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The Reformation and the Word of God

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The Reformation and the Word of God.

THE 400th anniversary of the setting up of the English Bible by Royal authority in the Churches of England served the great purpose of attracting attention to the Scriptures as the most precious literary treasure of the Christian Church.

Particularly was this great event of significance to Protestants, for, within the variety of Protestant emphasis and doctrine, it has ever been regarded as essential to the peculiar genius of Protestantism that it found its genesis and nourished its life on the Word of God as revealed primarily in Scripture.

But what, precisely, was the Protestant contribution on this point? It is easy, in a general way, to stand up in a mass meeting and join in cheers for Protestantism; but it is far more important, and not quite so easy, to disentangle the various threads in the Protestant strand, so that we may estimate the permanent value of the Reformation view of the Bible.

No one will deny that the Reformers took their courage in both hands when they challenged and overthrew the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. That Church, as Calvin was quite willing to recognise, had rendered great services. When men had asked: "What is the claim of the Bible on our thought and practice?" the Church had given a clear and definite reply. Catholic theory had declared that the Scriptures must have an infallible interpreter, and the only possible interpreter of this kind was the Church. In effect this was to substitute Church tradition for Scripture as the final standard. And men who longed for some kind of ultimate authority on which they might lean with full assurance found it in the strong claim of the Roman Church.

So when the Reformers attacked this authority they knocked away a support which had long been accepted as impregnable. Now of course it is very easy to knock away the supports that have upheld traditional religious beliefs and practices (we find that to be true to-day): but it is not quite so easy to replace the supports that have been knocked away. The Reformers took the (then) bold step of asserting that the only authority required was that of Scripture itself, without its special authorisation by ecclesiastical interpretation.

It soon became apparent that they had taken a step of far-reaching importance. To begin with, they had opened the Bible and had made it accessible for all, laymen as well.

In these days, when the Bible is printed in millions of copies and circulated throughout the earth, it is difficult to realise that, prior to the Reformation, God's Word was literally a sealed book to the vast majority of Christians. On this point the Roman Church had reversed the practice of the early Fathers. Chrysostom used to announce to his congregations the portions of the Bible he proposed to read on each succeeding Sunday. He used to say "The Bible was given to the common people," and the various versions of the Bible—Syriac, Latin, Coptic, Persian, Armenian, and so on, indicate that wherever the Gospel was preached it took its stand upon the Scripture as open to the eyes of all who desired to read it.

The Roman Church, however, definitely discouraged the laity from reading the Bible. In 1229, for example, at the Council held at Toulouse under the presidency of a papal legate, the fourteenth canon declared: "We prohibit the laity from having the books of the Old and New Testaments, unless it be at most that anyone wishes to have, for devotion, a Psalter, a Breviary for the Divine Offices, or the Hours of the Blessed Mary; but we forbid them in the most express manner to have the above books translated into the vulgar tongue." Dr. C. J. Cadoux, in his monumental *Catholicism and Christianity*, declares "the laity gradually gave up the private use of the Bible, and indeed largely lost the ability to read anything; but, when the art of reading revived, the Church put all sorts of obstacles in the way of the Bible being widely read" (p. 260). It became the general practice of Inquisitors to treat vernacular Bible-reading as presumptive evidence of heresy, and to burn vernacular translations wherever they found them. (Dr. Cadoux quotes a case of Bible burning under Catholic influence near Sheffield so late as 1860, and in 1864 the Bible Societies were grouped with Socialism, Communism, and secret societies as among the errors of the age [p. 266].) So when in England John Wycliffe began a translation of the Bible into English, and when in Germany Luther devoted himself to a translation of the New Testament into German (not from the Vulgate, but from Erasmus' second edition of the Greek text), and when, with the assistance of Melancthon, he completed the translation of the Old Testament, a movement of the greatest importance had begun: and we must count it among the major contributions of Protestantism. "Let us have the Bible open," the Reformers declared, "let it be available for every man." The Reformers fervently said "Amen" to those noble words of Chrysostom, uttered centuries before,

"Hear me, ye men of the world; get ye the Bible, that most wholesome remedy for the soul; if ye will nothing else, at least get the New Testament, St. Paul's epistles, the Gospels and the Acts, that they may be your continual and earnest teachers. Harken not only hereto in Church, but also at home; let the husband with the wife, let the father with the child, talk together of these matters, and to and fro let them both enquire and give their judgments."

But when you have got the Bible open and accessible you have only taken the first step. It then becomes important to understand it, and to be able to answer the question, "What in it is the Word of God?"

Both Calvin and Luther over-emphasised the simplicity of the Bible and its appeal to all men. Luther declared that "the Holy Spirit is the simplest writer and speaker that is in heaven and earth." Those of us who have ploughed our way, not without pain and tribulation, through the Hebrew and Greek requirements of the B.D. course, will take leave to doubt whether the Bible is so simple as all that! Calvin, with a little more insight than Luther, differed from him on this point: yet he did urge that the words of Scripture could have no more than one simple sense, and from this point of view he vigorously trounced the allegorists who had followed in the tradition of the great Origen. The habit of allegorising, Calvin said, was like reducing the Scriptures to a nose of wax . . . which could be pulled with equal ease this way and that!

Here Calvin laid his finger on the real difficulty. There has been, and still is, a good deal of "nose-pulling," a good deal of varied and not always justified straining at the words of Scripture to give them this or that desired meaning. It is not enough to put before the earnest enquirer an open Book: he has to be taught how to interpret and understand it. In what sense is it the Word of God? This is the question which still concerns us, and we may now enquire what guidance Calvin and Luther, as typical Reformation leaders, gave on this question.

It has recently been stated that "it was Calvin who gave form to the Protestant doctrine of Scripture." Doubtless historically this is true, but we shall find, I think, that while both Calvin and Luther gave expression to valuable elements in the science of interpretation, neither can be taken as adequate as a guide for the Christian of to-day. These two differed greatly in their attitude to the Bible, and we must examine the main views of each in turn.

Calvin was anxious to establish Scripture in such a position that all personal opinion must bow to its dictum. He committed himself to the principle that the whole body of Scripture, as

bequeathed to us by the early Church, would certainly approve itself as divinely inspired to every one to whom the witness of the Holy Spirit was given. For such it was authentic and authoritative from beginning to end. So he declared for the inerrancy of Scripture, its equal authority and uniform consistency and its declared sufficiency. In one of his sermons he stated: "The word Scripture imports that Moses was not the author of the Law, but that he was simply a kind of amanuensis or secretary who wrote what he received from God, and not what he manufactured in his own brain." Again, "The Holy Spirit so governed the language of Paul that not a superfluous word escaped from him." This is not to say that Calvin did not recognise the "human" element in the composition of the Bible. He did. But, he held, all personal idiosyncrasies were always under the control of the Holy Spirit, so that they showed themselves only according to His requirements. He was aware, of course, that some of Paul's epistles had been lost. But that gave him no anxiety. He declared "those epistles of Paul which the Lord judged to be necessary for His Church have been selected by His providence for everlasting remembrance." It would be untrue to say that Calvin was not sometimes in difficulties with this theory. He was challenged, for example, by the undoubted fact that in the New Testament there occur quotations from the Old Testament which are inaccurate. He sought a way out of this difficulty by remarking that after all it is the doctrine rather than the word which is the prime concern, and that the apostles were content if they were faithful to the sense of the passage which they quoted. But this is rather different from his statement already quoted, that the Bible is authentic and authoritative from beginning to end. Yet, allowing for all this, we have to admit that Calvin's position in general bears the marks of that rigid coherence which characterised the whole of his system. The point to be emphasised, and to which we shall have to return, is Calvin's assertion, fundamental to his position, that everything rests upon the work and witness of the Holy Spirit. Only the sanctifying work of God in the heart can make the Scriptures the Word of God to the soul.

We shall not expect to find anything like this consistency in Luther. By nature he was different from Calvin. For one thing, he could write and sing hymns, and while Calvin was by no means deficient in artistic and poetical appreciation, the German was more prone to exercise what we may refer to as poetic licence. With a delightful (but not to be copied) wave of the hand, Luther waved away difficult matters of canonicity. They simply did not worry him. His attitude to these and similar matters reminds us of the student who, asked in an

examination paper to make clear the different elements in the teaching of the eighth-century Hebrew prophets, answered that he wasn't very clear about it, but that, anyway, it didn't matter much as we were living in another age! Luther disliked the book of Esther, spoke disparagingly of the epistle of James, disapproved of Ecclesiastes, and was doubtful as to the authority of Hebrews and the Apocalypse. On the other hand, he regarded Genesis as a most holy book, containing more figures of Christ and His Kingdom than any other. In his delightful fashion he says, "When a contradiction occurs in Scripture and it cannot be reconciled . . . well, let it go!" Irreconcilables did not give him much anxiety. Indeed, he offered to set his doctor's cap on the head of anyone who could reconcile the teaching of James and Paul. Discrepancies and contradictions . . . what do they matter, he asked, provided the main facts of faith are fully grasped? . . . a position not unknown in present-day Christianity.

As Luther was not worried overmuch by inconsistencies in Biblical writers, we are not surprised to find that he was not worried, either, by inconsistencies in his own writings. He was not bound, as Calvin was, to make Scripture and the Word of God coterminous. As a matter of fact, he did sometimes refer to the Bible as though the whole Canon were inspired: yet, on the other hand, he declared that while the Word of God (by which he meant the Gospel) is in all the Bible (and it is interesting to note how both Calvin and Luther found references to Christ throughout the Bible) not all the Bible is the Word of God. Luther declined to confine the Word of God to the Bible, declaring that God still speaks to holy men as He did in days of old.

We may express the difference between Calvin and Luther in this way. Luther found his central principle in the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith, and especially as expressed in Romans and Galatians. With this Calvin agreed. But whereas Luther examined the Bible from the point of view of justification by faith, and suspected everything in it which it did not conform to that great principle, Calvin argued that everything in the Bible, when properly interpreted, could be brought into line with the dominant theme of the evangel.

It is clear from this that when we speak of the Reformation doctrine of the Bible we have to distinguish different emphases within the general assertion of Biblical authority. On the one side stands Calvin with his insistence on the Bible as the Word of God, an immovable rock on which the Christian can rest: consistent, uniformly authoritative, all-sufficient. On the other side stands Luther, regarding the Word of God as greater than Scripture, though at the same time giving to Scripture con-

spicuous devotion. He was much freer than Calvin in his attitude, accepting or rejecting this or that part of the Bible according as it squared with his conception of the Gospel. As far as I know, no Lutheran confession of faith insisted on the acceptance of the Canon as a vital article in that faith.

It was the failure to recognise this difference between the Calvinistic and Lutheran points of view that led a writer some time ago (in *The Times Literary Supplement*, May 8, 1924) to declare that the abandonment of Biblical infallibility means the abandonment of essential Protestantism. But this, of course, ignores the fact that while Calvin paved the way for the acceptance of the Bible as completely infallible, Luther opened the way for the attitude of discrimination between the various literary components of the Bible.

We may now put the question : should the modern Protestant follow Calvin, or Luther? Is it possible to follow either without important modification of their views?

In recent times, Karl Barth has counselled us to get back to Calvin. He has called us back to an examination of the authoritative value of the Bible. He has told us that in Scripture is all that is needed to hear the Word of God. "Barth's one theme is that God speaks, that He speaks His Word in three forms : first, directly in revelation to apostles and prophets; then indirectly in the written records of that revelation; thirdly, more indirectly through Christian preaching. Since it is God that speaks there is no need for any other proof of the Divine action. All apologetical efforts are needless and without value, and for that reason all attempts from history or psychology to found a science of religion can only be preliminary, propaedeutical, and are useless in the absence of faith" (Birch Hoyle : *Teaching of Karl Barth*).

Thus Barth stands for the absolute authority of Scripture as our refuge from the uncertainties of human subjectivism. But, let it be noted, his doctrine is no theory of literalism, for the validity of literary and historical criticism is recognised. Yet Barth seems reluctant to allow the principle of a progressive revelation. So anxious is he to emphasise the absoluteness of revelation in the Scriptures that he makes no allowance for the subjective element in the apprehension of that revelation. So he can say, "the Lordship of God is a simple truth which is altogether known or not known at all."

We are bound to say, therefore, that in spite of his real services to contemporary religious thought in his protest against humanism and mere subjectivism, his failure to recognise that the revelation of God is a much wider thing than Scripture, and his failure to do justice to the progressive character of that

special revelation, make him anything but a complete guide to the earnest enquirer. Something more than a return to Calvin is necessary if the Bible is to hold its place amid the varied attacks that are launched against it nowadays.

What, then, is the true Protestant position to-day? Like Calvin and Luther, we shall emphasise the supremacy of the Bible over ecclesiastical tradition. The Romanist "believes the Bible to be infallible, not because he has tested it or weighed the evidence against the statement, but simply because the Church says so" (Anderson Scott, *Romanism and the Gospel*, p. 184). We may recall in this connection an experience described by John Bunyan. In a time of spiritual depression he found encouragement as he recalled the words "Look at the generations of old and see; did ever any trust in God, and were confounded?" Then he searched the Bible for these words, and could not find them in the Canon. At last he found that they were in the book of Ecclesiasticus. "This at the first," he said, "did somewhat daunt me: but because, by this time, I had got more experience of the love and kindness of God, it troubled me the less: especially when I considered that though it was not in those Texts that we call Holy and Canonical, yet forasmuch as this sentence was the sum and substance of many of the Promises, it was my duty to take the comfort of it. And I bless God for that word, for it was of God to me" (*Grace Abounding*). The last sentence is important: "for it was of God to me." Here is the personal note which is all-important. Without this personal response and apprehension, the verdict of an ecclesiastical tradition cannot have any final value. It is to the everlasting credit of both Calvin and Luther that they both stressed the need for the witness of the Holy Spirit in the efficacy of the Divine Word. To no man, they said, is the Bible really authoritative until the sanctifying work of the Divine Spirit in heart and mind makes it so. And if it be argued against this that we thereby introduce the principle of individualism, we reply that it is precisely in this individual apprehension of the Word of God through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that we find the authority of the Bible in our experience.

This is to do more than introduce the principle of individualism as against the fixed decrees of ecclesiastical tradition: it is to emphasise the principle of personal liberty. We are at liberty to approach the Bible for ourselves. We are at liberty to apply to its understanding every enlightened principle of investigation. We make no mistake if we adopt Luther's own method and ask, in regard to the Bible, "Where can I find Christ?" Our answer to this question will not be the same as Luther's, but we shall be on sure ground if we seek, in the Old

Testament, the preparation for the culmination of God's self-disclosure in Jesus, and in the New Testament, for the manifestation of the Son of God and the historical and literary record of the great movement to which that manifestation gave rise.

We shall depart from Calvin's position in acknowledging that God's self-disclosure is over a field wider than that contained within the pages of the Canon, while agreeing with him that it is in the Bible that we are to seek the central and all-important element in that self-disclosure, viz., in the Word made flesh. We shall depart, too, from Luther's somewhat irresponsible handling of difficulties in the Bible. It is not enough, as he said, when confronted by irreconcilables, just to let them go: we are committed to an intelligent understanding of the Bible, to such an understanding as will arrange all its varied elements in a coherent revelation. This is possible once we accept the view of inspiration as progressive, personal and spiritual: God making Himself known according to the capacity of His servants to apprehend Him: the revelation itself coming through human personalities, and the record of it necessarily bearing the marks of those personalities: God speaking the word of truth on the central matters of salvation, the word being interpreted always in Him Who is the Life, the Truth, the Way.

Bearing these points in mind, we shall be able to acknowledge the quality of the statement drawn up in 1647 by the divines at the Westminster Assembly. "The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or Church, but wholly upon God (Who is truth itself), the Author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God. We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to a high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture; and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts."

There is no task more urgent in the Church to-day than the restoration of the Bible to its dynamic place in the experience of the believer.

The Protestantism of sixty or seventy years ago could assume that its adherents were familiar with the Bible. That

is no longer true. Without dwelling on the causes we may acknowledge the fact. To thousands the Bible is just as much a closed book as it was in the days before it was made accessible to the general reader.

But there are signs that a revival of interest in the Bible is upon us. The prominence of articles on religious themes in the Press, the vogue of the various modern versions, are an indication that the general public is awakening to the fact that for a shilling there can be purchased incomparably the finest religious book in the world.

And that is our opportunity. From our Protestant position we can say: "Let all the light of learning beat upon the Sacred Page," and: "Let the experience which is behind the ancient literature become your own."

Protestantism has everything to gain from the study of the open Bible, but only if that study be at once intelligent and consecrated. Thus Protestantism can assume the role of teacher. It is by our fearless teaching of the truths of the Bible, and by our no less fearless practice of those truths, that we shall find our proper sphere in the modern world.

F. TOWNLEY LORD.

ISAAC KIMBER, a pupil of Professor Ward at Gresham College, has long been known as a good man of letters, editing Ainsworth's *Latin Dictionary*, 1751, writing a *Life of Oliver Cromwell*, 1724, and editing the *Morning Chronicle* from 1728-32. These facts are in the D.N.B. A descendant has now proved in the *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, vol. 28, that he edited the *London Magazine* till his death in 1755. He was succeeded by Edward Kimber, his son, who wrote a *History of England* in ten volumes.