

THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE AND THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST

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The issue of biblical authority as the Word of God lies close to the center of Christian theology. Christianity stands or falls with the very question of authority of the Bible as the Word of God. Where we stand on this issue will determine the power of the Gospel we proclaim to the world. The question of biblical authority is, then, not the playing of the theological expert. It is the practical foundation on which the Gospel rests.

Everyone, therefore, who wishes to engage in the proclamation of the Gospel should first confront this question of biblical authority. Preaching is not the act of unfolding our personal convictions, but the act of informing sinners all that God has revealed. Evangelism presupposes submission to the authority of Scripture. In this sense the Lordship of Jesus Christ over every witnessing believer first starts with the question: "How do I accept the authority of the Word of God?"

The source of biblical authority

The acceptance of biblical authority is due to the belief that it is a divine revelation. In other words, what makes the Bible authoritative is that it is a divine Word. The question then arises, "Did God really speak to man?" Some fundamental presuppositions must be considered concerning this point.

First, *divine revelation is possible*. If we believe that God exists and is almighty, of course he can communicate himself to us. The very fact that God is alive proves the possibility of the self-communication of God, because it is the essence of love to reveal itself.

Second, *divine revelation is necessary*. God is bound in Christ to reveal his love toward sinners. In a special sense, revelation is available in the person of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son" (Heb. 1:1-2). About this revelation in Christ, we believe that the Scriptures are the clearest, fullest, and most complete expression and embodiment. And that Christ is the supreme revealer of God. Here we find the source of biblical authority in Christ.

Different views of Scripture

There are four different views of Scripture concerning the authority of the Bible.

First, *there is the Catholic view*. This holds the church to be the seat of authority. Of course the Church of Rome also believes that the Bible has divine authority and that through the Bible God speaks to us. However, that church has actually weakened the authority of the Bible by adding oral tradition to Scripture and by giving the church its *magisterium*,

the power of infallible and authentic interpretation. Rome claims to be the true defender of biblical authority. The Bible stands "under" the church.

On this point the noted Catholic theologian Ronald Knox says: "We have argued, first of all, that God is revealed in nature, then that he is revealed in Christ, and finally that Christ is revealed in his church, the Catholic Church. This general outline of certainty is sufficient to make us (if we wish to do God's will) take the church, the revelation of Christ, who is the revelation of God, for our guide on the rest of our journey; to let her teach us, knowing that her teaching must be his."

Knox thus dares to elevate the authority of the church above that of the Bible by insisting on the church's finality. Knox claims also that tradition has equal authority with the Bible. The Bible is thus one of the greatest sources of religious certitude; tradition is the other. By tradition is intended that oral teaching which the Lord gave to his apostles, and which they in turn handed on to subsequent generations.

Against these claims we must ask, "What constitutes the real church? Where is that church to be found?" The church in the fullest sense is best described as "the blessed company of all faithful people," and as such it is the product of divine revelation rather than the source of revelation.

The church is in the narrowest sense the product of Pentecost, and came into being on the Day of Pentecost by accepting divine revelation. Thus as the church began through accepting divine revelation it is difficult to see how it can be the seat of authority. Where does tradition find any support in Scripture for its authority and validity? Says Calvin, "Let us know that the assumption of the name of the church is a false pretense in all who are so carried away by the restraints of the Word of God, as to introduce a torrent of their own invention." As Calvin points out, tradition is no more than an assumption and an invention of the Church of Rome, and the attempt to endow upon tradition the same authority as the Bible has deserves to be condemned in the light of the Lord's own condemnation (Rev. 22:18).

Second, *there is the old liberal view*. The liberal held that man's natural abilities are to be used exclusively in the foundation of religious beliefs. The Bible is not the revelation of the Word of God, but simply an intellectual and philosophical symposium of ancient religious Jews. Only human reason is considered fully competent to discover and to define religious beliefs without any supernatural aid or divine revelation.

This view ignores the fact that man's faculties have been affected by sin. After the Fall, human reason became incapable of finding the truth without any supernatural help. This view ignores that there is such a thing as reality independent of reason. Truth is true whether we accept it or not. A thing must be true before we can accept it as truth. Truth is, first, objective — something presented — and only then is it subjective — something accepted. Thus reason is not originative or authoritative, but only a channel. It creates nothing; it weighs data and settles things as the result of weighing them.

Third, *there is the neo-orthodox view*. According to this also the Bible is a human book. It is not only the record of the religious experiences

of men, but also a witness to a revelation of God. Being a product of fallible human beings, it naturally contains errors. Nevertheless, it is a special and holy book in the sense that it is "witness" to the revelation of God, namely, his revelation in Jesus Christ. This "witness" is a human witness and as such it is open to criticism. As a human book, the authority of the Bible is relative, yet at the same time when God encounters us in his free Spirit through this fallible witness, it becomes God's revelation to us and its authority becomes absolute. God's Word in the encounter comes to me, not as information, but as demand, and faith is not mental assent, but the response of obedience.

Revelation is that which happens in the response of faith, rather than any thing that is said to evoke that response. Revelation is an event rather than propositional communication. In this kind of existentialization of revelation the seat of authority still rests on the human side, which makes the revelatory event possible by subjective appropriation.

We see here the essential kinship between the old liberal view and the neo-orthodox view of the Bible. They differ in detail, but both begin from the same starting-point and end up with the same destination. If there is any difference between them, it is only this: while the liberal relativizes the authority of the Bible, the neo-orthodox subjectivizes it and makes Christianity a kind of uncontrollable "Christ-mysticism."

Fourth, *there is the evangelical view*. According to this the Bible is the Word of God in such a sense that whatever it says God himself says. The Bible is not "man's report to us of what God says but (it is) the very Word of God itself, spoken by God himself through human lips and pens." It is "the very Word of God, instinct with divine life from the 'in the beginning' of Genesis to the 'Amen' of the Apocalypse."

The fact, however, that the Bible is the very Word of God does not exclude the divine-human character of Scripture. The Bible was composed by men in human language as they were motivated and guided by the Spirit of God. Because God has used the medium of human language to make his will known and has employed men to put his message into writing, there is variety in the literary form of the Bible. This divine-human character of the Bible makes its appearance like any ordinary book but its content is a message from God. That message is found in the Bible, and the Bible is the Word of God. Because of the fact that the Bible is the very Word of God, the Bible is the seat of authority.

The reformers regarded the Bible as the supreme doctrinal authority in faith and morals, divine in origin and consequently infallible. This position is well presented by the Belgic Confession thus, "We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith; believing without any doubt all things contained in them, not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but more especially because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they carry the evidence thereof in themselves."

The reformers emphasize the Bible's inherent authority and also its objective authority. They insist the Scripture has authority in and of itself as the inspired Word of God. It is the inspired Word of God which is written and therefore addresses man with divine authority.

The biblical doctrine of inspiration

Down through the ages the church has been convinced that the Bible in its entirety was inspired by God. The word "inspiration" needs to be clearly defined because of various modern uses of it.

Inspiration does not refer to the impression made upon the mind of the person reading the classical work or even the Bible. It refers solely to the impeccable text of the Bible which God breathed. The word "inspired" used in II Tim. 3:16 literally means, according to the Greek dictionary, "God-outbreathed." This term definitely affirms that all Scripture is the product of God's breath. Therefore the biblical meaning of inspiration rises far above the tendency to define inspiration merely as dynamic. Christ did not teach the inspiration of the writers of the Bible but he did teach the inspiration of their entire writings. Christ affirmed the inspiration of the entire Old Testament when he said: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled," (Matt. 5:17-18).

That Christ considered the Old Testament inspired is also shown from his repeated question, "Have you not read?" The question is actually equivalent to, "Do you not know that God has said?" (cf. Matt. 19:4, 21:16, 22:31). The same meaning is to be understood by "it was written" (Matt. 26:31, 26:54, Mark 9:12, 14:19, 27). Whoever carefully studies the Gospel narratives in the light of Jesus' attitude toward the Old Testament will agree with Reinhold Seeberg's words: "Jesus himself describes and employs the Old Testament as an infallible authority."

Peter asserts that the Old Testament has a distinct supernatural quality for "holy men of God spake as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (II Pet. 1:21). Paul also regarded the entire Old Testament as God-inspired. In Rom. 3:2 he refers to the Old Testament writings as the oracles of God. Thus most of the New Testament assertions about the inspiration of the Scriptures are made about the Old Testament.

Then what of the New Testament? Here Christ's unique position as the center of the Old and New Testaments must come to recognition. He placed his divine approval upon the entire writings of the Old Testament. Likewise he guaranteed the inspiration of the New Testament by his promise of the Holy Spirit. In other words, "He who accredited the Old Testament retrospectively accredited the New Testament prospectively."

This prospective accreditation appears repeatedly in the New Testament. Jesus promised his disciples the Holy Spirit who would guide them into all truth and would bring back to their remembrance the teachings they had heard (John 14:26). Peter asserted that he spoke by the Holy Spirit (I Pet. 1:12). Paul also assured the Corinthians that his message was not of men but from God. Likewise to the Galatians he certified "that the Gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from men, nor was I taught it, but it came through revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:11-12).

In writing to Timothy, Paul quoted Luke along with Deuteronomy as "Scripture" (I Tim. 5:18). Peter designates the writings of Paul "Scripture"

(II Pet. 3:16). Thus even before the close of the canon the Apostles were placing one another's writings in the same category as the Old Testament.

It was the position of the early Christians that the entire Bible was the Word of God. The Church fathers set forth the same testimony. The united testimony of such fathers as Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus is that the Bible is in its entirety inspired by God himself. Such a high view of inspiration carries with it certain concomitant truths. That is the doctrine of inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible. Infallibility is a necessary inference to be drawn from the doctrine of inspiration. Inspiration is incompatible with errors in the Bible. If the words of Scripture in the original autographs are the very words of God inspired by the Holy Spirit, they must of necessity be inerrant and infallible. This was the attitude toward the Scriptures that was held by the historical evangelical Christians through the ages till the present day.

New voices among the evangelicals on biblical inspiration

On the basis of the above-mentioned view of inspiration, it has been supposed that historically the reformers and the evangelicals of our own day are in common agreement with biblical authority. Now the agreement seems incomplete, however, and we are beginning to hear new voices among the evangelicals which cause us theologically to be on the alert because they seriously question the historic doctrine of verbal inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture.

De Wolf well observed this new change for he writes: "There is a noticeable, though indecisive change in the biblical inspiration and authority. Some of the new evangelicals, unlike most of the fundamentalists, avoid teaching 'verbal' inspiration of the Bible, stressing rather plenary or full inspiration." A survey commissioned by *Christianity Today* clearly shows that hesitancy is now prevailing among evangelicals regarding the infallibility of Scripture.

The survey regarding theological positions among American ministers revealed: twelve per cent liberal, fourteen per cent neo-orthodox and 74 per cent evangelicals, the latter comprised of 35 per cent "fundamentalists" and 39 per cent "conservatives." The distinction which was apparent regarding the doctrine of Scripture, showed that fundamentalists subscribed to the doctrine of inerrancy while the conservatives either did not subscribe to total inerrancy or had doubts about the doctrine. Nowadays we are beginning to hear from some evangelicals a cry for a reinvestigation of orthodoxy and a questioning of biblical inerrancy, thus creating such a new theological climate.

Contemporary orthodoxy, to some evangelical minds, needs to be realigned because it "does very little to sustain the classical dialogue on inspiration. The foundation of new ideas has apparently run dry, for what was once a live issue in the church has now ossified into a theological tradition. As a result a heavy pall of fear hangs over the academic community."¹⁰ Perhaps the basic reason for such a dissatisfaction against contemporary orthodoxy resides in the desire of some evangelical scholars to win a new respectability for orthodoxy in the academic community. To this end they even attempt to reexamine the

doctrine of biblical inspiration and infallibility in the light of modern science.

In doing so, a dangerous subservience to science is being signaled. The desire to win intellectual acceptability and to gain a new respectability for orthodoxy has now led into a friendly attitude toward science almost to the point of placing scholarship and science in the seat of authority. The so-called "threshold evolution" of Edward J. Carnell and "the progressive creationism" of Bernard Ramm are chief examples of this new trend.

Lordship of Christ and proclamation

The damage done to the authority of the Bible is not, however, limited to denials of the infallibility and verbal inspiration of the Bible by liberals, neo-orthodox, or others. Damage to the Bible is also done even by those who affirm its fully divine character and inspiration. Some evangelicals consider the Bible as mere communication and statements about God which are directed to man's rational comprehension and demand primarily intellectual acceptance.

Of course, the Bible is communication and should be accepted as statements about God. It is, nevertheless, more than communication and more than statements about God. We should be more than simply "orthodox" about the authority of the Bible. In this respect the Pharisees of Jesus' day were in one way "orthodox," for they rigidly accepted every proposition in the Old Testament.

However, their attitude was severely under Christ's judgment, because they divorced the Scripture from Christ. If we divorce the Lordship of Christ from the Scripture, we become guilty of bibliolatry. We must not see the Bible in isolation from the redemptive act of Christ. If we let the Bible take a place due to Christ alone we are falling into another subtle form of pharisaic intellectual idolatry.

This form of danger is great among those who believe in verbal inspiration and yet fail to see the Bible in living and unbreakable relation with the sovereign Lord Jesus Christ and the message of proclamation that follows. The Lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture must go hand in hand. The Lord Jesus Christ is the heart of all Scripture. Christ the Word incarnate, crucified, risen, glorified, now lays his total claim upon us in the words of his royal edict, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt. 28:18).

Under his Lordship, Scripture presses upon us the Gospel mandate which thrusts us into every corner of our world. Let us go forth then under his unlimited authority to fulfill the unlimited task of world evangelization with unlimited promise: "Lo, I am with you alway, even to the end of the world" (Matt. 28:20).

¹ *The Belief of Catholics*, 1958, p. 129.

² *Ibid.*, p. 130.

³ *Calvin's Institutes*, 1949, p. 466.

⁴ B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, 1951, p. 125.

⁵ Article V.

⁶ *Text Book of the History of Doctrines* (tr. E. Baker), I, p. 82.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Present Trends in Christian Thought*, 1960, p. 17.

⁹ November 10, 1961.

¹⁰ E. J. Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology*, 1959, p. 110.