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# THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE FOR THE ANGLICAN REFORMERS

by RALPH S. WERRELL

"IT can never cease to be of moment to the real lover of Scripture", said one of our teachers, "what was thought of its meaning by any patient investigator in any country or in any age". Neither can it cease to be of moment what was thought of the authority of Scripture, especially by patient investigators in this country in such a formative and decisive age as that of the Reformation. We are indebted to Mr. Werrell, Rector of Danby Wiske, Northallerton, for refreshing our memories on this important question.

**T**HE Anglican Reformers attached great importance to the knowledge of the Word of God, for it is only through the Holy Scriptures that man can know the revealed will of God, and find a standard by which he can discern the true from the false. As far as possible the material chosen has been that which has some relevance to the present situation.

"Unto a Christian man there can be nothing either more necessary or profitable than the knowledge of holy Scripture; forasmuch as in it is contained God's true word, setting forth his glory and also man's duty. And there is no truth nor doctrine necessary for our justification and everlasting salvation, but that is or may be drawn out of that fountain or well of truth."<sup>1</sup> Here in the opening words of the Homily on Holy Scripture the whole teaching of the Anglican Reformers as regards Holy Scripture is declared. This brief statement maintains the sufficiency of Scripture for our salvation, basing it upon the authority of God, since Scripture is the Word of God. It thus amplifies the teaching which we have in Article VI, for the sufficiency of Scripture rests on the fact that it is God's Word.

To the Reformers the Scripture was supreme in all things, and it alone the source of authority. Doctrine, however ancient and honoured (as the Creeds for example), should only be received inasmuch as it "may be proved by most certain warrants of holy Scripture".<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Homily on Holy Scripture.

<sup>2</sup> Article VIII (The XXXIX Articles).

## I. THE AUTHORITY OF GOD'S WORD

The authority of Scripture lies in the fact, as stated in the Homily on Holy Scripture, that "in it is contained God's true word".<sup>3</sup> God inspired the writers and moved them "for the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost".<sup>4</sup> Because it has this authority it is therefore all-sufficient to show us the way of salvation.

It is possible to argue that the actual meaning of the phrase "is contained" does not of necessity mean that the whole Bible is the Word of God, and that some parts of it are the words of man, but it is clear from the Reformers' teaching that this is not the case.

"Scripture hath for its author God himself; from whom it first proceeded and came forth. Therefore, the authority of Scripture may be proved from the author himself, since the authority of God himself shines forth in it."<sup>5</sup> Since the Scriptures are the Word of God, and since God is their author, Bishop Jewel can ask: "What title can there be of greater value? What may be said of them to make them of greater authority, than to say, 'The Lord hath spoken them'?"<sup>6</sup>

It is the whole Bible which is God's Word, and not parts of it only. We cannot choose some parts to be received whilst rejecting others. Bishop Jewel, writing of the ways Satan has tried to suppress the Word of God, says of the heretics, "they denied, some one part, and some another part of scriptures: they rased, blotted, corrupted, and altered the Word of God".<sup>7</sup> If then it is the work of heretics not to accept the whole of the Bible as the Word of God, "we cannot but wholly disapprove the opinion of those, who think that the sacred writers have, in some places, fallen into mistakes".<sup>8</sup>

"Now was the sacred scripture given by the Holy Ghost",<sup>9</sup> and therefore is free from all error. "We confess and believe all the canonical books of the Old Testament, and all the books of the New Testament, to be the very true 'word of God', and to be written by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost."<sup>10</sup> The Holy Spirit

<sup>3</sup> Homily on Holy Scripture.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Peter 1: 21.

<sup>5</sup> Whitaker, *Disputations on Holy Scripture*, P.S. edn., p. 289. (Here and below "P.S." stands for Parker Society publications, 1842-55.)

<sup>6</sup> Jewel, *Works*, vol. iv, P.S. edn., p. 1,163.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1,165.

<sup>8</sup> Whitaker, *op. cit.*, pp. 36, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Coverdale, *Works*, vol. i, P.S. edn., p. 394.

<sup>10</sup> Bradford, *Works*, vol. i, P.S. edn., p. 370.

directed the thoughts of the writers, and guided them as they wrote down God's message. We may not go as far as William Whitaker, yet we cannot quarrel with him when he says that their authority to write came from Christ and the Holy Spirit. "We believe that they [the writers of Holy Scripture] were induced and moved to write by the special authority of Christ and the Holy Spirit: for the scripture is called *theopneustos*, that is, delivered by the impulse and suggestion of the Holy Ghost. And 2 Peter 1: 21, Peter testifies that holy men of God spake 'as they were moved by the Holy Ghost'. Which makes it plain that they followed the impulse and authority of the Holy Spirit, not their own will and choice. The men were merely the instruments; it was the Holy Ghost who dictated to them."<sup>11</sup> Very few today would go with him in saying that the men were instruments taking down what the Holy Spirit dictated, but we should be wholeheartedly behind him in saying that they wrote at the "impulse and suggestion of the Holy Ghost"; for the Scriptures are indeed "the oracles and infallible speeches of God."<sup>12</sup>

It was the work of the Spirit of God to inspire the writers of scriptures, for "the Scripture is nothing else but that which the Spirit of God hath spoken by the prophets and apostles".<sup>13</sup> Therefore it is permanent, being "the voice of one God, and sealed up in writing by the inspiration of one manner of Spirit".<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, having but one Author, though many writers, it is at unity with itself, and so one passage alone is necessary to prove what is God's will on a matter; "it is enough if there be any one plain testimony for the same. Neither ought it to be measured by the number of scriptures, but by the authority, and by the verity of the same. And the majesty of this verity is as ample in one short sentence of the scripture, as in a thousand".<sup>15</sup>

The reason God has given us His Word is that we might be saved, and led into the way of truth. "Now was the sacred scripture given by the Holy Ghost", wrote Bishop Coverdale, "that man thereby might be guided and led unto salvation, and to most excellent felicity".<sup>16</sup>

## II. THE SUFFICIENCY OF GOD'S WORD

This cannot really be separated from the first section. God's

<sup>11</sup> Whitaker, *op. cit.*, p. 526.

<sup>12</sup> Becon, *Works*, vol. i, P.S. edn., p. 134.

<sup>13</sup> Tyndale, *Works*, vol. i, P.S. edn., p. 88.

<sup>14</sup> Philpott, *Works*, P.S. edn., p. 353.

<sup>15</sup> Ridley, *Works*, P.S. edn., p. 172.

<sup>16</sup> Coverdale, *op.cit.*, p. 394.

Word is sufficient for our salvation because it is God's Word. God is the Author of Scripture, and He is also the Author of our salvation. He has included in His Word, therefore, all that is necessary for us to know if we are to be saved. The sufficiency of God's Word in all things necessary for our salvation is therefore dependent upon the authority of the Scriptures as the inspired Word of God.

The Reformers' position is clearly stated in Article VI: "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required by any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation".<sup>17</sup> Traditions and the writings of the other saints of God are only to be received insofar as they can be proved by the Holy Scriptures.

"But we say that all things that are necessary, whether they regard either faith or practice, are plainly and abundantly explained in the scriptures. Hence we say that the sum of our religion is written, being precisely the same as the teaching of those apostles who wrote nothing".<sup>18</sup> Again, Whitaker writes, when considering 2 Tim. 3: 16, 17: "From this passage we draw the following conclusion: The whole scripture is useful for the end of rendering the man of God perfect for every good work: therefore, the scriptures are sufficient for all things necessary for us".<sup>19</sup>

This was necessary, for man, through the effects of the Fall, is imperfect, and therefore only the Scriptures, which are God-given, can be relied upon for our salvation as being free from the effects of man's sin: "otherwise we should daily forge ourselves new-feigned religions".<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, if God's Word were imperfect, and to be filled out by man, we are accusing God of not giving to us a sufficient revelation that we might be saved. "Yea: for it were a point of intolerable ungodliness and madness to think, either that God hath left an imperfect doctrine, or that men were able to make that perfect, which God left imperfect. Therefore the Lord hath most straitly forbidden men, that they neither add anything to, nor take anything from, His word, nor turn any way from it, either to the right hand or to the left".<sup>21</sup> "God's book

<sup>17</sup> Article VI (The XXXIX Articles).

<sup>18</sup> Whitaker, *op. cit.*, p. 513.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 632.

<sup>20</sup> Nowel's Catechism, P.S. edn., p. 114.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

is no imperfect work, but a perfect book, containing all things to be done, the whole duty of a Christian man, and sufficient doctrine to instruct a God's-man in all good works, and to make him perfect; as Paul witnesseth, writing to Timothee."<sup>22</sup>

John Lambert, in his defence, A.D. 1538, affirmed: "In Holy Scripture is contained sufficiently enough of doctrine for the regiment and salvation of our souls; . . . I say, that in holy Scripture the doctrine there contained is sufficient for the salvation of Christian men's souls: God give us grace we may know it, to build our faith steadfastly upon the same, in working thereafter!"<sup>23</sup>

The Reformers also drew greatly upon the works of the early church fathers, and they used these earlier saints in the defence of their position. This was perhaps especially true of Bishop Jewel. But these fathers of the church were not equal to Scripture, but were used to show that the position the Reformers held was not new-fangled. "St. Cyprian maintaineth well the same in an epistle that he writeth, *Ad Cecilium Fratrem*, which I would to God were in English, that all men might learn the devout goodness in it contained. In the same he teacheth clearly, how we ought to hear Christ only, and his learning, not regarding or attending to the traditions of men; like as he doth also in many other places."<sup>24</sup>

This view of John Lambert was also true of the later Reformers of the Church of England. They held that due use was to be made of the writings of Christian saints since the interpretation of others, and the teaching of the Church throughout the whole of history, are part of the ministry God has ordained, and as such must not be despised. However, such teaching is to be compared with, and tried against, the Holy Scripture, which alone is the true judge of all things relating to our faith, and is alone the infallible rule of faith.

Thomas Becon, after having quoted from the writings of the fathers of Christianity, says: "Neither do I recite the testimonies of the old fathers to confirm and make our matter the more strong, which already is sufficiently established by the holy scriptures; neither need they the confirmation of any man's doctrine". He then goes on to say that, without the authority of Scripture, "all that is ever taught or written be but mere fantasies and human inventions".<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Hutchinson, *Works*, P.S. edn., p. 253.

<sup>23</sup> Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, vol. 5, p. 194 (Church Historians of England, Seeley, 1857).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>25</sup> Becon, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

Whosoever is the writer of a book, and however much respect we have for the author as a saint of God, we must "prudently prove all kinds of doctrine with the true and infallible touchstone of God's most blessed word. . . . Things must be proved by the scriptures, and not by the spirit of pride, contention, despite, and contumacy". Furthermore, nothing is to be received, "except it may be established by the holy scripture and pure word of God".<sup>26</sup>

God's Word is therefore the supreme authority for the Church, and is sufficient for all doctrine and teaching. God has left nothing out, and there is nothing for man to fill in. That is the teaching of our Reformers, and it is the teaching which guided them and led them in the reformation of the Church of England, and for this truth many of them laid down their lives during the reign of Mary and Philip.

### III. THE SCRIPTURES THE JUDGE OF FAITH AND PRACTICE

Since the authority of the Word of God rests on the fact that God is the Author, and they "the oracles and infallible speeches of God",<sup>27</sup> we see that the Scriptures contain all that is necessary for us to know for our salvation. It follows, therefore, that Scriptures must be the judge of our faith, and if judge of our faith, then judge also of our practice, since faith and practice are bound together; "faith without works is dead" (Jas. 2: 26).

#### 1. *The Scripture and the Church.*

There are five grounds on which the Scriptures have authority above the Church, although some of these overlap to a certain extent. (i) The Word of God receives its authority direct from God Himself; God is the author of it. (ii) The Word of God is older than the Church. (iii) The Word of God is the foundation of the Church. (iv) It is only by the Scriptures that we can know the Church. (v) The Scriptures are the judge and touchstone whereby we can test the Church, and see whether it is a true or a false Church. "I believe that the same word of God is of a far greater authority than the Church."<sup>28</sup>

(i) The Holy Scriptures receive their authority from God Himself. John Philpot, in his Thirteenth Examination, said: "I grant that the authority of the church doth move the unbelievers to believe: yet the church giveth not the word its authority; for the word hath its authority only from God, and not of men".<sup>29</sup> As Christ received not the witness of man, "then also it will follow,

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>28</sup> Hooper, *Works*, vol. ii, P.S. edn., p. 43.

<sup>29</sup> Philpott, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

that neither does scripture need the witness of the Church. . . . Whence it is plain that no authority can be conceived greater or more certain than that of scripture."<sup>30</sup>

(ii) The Word is older than the Church; and (iii) the Word of God is the foundation of the Church. Archdeacon Philpot continued: "The word hath its being before the church, and the word is the foundation of the church; and first is the foundation sure, before the building thereon can be stedfast".<sup>31</sup> "For the word of God is the seed of the church",<sup>32</sup> wrote Whitaker.

(iv) It is only by Scripture that we can know the Church. "It behoveth us rather to search the scriptures, as Christ hath advised us, and thereby to assure ourselves of the church of God: for by this trial only, and by none other, it may be known."<sup>33</sup> Then a little further on Bishop Jewel adds, quoting John Chrysostom: "It can no way be known what is the church, but only by the scriptures." . . . By these ancient learned fathers it is plain that the church of God is known by God's word only, and none otherwise".<sup>34</sup>

Bishop Ridley adds to this on the same lines when he says: "The holy catholic or universal church, which is the communion of saints, the house of God . . . this church I do reverence and honour in the Lord. But the rule of this church is the word of God, according to which rule we go forward unto life."<sup>35</sup>

(v) The Scriptures are the judge of the Church, and therefore they have authority to reform the church. Bishop Jewel says: "Let us lay aside all self-will and contention, and have recourse only unto the truth that God hath revealed to us in his holy word. For thereby shall ye be able to know whether the church do right or no: and thereby shall ye be able to reform her, if she happen to do amiss. For it is possible the church may err; but it is not possible the scriptures may err. And the scriptures of God have authority to reform the church; but I never heard that the church hath authority to reform the scriptures."<sup>36</sup> When he comes to Article XIX, Rogers writes: "For authority also the word is before the church; because the voice of the church is the voice of man, who hath erred and may err from the truth; but the

<sup>30</sup> Whitaker, *op. cit.*, pp. 336 f.

<sup>31</sup> Philpott, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

<sup>32</sup> Whitaker, *op. cit.*, pp. 331 f.

<sup>33</sup> Jewel, *Works*, vol. iii, P.S. edn., p. 152.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>35</sup> Ridley, *op. cit.*, pp. 122 f.

<sup>36</sup> Jewel, *Works*, vol. i, P.S. edn., p. 79.

voice of the word is God's voice, who cannot deceive nor be deceived."<sup>37</sup>

Therefore we may say that the Scriptures are independent of the Church, but that the Church is dependent on the Scriptures, and on them alone, for its life and doctrine. "The Church of God must therefore be bound to none other authority than unto the voice of the gospel and unto the ministry thereof. . . . And seeing the church is bound unto this infallible truth, the only word of God, it is false and usurped authority that men attribute unto the clergy, and bind the word of God and Christ's church to the succession of bishops or any college of cardinals, schools, ministers, or cathedral churches."<sup>38</sup> Bishop Hooper goes on to say that Christ "left it unto the world in writing by the hands of his holy apostles: unto the which writing only he hath bound and obligated his church, and not to the writings of men".<sup>39</sup> "Thus proveth Paul, Eph. ii, that the church is bound unto the word of God: *Super fundamentum apostolorum et prophetarum extructi estis.*"<sup>40</sup>

"Must we believe the testimony of men, without it be grounded on God's word? Are ye become such an apostle? Because the church and congregation of Christ must discern, judge, try, and examine all manner of doctrine, and so to eschew the evil and keep the good, hath it therefore authority to make any new article, or to receive a doctrine contrary to God's word?"<sup>41</sup> Like Coverdale and all the Reformers, we must answer those questions with an unconditional No! For if we waver, even ever so slightly, we are undermining the foundations of the Church.

## 2. *The Scripture and the Individual.*

The Holy Scriptures are given to the individual in order to lead him into a saving relationship with the living Christ. They are given that we might have life. "Now was the sacred scripture given by the Holy Ghost, that man thereby might be guided and led unto salvation, and to most excellent felicity. For they that exercise themselves in holy scripture, studying and perusing it, ought thus to do; even to direct themselves and others unto life."<sup>42</sup>

Bishop Coverdale also quotes from the "Preface of the Prelates

<sup>37</sup> Rogers, *The Catholic Doctrine of the Church of England*, P.S. edn., p. 173.

<sup>38</sup> Hooper, *Works*, vol. i, P.S. edn., p. 27.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>41</sup> Coverdale, *Works*, vol. ii, P.S. edn., p. 419.

<sup>42</sup> Coverdale, *Works*, vol. i, P.S. edn., p. 394.

to the King's Majesty', prefixed to 'The Institution of a Christian Man', as follows: "The Bishops also and clergy of England, in the epistle of their book to the king's grace, do affirm, that 'Holy scripture alone showeth men the right path to come to God, to see him, to know him, to love him, to serve him, and so to serve him as he most desireth'."<sup>43</sup>

It is as the Holy Scriptures are applied to the heart of the individual that he receives salvation from Christ, and they are "fools, unwise, proud, that will not consent to the sound word and doctrine of Christ and his apostles".<sup>44</sup>

The Christian is a soldier of Christ, and is engaged in warfare against Satan and the hosts of evil. "But that divine harness, which with no weapon can be pierced, is fetched only out of the armoury of holy scripture, wherewith our David, Christ Jesus, brake the forehead of our adversary. Wherefore if we list to go unto the storehouse of God's scripture, we shall there find the true armour of this war, valiant in God not only to destroy fortresses, and counsels, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the doctrine of God; but also to resist in the day of adversity, and to quench all the hot and fiery weapons of our cruel enemy. Such weapons or armour of light, though we be the refuse and outcasts of the world, hath Almighty God given us, to make us stout and lusty in his wars. For in his armoury find we the harness of justice and verity, 'the buckler of faith, the helmet of health, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God': wherewith if we be diligently covered and fenced, there shall no tribulation, straitness, hunger, nakedness, persecution, etc., separate us from the love of God. Such armour, I say, shall holy scripture minister abundantly unto us, if we occupying our time therein do use the same wisely".<sup>45</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Head knowledge is not enough. The Scriptures are the Word of God, and are therefore our supreme authority both of faith and practice. Their teaching must be applied to our heart and lives by the Holy Spirit, both as a Church and also as individuals. "If we will that the true faith of Christ shall grow, continue, and increase, then we must bring the same to pass by true understanding of the scripture, by pure, sound, and wholesome doctrine. With the truth must lies be banished, with sound doctrine must false

<sup>43</sup> Coverdale, *Works*, vol. ii, P.S. edn., p. 335.

<sup>44</sup> Bradford, *op. cit.*, p. 394.

<sup>45</sup> Coverdale, *Works*, vol. i, P.S. edn., pp. 499 f.

be rooted out, with the light must darkness be expelled. But how can the true understanding of the scripture, the undoubted, wholesome, and sound doctrine, be had, when men do neither exercise and employ themselves, nor apply their endeavour, study, and diligence therein?"<sup>46</sup>

"Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience, and comfort of Thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 395.

<sup>47</sup> Collect of the Second Sunday in Advent.