old Testament revelation as having in some degree the quality of an oracle—as when the author's comment in *Gen. 2: 24* ('This is why a man leaves his father and mother...') is quoted as part of the Creator's utterance (*Matt. 19: 5*) or when the groundplan of the wilderness tabernacle is used as the Holy Spirit's object-lesson on the difference that Christ has made in the matter of access to God (*Heb. 9.8 f.*). Moreover, that Scripture itself is divinely inspired may well be regarded as confirmed over many centuries in the experience of the people of God, who have heard the voice of God addressing them directly in the words of both Testaments as they have heard it in no other book. It is because of this quality of Scripture that (as our statement says later) 'through it the Holy Spirit still speaks today.'

(c) *The only infallible rule of faith and practice.* Here we have a more precise form of words, derived from Presbyterian tradition. The Bible is the rule of faith and practice in the sense that its distinctive function is to 'teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man' (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Answer to Question 3). It is the only rule of this kind, for there is no other source vested with the like authority. The authority of Scripture in this regard is bound up with the authority of Christ, who as the living Word has perfectly revealed to mankind the God who is to be believed and obeyed. But we have no access to this perfect revelation except through the Biblical record. It is true that, on his departure from earth, Christ sent the Holy Spirit to be his witness and to bring home to his people the implications—of his person, teaching and work, but since the apostolic age the primary vehicle of the Spirit's witness and interpretative ministry is Holy Scripture. Hence the

authority of Scripture cannot be by-passed by an appeal to the authority of Christ or to the witness of the Spirit.

When Scripture is said to be the 'only' rule of faith, and practice the intention probably is to exclude the rival claims of church tradition or the inner light in isolation from Scripture. Nothing is to be imposed as an article of Christian belief which is not taught by the plain and consentient testimony of Scripture; nothing is to be required as necessary to Christian conduct which is not so expressed or implied by that same plain and consentient testimony. The words 'plain and consentient testimony' exclude the use of proof-texts detached from their contexts; they also exclude the extraction of doctrinal or ethical principles by allegorical devices from material which does not *prima facie* lay down such principles.

[p.323]

Amid the multiform diversity of the Biblical documents, one continuous theme gives them their basic unity—the history of salvation, the record of God's increasing purpose for man's redemption, from man's first disobedience to his final reinstatement in a renewed creation. The record bears witness to the bringer of salvation, the way of salvation and the heirs of salvation; and its truth is validated in the experience of those who, accepting the bringer of salvation (Christ) by the way of salvation (faith), know themselves to be heirs of salvation by the living evidence of liberation and renewal. The testimony of Scripture comes true in real life.

(b) *The voice of the Spirit today.* The value of saying that, while the prophets and other spokesmen of God were divinely inspired, the Scriptures which preserve their words are divinely inspired, is that it underlines the fact that the Spirit who spoke through those men and women in ancient times continues to speak through them today. In the words of Scripture we can hear not only what the Spirit said to the churches of the first century but also what He is saying to the churches of the late twentieth century.

The Spirit is the Spirit of life, and it is because of his activity that the living and powerful word of God is still to be heard in Scripture. His operation in the readers or hearers of Scripture, enabling them to recognize and respond to the voice of God, is commonly called illumination—'he illumines the minds of God's people', says our statement—and it is the necessary complement to his operation in the speakers or authors which we describe as inspiration. It has indeed been suggested that one and the same term should be used for both operations, to emphasize their interdependence; it is probably best to distinguish them, while bearing in mind that in the one as in the other the same Spirit of God is accomplishing his free and sovereign work.

(c) *Transcultural communication.* Apart from this activity of the Spirit, it is incredible to many men and women today that events of nearly two thousand years ago, however significant they may have been at the time, can have any vital relevance at this late date. The fact that they nevertheless have such relevance to the lives of a multitude of people throughout the world in our own generation is a token of the presence and power of the Spirit, making effective in us now the saving work that Christ accomplished for us then.

This bridging of the centuries is an aspect of the Spirit's ministry that could not in the nature of the case be appreciated in New Testament times as it is by us. But it is paralleled by another kind of bridging which was then recognized as something of epoch-making

importance—the bridging of disparate cultures. When the gospel broke out of its original Jewish environment and rooted itself successfully in Gentile soil, this was a transcultural achievement with which many members of the primitive church had difficulty in coming to terms. From that time to this the capacity of the gospel, and of the Bible which is the fundamental written record of the gospel, to cross cultural frontiers and naturalize itself ‘in every culture’, has been repeatedly acclaimed as a compelling demonstration of its power.

In our day we are familiar with the presence of various cultures within one national or linguistic group: alongside a dominant culture there may be an ‘alternative’ culture or several ‘sub-cultures’. That the Biblical message should cross linguistic barriers and be translated into as many tongues as possible has been accepted for a very long time; we must accustom ourselves to the idea of its crossing the cultural barrier and being translated into a variety of cultural idioms even within one linguistic area. The idiom of the Revised Standard Version or the New English Bible is a foreign speech to some social strata which nominally speak and understand ‘English’. Carl J. Burke’s *God is for Real, Man. and Treat Me Cool, Lord* are examples of a cultural translation: we may be familiar with these books in written form, but the constituency for which they are designed is more likely to appreciate their contents in spoken form. There are colossal problems of communication between the culture that uses ‘standard English’ (whether the British or American variety) and the culture of the coffee-bar and discotheque, but the Biblical message can be conveyed in the mutually unintelligible idioms of these cultures, so that members of both cultures, and of all others, may have their minds enlightened by the Spirit to perceive its truth.

(d) *Yet More Light*. When our statement speaks of the Spirit disclosing through the Scriptures ‘ever more of the many-coloured wisdom of God’, it echoes the language in which John Robinson of Leiden addressed the Pilgrim Fathers in 1620 before their departure for the new world. He deplored the tendency of so many to stick fast at the point to which they had been brought by some venerated leader of the past—Luther or Calvin, for example—and affirmed that, for his part, he believed that God had ‘yet more light and truth to break forth. from his holy word.’

The most orthodox of creeds or confessions, including the Lausanne Covenant itself, can enshrine the wisdom of the past and the insight of the present but, inevitably, it cannot accommodate that further illumination which coming generations will discover in Scripture. This means that confessional affirmations, however Biblical they may be, should never become the standard by which Biblical exposition and belief are to be measured. Such affirmations express the faith and witness of those who make them in a particular situation, and some of them have deservedly attained the status of historic documents, recited or subscribed to this day by large bodies of Christians. But the Bible itself, while firmly based in history, is not restricted by its historical basis: in it the Spirit ever speaks with fresh power, declaring the word of God for the needs of a new day.

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