The Bible As Authority

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We must return to the Bible. There is no hope for man outside the biblical faith. The Bible, rightly interpreted, that is from its own highest peak, God's actual presence as Holy Love in Jesus Christ, is man's final revelation. I know or can imagine no other God, or better, than he who has disclosed his will and way in Jesus Christ.

The Bible should not be a problem but a power. It should be the light of the world and the light for life. It should be our proud and precious possession. We should live by it, grow by it, and become glad and strong by it.

Nevertheless, it is a problem to numerous people, both inside and outside the faith. It is a difficulty in people's lives because it has been abused. It has been used wrongly. It has been sinned against by both enemies and friends. The church is confused, divided and enfeebled because the Bible has not been allowed to be the Bible, the living Word of God.

Two dangers beset the Bible, one from the left and the other from the right.

From the left we have a group of scholars who want to de-mythologize the Bible. With this they mean to remove from the Bible the primitive myths which modern man, trained in science, can no longer believe. These forces are led by the most prominent theologian in Europe, R. Bultmann, and in many's opinion the most weighty theologian in America, Paul Tillich. Both leaders are able, profound and dedicated, but they believe that science has forever destroyed legitimate faith in the supernatural world, a personal God who created and controls the world, and life after death. These men are followed by a number of competent and determined spirits.

I believe this movement constitutes a threat of life or death to everything that the Bible affirms at its very center. This movement will be defeated because the Bible is true and we can do everything ultimately for, and not against, the truth. God's truth will prevail.

The threat from the right has made the threat from the left
possible and indeed necessary. This is the threat unintelligently and immorally to flatten out the Bible, putting all of its material on the same level, rather than putting God in Christ as the center and the heart-beat of the Bible. Bishop Gerald Kennedy calls this "the crime of the levelers." This devastating attack on the Bible which drives the intelligently alert and morally sensitive people away from it, falsely, is due, all too often, to a zeal not according to knowledge. The Bible must be rescued from its unintelligent friends and be allowed to speak its sovereign message to a needy and waiting world.

Let me illustrate what I mean. A high executive of one of the greatest of the denominations in the South came to Principal Nathaniel Micklem with his problem: his high school daughter had come to him asking him whether to believe her preacher or her teachers as to the age of the earth. "I myself," he said, "can get along by believing, when I am in church, that the world is only 6,000 years old while believing that the world is much older when I am with educated people, but I don't want my daughter to have to grow up a split personality."

There is no need for a split personality on account of the Bible! I want to point out to you the full biblical faith, in its own light, for the world, with no sacrifice either of honesty or competence. We shall consider first "The Bible and Christ"; secondly, "The Bible and the Holy Spirit"; and thirdly, "The Bible and Experience."

The Bible and Christ

The Bible is indispensable as the original record of the constituting events of the Christian faith. The Church without the Bible is like a person with amnesia, i.e., without memory. Such a person lives, he sees, he can choose, but he does not know who he is nor how he got to be what he is. The depth and riches of his experience have dropped out. Everything for him is flat and thin. He has no secure sense of self-being. The Church without the Bible is unthinkable. It is its original self-attestation. It is, its founding deed.

Even such a state of complete forgetfulness would not be disastrous if the Christian faith were a matter of correct ideas or a matter of prescription for right living. But it is not primarily either of these. The Christian faith is a historical religion that is more like a personal life than any system of
ideas. It is rather a matter of a living relation between God and men which he has brought about by his mighty deeds. The Christian faith is a matter of God's showing his will and way, first in "a people prepared unto the Lord" and then in a Person. God reveals himself through mighty events. To be sure these people, these events, this Person must be known through ideas and communicated by means of ideas. Life is impossible on any developed level apart from ideas. That is the reason that I am so appreciative of the position of my conservative friends that the Bible gives what they call "propositional truth," i.e., definite ideas that you can nail down, fix as definite meaning. But all these ideas tell of God's mighty deed, they tell of a chosen people, of a Person who came in the fullness of time, and of a new kind of community that God has created through him.

The Bible then is, first of all, the record of God's mighty deeds to show us his salvation, showing us ourselves and how to reach heaven and home. As such, the Christian faith is through and through historical and dependent upon the historical record. To be sure these saving deeds, this Person, must be capable of being told. Where are we then? If our interpretation of the Bible will not take us to the place where God's self-disclosure through his saving deeds and his own coming to us is primary, on the one hand, then we are wrong and in need of correction; if, on the other hand, we arrive at God's deed and personal presence without being able to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love in terms of such ideas as convict us of sin and failure and show us to true salvation, then we shall also have made a mistake. We shall, however, arrive precisely at such a combination.

Christ and the Bible are inseparable. Luther said that he did not believe in Christ because of the Bible but in the Bible because of Christ. He said that Christ was the Lord of the Bible. When we come to the Bible we are confronted with the act of Christ at its very center, and Christ is not the whole Christ apart from the whole biblical faith, of God the Creator, the God of history as seen in the Chosen People, and the God of the Church. But Luther was right in his order of stress: the Bible tells of Christ. It is Christ that gives the full meaning to the Bible.

Christ, the holy love of God come to earth, is the Word. John of Damascus said that God is never without his Word. God is never Wordless. But that Word has become flesh in the
fullness of time, full of grace and truth, through whom we have seen the Father of glory and our own true selves. Christ is the Word of God and therefore we sing: "O Word of God incarnate, O Wisdom from on high," referring to Christ. Professor Henry Joel Cadbury has said that wherever the New Testament speaks of the Word of God it refers not to a Book but to a Person—it refers to the eternal Christ who became incarnate in Jesus Christ.

This is of utmost importance. The Apostle Paul had trouble with legalists and literalists who did not know the truth that only the Spirit gives life, even to the letter, and the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, the living Love of God in human history. And the very earliest of all Church Fathers, the blessed St. Ignatius, had the same problem in the first century of the Christian faith: "When I heard some people saying, 'If I don't find it in the original documents, I didn't believe it in the gospel, 'I answered them, 'But it is written.' They resorted, 'That's just the question.' To my mind it is Jesus Christ who is the original document. The inviolable archives are his cross and resurrection and that faith which came by him. It is by these things and through your prayers that I want to be justified."

Luther also said that the Bible is the cradle in which the child was laid. We are saved by the child, not the cradle. The cradle is necessary, but we must distinguish between the straws of the cradle and the holy child. Our problems are not new, but neither is the power of God to save! The Bible consists of many words, so to speak, of which Christ is the Word.

I want, however, an even closer relationship between Christ and the Bible. I want even the straws to be of intrinsic importance to the Christ. I want the whole Bible to be purposeful. How can all the truths of the Bible fit into the Truth of the Word of God in the fullness of time? If we can be both honest and competent at this point, we shall have succeeded in meeting the needs of every age on this question.

I believe that Christ is the Word made flesh, while the Bible is the written word for the preparation and for the exposition and development of what Christ means for us and for the world. The written Word contains the whole range of human experience; it consists of the whole gamut of human life. It is composed of the total spectrum of human colors from black to white. It is all there—from the murder of Cain to the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ and his glorious resurrection. In
between are all the shades of human deceit and human devotion. The movie magnate justifies before Senator Kefauver his depicting of sex abuses by saying that they are in the Bible! And all this is needed, for here is drawn for our benefit the whole history of the human race, the entire record of man's experience in sample form, and this history is an experience organically related to God's mighty deeds of revelation, and in the end to the figure of the Christ.

The Bible is a realistic book. Therefore it is wonderful. It is genuine and open, but withal it is not a discouraging book, for with all the sins and failure of men there portrayed, comes the even truer picture, because it is eternal, of God's saving mercy and faithfulness. To put everything on one level, stories of rape and sermon on the mount, songs of hate and the Cross of Christ, is to be guilty of what Bishop Gerald Kennedy calls, I repeat, "The crime of the levelers."

No, we need a criterion, and the only criterion for the Bible is Christ. Christ is the incarnation of God, the personal Spirit who is Holy Love. He is not a glorified X, the representative of the unknown God still a mystery, but God revealed in personal form in the fullness of time. Christ is God come to earth to save man by enlightening him, judging him, forgiving him, correcting him, and fulfilling him. Christ is "the true Light which enlightens every man who comes into the world." He is the Love of God who is "full of grace and truth." Christ is the universal Love that God is, who alone can fulfil every person and all people. He is not a theoretical or abstract universal, but a concrete embodiment of God who is the Reality and the full potential for all fully personal and universal relations. Christ is, at the same time, Person and actuality, standard and potentiality for Community. He is the Head of the Church.

This is the perfect Truth who is also sovereign grace. He is the changeless Absolute who yet relates himself in Love to every changing person and condition. He is the living Soul of the Bible who inspired the preparation of the fullness of time and is thus the beating, waiting heart of the Old Testament. He is the Reality of the New Testament, person, and church, and the criterion and dynamic of all the truth into which the Holy Spirit is to guide all who accept the Gospel and expect his coming again in glory. His coming in glory to put all things right, when even the Son will be subjected to him who put all things under his feet, alone gives the Bible its full con-
vincing power, for it proclaims that the Sovereign Lord is Saving Love.

Everything in the Bible contrary to this criterion is judged by it—from black to white with all the grades of gray in between. The very purpose of such grades is to show us vicariously and livingly in human experience and history what is right and wrong. Everything consistent with the criterion makes rich in human experience and history the meaning of truth and serves as example and encouragement for us.

The Bible and the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit, too, is defined as the Spirit of Truth, and the witness to him who is grace and truth, in such a way that everything that is true in the Bible is true because of him and everything that is false is false in relation to him. The Spirit of truth works through many channels and in many ways. When the scientist or the historian or the psychologist discovers a truth, he does so only because truth is and because truth is made possible for man in a spiritual universe. The final truth is God a Spirit, the God who came as Saviour in Christ, and the Holy Spirit who takes of Christ, whether as Creator, Sustainer, or Redeemer of man and his world, and communicates to those willing to accept him.

The Word of God then is primarily the Word Incarnate, Jesus as the Christ, the enactor in full humanity of the holy Love who God is. But it is also the written Word, the whole gamut of human experience and history in the Light and Lifting of that Word. But the Bible is a Trinitarian Book, not arbitrarily, not in terms of three Gods, but of the nature of God in his relation to the world. For the Word of God is also the continual offering to each receiver and reader of the Gospel. The Word is also the present imparting of the Holy Spirit to give light, warmth and power to the Incarnate Word in relation to the written Word. Without the presence of the Holy Spirit the Word is never fully proclaimed, read, understood, or accepted. We must always listen to what the Spirit saith to the churches, whether by man or book.

We need the letter; the Word must become flesh in a Person, be enmanned; the Word needs also to become nature in the Bible to creatures of and in nature; but the Spirit must yet breathe life into nature and into flesh. The letter without this Spirit is death; but the Spirit needs the letter of communi-
cation. No letter can, however, communicate in any fullness nor can the letter give life. To substitute the letter for the Spirit is therefore death, but the spirit without letter is that neutral white where all the colors are or that silence which is the source of sound; most of the time we mortal creatures must live by color and sound. Such is the function of the letter.

To use another figure: the written Word is the riches of all stained glass windows, for it is the full story of human life in one painting: this painting revolves around its central theme: the Christ, his life, ministry, teaching, crucifixion, resurrection, and the consequent spreading of the Gospel and the waiting for the consummation in glory. The meaning of the multitudinous and varied subscenes find their explanation only in terms of the central theme. Nevertheless, the whole painting is in shadow and undecipherable until the light is turned on it. Then it speaks its momentous and all-important message. That Light to be turned on is the Holy Spirit.

Or to use still another figure: a diamond well cut has innumerable facets, but it never glows with fascinating sparkle until the light strikes. Then what a total radiance is seen enhanced by man, minor dancing lights! Even so the Bible is the condition for Christian radiance, but will not give it till we turn on the light of the Holy Spirit.

This light of the Spirit will come when we are willing to be led into all truth. Central to such truth is God's own universal love, this inclusive and yet full intensive concern for each and all. The Bible is read in the Spirit only when it is read from God for the world. This Spirit is One who so loved that he gave his own Son, his very life for the world. Unless we so read the Bible as a self-offering unto God for the world, the Bible will remain a closed book to us. Only when the Bible is read in the Spirit of Agape, or Christ-love, can the Bible open up to us its unsearchable treasures and offer through us and to us its riches in glory. John Woolman said that where there is great Treasure there is also great Trust, Treasure and trust go together! Only he who will live the Bible can rightly read it and fully teach it.

Such reading in the Spirit will also mean that we are open to all further truth. As Robinson of the Mayflower said: "God has yet more light to break forth from his Word." That Word is inexhaustible. The truth of the Bible is God's own self-disclosure as holy Love and not through all eternity shall we
be able to comprehend fully what that means, for we shall remain men and not God. Over and over again we must study and obey, obey and study, thank God, and receive, knowing full well that we know not yet as we ought. What a treasure of grace is our precious Bible!

The Bible is also God's living speech to men, and we must be open to any and all truth from whatever quarter it comes, treating it with reverence and holy respect. All truth is of God and we do insult the Spirit, as Calvin stressed, when we refuse to accept the self-disclosure of that Spirit in whatever form and in whatever subject. Humble open-mindedness along with a critical care to test the spirits whether they be of God is the only attitude to maintain towards such truth as is not developed in the Bible. We can trust the Spirit to be our helper as we have need and to guide us into all truth as he will. The Spirit is never defensive, but always open and creative. In him we believe all things that are true and of a good report, in that he is himself the Love who abides in faith and hope. Biblical truth comes then, even as Jesus, not to destroy but to fulfil. The Bible judges what is untrue and evil while enriching and giving new context to whatever is true and good.

In the third place, the Holy Spirit makes the biblical faith a reality in our lives. He provides the immediacy for us. He gives us the click of conviction. He wipes the dust and the tears from our eyes and makes them eyes of faith. Assurance never comes from self-assurance. Assurance of self is brittle and easily shaken. The assurance which is mainly subjective is fugitive and fleeting. The assurance that the Holy Spirit gives is deep and continuing. As long as we remain in him our faith is strong even within our own weakness. The biblical faith is assurance through the Holy Spirit who provides all joy and peace in believing, making us "to abound in hope." There is no strong approach to the Bible as the Word of God that does not make indispensable the Holy Spirit as interpreter and as giver of assurance. Christ as the given light precedes, as does dedicated study and self-offering, but as Christ, the study and self-offering are carried on, within the larger orbit of the Spirit's reign and agency, finally there must come an intimate understanding and assurance of the Word of God that can come only through the power of the immediate work of the Holy Spirit.
The Bible and Experience

We have now discussed the Bible and Christ, and the Bible and the Holy Spirit. It remains to mention the Bible and Experience. This third part should not be of equal length and importance with the first two, for they are foundational. At the same time the subject of experience has come under a cloud lately and needs to be cleared. We must stress biblical experience, for Christ and the Holy Spirit have come that we might enter into a living experience of God. All of God's work in creation, history, and redemption, is for the sake of experience. Experience is our side of the picture, and, even though it is not primary or original, it is part and parcel of God's plan and work.

Christian experience is biblical experience. Christian experience is fellowship with God on the basis of his own grace and full acceptance. It presupposes the biblical world-view. With such a view we do not mean a world six thousand years old, having corners, and with the sun circling around it! The biblical world-view is the understanding that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Eternity we cannot understand and must leave in the hands of God. What we can understand, to a significant part, is the reality of God as the supernatural Creator of the universes. He is also the controller of the endless distances and of the submicroscopic spaces. Even man's history which is partly free, is yet as a whole under his sovereign planning and constant supervision. God is no absentee landlord; he cares for his land.

According to the biblical world-view, God is also the finisher and fulfiller of his work. This world is his; our lives are his; all is therefore to be accepted with thanksgiving and prayer and used within a free and responsible stewardship to God's glory, our own growth, and for human helpfulness. Our lives here are only part of their endless existence before the face of God. What such a promise means we cannot fathom, but we can trust him who has himself come into human life and history to show us his will, to make a way for us to himself, to our own true selves, and to right relations with him and with each other. All meaning, significance and decision are to be seen in the love of God in Christ Jesus, who is our Lord precisely because he enmanned the universal Love which God is. He is our only Lord in that no other Love can ever be absolute.
or hold claim over us. The Son, Life and Love thus go together inseparably in the biblical world-view. Such is at least a minimum but central statement of the biblical world-view which is presupposed by all Christian experience.

Such experience is through and through supernatural. Words get in the way, and we had better explain that word. The Christian experience is altogether natural in the sense that it belongs to man by his deepest nature. God made him for it. God gave himself in human life and death for it. God works to make it real and permanent in man. Christian experience is man's proper nature and in this sense is natural to him. By supernatural we mean that what is potentially natural to man can never be had by man apart from God's presence and gift of himself. It is not something a man can work out for himself. It is a relation to God which can come only by the work of God. Supernatural is therefore not over against or contrary to nature, but rather is indicated by nature and longed for, but impossible apart from what is more than nature as we know it.

Christian experience is a new relation into which we must be born by God. He accepts us freely because of his own work, by his own love, and as we are ready to understand and accept what he can mean to and for our lives. Jesus was a complete realist when he insisted that we must be born again, from above. Natural man has a spirit centered in himself and in his own ideals and interests. Such self-centeredness is necessary to an individual who is to become real in freedom and responsibility. But since what is natural to us as we are is not natural to us as we are to become, our ideals and interests fail to satisfy our deepest longings. We shall never find fulfilment and satisfaction on the deepest level of our lives until we find the reality for which we are born, namely, to be born again into the fuller presence of God with new ideals and interests, even of his own inclusive and intensive Love. Christian experience is finding the love of Christ and living in a constant acceptance of God, oneself, and others. It is therefore also a being born again into a new kind of community, the holy fellowship of the Church.

The Bible describes the Christian experience and how we can get it. The Bible shows us God and all his work on our behalf. The Bible shows us the conditions that must be met if we are to receive and live such an experience, but the Bible also feeds such an experience. We are born and therefore
The Bible is the proper food for Christian growth. Biblical experience is growth in grace, growth in the love of God which surpasses knowledge, growth in the community which builds itself up in love. The Bible contains milk for babes and meat for men, and also all the grades of feeding required in between. Those who feed on the Bible wisely and regularly show the growth of Christian experience. When reading, praying and living go together, within the framework and the living power of the Bible, what results is a biblical experience which is the yearning of the heart of God and the deepest craving in man. Christ, the Bible, the Holy Spirit, and Christian experience, ought always to be held together within our thinking and seeking.

In a way what I have said here is part of my own life from childhood. When as a boy of thirteen, I left home for America without any money or the language of the country, the last words of my mother as the train pulled out were: "Nels, remember Jesus; Nels, remember Jesus." However sophisticated my training and experience, deep down those simple words have been rock-bottom wisdom. Here we see and meet God.

When I arrived at Ellis Island no one was there to become my guardian, through neglect or misunderstanding, and for eleven long days I had to be in prison in no man's land, with no person who could understand me and under indescribable conditions. My one comfort was the Bible. I read it and read it, and found God near in it.

May I make the personal confession that without the Bible I am quite lost. It is so much a part of my daily routine, that all of life would be radically altered if the Bible were not being read. How can we ever thank God enough for such a blessing?

Let therefore the Bible be no problem but a power. Let it unite by its Love, lead by its Light, and save by its Spirit. Let us all take a loyalty pledge to honor the Bible by using it at its highest, God's Love in Christ, its truest light of God and leading for man.