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To walk in the Truth

Peter Milsom

Continuing our series of occasional articles on sections in the UCCF Doctrinal Basis, Peter Milsom, who is minister of Deeside Evangelical Christian Church in Clwyd, considers the clause 'The divine inspiration and infallibility of Holy Scripture, as originally given, and its supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct'. In particular he analyses the authority of Scripture in Christian belief and Christian behaviour today, as a framework in which to locate other articles in this issue.

The value of Holy Scripture to the people of God cannot be over-emphasised. Scripture itself bears eloquent testimony to the convictions and sentiments of every believer. 'Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens' (Psalm 119:89). 'Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long' (Psalm 119:97). Christians believe the words of Jesus when He said to His Father, 'Your word is truth', and rejoice in His prayer for His disciples, 'sanctify them by the truth' (John 17:17).

God's Word written

There are people who try to make a distinction between the Word of God and the words of Holy Scripture. We find no such distinction indicated, however, in the teaching of Jesus. Three times He answered the temptation of the devil with the affirmation 'it is written' (Matt. 4:1-11). Though He was well able to express God's truth in another way He deliberately chose to use the words of Old Testament Scripture. Yet today there is a measure of uncertainty about the verbal inspiration and the divine authority of the Scriptures. Although long-established con-

victions about the Bible are being questioned, with care, this may be turned to positive use. It is only too easy for us to become complacent about our doctrinal convictions and patterns of Christian conduct, but a climate of questioning obliges us to make conscious decisions about where we stand. Just as we recognise that Jesus Christ is God's word made flesh, so we need to see that Scripture is God's word written. Both reveal the will and character of God to men, but each comes to us for different though related purposes. It is Christ who became the 'source of eternal salvation for all who obey him' (Heb. 5:9), but it is the Scriptures that are able to make us 'wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus' (2 Tim. 3:15). It is by receiving their message that we learn how to receive him and to obey him day by day.

Our view of Holy Scripture

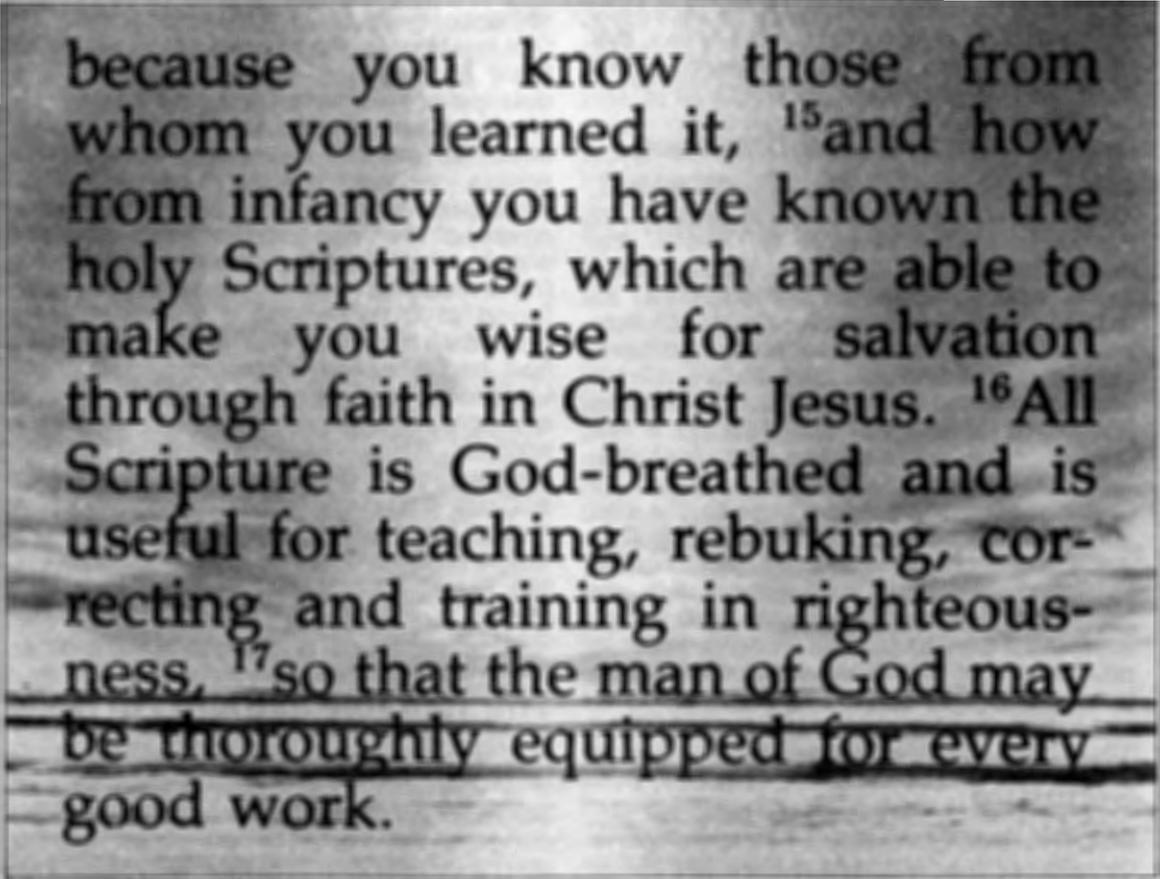
We can often trace definite stages in our Christian experience. When God begins to deal with us we are confronted first with our need to be reconciled to Him. We realize that formal religion does not accomplish this, and we are led to embrace Christ as our Saviour and Lord. Then, as newborn believers in Christ, we begin to grapple with doctrine in order to know **what** we believe. We read and become conversant with the various confessions of the Christian Faith and establish our own firm convictions. These are sharpened by informed discussion; and even heated debate, particularly in our student days! But, we may stop there. The fundamental truths of Biblical Christianity are established in our own minds, but where we once contended, now we merely conserve. As time goes by the truth no longer grips us as it once did, and does not shape and foster the growth and development of mature Christian character.

Is this true of our view of Holy Scripture? How do we approach the Word of God? How determined and consistent are we in applying its teaching in our daily lives? The debates of the last century or so are of more than academic importance. Those who contended two or three generations ago for the verbal inspiration of Holy Scripture realized the devastating consequences for Christian belief and behaviour of rejecting that truth. Their successors are spurred on by a recognition that the consequences are not only devastating but persistent, sapping the spiritual vitality of the church as well as that of the individual believer. The questioning of the truth of God's every word goes back to Eden, and since Eve that rock has shipwrecked many souls. How, then, are we to regard Holy Scripture?

What Scripture says, God says

These words go back to Augustine. They express the conviction that the ultimate Author of Holy Scripture is God himself. Paul reminded Timothy of this truth, 'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for

teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work' (2 Tim. 3:16). Paul was not merely saying that the writers of Scripture were inspired in the way that a poet or musical composer might be. Some theologians have used such an analogy to explain the inspiration of the Biblical authors. The result is that though they acknowledge a divine element in their writings they deny that every word comes from God. The Biblical writers, they suggest, are in the same category as other great literary figures. Nor was Paul saying that Scripture is inspiring, though this is true. He was speaking of something far more significant and amazing. He uses a word found nowhere else in Scripture to affirm the intimate relationship between God Himself and the Scriptures. They are 'breathed out by God' and so have their origin in Him. This emphasises the uniqueness of Holy Scripture. Of no other writings can it be said that, in their totality, God is their Author. This expression has great implications which Christians should grasp more completely. What are we to con-



because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

clude from God's 'breathing out' the writing, even the very words and their grammatical relationship, of Scripture in its varied books, poems and letters? That, while individual writers expressed their personal characteristics **in** what they wrote, **what** they wrote in itself was effectively originated by God himself, and its meaning effectively secured by Him.

The part played by human authors

How then, are we to understand the part played by the human authors? Did they simply write like robots so that their minds and personalities were over-ridden? It is clear that this was not God's way. Each of these men was prepared by God through birth, upbringing, and experience, to become the human author of God's revealed truth. Their writings arose out of God's dealings with them and through them. He so taught them and breathed out through them in inspiration that all they wrote was entirely free from error. Peter wrote, 'Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit' (2 Peter 1:20–21).

Is all Scripture God-breathed?

Can we apply Paul's words, already quoted, to the New Testament as well as the Old Testament? When he wrote to Timothy, the divine authority of apostolic teaching was being acknowledged in the churches, as they followed the example recorded in Acts 2:42, and saw that this authority had been given for building them up (2 Cor. 13:10) according to the principles Paul develops in Ephesians 2:19–3:7. Peter displays a like confidence in what he has written (1 Pet. 5:12) and associates the words uttered by Christ through the Apostles with the Old Testament writings (2 Pet. 3:2, 15–16). That not all in the church were ready to accept the apostles' writings as authoritative is apparent from such passages as 2 Thess. 3:14 and 2 Cor. 10, but the church was left in no doubt that this view was not an option but an error (2 Cor. 10:11).

The infallibility of Holy Scripture

Belief in the infallibility of Holy Scripture derives primarily from belief in divine

authorship. 'No Christian will question that God speaks truth and truth only (that is, that what he says is infallible). If all Scripture comes from God in such a sense that what it says, he says, then Scripture as such must be infallible, . . . because it is God's utterance.' (J. I. Packer in *Beyond the Battle for the Bible*.) As infallible, the Bible is reliable, but it is arbitrary to restrict its reliability to matters of faith and practice. It is as trustworthy in matters, say, of history and geography. But confidence in its message derives from belief in its consistent divine authorship, not from evidences from history or any other discipline. It is a matter of faith. That archaeological discoveries have discredited liberal scholars' scepticism regarding biblical accounts is all to the good, but this is not the basis of our confidence in the reliability of Scripture. We trust Scripture as infallible because we believe in its divine authorship. However, that does not release us from the need for humility and care in our interpretation, which is far from infallible.

The original autographs

How can we be certain that our Bibles are consistent with the original autographs? As this question is the subject of the article by Peter Misselbrook, there is no need for a detailed answer here. He shows that there is an abundance of textual evidence now available. We are still dependent upon manuscripts written many years after the Scriptures were originally given, but the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls revealed the way in which God has preserved the text in transmission. A complete scroll of Isaiah found at Qumran was a thousand years older than the oldest Hebrew manuscript we had had previously. Yet, remarkably, the variations are only slight – a striking example of the diligent care exercised by the scribes! Thus, while we must pursue earnestly all further light on what the biblical authors originally wrote, we have every reason for confidence in the text as we know it. There is no reason for us to believe that any major area of biblical teaching will be radically altered by further manuscript discoveries.

The supreme authority of Holy Scripture

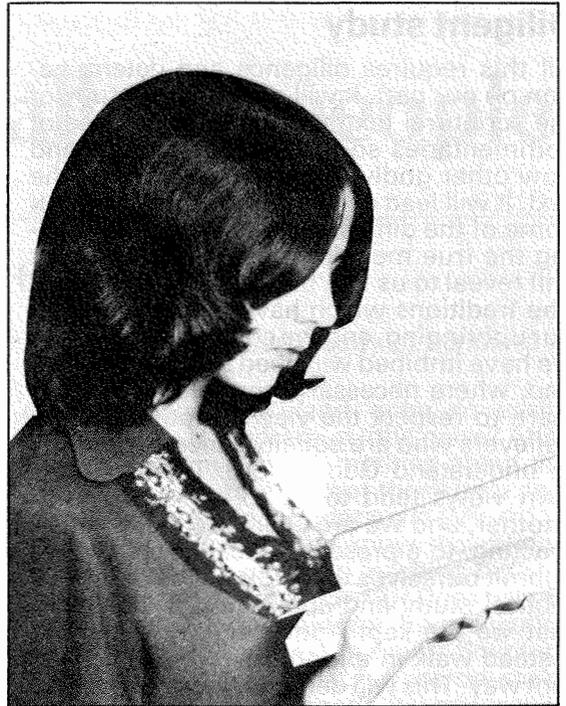
It is vitally important that our doctrine of Scripture is not simply a theory. There is the danger in the current debate concerning the inerrancy of Scripture that we might lose

sight of the need to apply the teaching of Scripture. Biblical inerrancy and Biblical authority are bound up together. There is a pressing need in our time for the Bible to be restored to its rightful place in the lives of Christians and of churches. As we read Scripture it is evident that God is addressing men with a message which they are humbly to receive, believe and obey. The divine authority of the Law commands our complete obedience. The Prophets called God's people to return from their evil ways to covenant faithfulness. The crowds were amazed at Jesus' teaching 'because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the Law' (Matt. 7:29). The epistles speak with apostolic authority to the practical situations which existed in the early congregations.

As Christians we should want to hear and understand God's message to us, giving due attention to every word of His revealed truth. For it is still true 'that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord' (Deut. 8:3). But we must ask, 'How seriously do we seek to do this?' Do we use our minds to the full in seeking to understand Scripture? Do we give enough time to diligent study of Scripture? Do we promptly and energetically seek to put scriptural teaching into practice? It must be studied (not merely glanced at) and made personal to each Christian. It must also be applied to contemporary issues – local, national, universal. There is sometimes a risk that academic delight in sound doctrine will divert us from carrying it into the High Street.

Our use of Scripture

How should we use and seek to understand Scripture? Some intellectually able Christians are content to be simplistic in their use of the Bible. They may seek guidance by opening it at random and taking the first verse their eye falls on as a 'word from the Lord'. Or individual verses may be taken out of their contexts and given a personal meaning which reflects the believer's personal preoccupation rather than the context in which God revealed that truth. The consequence of such methods is that words of Scripture are manipulated to say what we want them to say, in the manner of the sects. We might recall that the devil is not above using Scripture to suit his own ends! (Matt. 4:11). I remember one Christian who frequently used to open his Bible at random to seek a word from the



Lord. He almost always opened it at Isaiah, Jeremiah or Ezekiel. As a result he either received a word of severe condemnation or of glorious promise – with corresponding effects in his own spirit! We can and must say without hesitation that these were not words from the Lord, nor did they help him live a consistent, godly life.

Principles of interpretation

If we are to understand God's Word aright we need to adopt clear principles of interpretation. First, we must pay attention to the **historical context** in which the Scriptures were originally given, and respect it. Only in this way can we discover the true meaning. Secondly, we must recognize the **organic unity** of Scripture. The many different authors, with their differing historical situations, styles and purposes, all convey the message of the one God. All Scripture proceeds from the one mind through the one Spirit and is, therefore, a coherent whole. Our understanding of any particular passage must be consistent with the whole of the scriptural revelation. Thirdly, we must be concerned to interpret Scripture practically. God speaks to us here and now through His Word in order to elicit our prompt response. He does not only show us the way: He tells us to **walk** in it (Is. 30:21). This is the essential outcome of faithful interpretation.

Diligent study

All this requires diligence and determination on our part. It will demand the study of the scriptural text and the judicious use of commentaries so that we may understand how other godly men have interpreted the text. It will lead us to think and pray through some of the difficulties that arise in discerning the true meaning of some passages. It will reveal to us the 'blinkers' we each wear. The traditions which have influenced us in our upbringing, and the contemporary ideas we have imbibed will need to be challenged and, where necessary, corrected. We must learn to respect the views of other sincere believers who are equally concerned rightly to understand God's Word. Too often our own views tend to go to one extreme or another, and we are ever reacting, or over-reacting, to a present issue. It is only as we submit ourselves to the discipline of serious biblical study and application of the Word that we are kept from a zig-zag path, and instead walk in a more mature and consistent way. This will demand rigorous honesty in examining our own prejudices, and a courageous enterprise in venturing into unaccustomed areas of thought.

The illumination of the Holy Spirit

We need to seek the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Just as the authority of Scripture in its production arises from His work, so its present authority in application arises from His authoritative interpretation. He is the Spirit of Truth, whom Jesus told His disciples 'will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you' (Jn. 16:13-14). In all our study of God's Word we need to be totally dependent upon the divine aid and illumination of the Holy Spirit. His interpretation alone is infallible!

The Bible and the Church

Our personal study and application of Scripture must never be isolated from our fellowship in the church of Jesus Christ. We belong to the Fellowship of Faith, those who together seek to sit under the authority of God's Word. The church has not given Scripture its authority, but rather acknowledges the God-given authority of the books

of Holy Scripture. As evangelical Christians we acknowledge this scriptural authority to be supreme. One of the objections raised by the Church of Rome to the Reformers' insistence on making the Word of God freely available to all was that it would lead to proliferation of private interpretations, and a consequent undermining of authority. Whilst rejecting the withholding of the Bible from the people we need to recognize the danger of neglecting the close relationship between God's Word and God's people corporate. In each generation the gospel needs to be re-presented within fully scriptural categories to speak of Jesus Christ to contemporary needs and in contemporary terms. The church has to perceive genuine current issues, and find and apply scriptural passages in a response that is Biblical and accurately focussed.

The proclamation of God's Word

How do we regard the preaching of God's authoritative Word? The regular proclamation of His Word plays a vital role in our corporate life as believers. Do we, whether as preachers or as congregation, regard preaching as highly as we ought? Do we see the faithful proclamation of God's truth as coming to us with authority today? When we attend the preaching of the Word do we look for, expect and pray for an 'existential encounter' with the living God? For we should: we are not mere spectators. Do we seek to work out our Christian faith in the give and take of Christian fellowship? One of the privileges of belonging to a church is to be able to explore the contents of Holy Scripture with others who know and love the Lord and His Word. Our personal understanding is incomplete and our obedience very inadequate, but we can, and we should, encourage each other to greater insight and faithfulness.

We have an authoritative message to proclaim to a lost world. Many have believed the lie that all truth is relative, and that absolute truth cannot be known. The great privilege and responsibility of the Christian Church is to declare to people, 'This is what the Lord says!' With full confidence in, and acceptance of, all God's Holy Scripture we must be seeking to emulate the apostle Paul who said, 'We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ' (Col. 1:28).