

The Seat of Authority in Protestantism

There are indications that the historical-critical method of biblical study, with its slavish devotion to the techniques of the scientific method, may be due for some revision from within liberal scholarship. Biblical criticism, particularly the forms which it has assumed in the past two centuries, is an essentially Protestant phenomenon, and as such is a part of a larger problem. The attempt to discover an extra-biblical seat of authority for Christianity, successively in reason and in experience, seems to have rendered necessary some specific handling of Scripture by which a rationalistic explanation might be given for certain features which, as the Scriptures stand, are explicable only upon the basis of their supernatural character.

An objective appraisal of recent criticism yields at least one fairly obvious conclusion, that the method, conscious or unconscious, has been that of 'divide and conquer.' The two Testaments are separated as objects for study. The one is played off against the other. Within the New Testament are supposedly found antithetical groups of writings and opposed modes of thought. It was once fashionable to route heavy traffic across the bridge of a supposed disagreement between Paul and the original disciples. More recently, the Synoptic Gospels have been set in opposition to the Fourth Gospel, while some scholars have declared themselves "more at home in the Gospels than in the Epistles." Again, recent criticism has made much of the supposed fact that the writers of the New Testament subordinated all other considerations to the matter of producing a convincing tract for purposes of Christian 'propaganda.' Presumably the writers were without interest in matters of historical accuracy; thus,

to understand the New Testament, the reader must view its documents as *Tendenz-schriften*, the product of a purpose to convince.

The net result of the bulk of recent criticism has been to obscure the basic homogeneity of the New Testament. The centrifugal tendencies in biblical scholarship have found a culmination in the Form-Critical method, in which the New Testament is fragmented in near-atomic fashion. Emphasizing that which has probably been too largely ignored, namely the *Sitz-in-Leben*, or context in actual life out of which the Christian Gospel came, it has sought to recover the alleged units in which the 'oral tradition' was circulated. Two factors in this movement excite questions: first, is it certain that early Christian preaching made use of granules of recollection concerning Jesus? and second, does not the insistence of Dr. Frederick C. Grant, that the critic must be able to 'feel the pulse' of the documents indicate a degree of subjectivism in Form Criticism which render it questionable?

In protest against this trend toward fragmentation of the Scriptures, the Dialectical Theology has sought, within the general framework of liberalism, to formulate a Biblical Theology which emphasizes the organic unity of the Bible upon the basis of a comprehensive understanding of it as "The Word of God." This movement in theology has sought to recover the basic answers which the Reformers gave to the problem of authority, as they rejected the traditional authoritarianism of Rome. Its thinkers have frequently identified their views with those of the Reformation at this point, and in turn have sought to demonstrate that Luther and Calvin were misrepresented by later Protestant orthodoxy. This contention is, of course,

not new: Auguste Sabatier insisted that a type of Protestant scholasticism grew up to obscure the pure and undefiled religion of the Reformation.

Something will be said concerning this contention at a later point in this editorial. It needs to be pointed out here that theological liberalism is sensing a need for action upon the cue of the dialectical theologians, and that in seeking "to discover and set forth in fresh terms a conception of unity which cannot be disturbed by historical, sociological, or literary findings"¹ it is in reality re-opening the question of authority in the Christian religion.

Current theology is late in its attempt to rediscover the element of integrity in its sacred literature. The Gestalt School has for some years been seeking to effect unification within the heretofore centrifugal movements in psychology. The Existential School has sought to do the same for philosophy, continuing the emphasis of Kierkegaard upon the interaction among the factors in the total human situation. The welcome trend toward a similar unification in the field of biblical study seems to be, in part, a reaction against the extreme subjectivism which has entered into modern biblical criticism. And in reversing the trend in the direction of a biblical theology based upon the conception of the unity of Scripture, criticism must somehow rethink the question of authority in Protestantism, if we be correct in assuming that critical scholarship has been obliged to discount the historicity of Scripture in its quest for an extra-biblical authority in Protestantism.

A volume was published this winter entitled *The Infallible Word, A Symposium*, written by seven professors of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. This book seeks to re-

state the Reformed view of the Scriptures, with special reference to the question of authority. Although the writers deal with a variety of subjects, such as: "The Attestation of Scripture," "The Authority of the Old Testament," "The Authority of the New Testament," "The Transmission of the Text," "Scriptural Preaching," and others, the volume possesses a remarkable degree of unity. This unity is achieved largely by means of the emphasis upon the homogeneity of the Bible as a ground for belief in it as the seat of authority in Christianity.

It is inevitable that such a work should engage in conflict with two groups of thinkers, modern theological liberals, and the dialectical theologians. Understandably enough the writers are allergic to the latter, inasmuch as the Westminster men feel that they (the dialecticians) are incorrect in equating their own views with those of the reformers, especially at the point of belief in the authority of the Christian Scriptures.

The burden of the apologetic of our writers is that "the Scripture possesses binding and ruling authority by reason of what it is objectively, inherently, and qualitatively."² Barth and his followers make a great deal of the inward testimony of the Spirit to Scripture, and confuse this with the inspiration of Scripture. The Westminster men fear this to be a distant echo of Sabatier's fallacious antithesis between a 'religion of authority' and a 'religion of the spirit.' Thus, the Crisis Theology holds that the Bible becomes the Word of God in the *crisis* in which man is confronted by God in judgment-decision. Against this, the writers under review assert that the testimony of the Holy Spirit to the Scripture *depends upon* the inspiration of that Scripture. Inspiration is logically prior to the witness of the

¹ LYMAN, Mary Ely, "The Unity of the Bible" in *Journal of Bible and Religion*, Vol. XIV, No. 1, February, 1946, p. 5.

² *The Infallible Word, A Symposium*, Philadelphia: Guardian Publishing Corporation, (1945), p. 42.

Divine Spirit to Scripture.

In identifying their own views at this point with that of the reformers, the disciples of Barth seek to read back into the statements of Luther and Calvin the essence of the modern subjectivistic dialectic, utilizing the inevitable element of polarity between written Word and witnessing Spirit in their quest for evidence that the sixteenth century Reformation really accorded with their twentieth century views. If this were true, then the orthodox tradition in Protestantism is really a type of scholasticism, in which the more "dynamic" views of the Reformation have been obscured by a view of the Bible as inspired and therefore authoritative which is non-reformation in character.³

The volume under review would be strengthened by more specific quotations from the writings of the reformers at the point of their belief in the full inspiration of Scripture and in its consequent authority. For example, Luther's use of the Bible in the controversy with Zwingli at Marburg is inexplicable upon any other ground than that of his belief that at least the portion speaking of the Eucharist was completely authoritative. The whole of Calvin's *Institutes* would be rendered unintelligible, it seems to the writer, were his views concerning the Bible less positive than those held by classical Protestantism. It is interesting to note that Charles Clayton Morrison attributes this belief to both Luther and Calvin, citing it as an error (from the viewpoint of liberalism) characteristic of the Reformation.⁴

It is refreshing to discover in this

³ An alumnus of Westminster Theological Seminary has written a valuable article dealing in more detail with this same subject. See William Young: "The Inspiration of Scripture in Reformation and in Barthian Theology" in *Westminster Theological Journal*, Volume VIII, No. 1, November, 1945.

⁴ Morrison, Charles Clayton, "Protestant Misuse of the Bible" in *Christian Century*, June 5, 1946, pp. 712f.

volume a reassertion of the almost-forgotten antithesis between the 'natural man' and the 'spiritual man' as expressed by Paul in *I Cor.* 2:14. Inasmuch as it has been out of fashion to draw any clear line between unregenerate and regenerate, even orthodox Christianity has tended to blur the distinction, forgetting that the question is one which touches deeply the whole matter of the receiving and understanding of Scripture. At the expense of seeming to promulgate 'undemocratic' ideas, one of these writers has made bold to suggest that "the darkness and depravity of man's mind by reason of sin make him blind to the divine excellence of Scripture."⁵ This is plain speech, and serves to point up the truth that the Divine Spirit, bearing testimony to Scripture, also opens the mind to perceive the divine character of His handiwork.

Another important point of emphasis is the distinction which is drawn between the actual authority-content of the Gospel on the one hand, and the testimony of the Spirit to its intrinsic authority on the other. The latter is derived from the former; the former is valid in itself and of itself. The latter, however, renders the Scripture relevant to instinctive needs of the human spirit, "the needs for knowledge, authority, guidance, communion, and sympathy."⁶

Emphasis is thus laid upon the sufficiency of Scripture as a rule for life and practice. Closely related to this is the matter of interpretation; attention is drawn to the distinction between clearness and superficiality. Clarity is, however, a question influenced by the human equation. The 'natural' man lacks the insight necessary to a comprehensive grasp of Scripture. He may possibly find it relevant to some isolated areas of his life. The regenerate man will, however, perceive that

⁵ *The Infallible Word*, p. 46.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

the relevance of the Word of God is as wide as the area of His sovereignty.

The authors under review reveal a thorough awareness of the issues which exist between them and modern theological liberalism. Professor Edward J. Young, in his chapter "The Authority of the Old Testament" renders the conservative cause great service in his survey of the question of canonization, in which he feels to reside the crux of the question of the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures. N. B. Stonehouse treats of similar questions in connection with the New Testament. His chapter indicates an acquaintance with the chief movements in recent New Testament criticism; one could wish for an expansion of his argument which would come to grips with Form Criticism.

Especially rewarding to the reader is the chapter by John H. Skilton, "The Transmission of the Scriptures." This writer has done exceedingly careful work, and faces the problems involved in this important phase of the question with the type of reverent open-mindedness which ought to characterize the one seeking the truth at this point.

The final chapter, "Nature and Scripture" by Cornelius Van Til deals with the problem of the relation existing between the two forms of revelation. He does so with particular reference to the Westminster Confession, and may therefore be expected to deal with such questions as grace and salvation from a distinctly Calvinistic viewpoint. The chapter emphasizes the overall unity of God's revelation, and is least convincing in its assertion that it is the same God who is revealed in both nature and Scripture, but that nature reveals nothing of the grace of God. The solution to the problem is placed in the statement of the Confession that God is "eternal, incomprehensible, most free, most ab-

solute."⁷ Perhaps no more can be expected by way of explanation, but Dr. Van Til proceeds to suggest that natural revelation was supplemented by covenant (especially that with Noah) which is "a limiting notion in relation to the covenant of saving grace."⁸

The chief contribution of the chapter seems to be the continual emphasis upon the inter-relatedness of natural revelation and revelation in Scripture, and the careful study of the original terms of human probation, failure in which necessitated the covenant of grace. Concerning the question of the clearness of natural revelation, the writer puts the onus of the matter where it belongs, namely upon the dullness of the percipient. "It is . . . no easier for sinners to accept God's revelation in nature than to accept God's revelation in Scripture."⁹

Professor Van Til finds the natural theology of Aristotle more hostile to the Reformed position than that of Plato. This is interesting in the light of the fact that the theistic finitists, with whom the writer under discussion would doubtless be in the sharpest disagreement, are chiefly indebted to Plato. It is clear that Dr. Van Til sees Thomism as Enemy Number One of reformed theology. He gives a restrained praise to Kant for the service rendered Christian thought in denying that either univocal or equivocal reasoning can reach a proper view of God. This does not mean that he is in agreement with Kant; indeed, he sees the task of the dialectical theologians in harmonizing Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* with Calvin's *Institutes* as impossible. Barth and Brunner, in satisfying Kant's requirements are denying Calvin and Calvin's God. Van Til is firm here: he asserts that no peace can be made between the Crisis Theology and Reformed Theol-

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

ogy. The former must ultimately destroy reason; the latter, in rejecting autonomous reason, restores reason to its proper place.

Sufficient has been said concerning the Westminster volume to indicate two things: first that there are some elements with which not all would be in full agreement, these elements being those growing out of the specifically Calvinistic views of the writers; and second, that the book contains very much that is to be appre-

ciated and studied with care. In the opinion of the writer, the authors indicate a high degree of reserve at points upon which much remains yet to be said. They are seeking (and it seems with much success) to lay the ghosts which have risen at the mention of the words 'inspiration' and 'authority,' and in so doing have pointed the way to a wholesome conservatism in the understanding of the Bible.

—H. B. K.

THE PRESIDENT'S LETTER

(Concluded from page 33)

spiritual counselor. His work will begin with the fall term.

The increase in enrollment of the student body for the present year is thirty-one per cent. The increase for each of the two preceding years was twenty-five per cent. The overflow conditions have made it necessary to seek new quarters for the chapel services. The chapel services are now being held in the Presbyterian Church which is adjacent to the campus.

A Holiness Emphasis Week was sponsored by the student body during the spring quarter with Dr. J. L. Brasher as the leader. The results were so gratifying that the students have decided to make Holiness Emphasis Week an annual event in the student activities. A week-end retreat was held for the women students during the spring quarter with very gratifying results in deepening the spiritual life of those who attended. This is another feature which promises to become an annual event. More than three hundred out-of-town ministers and laymen attended the second annual Minister's Conference in February. The attendants at this conference came from New York to Louisiana and most of the intervening states. There is a spirit of alertness on the part of the faculty and the entire student body to the new day of progress and advancement which has come to Asbury Theological Seminary.