

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 *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

The Authority of the Bible

GEORGE JOHNSTON

ALMOST four hundred and fifty years ago the Fathers of the Reformed Churches appealed from Roman Pope to Holy Bible, from ecclesiastical tradition to the divine Scriptures, in the conviction that all churchmen, be they bishops or theologians, be they General Councils or conventicles of the faithful in parts remote, Christians at whatever stage of wisdom and sanctity, all alike must stand under the rule of faith contained in the Canon of the Old and New Covenants. They thought that polity in the Church Catholic, dogma, and even a man's daily behaviour should be governed by biblical norms. As a result, translations of the Bible were rapidly made available in the vulgar tongues of Europe, and this year we gratefully celebrate the three hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Authorized or King James Version. Here is reason enough for us to consider afresh the authority of the Bible.

At the same time, there has been a dramatic revival in our time of Bible study and of what is called biblical theology. For the former, perhaps the struggle of the Confessional Church in Germany during the Nazi regime, together with the influence of its witness through its martyrs (for example, Paul Schneider of Buchenwald) and its representatives within the Ecumenical Movement (beginning at the first World Conference of Christian Youth, Amsterdam, 1939), has been largely responsible. For the latter, a tremendous debt is certainly owed to Dr. Karl Barth. Throughout the world there is a growing desire among the laity of the churches to study the Scriptures, and many fruitful methods are being tried. Part of the reason for this resurgence may lie in the challenge to the Christian understanding of life that is offered by scientific secularism or by godless existentialism or by the waning school of Logical Positivism in philosophy. Other reasons may be found in the urgent tensions in what used to be called the Foreign Mission fields, and also in the vitality of competing faiths and cults in Africa and Asia. At any rate there has been a reaction to a certain type of arid biblical scholarship in which the research of theology has taken priority over the needs of true religion. The younger generation has revolted against a kind of "liberalism" that seems to have produced complete scepticism and relativism. It is no longer good enough for such students that academics should busy themselves with the minutiae of textual or historical criticism, in such a way that the classical period of early Christianity is submerged in a sea of contemporary mystery cults and pagan philosophies. It must now be shown (if possible) how and why Christianity is the final revelation, the one hope of the entire world, and is thus

the faith that ought to embrace all the living faiths of mankind. For such a purpose the Bible is indispensable, although some scholars will rightly insist that more than the Bible is necessary.

This is the context, then, in which we have to place the interesting and difficult subject of this paper.

I

We have to begin, however, with some statements about the nature of Christianity itself, for in my judgment we are really asking questions about the authority of the Bible for Christianity. When we know what that is, we may also have an inkling of its authority for the world at large.

Christianity, I take it, is a religion of gracious personal relationships between the unseen but real Creator of the universe and mankind. It is concerned therefore with the "I-Thou" realm. It is a religion of Spirit, not a mechanical thing to be manipulated by impersonal devices. How do I know this? I come to know it within the believing community first of all, even before I learn to read the biblical documents with understanding. It is introduced to me in the liturgy of the Church's worship and in many acts of its loving concern. Later I come to appropriate something of this more fully in the Church School and the catechumens' class. On maturity within the faith I come to have a fairly clear notion of what the Church means when it tells me that I have become part of the very life of Christ, our living Lord.

The gracious element is primarily the outgoing loving care of God our Maker, whose world is here provided for us, whose Church also prevents us (in the older usage of that word). "Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17), but this grace did not originate in the year of our Saviour's birth. Hosea knew of divine grace, and so did Abraham (or whoever told his saga). This divine *agape* or love is not confined to the provision of the means of existence. Rather it is most like itself when it acts to help men and women to be true, kind, humble, and obedient to God; when it welcomes prodigals; when it inspires them to creative life in the future. For men are usually proud, self-centred, cruel, and disobedient to the divine will. So grace seeks to make men like God, in whose image their true life was made. They are to treat one another graciously, not exploiting each other or enslaving their brethren. They must learn also to act graciously even toward God himself, not trying to make use of him for their own convenience (as if they could!), not pressing demands on him instead of saying, "Thy will be done," not turning him into an image or an idol. Men are to "love" the Lord their God with all their heart and mind and strength, and also to "love" their neighbours responsibly. Grace affects us in the totality of our life (home, school, church, nation, business, sex, and so on), and in all our tenses (from here to eternity).

Now in saying "all our tenses" we are to think only in terms of "personal Time." In the world of physical reality there are tenses of "before" and

"after," of cause and effect. There seems to be no invasion of the present by the future. It is the self-conscious mind or spirit that makes all the difference here, and this is something absolutely and inalienably "real" for every sane, rational human being. "I am, and so I think and will and feel. . . . I am, and so I know that I know that I am." This is what it means to be personal. We live in a present tense that holds our entire past within it and, if Jung be correct, the entire past of the human race too in some fashion. But our present time also, provided it is normal and healthy, always turns itself to, and is partly invaded by, all the futures imaginable. One commonly says that purpose in life can be discerned only as we look back; yet prophetic minds can detect what is going to happen, given certain stabilities. Purpose points men forward, and man needs to look ahead. The young want to become old and mature. The clever want to write books, or dominate politics, or achieve fame, or in some way "fulfill themselves." There appears to be no "meaning" in life if there be no open future, no goal, no end. When there is such a *telos* or goal, then our present is wondrously altered and given substance. "Future" means "not yet present" to us as living beings. In our own dimension of time at least, it has not taken place, and so we must insist that there is always an open future. We are not "determined" or bound by fate. Real choices may be made by us, and redemption is always possible. Otherwise there could be no forgiveness of sin. The Christian religion, with its strong sense of our freedom for the future, a future guaranteed by the love that is God, is thus the custodian of hope. It retains optimism because it believes in the living God who has embodied our spirits in bodies and tied our immortal minds to the finite realm of flesh and blood.

Since all the universe is the work of God's hands, it is clearly ours to enjoy. We are given opportunities in Christianity for the adoration of the Creator, and we are taught right at the beginning that our nature derives from his. We are to become makers ourselves; we are to explore and master the world of "things"; but again this must be done with a full appreciation that grace is regulative. Things too are to be loved. We are to incorporate all science and all the arts into our way of life, not separating morality off as if religion dealt only with some aspects of personal relations. It may take a St. Francis to remind us of such truths, but let us remember that he was a product, in some sense, of the Catholic Church.

This point about *things* is important, because it means that we have to be careful in our attitude to what may be called the "I-It" realm. It will shortly appear that the Bible as the product of the printing press is very largely a "thing," and we have to discover how things are related to the free personal world of Spirit.

Persons communicate by rational speech, by a variety of "I-Thou" meetings, by co-operation in common enterprises, and by deliberate sharing of the inner life. Persons "reveal" themselves. Christianity like Judaism

teaches that God himself communicates with his creature, man—by mystical vision, by encounters with mysteries, but also through mediators: priests, prophets, kings, teachers, parents, and friends. This does not imply, however, that things cannot be used for personal communication. Tokens and symbols of many kinds may be employed; and everyone knows what a "love letter" is. In similar ways, we believe, God may touch our spirits through the world out there, in the wonder and the joy of elevated thought, and in specially significant customs that have come down from older times. Certain symbolic acts are said to be sacraments in a way that the universe or any part of it may not be (although they may well be "sacramental"). That is to say, in the Christian life sacraments convey divine blessings: water in Baptism, bread and wine in the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist. And if they are not sacraments in quite the same way, the following have become very precious sacramental media for many believers: the vestments embroidered by loving hands; the episcopal hands laid lovingly and prayerfully on the heads of the young or the ordinand; the minister's or priest's hands raised in benediction; the stone or wood or glass or marble that furnishes houses of worship. By means of such things the divine Spirit and the human spirit may come into gracious contact.

The Bible is a library of documents manufactured for the service of God and man. It is the product of many human minds and hearts, and thus by the marvels of memory and learning it may be for us a treasury of personal witness, a sacramental thing.

II

Before we proceed farther along that avenue of thought, we have to notice that Christianity, as well as being a system of personal relations in grace, is a religion rooted and grounded in history. Its centre is an embodied human life. Its distinctive articles of faith concern what Dr. Herbert Farmer has called the "inhumanizing" or the "inhistoricizing" of God. Jesus of Nazareth, it is claimed, is Emmanuel, "God with us," and the "eternal Logos" dwelt among men in the tent that is flesh (John 1:14). There has never been a time when the Church was content to assert the ascended glory of Christ at the expense of the earthly life of Jesus. Every eucharistic celebration has at its heart a recital of what happened (as well as what disciples think to be the significance of what happened) "on the night in which he was betrayed," and it has ever to repeat in some translation what Jesus said in Hebrew or Aramaic in that upper room so long ago. The words and acts of Jesus Christ are central.

Why is this so? The answer is of course that the earliest disciples encountered God in meeting him; he mediated to them the future of God's blessed Kingdom; he proved to them his own, and God the Father's victory over earthly death; and he conveyed to them the dramatic surging spiritual power of God that is called the Holy Spirit. And in all catholic tradition

and faith these same realities become true for new disciples, whose sin is made sinful in his light but through him is pardoned and beaten down.

Because this has been so throughout the Christian centuries, the words of Jesus Christ have been accepted as the Word of God himself, the communication of truth, wisdom, duty, hope, and life. They have taken precedence inevitably over the Old Testament, which Jesus and his disciples accepted already as a record of divine revelation. True, the words of Jesus and the events of his life were not set down by himself. True, the hope he brought of an imminent Kingdom of glory and the failure of that hope have affected the records. Nevertheless it was not possible for Christianity to exist apart from a written witness about the things most surely believed among the first apostles. The Church gradually annexed certain documents to the Old Testament, and by A.D. 400 it had pretty well settled what should suffice it.

The unique coming of the divine, the Son (as theology says), into history as a man, makes all future men dependent on the disciples' witness to his God-manhood. That is what the apostolic gospels and letters give us. Once given, and accepted by the catholic judgment of the Church, they must stand over against all false documents, all inadequate testimonies, and all new-fangled claims in subsequent centuries. We are tied to the Word in the Man. Once given and recognized, of course, this written witness stands over the institutions, the teachers, and the doctrinal formulations of the Church itself. It will not do to assert that the Bible is the Church's book, made in it and for it, *as if this could mean that Jesus Christ was invented by the Church*. There truly was a man in the flesh, as the writer of the First Epistle of John insists, and apart from his real person there would be neither Bible nor Church. He makes both possible. Woe betide the Church if, in liturgy, sermon, or doctrine, it depart from the scriptural word, already accepted by the consentient witness and action of the Catholic Church itself! In fact, however, the Bible belongs *with* liturgy and the sermon and the doctrine. It is false to separate the written word from the ongoing tradition. But clearly the written Gospel must be primary; the Church itself is committed to this principle by its own act of declaring what is the Canon.

From this historical point of view, then, the Bible necessarily plays a unique and holy role in the religious life of the loving community and the gracious (or would-be gracious) men and women who are and who call themselves Christians. We read how the way was prepared, and what happened once the Way and the Truth had suffered in our human time for our human folly and sin. We are not allowed illusions about perfect holiness in the earliest churches. They were not as united as they should have been; they turned out a measure of frauds, heretics, and other sinners in despite of Jesus Christ. And that must be possible, if the God of Jesus Christ is himself grace, himself loving, not brute power. The authority of the Bible is that of a record that traces the ways of God with man, and his purpose for man and the universe.

III

How is this Bible related to the gracious personal system that we have affirmed Christianity to be?

First, we can say that Scripture should not be regarded as a collection of infallible oracles, since that would hinder any *contemporary* meeting between the Lord God and mankind. There is no magic in the Bible that transforms it into a tape-recorder of the divine address to men.

Next, we must allow that the Bible needs translation and interpretation. It is the product of many centuries. Its Oriental setting must be quite unfamiliar to many students. It is thus not possible just to pick up any version, in English or any other tongue, and assume that what is read is the literal voice of God. Nothing must be allowed to blind us to the values of constructive textual and historical criticism. Words change their meaning in Hebrew and Aramaic and Greek, as in English; and only research and academic study can help us to be accurate.

Again, certain books had much trouble entering into the Canon, since the Church remained doubtful about them. To this day, therefore, we are bound to feel that 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James, Jude, and Revelation are not as useful as the rest of the New Testament. There is at least an aura of uncertainty about some of them, and no one should try ungraciously to push their claims on reluctant readers. Esther in the Old Testament, and such other features as the divine punishments on Canaanite tribes or the cursing psalms, cause us difficulty. No revived biblicism should be allowed to reinstate these as if they were the Word of God because they are in the Bible! The edges of the Canon are, as even Dr. Karl Barth would agree, "ragged."

On the other hand, it is useful for a liberal scholar to say publicly that matters of date, authorship, locale, and so on are not in every case very important when we are looking for help in the spiritual life. The biblical documents express human travail, lack of faith, false religion, defeat, and also, joy, peace, and genuine communications with the divine world. May we go farther?

Christians hear the living Lord, Jesus Christ, speak when the Gospels are read aloud or in quiet. He commands their love and loyalty, he strikes at their conscience, yet never with any immoral coercion. Similarly God moves their minds to learn spiritual wisdom or to perceive truth as they overhear Paul speaking to some young church, or "Peter" giving comfort, or "John" acclaiming the great love in God. It may happen in the reading and study of Genesis or Leviticus or of one of the Prophets; and it is always happening to someone.

This biblical token of a divine presence and a divine word is clearly not some simple thing. It demands understanding. We have to think historically. We need to penetrate the poet's mind, or the mystic's, or the saint's. Yet, given our work upon the text, our prayers with the Church

and in the Church, and our faith in God, there are personal meetings of the divine Spirit with us that are made possible by the Bible. Printed by a machine, bound and sold in the shops of men, containing errors of various kinds, this book none the less becomes for some readers a true means of grace.

This is the consentient testimony of humble believers, of heroic saints, of brilliant theologians, of all sorts of men and women in many lands and many generations. May it not also be true of the non-Christian reader, then, that this book may for him become a mode of communication with God? He must be willing to take the Bible seriously and to let it say its own word to him. He must not be put off by well-meaning apologists who want to ram the "inspiration" of the Bible down his throat; what is "gracious" about such a procedure? He needs to be enabled to see the Bible within the context of a genuinely catholic, loving Church that seeks the good of all mankind. Given that, the Bible is well able to take care of its own "authority."