

What Do Protestants Believe Concerning the Bible?

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To speak of Protestantism is often to raise the spectre of divisiveness. We see nearly 300 denominations and sects with their divisions and diversities. How, then, can we hope to get an expression of common belief from such diversity?

Perhaps our church statistics may reveal the fact that there is far more unity in the diversity than we might have supposed. For instance, 90% of all Protestants are to be found in twenty denominations; 83% are in twelve. 225 sects have a combined total of only five per cent of American church membership. Indeed, some have ventured to say that there is almost as much unity in Protestantism as there is in Catholicism.

There is a remarkable unanimity in Protestantism regarding the sole headship of Jesus Christ. The resulting Christology and Soteriology are a common possession. There is wide agreement here. Likewise, all Protestants believe the Bible is the history of God's revelation of Himself in history; and all branches believe that this Bible is in some sense inspired, authoritative and unique.

Since the Bible occupies such a commanding place in Protestantism, it has always been a battleground of opinions, and it will continue to be so. Protestants sense the strategic value of their Bible hence the readiness with which leaders have rushed to its defense. Dr. Edwin Lewis suggests: "Perhaps the new biblicism will compel the reconsideration of the whole Christological question and by consequence the whole Soteriological question."¹ This would be a revolution more profound and transforming than the Protestant Reformation. Prot-

estants may be counted upon to defend very vigorously the "Faith of the Fathers."

How may we discover what Protestantism believes about the Bible? There is no better way than to read the great systematic theologies which leading Protestant divines have written. Heading such a list must always be Calvin's *Institutes*. Then might follow: Pope of England, Van Oosterzee of Utrecht, Hodge of Princeton, Strong of Rochester, Miley and Curtis of Drew, and Raymond of Garrett.

These thinkers all declare the Bible to be a divine-human book. They warn us against two possible extremes. One is represented by the docetics, who deny the human nature of the Bible, and the other by the Socinians, or humanists, who deny the divine. Both of these extreme positions are vigorously opposed and refuted by all the theologians mentioned, with the possible exception of Calvin, but if some of his *Commentaries* are consulted he can be included also.

1. The error of docetism. Van Oosterzee employs this term to describe the extremists who deny the human nature of the Bible. This heresy originated in the hyper-Calvinistic Cantons of Switzerland about 1675 A. D. — more than a hundred years after Calvin. It has always been congenial to the thinking of hyper-Calvinists with their theistic monergism, but it has been readily accepted by the smaller and more radical sects of other creedal movements as well. One Buxtorf is mentioned by Pope as a leader, holding that the words and letters, even the very vowel points of Hebrew, were inspired.

The verbal inspiration theory has been variously expressed in the United States.

¹"Emancipation of the Word of God", *Religion in Life*, Autumn, 1949.

As typical, we quote from J. Newton Parker, who writes in *The Bible Champion* for March, 1928: "That the Scriptures are verbally inspired, one of the very strongest evidences is, that the whole Christian world has universally desired and unremittingly sought to find and preserve the original." Again, "Then how can we say that the Bible is infallible and inspired without admitting that it [inspiration] is verbal...?" and "To say that the Bible is not verbally inspired...relegates the experimental or actual facts of the Bible to the realm of myths and falsehoods."

Thomas N. Ralston, in his *Elements of Divinity*, has developed what he terms the plenary view of inspiration. His volume was once a text-book in Asbury College, and was in the Course of Study for ministers in the Free Methodist Church, and I believe also in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Ralston states: "Inspiration is so full and complete that the sacred writers are not the real authors of the books they penned. They, as it were, disappear, and God supplies their place; that is, the Scriptures are the word of God..." (p. 597.)

It would seem from this, taken by itself, that Ralston was advancing a mechanical theory of inspiration, especially in the light of his further statement that "every portion of it... was given under plenary inspiration." However, when he explains his meaning more fully, we see that this was not what he had in mind.

Inspiration did not, said he, destroy the individuality of the several writers. "They were not used by the divine Spirit as mere machines, so as thus to blot out or suspend their moral agency or intellectual character; hence we find in the inspired writers the same variety in style and manner by which other authors are distinguished." (p. 598). The center of his emphasis is, that "in all cases, the book is *God's Word*." With respect to infallibility, Ralston holds that the writers were not inspired in the sense of having a "personal illumination" which would render them infallible as individuals; rather, they were only infallible in their official capacity. Thus, inspiration

came to them "as a spiritual influence, guiding, directing and controlling their tongues as they speak for God or their pens as they write the Scriptures, so that all they thus speak or write shall be free from error."

Thus, according to the so-called plenary (called by some the plenary verbal) view in inspiration, God left room for diversities in style, in order that men should be in possession of their human claim to the confidence of mankind. At the same time, He preserved them from error in delivering the message entrusted to them.

When the Fundamentalist - Modernist controversy broke upon the American church near 1910, the Bible was the chief battleground, and the plenary verbal theory was reaffirmed with the spirit and defended with vigor by many defenders of the Faith. Many who did not accept the full letter of the theory nevertheless accepted many of its implications. Now that this controversy has ended in a sweeping victory for the Modernists (sic), as some triumphantly affirm, it should be possible for all concerned to calmly and honestly rediscover the true import of this foundational doctrine of Protestantism, a true Bibliology.

2. The error of Socinianism. The opposite error from docetism is Socinianism or humanism. This denied the divinity of the Bible, accepting it only as a human book. In this tradition are to be found the Deists, German Rationalists, French Skeptics and many Modernists. It is inaccurate to place all liberals and Modernists in this category, even though they may lean in this direction. Those who say, "The Bible contains the Word of God" are by so much putting a divine element into the Book. These may be "left of center" as Protestants, but they do not belong in this category.

There are, however, too many unvarnished humanists in Protestantism. Dr. Nichols states it cogently:

Of all the world's Protestants it is the Americans who are now Erasmian. Two generations ago our believing forefathers were utterly scandalized at the worldly ideas which came out of Lutheran German institutions and professors. Today the shoe is on the other foot, and the Con-

tinentials are hard put to it to discover anything specifically Christian in the humanitarian idealism of liberal American Protestantism.²

Such men should be consistent and inscribe other names on their banners besides "Christian" and "Protestant." These grand words are too rich in historic meaning and sacred content to be prostituted to the service of a mundane humanism.

What do Protestants believe about the Bible? All with one voice say it is a divine-human Book, written by holy men of old who were under the inspiration of the Divine Spirit. As to the mechanics or metaphysics of that inspiration they have little to say, holding that it is an inscrutable mystery.

²James Hastings Nichols, *Primer for Protestants*, p. 83.

The greatest classic produced during the Reformation - and one of the greatest classics of all the Christian centuries — is Calvin's *Institutes*. He speaks for all in the Protestant tradition when he says of the Bible: "No man can have the least knowledge of true and sound doctrine without having been a disciple of the Scriptures" "They who have been inwardly taught by the Spirit feel an entire acquiescence in the Scripture, and that it is self-authenticated, carrying with it its own evidence." And then this master of logic and metaphysic fairly leaves one gasping with this simple, human, pragmatic test, "It is not an unimportant consideration, that since the publication of the Scripture, so many generations of men should have agreed in voluntarily obeying it."