

THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE:
THE ATTITUDE OF MODERN THEOLOGIANS

THERE are three reasons why it is important that the opinions of those from whom we differ should be studied in connection with the question of the Bible's authority. First, it is necessary in order that the true view might be properly known and stated. The early Christological controversies are instructive in this respect, since it was only as one heresy after another arose, and was refuted, that the true doctrine could fully be worked out, and, as far as possible, accurately defined. Again, it is necessary in order that erroneous views themselves might be fully understood, and thus avoided. Uninstructed Christians often use without thinking the language and thought-forms of heresy, and if they are not careful they will soon find it impossible to distinguish error from truth. The negative task of examining and excluding false teaching is not a pleasant one, especially when it is at the point of authority that the error occurs, and there is no common court of appeal, but it is one which is essential if the truth of God is to continue. Finally, it is necessary in order that what is good and right in heretical teaching might be incorporated into the orthodox statement. It is a truism that heresy is usually a distortion of the truth, an exaggeration of one aspect at the expense of the others, but this truism is one which ought always to be taken into account. In the opposing of false views care must be taken not to fall into the other extreme of error. The heresy rests upon some truth, perhaps a truth ignored or forgotten, which ought to have its right place, but no more than its right place, in true thinking.

In the question of the authority of the Bible there are three broad schools of thinking to-day which challenge what we believe to be the orthodox, Scriptural, Apostolic and Reformed position, and it will be our task to examine these three schools, keeping the general aims in view. First, and not least formidable, is the Roman Catholic teaching. In one sense this is not a modern view, since the Roman position was fixed at Trent, and in essentials has not altered or developed from that time. But in another sense it is very modern, partly because it is held by living Roman theologians, partly because it is likely to prove more

lasting than the Liberal view which now claims so much attention, and which superficially appears to be the more dangerous.

In the first question, that of the Scripture as a rule of faith, the Roman Catholic seems to adopt a position very much like the orthodox one. For him, the Word of God is an absolute rule. It displaces all private interpretations. It is inspired immediately by God. It is completely trustworthy, not only from the point of view of history, but also from that of doctrine. The value of textual studies is not questioned, since original texts correct errors in copying, give right readings, light up obscurities, and give force to the expressions used. The Roman Catholic Church does not approve of destructive rational or historical criticism, and indeed regards it as an evil fruit of the Lutheran heresy, the final stage in the assertion of freedom of interpretation.

Up to this point there would not be any essential quarrel with the Romans, but three further questions arise, in which the erroneous thinking of Rome is fully exposed. The first is: "What is Scripture?" The Roman answer is that Scripture consists of the Old and New Testaments including the Old Testament Apocrypha. Thus writings which cannot be included in the list of inspired and authoritative books have with them the same weight in doctrinal discussion as the truly canonical books. More than that, on the plea that Jerome had access to old and purer texts, and that his work has the sanction of centuries of use, the Vulgate is accorded the rank of a fully authoritative text. This means that doctrines may be grounded upon the Latin text even where it obviously does not correctly render the original.

The second question is: "Who is to interpret Scripture?" and the Roman answer is that Scripture is too obscure to be self-interpreting, and that there is need for a further authority to decide which is the right sense. In the Old Testament the law was interpreted by Moses and the priests. Now the interpretation of the Bible is in the hands of the Church, speaking through *ex cathedra* pronouncements of the Pope, and the decisions of general councils, together with the expositions of the early Fathers. Truly, the Bible is the basic authority, but side by side with that basic authority there is this interpretative authority, to which all Christians must bow. For the Roman Catholic there can be no appeal to the Scripture as privately read

and understood, only to the official Scripture officially interpreted. Whatever the Church reads into or out of the Bible is the rule of faith, not the Bible itself.

There is a third question: "Does the Bible as a rule of faith suffice, or is there a further and necessary rule side by side with and supplementing the Bible?" The Roman answer is that the Bible is not enough, nor in the strictest sense is it even necessary. Before the written Word there was an oral tradition, and side by side with the written Word there is to-day a tradition (both teaching and customs) derived directly from the Apostles, which is of equal rank with the Bible. Authoritative traditions consist of those which were universally accepted (as the teaching of the virginity of Mary), or of customs universally practised (as infant baptism), of those which are manifestly ancient, although not demonstrably apostolic (as the Lenten fast), of those which most doctors hold and which are not disputed by others (as baptismal rites, or the cult of images), and of those which are held by apostolic churches, of which Rome is the only one at the present time (as the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception). In effect this means that the appeal to Scripture is set aside, and the authority of the Bible is to all intents and purposes overthrown.

The devastating effects of Roman teaching upon the Bible's authority are clear enough, both in theory and even more so in experience, but it must not be forgotten that the task of meeting Roman doctrine still remains. Many questions require a more precise and exact handling if heresy of this kind is to be excluded. First, the textual: Why must the canonical books be given one authority, the Apocrypha another? What is the pure text, and to what extent, if any, can renderings be said to be inspired, or even, to what extent can we rely on any text as fully inspired? Second, the doctrinal: How is the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in Scripture interpretation to be correctly stated, so as to avoid the dangers of ecclesiastical monopoly on the one side, of fanatical individualism on the other? In what sense are the Scriptures of public interpretation? How far are the expositions of others, the Fathers or the Reformers—men who manifestly worked with prayer—to be taken into account in our own reading of the Bible? Third, the questions of order: To what extent is tradition permissible, if not in matters of faith, at any rate in those of order? Must church life be modelled exclusively upon the detailed

practice of Scripture, in such a way that what is not in the Bible is necessarily excluded, or has any church the power to maintain ceremonies and traditions so long as they are in accordance with Scripture principles, and of value for Christian life? All these are questions which demand some treatment and answer if a true doctrine of the authority of the Bible is to be maintained. In the answering of them it might be that something of value might be gained from the very manifest Roman errors, the danger of exalting one translation (Vulgate, or Authorised Version) into the infallible Word, the undoubted worth of previous expositions, not of course as infallible authorities, but as useful guides, the necessity of relating Christian principles to the historical development of the Church (right or wrong) as it came face to face with historical situations.

A second unorthodox teaching, which during the last two centuries has occupied the energies of defenders of the authority of the Bible almost exclusively—and with much justification in view of the radical nature of the attack—is that of modern historical and liberal Protestantism. This is a modern movement in every sense, since its development has been largely during the post-Reformation period, and it has provided a view of the Bible which is that of the majority perhaps of Protestant theological teachers and ministers, allowing, of course, for the many varieties of presentation. Rome attacks and destroys the authority of the Bible, not by denying its divine origin and unique position, but by adding to it other authorities which rob it of its power. Historical liberalism knows nothing of these subtle methods of peaceful penetration. It attacks the Bible frontally, denying the absoluteness or divine nature of its authority, willing to grant it authority—a limited and relative authority—only on the human level.

A full analysis of this complex liberal movement, in which so many different forms of thought coalesced, is unfortunately quite impossible in this paper, and all that can be done is to outline the various thought-forms, and to indicate the points at which they come into conflict with the orthodox doctrine. Five main movements combined—generally speaking—to produce this modern view of the Bible: (1) Rationalism, which at its best, as with the German Neology, sought to reduce revealed Christianity to the level of a religion of reason, and at its worst, as with Voltaire, sought to laugh Christianity out of court as

contrary to reason; (2) Empiricism, or Historicism, which had as its main aim the study of Christianity and all its phenomena along the strict lines of historical observation; (3) Poeticism, which, as with Herder and many of the early critics, approached the Bible as a primitive poetry-book, in which religious truths—partly emotional, partly rational—are set out in aesthetic forms; (4) emotional Pietism, the special and most important contribution of Schleiermacher, by which the doctrines of Christianity (including that of Holy Scripture) are re-interpreted in terms, not now of reason or history, or poetry, but of the individual emotional experience; (5) philosophical Idealism, which, in its final form in Hegel, gave a new rational interpretation upon a different philosophical basis: a basis which had as its starting point the individual thinking Ego. It is not to be supposed, of course, that there were not opposing tendencies in these movements, or that all of them are necessarily present, or present in equal proportions, in every liberal theologian; but generally speaking—and making full allowance for the many points of divergence—these are the movements which together constitute the liberal and humanistic challenge to the orthodox doctrine of Bible authority.

In what does that challenge consist? It consists first in the rejection of a Transcendent Deity and of supernatural acts of God. This means that the Bible has to be explained as reason, or history, or poetry, or religion, but not as the Word of God. The Bible is reduced to the level of a human book, outstanding perhaps of its kind, but not above all other books. The Bible has to be studied comparatively, with other books of religion, poetry, history or rational truth. It is inspired, but only in the same way as all other books are inspired, by the God immanent in all things. It is liable to error, because it is human, and all things human are equally liable to error. Thus the Bible ceases to be studied as a Divine message, a Word of salvation, and it comes to be studied as a product of the human spirit. In the investigation of it, questions of authorship, date, circumstances, style, development of thought, all these replace the first and fundamental question, the question as to the content of the revelation of the Creator-Lord, the Saviour.

The challenge of liberal humanism to the orthodox view of the Bible consists also in the comprehension of the Bible within a world-scheme of human progress, although this scheme is in

actual fact quite contrary to the teaching of the Bible itself. It is not our concern at the moment to discuss the wider and deeper aspects of the doctrine of progress, the general view of man, the view of sin, the interpretation of history, the relation to redemption, important as these are even considered as a challenge to the divinely revealed message of the Bible. But it is our concern to notice that the thought of the Bible, and the history which it records, and the culture which it represents, are all approached from the human standpoint and forced into the universal humanistic scheme. At two points this has serious consequences. First, it means that the sequence of Bible history, as the Bible gives it, has to be rejected, because unfortunately it does not fit the evolutionary interpretation. The facts have to be sifted from the so-called additions of religious fancy, and worked up into a new scheme. Second, it means that the message of the Bible has similarly to be treated and amended in order that a neat progression of religious thought might be observed. Even if it is granted, as many will grant, that in the teaching of Jesus Christ the highest point in all religious thinking is reached, it is still part of this same development of the religious instincts and faculties of the race, and the Bible has no superior authority as the Bible, only the authority of the highest human achievement in religion thus far. It will be seen that this is of a piece with the primary rejection of a Transcendent God and a Transcendent Word of God.

The challenge of liberal humanism consists again in individualistic subjectivism which it opposes to the objectivism of the orthodox doctrine of the Word of God. Outward authority is cast off, and it is replaced by the inward authority of the individual thought or experience. Reason here, emotion there, usurps the place of God. The thought or experience is valid and valuable, not because it accords with an external standard of divine truth, but because it is individual, a single manifestation of the divine spirit immanent in and working through all. The thoughts and feelings of Bible men have of course the same validity and value, in the case of the greatest Bible men perhaps the highest value, but only as similar manifestations of the same spirit. This means, not only that the basic authority of the Bible is rejected, not only that all religion is approached comparatively and judged relatively, but that every individual becomes a law unto himself in religious matters. God is dethroned, and humanity reigns,

but in practice humanity comes to mean little more than individual man, the thinking or feeling self.

This is the challenge, and in the facing of this challenge, the most potent and deadly heresy of Protestant Christianity, it is evident that much serious thinking, much close defining and much careful restating needs to be done. The whole question of an absolute and authoritative revelation has to be considered; the question of that revelation in its relation to history, to Israel, to Jesus Christ, to the Bible itself from the point of view of a literary product; the question of that revelation in its relation to the world-religions, or to so-called natural religion. Again, there is the question, subsidiary, but by no means unimportant, of the inspiration of the Bible; the question of that inspiration in its relation to the ordinary poetic inspiration of which literature speaks; the question of the special working of the Spirit of God in its relation to the general working, the activities which can be considered as products of common grace. These matters have been dealt with in the past, but the new challenge carries with it a call, not for the abandonment of the old doctrine, not for its amendment, but for a new and more careful and searching statement of it. And at one point, while the general presuppositions which underlie liberal writing upon the Bible are unhesitatingly rejected, the issue must be faced: Is there not something to be learned from a more thoroughgoing relating of the Bible message to the historical circumstances and even the literary form? The Bible is first of all God's book, as Jesus Christ is first of all Son of God, but it is a human book too, God's book in the world, as Jesus is the Son of Man, the Word made flesh. Naturally, no one who truly accepts the Bible's authority as the Word of God will wish to study the historical setting at the expense of the revealed message, but may he not wish to investigate the historical setting as the means to a better understanding of that message? Can there not be a true and reverent criticism—using the word in its constructive, not its destructive sense—even while the hostile rationalistic criticism is refuted?

A third unorthodox teaching, which has grown up in recent years largely as a reaction against contemporary humanism, is that associated with the theology of Karl Barth, or at any rate with the development which that theology has undergone at the hands of many, perhaps even a majority, of the disciples of Barth. It is not easy to make definite pronouncements with regard

to Barthian doctrine, partly because it is to some extent still in the making, partly because it is of too recent an origin to allow of dispassionate treatment. Again, at many points, vital points, the so-called Barthian school does not present a united front. In so far as Barthianism does, or can, harmonise with traditional teaching—the form of presentation differs of course—it need not perhaps detain us now, but in so far as it seems to be moving in a different direction, or to allow of non-orthodox views, it ought to be studied with the closest possible care.

Many real or possible points of divergence between the teaching of Barth upon the authority of the Bible and that of the Reformers have been suggested, and perhaps it would be most useful to list these, with such comments as appear to be necessary. They fall into two distinct classes, and first come those which concern the form of Scriptural revelation, the Bible as a book. The Barthian is at pains to stress the fact that the Bible is, outwardly considered, a human book with others. This means that he may if he chooses regard it as fallible. He is not tied to the view that God is the author in the sense that God determined the individual words, the phrases, even the expressions. He can with quite a good conscience agree that there are in it historical or scientific errors. He does not stress the fact that the Bible is truth in itself, that is to say, truth objectively, truth divorced from the divine act of revelation through the Bible. The Bible is indeed the only basis upon which, or rather the only form through which, God does work in revelation, but this is to be regarded as a paradox of grace. The Barthian does not discard an objective Word of God, but he does tend to disparage that Word, seeing in it not an instrument fashioned expressly for the purpose of revelation, the very nature of which proclaims its divine origin, but an imperfect, disproportionate human work, paradoxically and perhaps even arbitrarily chosen and used for that purpose. It must be admitted that most Barthian work has been along lines such as these, partly because of Barth's own fear of a worship of the outward form of the Bible at the expense of the inward content—a not wholly imaginary fear—and partly because many liberals have found in Barth a way back to an authoritative faith without the sacrifice of their assured critical findings. Whether such a development is the necessary, even the true, outcome of the real thought of Barth is quite another matter, and it is certainly possible to follow Barth at

many points without this disparagement of the outward form of revelation.

To the second class of possible errors belong those which are concerned with the content of the Bible, the Bible as divine revelation. First of all is the view that the Bible is only inspired as the Holy Spirit applies it and lights it up to the individual soul. Inspiration is confused with illumination, and if this teaching, which has, of course, a very real truth behind it, is pressed, it means that the Bible has no divine content except when the Holy Spirit speaks through it to the individual man. Revelation in the Bible becomes then an act of God, God's revealing of Himself, rather than the product of a divine act, a given revelation. It is along these lines that Barth himself sees and points to a distinction between revelation and revealedness, verbal inspiration and verbal inspiredness, the former phrases being accepted but the latter rejected as not part of true Reformed teaching. Within the limits that there can be no objective Word of God without also the application to individual souls there is truth in this distinction, but beyond those limits it leads in a dangerous direction. Pressed too far it means that the Bible can only be authoritative, not as an outward law, but as the Bible in the individual ego, as an inward experience, and with all Barth's insistence upon the fact that Christianity rests upon unique historical events, with all his stress upon the transcendence of God, in the last analysis we are still left with a faith which depends upon a subjective experience, and with the substantial autonomy of the individual ego. A further danger with Barth is that lawful paradox can easily be replaced by sheer irrationalities, for while it is no doubt a paradox that eternal truth is revealed in temporal events, witnessed through a human book, it is sheer unreason to say that that truth is revealed in and through that which is erroneous.

The problems raised by the Barthian theology are, of course, the central problems of all thinking upon the authority of Holy Scripture. They bring us to the very heart of the problem. Barth has performed a useful service by showing that the categories of a dead (as opposed to a living) orthodoxy simply will not do. An abstract objectivism, a mechanical conception of revelation, these are as far from the truth on the one side as is a pure subjectivism or a naturalistic view of revelation on the other. The problem upon which Barth himself is working is that of

solving the central relationship of revelation to history on the one side, to the individual believer on the other. Ought we to think that the Bible is trustworthy merely because we can demonstrate its historical accuracy? Ought we to think it authoritative merely because we have come to know the truth of its message through the Holy Spirit, and irrespective of the historical reliability or otherwise? Ought we not to seek the authority of the Bible in the balanced relationship of a perfect form (the objective Word), and a perfect content (the Word applied subjectively by the Holy Ghost)—the form holding the content, the content not applied except in and through the form?

In closing I should like to put forward the suggestion, not original, but not often regarded, that a true doctrine of history and revelation in the Bible will only be formulated when the problem is studied in the light of the similar problem of the Incarnation. In Christ the Word revealed there are the two, the divine and the human; the revelation, the history; distinct and yet one: so too it is in the Word written, which is the witness to Christ. It is not enough to deny the divine, to see only a man here, a book there. But it is also not enough to ignore the human, to see only a God here, an oracle there. If it is paradoxical (but not irrational) and yet true that the man Jesus is the Son of God (and faith by the Holy Ghost knows Him to be so), so too it is paradoxical (but not irrational) and yet true that the book, the Bible, can be and is the revelation of God (and faith by the Holy Ghost apprehends it as such). The two sides are paradoxically related, but they are congruous the one to the other, and must be: Jesus is perfect man, the Bible a perfect book. Of course the parallel must not be pressed too far, for Jesus Christ is God, Himself Person and Creator, whereas the Bible, however highly we value it, is a creature, the witness to a Person. But if the whole question is approached from this angle, with the Incarnation as our guide, it may well be that the way will open up to a truer and fuller understanding, one which is orthodox, and which safeguards the authority and integrity of the Scriptures, not in content only but also in historical form.