

PAPER II

The Authority of Scripture

by

The Revd. Canon H.E.W. Turner (Anglican)

This is bound up directly with the doctrines of Revelation and of the Church (including the ~~magisterium~~) and indirectly with those doctrines for which its support is asserted and denied. The authority of the Bible includes its use as a norm for doctrine and a guide for living. Most Anglicans reject the use of terms like infallibility and inerrancy as inappropriate.

1. Revelation and the Bible

In Reformation times the Bible was universally treated as a network of propositions from which more or less directly supernatural knowledge could be deduced, a textbook or religious truth. Modern study has stressed the historical conditioning of the Bible. Revelation now appears as historical revelation and the two-tier theory of knowledge as supernatural and natural is abandoned by many theologians. The centre of gravity of Revelation now appears to many to lie not in propositions but in event (Heilsgeschichte). The literary forms of the Bible and the style of thinking appropriate to each has received close attention and some (like A.M. Farrer, the Glass of Vision) find the locus of revelation in the master images through which it is often (though not exclusively) presented. Even Barth refuses to identify Revelation and the Bible tout court; it is the primary witness to Revelation rather than Revelation itself. The reaction against propositional revelation may well have gone too far but it is clear that the use of the Bible as a doctrinal norm is a more delicate matter than it once appeared. Besides the exegete, the dogmatician needs the help of the historian, particularly the historian of ideas before he can assess the evidence. The Bible as a source of doctrine must be more flexibly interpreted than in the past.

2. The Church and the Bible

'Christianity is unique among world religions in being born with a Bible in its cradle' (C.F. Evans, Cambridge, History of the Bible, Vol. I p. 232) though the completion of the Old Testament Canon may not long antedate the rise of the Christian Church. Obviously the New Testament was written by Churchmen for Churchmen. Form Criticism emphasises this feature of the Gospels themselves. The Canon of the New Testament was fixed in and by the Church. The Bible is therefore within the Church. But the Bible is also over the Church as an authoritative norm for faith and life. Even before the Canon had moved far towards completion the New Testament documents were regarded as authoritative and their contents determined to a large extent the development of orthodoxy. The Canon was reached by a gradual process of general acceptance and not by a series of formal acts of the Church. Conciliar action emerges late in the process and embodies the results of agreement already largely reached. Canonicity was a recognition of an authoritativeness resident in the documents and not the conferment of authority upon them.

3. The Primacy and Sufficiency of Scripture

All Christians would accept at least the primacy of Scripture as a norm for faith and life though the grounds for this are not as fully agreed. Among the criteria proposed are antiquity (though the New Testament appears to extend into the Sub-apostolic Age), apostolicity of authorship (though not all books are of apostolic authorship and some attributions are disputed), orthodoxy of content (as against some other claimants), unity of witness (see A.M.Hunter, Unity of the New Testament) combined with variety of traditions (see C.F.Evans l.c. p.284). The inspiration of the New Testament is not in serious dispute though no doctrine of inspiration has received universal acceptance.

The sufficiency of Scripture is held by some but rejected by others. There are some Patristic statements of this principle (see H.E.W.Turner, Pattern of Christian Truth, pp. 297-306) though this would read strangely to other Fathers (e.g. Tertullian de Praescriptione Haereticorum). It is the nerve of the Reformation principle of the sola Scriptura. This principle is however not easy to apply. ~~Some Biblical Protestant require that even~~

^{Just} as the Old Testament Torah needed application to new situations through the halakkah (oral tradition), so even Biblical Christians develop their own traditions of what is Biblically acceptable. Lutheranism takes conformity to the central doctrine of Justification by Faith alone as the criterion of what is acceptable or indifferent in the light of Scripture. The Anglican Article VI headed, Of the Sufficiency of the Scriptures for Salvation, is studiously moderate and confines itself explicitly to doctrine.

4. Scripture and Tradition

In Anglican theology Tradition has always been regarded as a subordinate standard (Creeds, Liturgy, forms of Ministry), subordinate to Scripture as its source and control. The Council of Trent juxtaposes Scripture and Tradition 'to be received with equal reverence and affection'. Anglicans would like to be assured that the 'partim...partim' interpretation of the 'et...et' of Trent has been abandoned (see J.R.Geiselman in Christianity Divided pp. 39-43). They reject as historically unfounded the notion of an unwritten tradition parallel to and supplementing the written record of Scripture and suspect the distinction between what is explicit/implicit in Scripture as a dogmatic norm at least in the use to which it is often put and the lengths to which it is sometimes carried. The differences here are not so great as they once were but the file of the controversy is not completely dead.

5. Who is to expound the Scriptures as a norm authoritatively and how?

'No prophecy of Scripture is of private interpretation' wrote the author of 2 Peter 1.20 and this has been interpreted more widely than he probably intended. Ecclesial exegesis, of which St. Augustine was a distinguished and influential exponent (see G. Bonner, Cambridge History of the Bible, Vol. I, pp. 553 ff) has been regarded as the norm.

Expounding with the Church parallels thinking with the Church. In practice the exegesis of few texts has been determined by the exercise of the magisterium. But exegesis is a scientific study involving textual, lexicographical and historical techniques in order to discover how much particular text will actually bear. Yet the exegete himself is not a 'neutral person' but does his work within a context of presuppositions. It is possible to read a series of commentaries side by side not only asking 'Which best reflects the thought of the original writer?' but also 'What makes the author for one of several open possibilities?' Here is a possible role for expounding with the Church but the question of scientific exegesis comes first. Anglicans always prefer to allow views which are exegetically aberrant or wrongly contexted to be outgrown or 'out-argued' than to condemn them out of hand.

In using the Bible as a doctrinal norm Anglicans prefer to argue from broad sweeps of Scripture than to build too much upon particular texts which are sometimes torn from their exegetical and historical contexts. There are certainly cases where a positive answer can be found from Scripture and others where Scripture returns a decisive negative. The chief problem here is how to interpret the silences of Scripture. Are they to be taken as hostile or as neutral? The silence of Scripture is sufficient for an Anglican to preclude the definition of a dogma (see Article VI), prescinding from the question whether the proposed dogma is viable as a theologoumenon or a pious opinion. He would exclude all egorical and typological considerations as not providing express Scriptural warrant for this purpose. He would interpret the obscure in the light of the clear and appeal to clear related Scriptural principles in his assessment of the silence of Scripture.