

CHAPTER 2

THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE

During the Reformation, the Protestants criticized the doctrines and practices of the Catholic Church, claiming the superior authority of the scriptures. Henceforth the Bible became the normative standard of Protestant orthodoxy; anything which contradicted the clear teaching of scripture was rejected, and anything the Bible failed to mention could not be an essential part of the Christian faith. Although there were differences among Protestants, from the beginning there has always been general agreement that the Bible is the primary authority in matters of faith and morals.

Luther's reformation was based on Paul's teachings. Naturally he called the anti-Pauline epistle of James a letter made of straw and regarded it as unimportant. Luther and Calvin also did not consider the book of Revelation valuable. Luther maintained that the whole Bible is not equally authoritative; the New Testament is superior to the Old Testament.

The doctrine of the verbal inerrancy of the Bible was created during the 17th century, the century of Protestant scholasticism that followed the deaths of Luther and Calvin. According to this theory, God Himself dictated every verse of the Bible,

and the various human authors merely recorded the exact words God spoke. This doctrine made every verse a direct revelation, and of lasting authority. It should be remembered that this idea was not the opinion of the Protestant Reformers; it developed after the original vitality of Protestantism had virtually disappeared.¹

The doctrine of verbal inspiration has two major defects. First, the canonization of the Bible was a long process and the decision as to which books to include was gradual. The Septuagint contains apocryphal books which are not found in the Hebrew Old Testament. The Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Bibles today follow the Septuagint (translated from Hebrew into Greek in 250 B.C.), which Luther and Calvin rejected. There is no agreement among Christians about the Old Testament canon.

The New Testament was canonized in the 4th century A.D. Before that time, some Christians regarded books like *The Shepherd of Hermas* and the two *Epistles of Clement*, the Gospels of Peter, Mary, Thomas and Philip, the *Book of Enoch* and the *Didache (Teachings of the Twelve Apostles)* as part of scripture. Also, some early Christians did not recognize the authority of 2 Peter and Revelation. Therefore, there was a long screening process during the formation of the New Testament canon.

A second weakness became obvious as a result of historical-critical study of the scriptures. Within the Bible there are many conflicting religious, moral and doctrinal ideas. Some passages are historically contradictory; in places the Bible contains morally inadequate teachings. Often the scriptural world-view is unscientific. Furthermore, from the historical-critical standpoint, the Bible shows the gradual evolution of man's ideas about himself and God; so there is not one standard of biblical faith and practice, but a variety. Thus we can no longer take verses from different parts of the Bible at random and assume that

they all have equally inerrant validity.² Each passage must be interpreted in the context of its times.

Consequently, modern theologians have generally abandoned the doctrine of verbal inspiration. More convincing is the idea that the writers of the scriptures were inspired; the authors used their own talents, employed ideas of their own times, and were affected by their historical environment. Yet God spoke to them and through them, to their contemporaries and to us.

How are the scriptures inspired? First of all, the Bible is a record of man's fundamental aspirations for the good life. Large numbers of people who cannot accept the doctrinal teachings of Judaism or Christianity nevertheless recognize the moral authority of the Bible. They live by the Ten Commandments, and try to obey the Golden Rule. We are deeply moved by the Hebrew prophets' demand for justice and mercy, and who will ever forget the parables of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son? The moral authority of the scriptures is almost universally accepted. The Bible is inspired because it makes us better men and women.

In the second place, the scriptures have had an enormous influence upon the intellectual development of man. Some have said that modern science grew out of the Judeo-Christian faith that there is one God who fashioned the whole universe according to a rational plan. Other scholars have pointed out the profound effect the Hebrew prophets and the apocalyptic dream of a coming new world have had upon socialism, Marxism and other utopian philosophies.

In the third place, the Bible is a unique source of inspiration because of what it tells us about human nature. In the Bible, we find an amazingly realistic portrait of man, which corrects our sentimental optimism on the one hand, and our cynical pessimism on the other. Learning about Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Job and Jesus inspires one with a vision of the

nobility of man; and by recalling the fate of Samson, Ahab, Jezebel and Judas, we are warned of human weakness and wickedness. If modern civilization is to have a true understanding of human nature, it has to be made aware of the Genesis doctrine that man is made in the image of God, as well as the Pauline doctrine of original sin which infects us all.

Key passages of scripture have had a continual influence on theology. Our doctrines have been built upon the first two chapters of Genesis, the Suffering Servant passages of Deutero-Isaiah, the contrast between law and gospel in Paul's letters, the exposition of human sinfulness in the Letter to the Romans, the prologue to the Fourth Gospel, as well as Revelation's vision of a new heaven and new earth. There is no systematic theology in the Bible, and none of its authors was a systematic theologian—not even Paul. Yet every theology grows out of the scriptures, and is dependent upon them for nourishment.

Finally, the Bible is a book for the whole Church. It is an important unifying element in Christian life and thought. Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Methodists, Baptists and Quakers differ from each other in doctrine, rituals, church organization and history; but they all share a common Bible. They all agree that the scriptures are in some way a unique authority for what they believe and how they act.

The interpretation of the Bible often divides Christians one from another. But at the same time, the scriptures provide a unifying factor in the growing dialogue between the denominations, as well as in the acts of loving service which bind all Christians together in the one Body of Christ.

Most importantly, the Bible records salvation-history, or more specifically, the history of restoration for man and God. Throughout history, God has been calling, "Adam, where are you?" And man, searching for the source of his life, still hears God's voice and feels His love in the Bible.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

1 Protestant scholasticism: Protestant systematic theologies in the 17th-18th centuries which used the same approach as medieval scholasticism, namely, careful definitions of doctrines and logical deductions from first principles. These first principles were:

1. The sovereignty of God;
2. the authority of the scriptures;
3. the sinfulness of man;
4. salvation by faith alone; and
5. the divinity of Christ.

Melanchthon was the first Protestant scholastic theologian. Few read these theologians now, because they took the fire out of Luther and Calvin.

2 Some neo-Evangelicals now distinguish between “infallible” and “inerrant” scriptures. Infallible scriptures are never mistaken in matters of faith and ethics, but may err in other matters; while inerrant scriptures are always true in every matter—faith, morals, science, history, etc.