

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bib-sacra\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php)

## ARTICLE II.

## AUTHORITY AND THE PULPIT.

BY THE REVEREND CHARLES H. OLIPHANT.

“I hung my verses in the wind,—  
 Time and tide their faults should find!  
 All were winnowed through and through.  
 Five lines lasted sound and true!  
 Sunshine cannot bleach the snow,  
 Nor time unmake what Poets know.  
 Have you eyes to find the five  
 Which five hundred did survive?”

R. W. EMERSON, *The Test*.

“The final form of truth may come to be simply a summing-up of the experience of mankind as it has affected human destiny through the history of the world.”—CARL HILTY, *Happiness*, p. 135.

THE design of this article is a plea for authoritative preaching. Lest its position be misunderstood, a few preliminary propositions may be stated.

Truth is everywhere and always sacred. Congregationalism is the denomination which can afford to make all truth its ally and to be frank about it. From its rise in Brownism, our churches have stood squarely for intellectual freedom and spiritual fellowship. “If I am bound to believe what they say who are in authority, then my conscience is subject to error.”<sup>1</sup> Thomas Goodwin somewhere averred that “Errors maintained against knowledge are alone vital.”

We of the new century are done with the ancient device of setting the sun by the dial of our creed. Denominationally it is our pride that we are “authors of liberty,” and walk

<sup>1</sup> Henry Burton, *Rejoinder to Prynne*, p. 48.

not only in God's ways made known, but also to be made known, to us. A leader in another communion has said, "The Congregational Church is the foremost intellectual power on this continent." The denomination should aim still to deserve this reputation. Among the sects, our witness is to the perpetual reasonableness of faith, to the unfettered mind, to the enlightening office of Christ. According to Justin Martyr, "All pagans who live reasonably, or by the word of wisdom, have the Son" (Logos). Never was it more evident than it is to-day, that "truth is the daughter of time, not of authority."

By the logic of her birth and bringing-up, Congregationalism is committed to the principle of intellectual liberty. It is a dangerous denomination, and we love it. There is freedom to err in it; therefore, there is freedom to know the truth. In such a communion the errors that move for adoption have perpetual leave to withdraw; the evil humors that arise, liberty to come to a head, and cure themselves.

That the age we live in is religious, none will doubt. Yet its religiousness shows a greater diversity of operations than ever before. The church seems about to be disintegrated by the very liberty of thought for which our party has contended. Authority in the old sense has long since been denied to the pulpit. What is left is hardly more than *influence*, the specific gravity of Christian character. The pulpit is not so sure of its message; or, when it is, it strikes many false notes. The church seems "afraid to conquer." Its heralds are hesitant and apologetic. Their sermons are editorials, or, what is worse, "discourses." Every man has his own gospel. "Athens is in her ships." Men preach not as "authoritative teachers," but as "communicative learners." Of sweet reasonableness there is much, but where is the ring of authority:

Has there been a revelation or only a speculation? Because there is much to learn, is there nothing to preach? Such are the questions in answering which I trust that neither my space nor the reader's patience will be quite exhausted.

When that picturesque Philistine, Elbert Hubbard, speaks of the churches, it is in this fashion: "There is no dispassionate and unprejudiced man now but that knows and will admit that Protestant churches in America are no longer religious institutions. They are social clubs, with a ritual, often obsolete, and, as such, serve their purpose, and surely are more or less useful." Though such language is, of course, not to be taken too seriously, no Christian can read it without some degree of compunction. No danger is more subtle than that in which the church ever stands of becoming an æsthetic institution, where offenses against good taste are more eagerly shunned than the sins which, under cover of such an ecclesiasticism, become daily more respectable.

For myself, however, I should put into the impeachment of our churches different specifications. I do not find the distinctive weakness of the church to be either in its sociability or its "clubableness." It is oftener true that there is a deficiency than an excess of social coherence. What appears to be the apter and not less severe criticism is that the churches are united in little else than agreement about the minister, and, in stress upon this point, have become lectureships rather than fellowships, which condition may be charged in part to the pulpit's disuse of the method of authority. To a consideration of the legitimacy of this method of preaching, let us, then, with some misgiving, but not without a deep conviction, turn.

Three views, according to Professor Howison, have been held of the relation of reason to religion: (1) religion con-

tradicts reason; (2) religion supplements reason; (3) religion rests upon reason, and its authority is the authority of reason. He continues: "Reason, instead of paying homage to Religion, and making its submission to external authority, now legislates for the religion which is its own offspring, and becomes itself the authority from which the credentials of religion must issue."<sup>1</sup>

To this, as a general statement, one may agree, though not to the implication suggested by the writer, that the "method of authority" and the "method of conviction" are antagonistic the one to the other. In the preacher's witness to the truth, these methods are to blend. For the very reason that all legitimate authority is not above reason, but within it, the use of authority is the reasonable service of the pulpit. By as much as religion is unmistakably rational, by so much should it be authoritative. *The reason for authority is, therefore, the authority of reason.*

"Thought in motion, it is said, is for the sake of thought at rest." The method of conviction is not less valid in religion when conviction is agelong, and represents the agreement of experts in spiritual things. Convictions having these properties become authoritative, and the denial of their authority in religion is like the anarchist's denial to society in general of those powers and liberties which he claims for himself. Without its appropriate authoritativeness, reason becomes anarchic, and socially ineffective.

Difficulty, however, lies in the definition of legitimate religious authority. "The semi-regenerate man," says Thomas H. Green, "craves for positive declarations."<sup>2</sup> But so does the *wholly* regenerate man, and the totally *depraved* man. To deny such positive declarations, it is true, is quite in the

<sup>1</sup> *Limits of Evolution*, p. 224.

<sup>2</sup> *Posthumous Fragments*.

mode of present-day thought. The vice of the method of authority is the want of a rational delimitation of its scope. As it affects the pulpit, however, the fact must not be ignored, that within the holy precincts of truth there is a *most* holy place reserved for *the* truth—for truth, not only “as it is in Jesus,” but as it is in the agreement of the church’s testimony. Whatever theory be adopted as to the mode or measure of revelation; whether the truth be regarded as supernaturally displayed or vitally experienced; whether the Bible be the occasion or the consequence or the concomitant of revelation; even though, out of its “verses hung in the wind” of centuries, we can find but “five which five hundred do survive,”—the case is the same. Within the orbit of thought in motion, there is somewhere a stable equilibrium of thought at rest, to which, as truly as to its supreme prophet and oracle, all authority is given, at least on earth. So that, although such authority is not an ideal or normal standard, but only a practical or working one, it is the function of preaching to assert it.

Writing in 1877, Mr. Gladstone said: “In twenty-eight more years, perhaps, those of us who may be alive will have nerve to look in the face the proposal that the doctrine of a trustworthy authority in *morals* shall be abandoned, as well as that of a trustworthy authority in religion.”<sup>1</sup> But “those who think lightly of the testimony of the ages, or the tradition of their race, which, at all events, keeps them in communion with it, are often found the slaves of Mr. A. or Mr. B. of their newspaper or of their club.” Twenty-five years have passed, and how nearly has this prophecy been fulfilled! “It is not,” writes President Eliot, “the authority of the Bible only which has declined. All authority has lost force;

<sup>1</sup>Nineteenth Century, July, 1877. The present writer’s agreement with all that Mr. Gladstone wrote upon this subject is not here implied.

authority political, ecclesiastical, educational, and domestic. The world has had too much of authority, not enough of love and freedom." "There is, however," Dr. Eliot continues, "an authority which has been withal increasing in influence: it is the developing social sense, or sense of kin." Now we shall have made a beginning in answering our questions if we remind ourselves that this "sense of kin" is the essential part of the Christian revelation, upon which, rather more than upon other parts of the same revelation, the ministers of the church have dwelt with authority.

It has been said that "neither the verb 'to love' nor 'to believe' has any imperative mood." Jesus, however, used both words in the imperative: "I say unto you, Love your enemies." "Ye believe in God, believe also in me." By common consent it was allowed that Jesus taught with authority, and that he claimed authority. What did he claim? With what kind of authority did he teach?

The twofold use of the word authority admits of great confusion of ideas: (1) as signifying power to command or to act, as the authority of a king or judge, the right of coercive administration; (2) "the power derived from opinion, respect, or long-established reputation; influence conferred by character, office, station, mental superiority, or the like."

A writer of half a century ago defines authority as "the influence which determines belief without a comprehension of the proof."<sup>1</sup> Gladstone states the principle of authority thus: "The mass and quality of prior assent to a proposition in some minds may be, without examination of the grounds, a legitimate ground of assent for other minds in matters of knowledge and in matters of voluntary action."

According to these definitions of authority (excluding that

<sup>1</sup>George Lewis, quoted by Gladstone,

one denoting governmental or executive power), its recognition and use is distinctly reasonable. *It is a weight put into the balance of free judgment* without destroying either the freedom or the judgment. To deny the legitimacy of such authority in matters of religion appears to me to be superlatively irrational. Arthur James Balfour, in his "Foundations of Belief," goes further still in its defense: "If we would find the quality in which we most notably excel the brute creation, we should look for it not so much in our faculty of convincing and being convinced by the exercise of reasoning as in our capacity for influencing and being influenced by authority" (page 238).

I confess to a distaste for such antitheses. To set reason over against authority degrades both and confuses the issue. Reason is the total vibration of the chord of thought. Authority is like the nodes at which that vibration rests within itself, and whence are propagated the harmonic overtones, which may be likened to the overplus or stable residuum of the total vibration; to the common and settled convictions of thinking minds.

If we turn now to the value of evidence and precedent, we find that both are allowed, at law, to possess authority in virtue of the solidarity of our thinking as well as our acting, as social beings. In Greenleaf's treatise on Evidence are these words: "Matters of fact are proved by moral evidence alone, i. e. all evidence not obtained either from intuition or from demonstration" (page 3). "The true question, therefore, in trials of fact, is not whether it is possible that the testimony may be false, but whether there is sufficient probability of its truth" (p. 4). "All that men know is referable to perception and reflection. But, in fact, the knowledge acquired by an individual through his own perception and reflection is but

a small part of what he possesses ; much of what we are content to regard and act upon as knowledge having been acquired through the perception of others. The disposition to believe upon the evidence of extraneous testimony is a fundamental principle of our moral nature, constituting the general basis upon which all evidence may be said to rest" (p. 15).

How is it with the judiciary? Certainly it is not the individual acumen of a judge which alone makes his judgment august and effective! Such acumen is indeed indispensable, but only as it is added to the knowledge of cases, the citation of ancient and modern instances, the corroborative weight of precedent. If it is true that a recent appointee to the supreme bench of the nation remarked in public on the eve of his departure for Washington, "For no rule of action can we claim that it has the authority of the universe behind it," exception should be made of those rules of action which are accredited by the best judgment of the best men from time whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary.

For the church such authority may to a large extent be claimed. Her testimony has been compared to the weight of the ax-head which makes the edge cut, without which the keenest wit, the brightest individual essay or pronouncement, will be relatively ineffective.

We are too ready, I am convinced, to look upon spiritual experience and its vital truths as we regard the doctrines of inductive science or the products of invention,—as changing from generation to generation. But the values of the soul are not variable, like the vehicles of locomotion. The spirit that once went to God in a stage-coach does not go with greater celerity in an automobile. The approaches to the Infinite are the same from generation to generation. We un-

derstand the Bible better than our fathers did, but we may not know God as well as they knew him.

To claim authority for any system of theology is no part of my intention. One may agree with Martineau, in his masterly contention for the inner light as a just objective revelation, and yet hold to a real and valid principle of ecclesiastical authority.

But it will be asked, What is added to conviction by the assertion of such a principle? I would say, The same power that came into the teaching of Jesus when the assurance grew upon him that his spiritual intuition was the fulfillment, not the destruction, of the testimony of Israel; that his commandments summed up the law and the prophets; when he could say, "It is written," and appeal from the fashionable Targum of the day, from the Scribe and Pharisee, to Moses and the Psalms; when in the synagogue of Nazareth he could find in the roll of Isaiah his own momentous commission. One will find, of course, in some pulpits to-day much assertion of authority with the statement of many "things that aren't so." Is that worse than to hear many things that are true with no accent of authority, no apparent consciousness of the historic continuity of the church's testimony to them? Is not my conviction reënforced, confirmed, by that of myriads of others, though their conviction differed not in kind from my own?

The fallacy suspected in the aversion of our age to authority in the pulpit is the inference that, because the seat of authority is not above or other than the normal Christian experience, there can be no authority other than *individual* conviction. In opposition to this view, it should be urged that, in the collateral, collective, cumulative weight of Christian experience and testimony like our own, we have a valid seat

of objective authority within reason, and not differing in quality from the Inner Light itself, only vastly augmented. Without the recognition of such a principle, the *Te Deum* would lose half its meaning:—

All the earth doth worship thee;  
 The holy church throughout all the world doth acknowledge thee;  
 The goodly fellowship of the prophets,  
 The noble army of martyrs,  
 The glorious company of the apostles,  
 Praise thee.

*The authority of Jesus:* "He taught as one having authority."—The authority with which Jesus taught was the authority of reason: not, it is true, of reason in a partitive metaphysical sense; not of a rational consciousness, independent of the mystical or inspirational consciousness, but of both as they coalesced in a soul open, free, and pure, like an organ, with all its registers quick and responsive to the touch of reality.

"*Not as the Scribes.*"—Theirs was the authority of a closed book, his of an open mind; theirs was traditional, his was original; theirs was derivative and ministerial, his immediate and prophetic; theirs was the method of exposition, his of experience; theirs literal, his spiritual; theirs was the authority of form, his of reality. Yet though the disciples he made were not converts by the sword, not conformists through fear, not servile from terror, but disciples through love, through sweetness and light, no king, no lawgiver, no ruler, has ever commanded obedience more inexorably, nor been honored with such absolute surrender and service. Moreover, the total impression made upon us by Jesus is not of one whose authoritativeness was capricious and innovating; but rather of a reverent and conservative soul, heeding the *spirit*, if not the letter, of the past.

"Christianity," wrote Max Müller in 1892, "was really

from the beginning a synthesis of the best thoughts of the past as they had been slowly elaborated by the two principal representatives of the human race—the Aryan and the Semitic.” “By the Vedas,” said the Swami Vivekenanda, “the Hindus do not mean the books themselves, but the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws stored by all men through all times.”

As in all Old Testament prophecy there is the note of conservatism, holding the people back from the crass experiment of new-fangled sin, reminding them of a divine voice they had already heard; so Jesus came, not to destroy, but to fulfill. He submitted to be known as a baptized disciple of John, regarded by many as a rival teacher and acknowledged generally as a prophet. “What saith the *law*?” he demanded of an inquirer who came to him for light. “They have Moses and the prophets,” let them hear them. On two recognized commandments,—love to God and to the neighbor,—he founded his teaching. In the consciousness of such love he dared all opposition and moved upon the works of the devil. Mindful of the rights of such love, he asserted eminent domain for his kingdom and its claims. He doomed the ass for his use, offering no apology but his need of him. He cleared the Temple of commercialism; he accepted the hurrahs of the boys, and did not protest against those who strewed palm-branches in his way. The triumphal entry and spontaneous enthusiasm of the people were audaciously appropriated as befitting a self-consciousness which was rooted in so divine an altruism.

One who loves may always command.

“A mother never is afraid

Of speaking angrily to any child,

Since love, she knows, is justified of love.”—MRS. BROWNING.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by President Hyde, art. “The New Ethica,” in the *Atlantic*, November, 1902.

"Ignorant, short-sighted, inexperienced as he is," says President Hyde, "the child who walks in implicit trust in the wisdom and goodness of his parents cannot go far astray. He is guided by a vicarious intelligence in which the wisdom and experience of the race are reproduced and interpreted for him in each new crisis by the insight of love." Is this true only of children in *years*?

"How," a correspondent asked a certain editor, "can a Christian go to a Buddhist and preach Christianity as a duly accredited message from God to men, if authority is neither in church nor book, but only an inner light?" The history of mysticism proves how slight a difficulty there would be in that. Yet here again is the antithesis between authority and reason, between church or book and inner light. Why not allow that authority is in church and book because it and they alike belong to the insight of love, because church and book are voices of the soul? If one's intuition is final for himself, as it is and ever must be, are the concurrent intuition and experience of myriads of no greater authority? Shall not a preacher who finds himself supported by the historic testimony of the ages stake something upon his "Thus saith the Lord"?

"For human use it is evident that criticism was intended by Providence as a purgative, not as a food. There is nothing of which we are more weakly proud, especially we men, than our logic. And yet it is our logic that too often makes fools of us. In fact, plain logic is usually too simple an apparatus for the need. The data for the construction of a perfect syllogism can only be obtained from an artificially prepared cross-section of life,—which never does it justice. To operate with plane geometry, and neglect the third dimension on the axis of historic order is to do offense unto the

constitutive principle of human social life. To be human is to be social, to be social is to be historical, and human judgments to be sound, must be historical judgments.<sup>1</sup>

Is there no historic consensus on which our little testimony is borne—as chips are borne by the tide—compared with which our little theologic systems—*ours*, as well as our *father's*, “have their day and cease to be”; no Christian momentum which by our partaking of it enables us to pull more than our poor weight, and “to speak and exhort and reprove with all authority”; so that, in some true sense, we may feel that whatsoever we “bind on earth shall be bound in heaven”?

The time appears to me to be ripe for the reassertion of some principle of authority within the free churches called Protestant. With humiliation we must confess that Protestantism has been outgeneraled by the more experienced and far-sighted Roman Catholic polemic. Not the book, but the church, is the source of authority. A keener insight into human nature, a more deliberate prognosis of the advancement of learning, should have saved Protestantism from risking the principle of authority upon human writings, however inspired. Neither Catholic nor Protestant is, to be sure, quite right; but the Catholic is nearer right in resting for authority upon the living church than we in seeking it in the prophecies that fail, the tongues that cease, or the letter that kills.

With no fear that the Bible will ever lose its power as the word of God and Book of Life, it may be asked if just now we are not plagued with sects which have carried out to the letter post-Reformation insistence upon literal infallibility for Scripture. “An amiable old lady in Concord with a gift for inconsequence asks us to believe that we are ensphered in a gigantic swindle, and that the best way to get at the truth of

<sup>1</sup> President B. I. Wheeler, in *Atlantic*, November, 1902, p. 638.

things is to assume that they are all lies." <sup>1</sup> In support of her claims she offers a "Key to the *Scriptures*"! A false prophet from Chicago comes to us clad in the same "limp-leather, silk-sewed, divinity circuit." Both brandish Bibles as they preach their new crusades.

What, now, shall be our attitude toward such extraordinary pretensions and often strangely beneficent delusions? Stress should be laid on the fact that they are as yet *untried*; that no single generation can determine the worth of notions such as these. They are "without father, without mother, without genealogy," without traditions, without a literature. No family has yet been brought up in them. No one, therefore, knows their secondary or ultimate effects upon character. In other words, they have no authority.

Nor is it a sufficient answer to this to say, that *all* our denominational systems are eccentric. The eccentricity of the historic though variant bodies of Christendom is such that, while the axis of rotation is not perhaps in any case a true center, it lies within the circumference of the historic faith. One denomination accentuates mystical piety, another the rational understanding, another ecclesiastical order and continuity, another divine sovereignty, another evangelical fervor; but each of these centers of denominational zeal lies within the circumference of the historic faith of Christendom, each is but the relative accentuation of a truth of the historic order.

Not so Dr. Dowie. Not so Mrs. Eddy. Where is the authority for Dowie's Elijahhood, for Mrs. Eddy's "concatenation of nonentical identities"? Challenge her to take her Bible, and you will, I fear, be worsted in the arbitrament of literal Scripture. How changed the situation if we require her to show *a century's persistent faith in and practice of her creed!*

<sup>1</sup> Rev. M. L. Williston.

To object to this principle of authority, on account of the obvious limitation of its applicability, is a mere quiddity. Authority is not the same as infallibility. Of the latter we have indeed had too much. It had been better for the world if the doctrine of infallibility had never been born. But the church represents the deposit of the Spirit's witness in human experience. It is like the nautical chart in which are written down the day-marks and beacons, the buoys and signals, the sailing directions and soundings in the ocean's danger-belt. Because the chart is amendable, it is not less authoritative. Because it grew out of the successive adventures of ill-starred or successful navigators, has it no authority for the sailor beyond his own conviction or ability to verify its conclusions? The government which invites each purchaser of such a chart to report its errors or insufficiencies at Washington, stamps it, nevertheless, with its seal, approves and authorizes it, despite inevitable errors. In like manner the preacher may without fear utter the corporate subconsciousness of the church.

Is there not, at the present time, a dearth of such authoritative preaching? Can real preaching be anything but authoritative? Important as is the literary form and the Christlike temper; needful as are the grace of charity and the virtue of candor,—are these the distinctive traits of the sermon? The sermon is a message; the preacher a herald. Let the matter of it be however simple, the mode can be no other than imperative.

The church, then, that abdicates the seat of authority, forfeits the homage of the people. If it can be made out that the Congregational minister is a highly enlightened type of man, even in that fact may lurk a subtle temptation. His sermon may be cast in such a mold that, should there chance to be in

the audience a professor of psychology, he should hear no positive affirmations. Moral laws should be alluded to for their "symbolical validity" only. Prohibitions should become inhibitions; rewards, a poetic El Dorado; punishment, a hope deferred. The whole scheme of inexorable retributive love too often dissolves in euphemisms, and the historic Christian experience in amiable maxims like those of Franklin's autobiography or an editorial in a Sunday newspaper.

The question is raised whether there are not more truths than we suspect which can be *preached* as well as discoursed upon; and I would humbly affirm that, narrow as we may the scope of the message, curtail as we must the over-faiths and irrelevant dogmas of outworn creeds, insisting, above all, that authority lies never *beyond*, but always *within* rational conviction, being the weight freely assigned by Reason to historic testimony, there still remains to us the Faith once for all delivered to the saints: the God declared by Jesus; his sovereign Fatherhood; the reality of his presence and of his providence; the guilt and retribution of sin; the validity of prayer; the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount; the communion of the Holy Spirit; and for those who will accept it, the life everlasting.

For the disputer of the world there is ample room outside the church and, as there should be, hospitable treatment everywhere. As for the man in the pulpit, it is his kingly office "to bear witness to the Truth."