

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 *Scripture* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_scripture-01.php

THE CHURCH OF THE BIBLE

by C. LATTEY, S.J.

This article contains the substance of a lecture, given as part of the C.B.A. course, at the Mount Street Hall on June 3rd, 1945.

WHAT a change we have seen ! The Catholic Church, which used to be assailed for being unbiblical and for making too light of the Bible, is now attacked for taking Scripture too seriously, not merely by unbelievers, but (we may say roughly) by all the would-be Christian bodies in the country. The old Protestantism, professing an absolute faith in the Bible, and a readiness to stand or fall by it, is largely dead or dying, beaten down by a rationalistic criticism with which it has vainly sought to come to terms. In this, as in other matters, the choice is between Catholicism or chaos ; and there is little prospect of a sweeping victory for Catholicism, though (as the dreadful alternative is better realized) it seems more likely to increase than to decrease in strength, especially if greater publicity be secured for spoken and written defence or explanation. Which is a hint to our members !

Nor must we omit, still by way of prelude, a glance at the old question, how are we to know what *is* the Bible ? The question of course has no interest if the Bible be looked upon as a merely human book, with no special divine authority ; but if it be called the word of God, then we are bound to ask, what do you mean by so calling it, and upon what grounds do you apply such a tremendous title to it ? It must imply, surely, that the Bible has God for its Author, that it is He who is ultimately responsible for it, in a way that He is not responsible for other books written in the ordinary way by human beings, that we are therefore bound to accept it in a way that we are not bound to accept ordinary books, that we have no right to reject it, to ignore it, to disbelieve it, or indeed any part of it. How then are we to know that the book is His ?

In a collection of lectures entitled *The Interpretation of the Bible* recently edited by Mr. C. W. Dugmore, to which Father Conrad Pepler, O.P., has contributed a useful account of "The Faith of the Middle Ages," there is a lecture by Dr. Albert Peel on "The Bible and the People: Protestant views of the authority of the Bible." With refreshing insistence he quotes among other Protestant testimonies the words of Calvin that Scripture "is self-authenticated, carrying with it its own evidence, and ought not to be made the subject of demonstration and arguments of reason, but . . . obtains the credit which it deserves with us by the testimony of the Spirit" (p. 69: Calvin, *Institutio*, I, vii, 5). But can this sort of thing be taken seriously nowadays ? If one had to judge of the divine inspiration of a book by the spiritual help derived from it, how many would prefer (let us say) the book of Leviticus to the Imitation

of Christ? Which reminds me to say that the Bible should not be regarded as a single book, but rather as a small library of books, of which all have their place in the divine scheme, but not all are quite obviously very profitable to faith or morals. No: the only certain way whereby we can learn of the divine authorship is for God Himself to reveal it, and to entrust the knowledge of that revelation to a teaching authority.

We come now to the main theme of this paper. Taking for granted the belief, wherever found, that Holy Scripture really is the word of God, we ask, where is the body—the religious organization—that fulfils its requirements? If anybody really and truly holds that the Bible must be our rule of faith, where will this land him? To this I give the answer without hesitation: in the Catholic Church. I do not say, I am far from saying, that the answer has always been as clear as it is to-day, in the middle of the twentieth century: indeed, I am inclined to say that the farther back one goes in history, the more difficult would it have been to apply this test to the claims of the Catholic Church as compared with that of other Christian bodies. But nowadays, when unbelief has eaten so deeply into those bodies, the answer to the unprejudiced mind must be as clear as daylight. At all events in the West: for I cannot here take into consideration the oriental churches. The argument does apply to them, but not so obviously, and it would take too long to deal with them, and the subject is of far less practical importance. We are face to face with a Protestantism which is slowly drifting into nothing at all; there are some Catholic tendencies which offer us hope of saving a remnant for true Catholicism, but not any noteworthy tendency to turn Oriental.

I fear it may be thought something of an insult to begin with God Himself; nevertheless, in these days it is not only justified but highly necessary. It is startling, at all events at first contact, to find how common in actual fact is the rejection of miracles; and such a rejection, it seems safe to say, is always based upon an inadequate notion of God. I say, in actual fact, because often in formal principle there is no such rejection; yet one not uncommonly finds that no accumulated evidence is admitted to prove the miracle. Nor is the objector usually content to plead our ignorance of the laws of nature, and other such abstract difficulties (to which it can usually be answered that at least we know what the laws of nature cannot do): that is felt not to be enough, and in sheer desperation the very facts themselves, however strong the evidence, are refused credence. Yet, as I think Sir Oliver Lodge once put it, if there be a God, a miracle is no more difficult to believe than a gardener watering his garden.

Upon the subject of the Blessed Trinity I confess I am loth to speak with non-Catholics, at all events as a rule, for fear of heresies and blasphemies, unintentional as these latter would usually be—though I have

just one painful recollection of a minister whose stress on the "Blessed" had an unmistakable implication. My impression is that a large number of Protestant ministers are quite at sea on the question, and that one must be content if their practical Unitarianism supposes what we should call for short a "personal" God. Yet the evidence for the Divinity of Christ (now to be considered) is strong, and the Holy Ghost is clearly made equal to Father and Son, and is plainly understood to be God in (*e.g.*) Acts v, 3—4.

"What think ye of Christ?" His Godhead remains a burning question, only too liable to be explained away ("We are all of us more or less divine") when not doubted or denied, or based upon an inadequate notion of the Godhead. Nevertheless the Bible is quite plain, for example, in the prologue to St. John's Gospel: The Word was God, and was made flesh (i, 1, 14). St. Thomas's confession is accepted by Christ: "My Lord and my God!" (xx, 28). The way for this confession had been prepared: "Before Abraham came to be, I am" (viii, 58): "I and the Father are one" (x, 30). St. Paul is no less explicit; indeed his epistles become largely meaningless unless we understand him to be presupposing this belief. It would need a large volume to bring out the full proof that he truly believed Christ to be God; but it would be elaborating the obvious. It must be enough here to mention two decisive passages. In Rom. ix, 4—5 he is showing himself fully aware of the privileges of the Jews, before writing of their partial rejection of Christ, and God's partial rejection of them. Theirs the covenants, theirs the Mosaic Law, the Temple liturgy, the promises, the patriarchs, from them was "Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed for ever." Their supreme glory is that when God Himself took flesh, He took flesh as a Jew. This meaning alone satisfies text and context. The other passage is the best known of all, Philip ii, 6—11. Christ is said to have been by nature God (literally, "in the form of God," but "form" must not be taken in its strictly Aristotelian or scholastic meaning), and every tongue is to confess that "Jesus Christ is Lord," which is the great confession of His Godhead. This is also stressed in Rom. x, 9 and I Cor. xii, 3. The Jews would not pronounce the sacred name Jehovah (more accurately, Yahweh), but substituted for it "Lord," so that this confession really means that Jesus is Jehovah.

St. John selects for his narrative what brings out Christ and Godhead (xx, 31), and St. Paul is teaching without immediate reference to Christ's life; but even the first three gospels cannot be explained without allowing for His supreme claim. Quite early in the ministry the leper says to Christ, "If thou wilt, thou canst make me clean"; and He answers without further ado, "I will: be thou made clean," and He works the miracle, without any special appeal to God or anything of that sort. We next read in St. Mark and St. Luke of His telling the paralytic, "Thy sins are fo

given thee." The scribes and pharisees think and say: "Who can forgive sins save God alone?" Our Lord does not hasten to explain (as every confessor would) that He is only forgiving sins by God's special commission: no, He takes up the challenge. "That you may know that I have power to forgive sins." He works this miracle too. The conclusion should have been obvious to any right-minded man, at all events after reflection. (See Matt. viii, 1—4; ix, 2—8; Mark i, 40—ii, 12; Luke v, 12—26.)

Christ's bodily resurrection is clearly set forth in the gospels, and elsewhere in the New Testament, indeed, it is looked upon as one of the chief functions of the apostles to bear witness to it (Acts i, 22; ii, 32, *etc.*). St. Paul bears emphatic witness to it in I Cor. xv, 1—11, and then goes on to explain that the just will rise at the last day with their bodies glorified. Unfortunately, not a few, in their anxiety to explain away Christ's resurrection and our own, wish to interpret the "spiritual body" of verse 44, not of the glorified body, but as not being a true body at all, thus making nonsense of the rest of the chapter, and of a large part of the New Testament as well.

Another New Testament doctrine that is frequently explained away is the sacrificial and redemptive character of Our Lord's death, so obviously signified in Heb. ix, 11—15. It is also asserted in Rom. viii, 3, where according to the right translation God has sent His Son "in the likeness of sinful flesh and as a sin-offering," this last with a reference to Is. liii; and likewise (to mention one other passage) in Eph. v, 2.

Baptism and the Holy Eucharist are admitted perhaps by all Christians except the Salvation Army, one of whose officials explained to me some time back (after I had satisfied her that I really believed in the Bible!) that they had neither; I could not see that she had any explanation of this that was even plausible. The precise nature of Baptism it would take too long to discuss; but in the doctrine of the Real Presence the Church and her children are simply answering with their *Credo* to Our Lord's words at the Last Supper and in John vi. The Real Presence is occasionally whittled down to the Real Absence. The Sacrifice of the Mass was prophesied in Mal. i, 11, and unless the Mass be admitted to fulfil this prophecy, the prophecy remains unfulfilled. Having edited the book of Malachy in the Westminster Version of the Sacred Scriptures with an especial eye to this prophecy, I may be allowed to refer to this edition and to pass on. It need hardly be said that all Protestantism is against the Mass, no less than against the Pope—who thus finds himself in good company!

And Hell! How many are anxious to repudiate it—and not a few Christians among them. How different from the early Protestants, who were pushing people into it wholesale without the slightest regard for the question of moral guilt. And what a perversion of all right feeling

we often find underlying all this : the objection to physical evil urged far more strongly than any objection to moral evil. This in itself is an immoral attitude, for it is obvious, and can be proved up to the hilt from the gospels, that physical evil may be a great blessing, when rightly borne for Christ ; whereas the least particle of moral evil far outweighs in evil all the physical suffering in the world. What is Christ's own teaching ? Some are eager to foist upon us a wholly untrue and merely sentimental idea of His attitude, which is quite out of harmony with the plain report of the gospels in particular and of the New Testament in general. Our Lord certainly proclaimed that He was meek and humble of heart, that His yoke was sweet and His burden light, that He was the Good Shepherd ; but there was also another side to His teaching. He was something of an alarmist, if I may put it that way reverently, and warned His hearers urgently and repeatedly to beware of losing their souls in Hell. If they did not avail themselves of God's mercy, they would feel His justice. God is not mocked with impunity even in this world, as the terrible condition to which more or less godless governments have brought their peoples abundantly shows ; but any punishment of the guilty here is only a forecast of worse to come, whereas the many martyrs of the twentieth century enjoy a crown of glory. I must not delay, however, upon a vindication of Hell, even so far as it is possible (for there is always something of a mystery left), but must be content to point out that a religion professing to be biblical must certainly include belief in it.

I do not propose to dilate upon the Church or the Pope, because the subject is already so familiar to Catholics, and it is my purpose rather to set forth what may need to be better realized and emphasized, both for the sake of Catholics and non-Catholics. Briefly : the Bible shows that there is to be but one Church for the whole world, which is to be believed and obeyed, and that St. Peter's office as head of that Church is continued in his successors, being in fact far more needed now than in New Testament times. Body after body has broken away from the Holy See, but it has evidently broken away from the unity of the Church also ; the so-called Orthodox Church in the East and the Anglican communion in the West are both of them federations of independent units, not single churches.

It may be worth while to point out also that Our Lord, while commanding all to obey the Church, never promised that all that was to be believed was to be written down. For a number of years the gospel was being preached by the apostles without any written books of the New Testament, which only came into being gradually during the first century. Even when completed, it never contained any guarantee that it comprised all that was to be believed ; what it did confirm was the duty of submission to the Church. It is a strange paradox that the Catholic Church

which alone in the West refuses to regard the Bible as the sole source of revelation, should be the only Church to preserve the main biblical truths intact.

“ And Mary sang Magnificat ” : and we may well sing it with her, in conclusion, in our hearts, as she in hers, wherein humility and thankfulness were mingled with exceeding joy. And she is prophesying, evidently we are to understand this, as in the case of Zachary and Simeon. “ Henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.” They shall indeed, all the generations of children of the Catholic Church, every time they say a Hail Mary, and many another time too, in spite of all the effort of Protestantism to stop them—which effort, when one comes to think of it, is not such a very biblical proceeding ! Miss Guiney, in her admirable edition of *Recusant Poets* (Sheed and Ward, 1938), has published one poignant record of what the Catholics thought about it in “ A Lament for Our Lady’s Shrine at Walsingham,” written possibly by Blessed Robert Southwell, S.J. I reproduce the last lines as printed (p. 356) :

Sinne is wher our Ladie sate
 Heaven turned is to Hell.
 Sathan sittes wher our Lord did swaye
 Walsingham oh farewell.