

Pulpit & People

**Essays in honour of William Still
on his 75th birthday**

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THE PULPIT BIBLE:

Preaching and the Logic of Authority

NIGEL M. de S. CAMERON

William Still, for whom we give thanks to Almighty God and to whom we gladly pay tribute in these pages, is before anything else a preacher. His contributions to the life and thought of the Church have been many, but it is his practice and encouragement of expository preaching that have singled him out and given him such influence, both in Scotland and (as this volume demonstrates) much further afield.

Yet he is not a preacher *simpliciter*, he is a preacher of the Word. The content and the manner of his preaching are reflections of his preoccupation with the Holy Scriptures. The ministry of William Still therefore raises in a form that is acute a question which has long lain behind the church's use of Scripture.

The Crisis of Authority

The question of the authority of the Bible has been at the centre of the crisis of belief which has enveloped the church for more than a century, since that which holds the most central place in the practice of the Church's faith has become the object of the most serious doubt. The early Christians inherited from their Jewish forebears a belief in Holy Scripture as the Word of God. For them this first referred to the Old Testament, but soon also to the writings of the New, as is already evident in II Peter 3: 15, 16 where (some of) the Apostle Paul's writings are treated as on a par with the 'other' Scriptures.

Scripture as the Word of God was understood to have plenary authority. That is to say, it had authority on any subject on which it touched. This authority served a two-fold function, which we may depict as *doctrinal* and *practical*. It is evident already in the use made of the Old Testament by the writers of the New. *Doctrinally* the role of Scripture was to define the faith, and *practically* it was to serve as the authority for the preaching of the faith: both to instruct those who believed it already, and to commend it to those who did not.

Both these uses of Holy Scripture to authenticate theological statements continue to this day, whether such statements are intended to *define* the faith (as in the formulation of doctrinal standards) or to *teach* and *commend* it (as in the tradition of preaching which lies at the heart of our Reformed worship).

But these uses of Scripture have continued without regard to the fundamentally new way in which the Bible has come to be viewed by

the majority of Protestant Christians.¹ Conservative evangelicals claim that they are almost alone within the Protestant Churches today in holding to the plenary authority of Holy Scripture, a belief which was once universal in the Church, and it is hard to see how either element in this claim can be gainsaid. Striking testimony has been borne to it by Kirsopp Lake, the famous New Testament scholar who found himself at the opposite end of the spectrum from the conservatives in the 'Fundamentalist' controversy in the United States during the early part of this century. Lake wrote as follows:

It is a mistake, often made by educated men who happen to have but little knowledge of historical theology, to suppose that Fundamentalism is a new and strange form of thought. It is nothing of the kind: it is the partial and uneducated survival of a theology that was once universally held by all Christians. How many were there, for instance, in the Christian Churches, in the eighteenth century, who doubted the infallible inspiration of all Scripture? A few, perhaps, but very few. No, the Fundamentalist may be wrong: I think he is. But it is we who have departed from the tradition, not he, and I am sorry for anyone who tries to argue with a Fundamentalist on the basis of authority. The Bible, and the *corpus theologicum* of the Church, is [*sic*] on the Fundamentalist side.²

No doubt Lake's case could be disputed in some particulars. It would certainly need to be qualified, not least in his assertion that the conservative evangelicalism, as we should call it, of the early years of this century was 'uneducated'. The conservative ranks included such distinguished scholars as B. B. Warfield and J. Gresham Machen; and, as his comments themselves imply, there were 'uneducated' liberals too! Lake's essential proposition, that the conservatives of his day were defending the tradition of the historic church, is difficult to contest. Theological conservatives today accept the mantle Lake offered. In Christian doctrine in general, and in the doctrine of Holy Scripture in particular, they bear the standard of the historic Church's understanding of Holy Scripture.

But what of the adequacy of alternative concepts of Scripture for the functions which Scripture is still called on to perform, as much by those who deny its plenary authority as by those who accept it? This question is raised because, despite the fact that widespread scepticism as to the truthfulness of Scripture (historical/factual, even theological/ethical) has dominated Protestant theological endeavour for a century and more, when the Bible is being *used* rather than *examined* it is largely allowed to play the roles it has always played.³ And that is so whether it

1. The position in the Roman Catholic church is, of course, markedly different, with a strong tradition of conservative Biblical interpretation which is largely parallel to that which has been maintained within Protestant churches almost exclusively by conservative evangelicals. See the fascinating pair of essays by J. I. Packer and S. B. Clark in *Christianity Confronts Modernity*, edited by P. Williamson and K. Perrotta, Edinburgh 1981.
2. Kirsopp Lake, *The Religion of Yesterday and Tomorrow*, London, 1925, pp. 61, 2.
3. As one distinguished theologian remarked to the present writer during discussion of the authority of Scripture, 'people only say they aren't Fundamentalists when they're asked'. He was not one himself.

is being called upon to define and justify doctrinal proposals in a formal context (with an updated version of the old 'proof text') or to authenticate them in the context of preaching and teaching.⁴

It is at this point that everyone associated with the Church (whether as member or adherent, joining in public worship, Bible class or Sunday School) is confronted with the practical question of the authority of Scripture, since they find themselves recipients of the teaching of Christian doctrine and ethics that is founded upon, and generally *claimed* to be founded upon, the authority of the Bible. Yet it is a Bible whose authority the majority of those engaged in such teaching accept only selectively. They would themselves deny that their disbelief in this or that element in the Bible prejudiced the propriety of their use of those elements in it which they choose to accept. Of course: a failure to make such a claim would involve an admission of fundamental inconsistency. The question remains whether the rejection of the authority of Scripture in particular areas does not entail the rejection of its authority as a whole. That is to say, in those areas in which its teaching is accepted, is it accepted because of the authority of Scripture, or is it accepted because in these particular cases the teaching of Scripture happens to coincide with positions taken up for other reasons?

The most consistent feature of contemporary avowals and denials of Biblical authority is their idiosyncratic character. This needs to be emphasised, since many who have somewhat unreflectingly adopted what they take to be the orthodoxy of the day believe that they have taken up a single and consistent alternative to the orthodoxy of an earlier day (which they may or may not recognise with the candour of Kirsopp Lake to be *the* orthodoxy of the Christian tradition). That is to say, they are under the impression that there is no necessity to believe the Bible to possess plenary authority since its authority is independent of any such formulation; and since most modern Christian thinkers and preachers have moved from it to an eclectic alternative.

But *there is no such single 'alternative'*. What alone is common to 'alternative' notions of Biblical authority is their denial that authority is plenary. That is, they are united in denying the belief of an earlier day that the teaching of Scripture is authoritative on whatever it touches; but they deny it in different places and for different reasons. They have no consensus alternative to set in its stead. In the context of the north American debate to which we have already made reference, B. B. Warfield of Princeton assessed the position in these words:

4. Which is not to go into the question of whether there is an essential difference between preaching and teaching, in the context of the Christian congregation. The present writer's view is that the difference is one of emphasis rather than kind, but that it can be great enough for a distinction to be made for practical purposes. For the present discussion it is enough to state that all Christian preaching and teaching contains an irreducible element of doctrinal and/or ethical content which must somehow be justified, and which is in fact justified (candidly or covertly) by appeal to Holy Scripture.

The old formula, *quot homines tot sententiae*, seems no longer adequate. Wherever five "advanced thinkers" assemble, at least six theories as to inspiration are likely to be ventilated. They differ in every conceivable point, or in every conceivable point save one. They agree that inspiration is less pervasive and less determinative than has heretofore been thought, or than is still thought in less enlightened circles. They agree that there is less of the truth of God and more of the error of man in the Bible than Christians have been wont to believe. They agree accordingly that the teaching of the Bible may be, in this, that or the other, — here, there or elsewhere, — safely neglected or openly repudiated. So soon as we turn to the constructive side, however, and ask wherein the inspiration of the Bible consists: how far it guarantees the trustworthiness of the Bible's teaching: in what of its elements is the Bible a divinely safeguarded guide to truth: the concurrence ends and hopeless dissension sets in. They agree only in their common destructive attitude towards some higher view of the inspiration of the Bible, of the presence of which each one seems supremely conscious.⁵

If, as we would suggest, this is as true today as it was when it was first penned, it is incumbent upon those who dissent from the historic doctrine of Biblical authority to explain the logic of their position. In particular, they must be able to explain how their own doubts about the Bible relate to the confidence which they invite others to have in it at points where they accept its teaching, which they desire to commend. It is a question which affects every minister as he prepares for his pulpit ministry, and as he addresses his congregation with an open Bible before him. Indeed, it affects him at least as much when he, or someone in his place, reads from the Scriptures before he preaches, because the reading of Scripture in the context of public worship is presumptive of its authority before ever the preacher begins to cite its propositions in justification of his message to the people.

Is the preaching and public reading of the Holy Scriptures any longer justified, in a theological context in which some or many of the statements of Scripture are denied? What, may we ask, is the logical force of an appeal to an authority which is partly authoritative and partly not, unless there is an indisputably clear criterion which will determine how statements of the one kind are to be distinguished from statements of the other? After more than a century, this remains a question which has never been satisfactorily answered. It is generally ignored.

Authority in Question

There are several ways in which the *prima facie* authority of Scripture has been called into question. We cannot here attempt a systematic assessment of them. But we can survey some typical ways in which those who reject the tradition seek to set aside statements in Scripture with which they do not agree. In each instance what we note is that, even within a single area, it is unusual for there to be

5. 'The Inspiration of the Bible', in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 10 vols, OUP, New York, 1927, reprinted 1981, i, p. 51.

consistency; that is to say, those who generally reject material in a given area will still wish to retain *some* claims for Biblical authority within this area, while repudiating others.

We take four areas in which doubt as to the authority of the teaching of Scripture has led to attempts to reconstruct an idea of Biblical authority which can survive doubt and, indeed, disbelief. The first concerns *historical* claims in Scripture, the second elements of the *miraculous*, the third *ethical* or *practical* injunctions, and the fourth *doctrinal* assertions. Plainly there is overlap between these areas; that, indeed, is one of the main features which emerges in the discussion which follows, and one of the chief difficulties which modern attempts to reconstruct the idea of Biblical authority must face.

It is at first sight a simple matter to decide that, since the subject-matter of the revelation of God is religious, the historical statements in Scripture can be left open to doubt while the theological statements are believed. There are certainly very many people who think so. The problem with this approach is two-fold. First, as we have noted, such a view will invariably be held alongside a conviction of the major importance of *some* historical events recorded in Scripture, which (it will be said) are not in doubt, while *others* are rejected.

This seems at first blush to be deeply inconsistent, and on further examination the seeming inconsistency does not disappear, but rather demonstrates that the criterion of selection actually at work is not what is claimed. Some historical events are to be rejected, others are fundamentally important and cannot be doubted. But the grounds on which one Biblical event is doubted must be allowed to operate in relation to other Biblical events. If, let us say, the Biblical narrative of the fall of Jericho is held to be doubtful on the grounds of general historical enquiry, then in principle every Biblical event must be open to doubt, and even those for which there is good general historical evidence can never be taken as foundations for faith, since all historical evidence is a matter of probabilities. We believe the Biblical history *either* because it is the Biblical history, *or* because the secular historian warrants that it is, at a given point, after all the available evidence has been weighed, probably reliable. We may not reasonably decide to believe *a* happened for the first reason (the Bible tells us) while at the same time doubting whether *b* happened for the second (the historian thinks it is in some degree unlikely).

Which leads us to the second aspect of the problem which this approach faces. Certain Biblical events are held to be crucial, even if only the major elements in the life of Jesus Christ, since (it is said) their historical character, while generally considered necessary, is secondary to their theological significance. But what of other *prima facie* historical events? Do they not also partake of a *theological*, as opposed to a merely *historical*, importance? A special problem arises with an event like the Exodus from Egypt, which is foundational for the entire theological structure of the Old Testament and therefore of the New.

If there had been no Exodus (and there are many scholars who would doubt whether anything like it ever took place) it does not raise merely historical, but fundamental theological, difficulties. Yet it is merely a special case of a general problem. What we are presented with in the Holy Scriptures is, as we might say, a religion in the guise of a history. There is nothing 'merely historical' in the Bible, and while (of course) it would be foolish to pretend that there are no events recorded which are of very minor significance, it would be more foolish still to pretend that even they were of no significance whatever. In principle the entire record is of religious-theological importance.

A second approach would focus on the miraculous element in Scripture as something (at least, in some measure) beyond belief. The Gospel miracles form a major portion of the miraculous material in Scripture. There are those who accept them while disbelieving miraculous accounts in the Old Testament, while others would seek naturalistic explanations for the Gospel stories which, they would suggest, were the result of misunderstanding or exaggeration (so that, in a classic instance, the feeding of the five thousand was generated by the crowd's response to the boy's generosity: he shared his picnic, so they did too).

The essential ground for rejecting miraculous accounts in Scripture is a naturalistic approach to historical events. This is a reasonable approach, or so it seems, in that we have only our experience of the present to use as a guide to the past. What is credible in Scripture is what we would expect today. Yet the problem with this approach is that it proves too much. Such an assessment of the Biblical narrative would excise *every* miraculous element, including the plainest miracle of all, the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

But the difficulty goes deeper, for the miraculous element in Scripture is not confined to this miracle or that; not even to the great miracle of the incarnation, with its culmination in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Any religion of revelation is inherently and fundamentally miraculous. That is to say, it is impossible to receive the Biblical religion as anything other than one extended miracle, inexplicable in its entirety as a merely natural phenomenon. During the nineteenth century there were systematic attempts to re-write the Biblical history to make it accord with the evolutionary naturalism of the day. Such an approach must either prove too thorough-going for even its supporters (resulting in a scaling-down of the faith of the Bible to the consequence of human insight and endeavour) or, as has tended to be the result, it has had to draw back from its declared intention, and qualify its method in order to make room for the Biblical religion; and so admitted its arbitrary character.

A third approach would seek to reject aspects of the ethical and practical teaching of the Scriptures. Since this can raise complex issues concerning the relation of the testaments, we confine our discussion to New Testament teaching. In, for example, the controversy about the

place of women in the Church, or in the family, some would argue that the New Testament writers have been misinterpreted; that they do not intend to say what they seem to say. Others, while accepting that the Apostle Paul teaches that women should be subordinate to their husbands, and that they should not occupy certain roles within the Church, reject the relevance of his teaching for the Church of today. This latter kind of argument represents a rejection of the normative character of Biblical ethical injunctions, since (in the instances we have cited) we read fundamental theological arguments used in support of the Apostle's contentions, not arguments *ad hominem* or addressed to special situations.

The difficulty here, once again, is that the interpreter is without an objective criterion by which to choose when he is to accept and when to reject an ethical injunction. Another, striking, example is that of homosexual behaviour, plainly condemned in the New Testament. If it is open to us to reject that condemnation, what of the condemnation of fornication and of adultery? May we not, with as much or as little justification, decide to reject such prohibitions too?

Our fourth category, that of doctrine, raises analogous, if more fundamental, problems. It is remarkable that ill-considered repudiations of Biblical authority so frequently resolve into objections to Biblical doctrine, since this is the element to which lip-service is most generally paid. Indeed the close connection of each of the three foregoing with this most fundamental category is revealed by the way in which objections to history, miracle and ethical injunctions in Scripture are in fact deeper-rooted. The fundamental doctrine which proves to be at stake is the doctrine of God, since aspects of the Biblical revelation of the character of God are found to be unpalatable and are, in consequence, repudiated as lacking authority for the church today.

Thus records of the acts of God may be held to be unhistorical partly because they are miraculous and therefore incredible (such as the plagues and drowning of Pharaoh recorded in Exodus), and partly also because God is conceived by the modern interpreter as not 'being like that'. He *could* not have done what is attributed to him; so he did not do it; so it did not happen. Whereas another miraculous account (let us say the resurrection), while *prima facie* equally improbable and historically unprovable, is accepted, since it represents the sort of thing which God might be expected to do. In this case a preconceived idea of the character of God, formed by a selective induction of the Biblical material, is employed to reject other elements in that material and so make the whole conform to the interpreter's image.

A similar approach is seen in some responses to the ethical injunctions forbidding the practice of homosexuality. Since the notion of a God who forbids and who judges is alien to the modern interpreter, evidence that the God of the Bible does indeed forbid and judge is excised. The ill-informed approach of so many people to the Biblical teaching on the subject of eternal punishment furnishes a

straightforward example, in that the teaching is undeniably present. It is common to hear it said that this doctrine conflicts with the teaching of Jesus, and for it to be blamed on the Old Testament or the distorting effects of the Apostle Paul on the Christian faith. In fact, were it not for the teaching of Jesus on the subject we should have very limited material on which to build *any* Biblical doctrine of eternal punishment. It is, of all the doctrines taught in Holy Scripture, the most distinctively dominical.

But this fourth example, in which the authority of Scripture in explicitly doctrinal matters is held to be less than absolute, reveals most plainly the arbitrary character of interpretation of this kind. It functions by comparing the doctrines taught in Scripture with some prior concept of (for example) the character of God, and accepting or rejecting those doctrines according to their conformity or lack of conformity to that concept. Plainly this is no acceptance of Biblical authority, it is the elevation of the preconceptions of the interpreter over the Bible, in such a way as to ensure that the Bible itself is brought into conformity with the interpreter's own position.

The Pulpit Use of Scripture

We would therefore suggest that modern interpreters have failed to establish an acceptable criterion by which what is authoritative may be distinguished from what is not in the sacred text. On the contrary, there is a fatally subjective and arbitrary element in all Biblical interpretation which rejects the plenary authority of Scripture.

But this is especially evident when we consider the task of the preacher. He generally adopts, for didactic purposes, the traditional preaching form of the exposition of Holy Scripture, standing in the tradition of the ancient as well as the Reformation church. Yet the consensus theological tradition of the day repudiates the major premise of such a didactic use of Scripture, denying plenary authority to the canon of the church. The fundamental illogic of every doctrinal formulation which *argues from Scripture while denying to Scripture, in effect, any right to be argued from*, is repeated in every sermon which begins with a text but will not allow comparable authority to other such texts. The major premise of the pulpit use of Holy Scripture is its plenary authority, yet, like the smile of the Cheshire cat, the pulpit usage remains long after the cat has vanished. Only those who have broken radically and self-consciously with the Christian tradition (such as the Unitarians, who may be found with a string quartet in the place of the sermon at public worship; and individual radicals within the major denominations) have abandoned the old *form* of preaching as didactic instruction out of the Scriptures. At the same time, many who maintain the old form have so far emptied it of its content (in taking a 'text' as a mere *bon mot* with which to introduce their own, independent, reflections) as to deny it any serious influence on what is held to follow. Yet the pattern remains: reading, text, preaching, with

its assumption of a logic in which an authority attaches to the preaching which is not merely that of the preacher, but that of his text — and, therefore, of its author, who is God.

The passage which functions as a 'text' is typically brief, and the practice of employing a 'text' for developing an argument which is independent of what it says depends upon such brevity. But the 'text' can also be a longer passage, and the fuller the 'text' the more difficult it is for the preacher to abuse it (by accident or design), since what it says will be generally plainer and more difficult to misinterpret or ignore. It is interesting that the revival of expository preaching with which William Still's name is particularly associated does not follow the 'text-preaching' of earlier evangelical preachers, but more normally takes much longer passages as 'texts' such as Calvin took in his Sermons. Following him, William Still has worked his way steadily through all the books of the Old and New Testaments. Yet, as he would readily admit, there is no necessary relationship between this form and the content which it is intended to convey. It would be possible, if unlikely, for an interpreter who rejected the plenary authority of Scripture to twist it systematically to conform to his own preconceptions of religious truth. It is more likely that he would use another method. And other methods may equally be employed to this end, to bring to bear the teaching of Holy Scripture: preaching from texts, from the clauses of the great creeds, from the chapters of the confessions of the Reformation, from the seasons of the Christian Year — to draw out the teaching of Scripture and present it for the edification and challenge of the congregation; and it is to this task that the preacher is called.

And, as he fulfils his calling, expounding the 'Word of God written' (as it is called in the *XXXIX Articles*) he bears unwitting testimony to the plenary authority of the Word by which, through his Holy Spirit, God speaks today as he has in every day.

A glory gilds the sacred page,
Majestic, like the sun;
It gives a light to every age;
It gives, but borrows none.