

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 *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The Rule of Faith

ARTHUR N. PRIOR, M.A.

AMONG the questions on which deep differences are to be found in the ranks of those who are nevertheless prepared to share the name of "Evangelicals," is the doctrine of Holy Scripture. One way to set about clearing up these differences is to find the one basic fact about Holy Scripture on which all "Evangelicals" are agreed, and then to work together at elucidating in detail what this fact means, until our natural progress in the working out of this leads us to those "details" which at present divide and puzzle us. Whether there is such a single fact—and important fact—about Holy Scripture on which all Evangelicals are agreed to-day, I do not know; but there is certainly such a fact on which they were agreed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, before such questions as the legitimacy of certain kinds of Biblical criticism had yet arisen. I propose here simply to state this fact, and to illustrate its key importance for the early Reformers and Puritans, and for at least one modern theologian, leaving it to others to work out its meaning fully enough to discover its bearings on current controversies.

The fact in question is the fact that *it is through the Bible—the witness of the prophets and apostles—that Christ rules His Church in the time between His Ascension and His Second Coming.*

THE RULE OF THE BIBLE.

The three main Confessions of Faith of English-speaking Protestantism give every evidence that the first truth about Holy Scripture which their compilers were concerned to assert was its rule over the Church.

In the case of the Thirty-nine Articles, this is not quite as clear as in that of the Scots Confession of 1560, and the Westminster Confession, but it is clear enough. The Sixth Article affirms the "sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for salvation," and says of the Apocrypha that while "the

Church doth read (them) for example of life and instruction of manners," "yet doth it not apply them to establish any doctrine"—the plain inference being that the distinctive fact about the Bible is that it *is* the book we must appeal to for the establishment of any doctrine. The Twentieth Article, on the authority of the Church, and the Twenty-first, on that of General Councils, make a point of strictly subordinating both to the authority of Scripture.

In the Scots Confession there can be no doubt at all where the emphasis lies. In the Preface the rule of the Bible is affirmed in a manner which an admirer of Kierkegaard would no doubt describe as "existential." That is, the compilers do not merely assert the authority of the Bible in the abstract, from the point of view of detached spectators, but themselves personally and as spokesmen of the Church confess their own submission to it, "Protestant that gif onie man will note in this our confessioun onie Artickle or sentence repugnand to Gods halie word, that it would pleis him of his gentleness and for christian charities sake to admonish us of the same in writing; and we upon our honoures and fidelitie, be Gods grace do promise unto him satisfioun fra the mouth of God, that is, his haly scriptures, or else reformation of that quhilk he sal prove to be amisse." The necessity not only for themselves but for all to practise such submission is affirmed in their articles on the "notes" of the true Church and on General Councils; and their brief article on the Scriptures, the nineteenth, reads, "As we believe and confesse the Scriptures of God sufficient to instruct and make the man of God perfite, so do we affirme and avow the authoritie of the same to be of God, and nether to depend on men nor angelis. We affirme, therefore, that sik as allege the Scripture to have na uther authoritie bot that quhilk it has received from the Kirk, to be blasphemous against God, and injurious to the trew Kirk, quhilk alwaies heares and obeyis the voice of her awin Spouse and Pastor; bot takis not upon her to be maistres over the samin." The Scriptures are for the Church the "voice of her own Spouse and Pastor," Whom she must obey but cannot command.

This emphasis is equally evident in the general development of thought which led up to the framing of this Confession. For example, in a dispute in 1547 between John Knox

and one Friar Arbuckle, the latter "ever fled to the authoritie of the Kyrk. Whairto the said Johnne answered offer then ones, 'That the spous of Christ had nether power nor authoritie against the word of God.' These said the Freir, 'Yf so be, ye will leave us na Kirk.' 'Indeed' (said the other), in David I read that there is a church of the malignantis, for he sayis, *Odi ecclesiam malignantium*. That church ye may have, without the word, and doing many thingis directly feghtting against the word of God. Of that church yf ye wilbe, I can not impead yow. Bott as for me, I wilbe of none other church, except of that which hath Christ Jesus to be pastor, and which hearis his voce, and will nott hear a strangeir."¹ In this constant citation of the tenth chapter of John, Knox no doubt took his cue from Zwingli, whose Theses of Bern of 1528, one of the first documents of the Swiss Reformation, begins with the statement that "The holy Christian Church, of which Christ is the only Head, is born of the Word of God, abides therein, and knows not the voice of a stranger." The same "shepherd's voice" passage from John was used by the German Confessional Church, in the declaration of their Synod at Baemen in 1934, as a proof-text for their doctrine that "Jesus Christ, as He is revealed to us in the Holy Gospel, is the only word of God which we have to trust and to obey, in life and in death."

The Westminster Confession—which, when it was originally framed, was not a purely Presbyterian document, but the work of an Assembly, summoned by Parliament, of the Church of England—opens with the description of Holy Scripture as a "way of God's revealing his will unto his people" and as "given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life, and this conception of Scripture as a "rule" dominates the whole of the opening chapter. In view of current controversies, it is interesting to note that the fourth section of this chapter says that the Holy Scripture should be received as authoritative, not on the testimony of men, but "because it *is* the word of God," while the tenth section, on the other hand, says that "The supreme Judge, by which all controversies are to be determined" is "the Holy Spirit speaking *in* the scripture." Similarly the Westminster Assembly's Larger Catechism affirms that "The holy scriptures of the Old and New Testament *are* the word of God,"

¹ *The Works of John Knox*. Laing's Edition, Vol. I, p. 200.

while the Shorter Catechism speaks of the word of God as being "contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments." Both affirm the rule of the Scriptures over God's people, the Larger Catechism describing them as "the only rule of faith and obedience," and the Shorter saying that the Word of God "contained" in them is "the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him."

The most exhaustive discussion of the doctrine of Holy Scripture that has appeared in our own time, and so far as I know in any time, the 1,500 packed pages of Karl Barth's Prolegomena to his Church Dogmatics, similarly emphasize the rule of the Bible over the Church. The task of theology, Barth maintains, is the criticism of the preaching of the Church by the standard of Holy Scripture, and his Prolegomena are simply a detailed analysis of the meaning of this description of the theology's task. His whole way of going about things thus implies the treatment of the Bible as in the first place a "rule." In his first brief outline of his beliefs about "The Written Word of God," the same fact is stressed. The Church, says Barth, has not been left alone by Christ to follow her own devices, but is still under His living rule. And the concrete instrument of His rule is the Bible.¹ When the missionary obligations of the Church were questioned, the Duke of Wellington is said to have pointed to a well-known missionary text and said, "There are your marching orders!" For Barth also the Bible is the Church's "marching orders."² He attaches special importance to the fact that the term "canon" generally means a rule or regulation. It means that also when we talk about the "canon" of Holy Scripture. He might also have cited the early Celtic Church's use of the term "Pandects," commonly applied to the laws of Justinian, to refer to the Bible.³

Like the framers of the Scots Confession, Barth regards it as important to confess the authority of the Bible not only in the abstract but also in an "existential" way—that is, he does not merely talk about the necessity of submitting

¹ *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, p. 113.

² *Ibid.*, p. 114.

³ See Rev. Duncan MacGregor, in an article on "The Celtic Inheritance of the Scottish Church, in *The Divine Life in the Church* (Scottish Church Society), Vol. II, p. 29.

to it, but himself submits to it in the working out of his doctrine. It is perhaps necessary to explain here that Barth believes that the longest way round is often the shortest way home (a belief which is, of course, a presupposition of the present article). The Scottish Covenanting divine John Brown of Wamphray, in writing a book about the obligation to keep the law of the Sabbath, spread himself over several hundred pages in a preliminary discussion of such matters as the nature of law in general and of divine law in particular, the kinds of divine law, the character of God's covenant with Israel, and the nature and kinds of divine worship. Similarly, Barth, in discussing the criticism of the Church's preaching by the Bible, does not hesitate to devote a vast amount of space to such questions as the nature of that "Word" or "revelation" of God which the Bible is said alternatively to "be" or "contain" (the word Barth himself prefers is "become," though in a carefully defined sense he admits the legitimacy of "be" also.) "When, however, "to make it clear how Church proclamation is to be measured by Holy Scripture, we first of all inquire into the prior concept of *revelation*, in this very inquiry we are bound to stand by Holy Scripture as the witness to revelation. *Perhaps more important than anything that dogmatics can say about the distinctive place of the Bible in the Church and over against the Church is the example it itself has to give in laying its foundations.*"¹ That sentence is in the true line of the Scottish Reformers.

THE TIME OF THE BIBLE.

The rule of the Bible cannot be rightly understood unless we also understand the "time," the "act" in the drama of redemption, in which it plays this dominating part. It is through the Bible that Christ exercises His rule over the Church *in the time between His Ascension and His Second Coming*. Though they have one now, God's people have not always had a Bible, nor will they always have one. The rule of the Bible is a "sign of the times," a distinguishing feature of the "last days" in which we now live.

This part of the description of the rule of the Bible over the Church was not so fully developed, in England and

¹ Barth, *op. cit.*, p. 339.

Scotland at all events, by the first Reformers as it was by the later "Protestant schoolmen." John Knox, for example, spoke in exactly the same way about the "Word of God," which came to Noah and Abraham before any Scripture existed, as he did about the written Word of God to which he recalled the Scottish Church of God in his own day—and, for that matter, about the "Word of God" which was then declared from Scottish pulpits by himself and his fellow Reformers. A particularly striking instance of this occurs in his last-published work, a defence of the Scottish Reformation against a Jesuit named Tyrie. To Tyrie's charge that the Reformed Church was a "new-found" (i.e. newly-founded) Church he replies that the only proper test of a Church's "antiquity" lies in the antiquity of the Word which it believes. In support of this, he cites the "Church" established in the family of Abraham, which, despite all appearances to the contrary, was not a "new-found Kirk," because the Word which Abraham believed, different as it was from anything that reached him by tradition, was nevertheless the same Word of promise which God had earlier spoken to Adam and Noah.¹ For Knox, "the Word of God" means indifferently God's directly spoken Word to such men as the patriarchs, and Holy Writ. He was little interested in such questions as inspiration, connected with the way in which the Word of God came to take this written form (what Professor Haitjema of Groningen has in our day termed the "inscripturation" of the Word), his main concern being to assert that the Bible, however it came to be so, is here and now God's living Word to those to whom He gives grace to hear it.

In this general attitude there is much that we still cannot afford to lose. We must still believe of the kind of Word which God directly spoke to Noah and Abraham that it is precisely this Word of God which the Scriptures by the power of the Spirit "become" to His people. That, surely, is the essential truth that people are trying to express when they say that the Bible "is" the Word of God or "contains" it. But this very fact cannot be expressed without formally distinguishing between the "Scriptures" which "become" this Word and the original revelation which they "become." The later attempts of Protestant scholasticism to make this

¹ *Knox's Works*. Vol., VI, pp. 491-2.

distinction more sharp and explicit were therefore not unnecessary. There is a kind of theo-Protestantism—which, we may add, sometimes calls itself “Barthian”—which is fond of praising the Reformers at the expense of the great Puritan divines who succeeded them; but this is short-sighted—we must learn from both periods. Barth himself, whatever attitude his admirers take, uses and quotes the *Protestant Schoolmen* lavishly, and by no means always to criticize them. In fact, he ought really to be thought of as one of them himself.

A practical consequence of this “division of labour” among the different periods is that we do not find this “time-factor” elaborated in the earlier standards of the English and Scottish Churches, but only in the Westminster Confession. Here, however, it is given sufficient importance to appear in the final section of the first chapter, where we read that “it pleased the Lord, at sundry times and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare . . . his will unto his Church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagation of the truth and for the establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing, which maketh the holy scriptures to be most necessary; these former ways of God’s revealing his will being now ceased.”

This passage was doubtless in the mind of that eccentric but instructive nineteenth-century preacher, Edward Irving, when he thus opened the first of his series of sermons on the Word of God: “There was a time when each revelation of the word of God had an introduction into this earth which neither permitted men to doubt whence it came, nor wherefore it was sent. If, at the giving of each several truth, a star was not lighted up in heaven, as at the birth of the Prince of truth, there was done upon the earth a wonder, to make her children listen to the message of their Maker. The Almighty made bare His arm; and, through mighty acts shown by His holy servants, gave demonstration of His truth, and found for it a sure place among the other matters of human knowledge and belief. But now the miracles of God have ceased, and nature, secure and unmolested, is no longer called on for testimony to her Creator’s voice. No burning bush draws the footsteps to His presence-chamber;

no invisible voice holds the ear awake ; no hand cometh forth from the obscure to write His purposes in letters of flame. The vision is shut up, the testimony is sealed, and the word of the Lord is ended, and this solitary volume, with its chapters and verses, is the sum total of all for which the chariot of heaven made so many visits to the earth, and the Son of God himself tabernacled and dwelt among us."

The Puritan divines of the early seventeenth century, and later too, were very fond of dwelling upon and describing these "ways of God's revealing himself," which are "now ceased," and the gradual precipitation of these revelations into their present written form. Detailed discussions of these points are to be found, for example, in the *Christian Synagogue* (1632) and other writings of John Wemyss of Lathockes in Scotland, a quaint scholar who delved into all sorts of Rabbinic and Talmudic lore in order to increase his understanding of the Scriptures.

Among the subjects discussed by Wemyss is *why* "God thought it necessary, after he had taught his Church by Word, next to teach her by write." He says very truly, "That we may the better understand the necessity of the writing of the word, wee must distinguish here the states of the Church"—her first "family or oeconomicke" state, her second "nationall, dispersed through the countrey of the Jewes," and her third "Ecomenicall or Catholicke, dispersed through the whole world." When, however, he attempts an explanation of why God's word was merely spoken to the patriarchs, in the process of being written among the Jews, and merely written to the present and Universal Church, Wemyss's explanation, though ingenious, is rather trivial, and, so to speak, "humanistic" in character. It also attributes to oral tradition an importance in patriarchal times which was plainly not accorded to it by Knox when he based the "antiquity" of the Church in Abraham's household solely on the real antiquity of the Word which came quite anew to Abraham. "So long," says Wemyss, "as shee was in a family, and the Patriarches lived long, to record to the posterity the word and the workes of God, then God taught his Church by the word unwritten. But when his Church began to be enlarged, first through *Judea*, and then through the whole world, then he would have his word set down in write ; because then the Fathers were not

of so long a life to record to the posterity the word and the workes of God."¹

Whether or not this may be criticized for what it says, it must certainly be criticized for what it omits. The closing of the canon surely has a deeper connection with the main events in the work of our redemption than is expressed in this explanation. Karl Barth, in handling the same question, characteristically links it up in the closest possible way with the rule of Christ. The "states of the Church, referred to by Wemyss are differentiated by Barth, not in the first place according to the Church's extent, but according to the methods of Christ's rule. During His life on earth before and after His Resurrection, Christ ruled His flock in person; and in the period of preparation for His Coming direct revelations were also used, though mediated, among the Jews, by the prophets. It is since His Ascension that His rule has been exercised by means of the Scriptures—that is, by a permanent mediation of the prophets and apostles. In his *Credo*, Barth cites the text, "He that heareth you, heareth Me," as a proof of this permanent authority of the apostles in the Church in the period of Christ's "absence."

It should be noted that it is the apostles themselves to whom (with the prophets) he attributes this permanent authority; not their "successors." This is his main quarrel with so-called Catholic doctrines of apostolic succession. He does not deny that bishops, and for that matter all faithful Christian preachers, are in a sense the successors of the apostles, proclaiming, like them, a word which may by God's power and grace become His own Word to their hearers. But their "succession" is of such a kind that the original apostles, whose testimony is deposited in the New Testament, retain for all time a certain independence and authority over them. The authority of the original apostle remains alive in itself and is not completely taken up into the authority of those who, in each generation, "succeed" them. The Word of God which now rules the Church is a written Word simply because in this form it preserves the original prophetic and apostolic testimony and saves it from merging into the "tradition" of the Church. The Protestant answer to the "Catholic" doctrine of apostolic

¹ J. Wemyss: *Exercitations Divine: Containing Diverse Questions and Solutions for the right understanding of the Scriptures*, pp. 61-2.

succession is that the apostles were not merely the first bishops, now succeeded by other bishops; through the New Testament, they are our "chief pastors" *still*.¹ Here Barth has revived the doctrine of the early Celtic Church that the true "Vicar of Christ" is the Bible.²

The "permanence" of this rule of the prophets and apostles is, however, only relative. The time of their rule—that is, of the rule of the Bible—has not only a beginning but an end. The Bible not only points the Church back to a past revelation, but also points her forward to a revelation that is to come. This "future revelation," to which Barth is constantly referring, is, of course, Christ's Second Coming. This end of the Bible's rule is not referred to as such an end in the Westminster Confession; but the eighteenth-century Scottish Seceder, Adam Gib, drawing on common earlier teaching, mentions the fact that "There will be no use or occasion in heaven for that blessed book called the *Bible*," and in their choice of a text for a "head-piece" the compilers of the Scots Confession suggest that all their main affirmations about the state of the Church, naturally including those about the Church's government, refer to the period between the Ascension and the Second Coming. The text is Matthew xxiv. 14, "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations, and then shall the end come."

All this discussion of the "time" of the Bible's rule in the Church is another instance of concrete, "existential" obedience to the Bible's authority. That is to say, these doctrines of the divine "times" can themselves only be worked out by actually using the Bible, and using it as authoritative. It is only from the Bible that we learn of these times when God spoke to men and ruled them in other ways, and of the time when He shall again do so. This is among those truths about the Bible which can only be inferred *from* the Bible; and from such truths we must begin if we believe with our fathers that the Bible is its own best interpreter.

¹ *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, p. 115 ff.

² D. MacGregor, *op. cit.*