

THE AUTHORITY OF HOLY SCRIPTURE.

BY THE REV. A. LILLINGSTON, M.A., Canon Residentiary,
Durham.

THE Committee have been well advised in asking us to consider the question of "Authority," and I trust it will be duly welcomed and seriously weighed. It is far from being a simple one to handle: it has its special difficulties and perplexities; but it is always an important one because men and women of every generation want to know where they can find a Guide, a supernatural and Divine Guide; a Guide for their daily life, and a Guide about matters eternal. The craving for a standard of belief and of conduct is nothing less than a universal one, and cannot be long ignored.

And it is unusually important at the present time because of the well-known bid of a vigorous body of Churchmen to capture the religious world by offering to guide it into all Truth by methods which, as we may see, must fail and can never satisfy, but may rather mislead and harm.

If you will now notice the title of our subject, you will see that we are to pay particular attention to the "Authority of Scripture," and it may be at once assumed that the object in view is to define and defend the peculiar qualifications of Holy Writ to act as an Authority, and to meet the spiritual needs and demands of mankind.

I do not hesitate to adopt that task, and I will endeavour to lay before you the reasons why Churchmen in England have during recent centuries consistently looked to the Bible for light and comfort in all their religious life, and have relied on its teaching to answer the various enigmas of the present and the future:—

I. Because we are satisfied, some would say, sure, about its origin and its source. This is a very important point, as the mind of man quite naturally refuses to rest on an uncertain and insecure foundation. If a man is a fool who builds his house on sand, how much more foolish is he who stakes his Eternal Destiny on anything less stable than an impregnable Rock, as Scripture has shown itself to be!

Here at once is the superiority of the Bible to TRADITION, of which the Roman Church makes so much. It is not that unwritten Tradition is necessarily less true than written Truth, but that we cannot trace it, we simply do not know where it came from. If we could be certain that any unwritten doctrine came from Christ and His Apostles, we should, of course, receive it with the same reverence and confidence that we pay to the written Word.

Bishop Harold Browne¹ said: "Tradition by word of mouth is a thing proverbially uncertain. In peculiar conditions of Society, or for a short time, it may be sufficient for the preservation of Truth. But it is evidently unfitted for a body like the Catholic Church, which was to pervade all nations, extend throughout all ages,

¹ [The Writer has drawn some of the material of this paper from Bishop Browne's notes on Article VI.].

weather the storm of ignorance and barbarism at one time, and bear up against the scorching and withering glare of learned infidelity at another." And then he added: "Scripture having been evidently designed to correct the uncertainty, and supply the deficiency of tradition, it is unreasonable to suppose that God would have suffered Scripture itself, the more certain Guide, to be imperfect, and to need the less certain Guide, Tradition, to supply its defects."

I think that it is he, too, who said: "If tradition committed to the Church had been sufficient to preserve the Truth, then the writing of the four Gospels, and of the other parts of the New Testament, would have been superfluous."

And so we may safely assert that there is a total absence of all evidence to prove, that there is even professedly any tradition extant, to which we are indebted for the knowledge of any great doctrine of faith, *independently of the Written Word*. John Wycliffe, who lived in days when tradition was more honoured in England than it has been since the Reformation, was even more emphatic, saying: "To place above Scripture, and prefer to it, human traditions, doctrines, and ordinances, is nothing but an act of blind presumption. A power of human appointment which pretends to set itself above the Holy Scriptures can only lame the efficacy of the Word of God, and introduce confusion. Yes, it leads to blasphemy, when the Pope puts forward the claim that what he decrees in matters of faith must be received as Gospel, and that his law must, even more than the Gospel itself, be observed and carried out."

Let these opinions suffice to confirm us in our allegiance to the Bible, and in our scepticism concerning Tradition which can never be anything but vague and arbitrary, consisting as it does of the *dicta* of fallible man, and possessing nothing of the certainty and soundness of the sacred Scriptures.

In the next place, if we are unwilling to honour Tradition and to recognize it as our Authority, what about the Church?

Is it not the prerogative of the Church to teach, and of the Bible to prove? Are not men justified in turning to the Church, as they do, for Authority: in expecting the Church to exercise Authority, and be their Law and their Guide?

This is a serious question, because to this day many take refuge in the figment of an infallible Church, which guards, sustains, and interprets revelation.

Before dealing with this special point, let me make two observations:—

(a) That we have never yet, with all our wit and wisdom, found out what exactly is the Church, and what is not.

(b) That it seems impossible for representative bodies of the Church of England even, to reach entire and unanimous agreement upon matters of grave and vital importance.

If by the Church, you mean the House of Bishops, I would remind you that Bishop Gore is reported to have said that he des-

paired of the Bishops being of one mind. And the Bench of his day was smaller, and not less distinguished, than it is to-day.

If by the Church, you mean the Church Assembly, does any man outside Bedlam expect unanimity there, after the discussions on Prayer Book Revision? And can any man with a Christian heart fail to pity the Bishops as they undertake to deal with the chaos that lies in front of them? I would only urge you earnestly to pray that they may do their work conscientiously by being true to their consecration vows, one of which is to uphold the sufficiency of the Bible.

Coming now to our special point, and speaking of the Church as "the faithful in Christ," we readily and gladly acknowledge that Bible and Church are dependent on one another; probably they could not have come into being without one another, and could not function now without one another. Certainly it is true that the Church has always been a failure when it has been untrue to the Holy Scriptures, which are the title deeds of the Church, the law of the Church's life, the test of her purity, the source of her strength, the spring of her progress.

As Dr. Westcott once wrote: "A corrupted Bible is a sign of a corrupted Church, a Bible mutilated or imperfect, a sign of a Church not yet raised to the complete perception of Truth."

We might argue over this question in a circle *ad infinitum*, but I will content myself with a valuable quotation from Peake's *Commentary* (p. 7): "The Church did not create the Bible, any more than the Bible the Church; they were both derived from a common source—the experience of those who came into personal contact with Jesus Christ, and felt the inspiration of His saving Personality and Work. The Gospels are the memorials of His life and teaching, which took shape within the early Church, but were not created by it; the Epistles are the literary deposit of the experience of those who were filled with the power of His Holy Spirit, and who, living under the quickening influence of His grace, founded the Church. This reciprocal relation between Church and Bible thus invalidates the claim of the Church to superiority over the Bible as the ultimate revelation of God, and the authentic interpreter of His will. They are co-ordinates." (*Vide* also Calvin's *Institutes*, Vol. I, chap. vii., p. 59 f.)

2. Because of the universal consent which the Bible has received, and the unwavering reliance which has been placed on it throughout the course of Christian history. When we look into it, we find that Scripture has ever been adduced, by Divines of all schools and all communions as capable of proving all the great doctrines of the faith, and all the important rules of duty, such as the Trinity, Incarnation, Atonement, Justification, Sanctification, the grace of the Sacraments, the privileges of the Church, etc. Though different schools have differed as to the way in which Scripture should be interpreted on some of these points, yet all have agreed that the true doctrine concerning the weighty and cardinal points of faith may be gathered from Scripture, if interpreted aright: and this,

largely on account of a conviction that it possesses a special and an unquestionable authority.

I need not give you more than a mere reminder that there are many passages which prove that our Lord Himself regarded the Old Testament as revealing the Will of God: that the Jewish monotheism which stood out so splendidly from the surrounding atmosphere of polytheism, stood or fell with the supernatural authority of the Jewish Scriptures. If any Jew denied the divine origin of the Scriptures and the Law, he would also have destroyed the grounds of the Jewish belief in one God.

Let me also remind you that, as Paley points out, the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles are quoted, or alluded to, by a series of Christian writers, beginning with those who were contemporary with the Apostles, or who immediately followed them, and proceeding in close and regular succession from their time to the present: *and* that when they are quoted, or alluded to, it is with peculiar respect, as books *sui generis*, as possessing an authority which belonged to no other books, and as conclusive in all questions and controversies among Christians. What is very striking is that the decisions of the first four General Councils, whose authority is acknowledged by all, and whose doctrinal standards are our heritage to-day, were accepted because they immediately and readily commended themselves to the judgment of the whole Church *as in accordance with Divine* revelation.

Let me give you the names of some of the primitive Fathers who with one voice affirm the perfection and sufficiency of the written Word for the end for which it was written, i.e. for a rule of faith and for a rule of life: Irenæus, Tertullian, Origen, Hippolytus, Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Basil, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and many others. It is impossible to escape from the influence of these early Christians, and it would surely be unwise and even precarious to scorn their opinion on such a question, and to turn aside and pin our faith to any authority but the Scriptures by which they lived and did their work. It seems indisputable that they were convinced that the Apostles, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, did not trust the known and well-proved insufficiency of Tradition, but had recourse to the Scriptures as a source and rule of faith.

Jeremy Taylor puts the matter thus: "The Apostles at first owned these writings: the churches received them; they transmitted them to their posterity: they grounded their faith upon them: they proved their propositions by them: by them they confuted heretics, and they made them the measure of right and wrong: all that collective body of doctrine of which all Christians collectively made public confessions, and on which their hopes of salvation did rely, were all contained in them, and they agreed in no point of faith which is not plainly set down in Scripture."

3. Because we are persuaded that, as Article VI states, "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation," and that, in a unique way and to a unique degree.

We do not pretend that the Bible deals with all religious topics of interest in a final way, nor do we hold that it even refers to some of them. That is the criticism of some Roman writers, who would have us consult the Church and Tradition to supply the deficiency. For example, the Scriptures (it is said) do not adequately meet our curiosity about Original Sin, the perpetual Virginity of the Blessed Mary, the observance of Easter, Infant Baptism, Purgatory, and so forth.

We grant this, but we do not grant that full and complete light on such points is essential to salvation ; they do not all materially concern our personal faith or practice : if we knew all that is to be known about them, our salvation and sanctification might not be advanced one whit.

Given the Bible, we can do our duty fully to God and man : the Bible is our sufficient authority, because, as a careful student once put it, it is full, because it is clear, because it is definite, because it is accessible, because it is satisfying. The soul that humbly receives it needs nothing that is not derived thence for spiritual life and power.

Convinced of this, we generally concur with Wycliffe, who deduced from the Divine origin and absolute authority of the Bible its perfect and entire sufficiency. To him the Bible alone was the ground document of the Church, its fundamental law, its *charta*. He loved to speak of the Bible as the charter of the Church's liberties, as the God-given deed of grace and promise. To Scripture alone he ascribed the prerogative of authenticity. In comparison with it, all other writings, albeit they may be the genuine works of great Church Doctors, are " apocryphal," and have no claim on our faith for their own sake.

This point of the sufficiency of Scripture is one on which we cannot be too clear because of an insistent cry for a fresh revelation. It is sometimes stated that the only way in which to encounter scepticism and agnosticism, and the destructive power of science and criticism is by a sure word from Heaven. Against that we simply have to say that we need no revelation that is not contained in the Bible. Since the last words of Scripture were written no additional revelation has come. After all, this is the argument for inspiration which can never be set aside. It rests upon the sure foundation of fact and experience. The illumination of Christian genius has been thrown on every phase of religious thought and feeling. The promises of God have been every day fulfilled in the experience of Christian souls. These have borne their abundant witness that in Christ is Yea, and yet there is not one solitary sentence to be added to the Word of God. We know of God what was written of God nearly 2,000 years ago, and we know nothing besides. The completeness, the sufficiency, of revelation is an objective fact, certified by the failure of every attempt to add to it. Still the Holy Spirit takes of the things of Christ, and shows them unto us, and so revelation, while it is old and grows older, is perennially new.

To put it in another way, we are continually having a fresh revelation because Christ answers our perplexities and despairs by being present in His exalted life through His Spirit in faithful hearts, and by giving us an immediate experience of His life and power.

I need not go into this matter at greater length. Our Article VI, which stamps the Church of England as essentially Protestant, inasmuch as it echoes the original protest presented to the Diet at Spires in 1529 by the Lutheran Princes of Germany, is sufficiently plain. It draws a great distinction between things necessary for salvation, and things practically beneficial, but not essential. This distinction is the main subject of the second Book of Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity*. As for the sufficiency of Holy Scripture for salvation, it was a universal article of faith in the first four centuries.

Paley in his "Evidences" furnishes us with an overwhelming collection of quotations from primitive writers; and the subject was investigated in a complete and masterly way by the late Dean Goode in the tenth chapter of his *Divine Rule of Faith and Practice*.

In short, if we want to know what we should believe, and what we need not believe, the simplest answer comes from S. Augustine, who said: "If it is established by the clear authority of the Divine Scriptures, those I mean that are called Canonical in the Church, it is to be believed without any doubt. But other witnesses or testimonies, which are used to persuade you to believe anything, you may believe or not, just as you shall see that they have or have not any weight giving them a just claim to your confidence."

4. Because we are convinced that Holy Scripture has a supernatural element, and exercises a unique power over the heart of man. In other words, the authority which the Bible possesses is that of its own spiritual supremacy, and its unique spiritual power.

When it can be shown that Christianity is, as a whole, unique, spiritually exalted, adequate to the needs of men, and different from anything which might have been looked for as the product of human thought and experience, can the existence of a supernatural element in Scripture be seriously disputed? Do we not rather, readily and generally admit that if anywhere man has a revelation from God, it is contained in the Bible?

Calvin, in his *Institutes*, says: "Read Demosthenes or Cicero; read Plato, Aristotle, or any others of that class; I grant that you will be attracted, delighted, moved, and enraptured by them in a surprising manner: but if, after reading them, you turn to the perusal of the sacred volume, whether you are willing or unwilling, it will affect you so powerfully, it will so penetrate your heart, and impress itself so strongly on your mind, that, compared with its energetic influence, the beauties of rhetoricians and philosophers will almost entirely disappear: so that it is easy to perceive something Divine in the sacred Scriptures, which far surpass the highest attainments and ornaments of human industry" (Book I, chap. viii.).

If we look further and ask, "What is it that gives this word its power?" we have little difficulty in finding our answer.

It is not because of its morals and its moral idea. It is not in its ideas of two worlds, and men placed between them. It is not in its exposure of our incapacity by and of ourselves to rise to the higher, and become Godlike and Christlike. But it is due to the marvellous story which tells us that our moral warfare is shared by God Himself, that the Divine nature itself descended into that warfare, that it bears the agony of strife, the very shame and curse of it all.

Yes, because the Bible alone of all books in the world has that story of Divine love to tell, we know the Bible to be the Word of God. Not that it fits the older theories of inspiration, but that, independently of all human theories of inspiration, it carries home to the hearts and consciences and souls of sinful men, that otherwise would remain in sin but for this strange and almost incredible story of God's love, God's sacrifice and agony for them.

There it stands, full of grace and dignity, needing no proof for itself, but appealing only in its own strength, because God is in it.

Let me close with a word about the Holy Spirit, Who, we believe, is mainly responsible for this Holy Book, and Who employs it continually for His work amongst us.

I do not at all know how the Bible is inspired, but I am deeply convinced that it is inspired, and inspired in a manner and to a degree which belongs to no other volume. That fact (and I take it to be a fact) mainly constitutes its authority.

There is an indefinable something about the Book which lays hold of us, as with authority: sometimes making us tremble, sometimes laying us low, sometimes raising us up.

Verily, this Word *is* quick and powerful, and makes a mark of its very own.

But for this to be realized and experienced, we must ourselves be reverent and willing "listeners in." It is only to true hearts, childlike men and women, that the Holy Spirit gives His services: but He does make such to feel the authority as well as the dignity of the Bible: He opens their understanding, making the revelation of Christ as fresh and as direct from Heaven as on the day when it was first bestowed.

I mention this for a double purpose:—

(a) To utter a warning against reason.

Reason has its place, and its uses: it is needed in all our life; but it is human, and it cannot of itself and by itself apprehend the message of the Word. "The testimony of the Spirit is superior to all reason."

(b) To stress the importance of our personal dedication.

The Holy Ghost witnesses the Truth of the Christian Gospel in the daily renewal and sanctification of our souls. *We ourselves* can be, and ought to be, irrefutable evidence of the authority of the Bible.