

Commitment to Christ and the Doctrine of Scripture

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When your Secretary wrote to me kindly inviting me to participate in this conference he asked me to read a paper on the doctrine of Scripture from a 'theological and dogmatic' point of view, and he alluded to the fact (gleaned from one of your members who is an old friend of mine) that at one time in my life my thinking about the Bible had been deeply influenced by the writings of B.B. Warfield. What happened to me at that now far-off time was, I think, that I discovered a way of looking at the Bible's witness to itself which gave me the theological rationale for the conservative approach to the Bible which I had been brought up on and which in practice I had always adopted but had become worried about. The effect of my reading of Warfield was that I was set more firmly onto the foundation from which I had begun my Christian pilgrimage.

I mention 'this', partly because you, Mr Secretary, referred to it in your letter and partly because I hope I can assume that a conference of evangelical theologians such as this will not require me to rehearse those important arguments for the Bible's inspiration and authority of which Warfield has given so masterly an account. I want to concentrate on one major issue which I believe to be fundamental for evangelicals and others in the current debate on the doctrine of Scripture. I refer to the relationship between personal commitment to Christ and adherence to the Scriptures as the Word of God written. I hope that this will provide an approach to the doctrine of the sort that was requested of me.

Divine-human Encounter

I begin with a few words about personal piety. One of the dominant strands in this, discernible in all branches of the Church at all periods of its history, but coming to especially sharp expression in evangelicalism, is that which we may characterize as 'the divine-human encounter' (to use the title of Brunner's famous book). The emphasis here is that God is personal and that he has personal dealings with his personal creatures. He who created the world and sustains it in being, governing and controlling it at every point, also redeemed it through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is the personal incarnation of the personal God and the only Saviour of men. The whole movement of God towards the sinful race is a matter of grace, and the benefits of the accomplished work of redemption are applied in all ages by the Holy Spirit whose saving ministry is positively regarded to by faith. Thus the whole 'scheme' of encounter revolves around the two poles of grace and faith. It describes a way of life which, in its every facet, relies upon the truth that God sustains a personal relationship with men.

The activity of prayer brings this into focus. The evangelical sees prayer more in terms of dialogue than anything else ('God speaks to me and I speak to God'), and not infrequently it takes the form of a wrestling with God or a pouring out of the heart to God in earnest, even anxious, supplication. Other sorts of prayer are not indeed ruled out (e.g. meditation) but the evangelical lays heaviest emphasis on this 'conversation' aspect because this is the way in which his tradition (squarely based as it is on 'biblical personalism') has taught him to think about his relationship to God and has shaped his religious consciousness. And this being so, it is not at all surprising that he should have a strong and ever-present desire to know what God is saying to him, to know his mind, as we say. If his relationship with God is to grow and to take in more and more aspects of his experience, he must know what God is telling him to believe and to do. I want to argue that the evangelical doctrine of Scripture fits comfortably into this framework of piety, indeed belongs to it.

Gospel and Scripture

An evangelical doctrine of Scripture, as its name implies, is controlled in all its parts by the Gospel. By this I mean that, in the context of that grace-faith relationship of which I have just spoken, the believer enters into union with Christ and is thereby committed to a life of trust and obedience which covers the activity of his mind as well as his behaviour. He is an obligated person. He is not his own. He belongs to another and it is his duty to conform himself in every department of his life to the pattern which is given him in the Gospel. The Bible is presented to him within the context of that experience. He believes it and lives by it because it comes to him with the Christ of the Gospel's imprimatur upon it. He does not move spiritually or theologically or logically from credible Bible to credible Gospel. He travels in exactly the opposite direction.

If I were required to spell this out I would do so by drawing heavily upon the Bible's teaching concerning its own nature and purpose. As we examine and evaluate the teaching of Jesus (both his statements and his own personal practice) relative to the Old Testament, we find ourselves forced to adopt a high view of the authority of these documents. As we consider the way in which Jesus clothes with authority and spiritually equips chosen men to bear authoritative testimony to him before the world, we find ourselves taking up a view of the New

Testament Scriptures similar to that which we have adopted in regard to the Old. There is, of course, much else in the Scriptures themselves which would lead us to trust them, but the christological centre and starting point is crucial for the evangelical approach.

Now, of course, we are confronted here with a complex situation. In the first place, it is complex because it comprises a whole-of-life transformation as well as a process of reasoning. In the second place, it is complex because the Christ to whom one is joined by faith is known only from the Gospel and this Gospel is itself enshrined in the Bible, so that the Bible's immediate testimony to Christ and his salvation is accepted as a starting-point for discovering what the status of the Bible really is. There is a certain circularity about the process, a sort of CIRCULUS VERITATIS DEI, and this is inevitable because we are dealing here with the question of an absolute authority which by definition cannot be tested by any other norm. The essential point is that the evangelical doctrine of Scripture begins with the Evangel, appropriated by faith, and proceeds from there.

Maintaining a Christological approach

I feel sure that all of us would subscribe to this approach but it is obviously worth saying that it is all too easy (history proves it) to slide away from this position and to finish up in a very different place.

This is an approach which needs to be vigilantly maintained – I mean in one's own heart and mind as well as in the Church. Let me say something about the intellectual side of it. I am well aware, of course, that it is possible for a true believer in Christ to reach conclusions about Scripture very different from those which I have characterised as 'evangelical' (he may, for instance, read our Lord's teaching differently). It is always arrogant to suppose that unless a professing Christian reasons himself to the same positions as one's own he cannot be a converted man. What I would want to say is simply that the evangelical doctrine of Scripture is arrived at by a perfectly valid (and, to the evangelical, at least, convincing) chain of reasoning which is firmly attached to what the Bible says about Christ, his work and his teaching. For the evangelical, submission to Christ in its intellectual and noetic as well as in its personal and existential aspect leads to a high view of the inspiration and authority of Scripture and this view he is eager to maintain. The pressures in the Church at large tending to undermine the evangelical doctrine of Scripture are known to us all if we are at all conversant with modern critical study of the Bible and have any degree of self-awareness. There is always the temptation so to maximise the humanness of the Bible that its divine origin is seriously obscured. There is the temptation to adopt some external touchstone by which to decide what in the Bible is to be accepted and believed and what discarded. And among those who do accept a high doctrine of the Bible's authority there is the temptation to build confidence on arguments and 'evidences' (e.g. archaeological confirmations of biblical history) rather than upon the Bible testimony to itself (which centres on Christ's own teaching and example). Not indeed (to stay for a moment on this last point) that it is mistaken to try to clear up biblical problems in the field of history or to offer confirmatory evidence from extra-biblical sources. Such an exercise, it seems to me, is entirely consonant with belief in Scripture's God-given authority. The question here is what importance one gives to any positive conclusions reached when one is constructing one's doctrine of Scripture. Calvin has some decisive remarks on this: "Let this point therefore stand: that those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon Scripture, and that Scripture indeed is self-authenticated; hence it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning. And the certainty it deserves with us, it attains by the testimony of the Spirit".¹ Again, in a more balanced fashion: "Scripture will ultimately suffice for a saving knowledge of God only when its certainty is founded upon the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, these human testimonies which exist to confirm it will not be in vain if, as secondary aids to our feebleness, they follow that chief and highest testimony".²

I cannot say any more here about the maintenance of this approach to Scripture on its intellectual side. But let me say a little about its spiritual aspect. I come back to what I said earlier about the grace-faith relationship. The christological approach which I have been commending, because it involves, when properly understood, an attitude of commitment to Christ himself, demands that the life of the Church should, in its every part, promote and undergird that personal relationship with God in which *every* doctrine of the faith, including the doctrine of Scripture, comes to its truest expression. In that setting, the Bible naturally occupies an important place, for how else can people be schooled in the way of discipleship than by using the 'disciple's handbook'? The use of the Bible by church members in their homes, the preaching and teaching from the Bible which happens in the congregation, the invariable reference to the Bible when matters of Church life or reform are under discussion, in short, the pride of place given to the Bible, and *obviously* given to it, in the whole life of the Church, makes clear that the Christian life depends upon God's Word, that the Christian life can only be weak, stunted and deformed without the nourishment which God gives. The christological way of building the doctrine of Scripture is part and parcel of the christological way of ordering the life of the Church. It is therefore not to be expected that an evangelical doctrine of Scripture will hold sway over the minds of Christians when the life of the Church is not ordered in a thoroughly Christ-centred fashion. I think that we have sometimes 'intellectualized' our doctrine of Scripture, quite unwittingly, by working on it in detachment from these wider considerations.

My own practice in all this, for what it is worth, in the context of a parochial preaching and teaching ministry, is to return again and again to the christological centre-point. I find it necessary. The habitual reference to the teaching of Christ and his apostles is the way to re-learn submission to the Word of God in the Bible. It seems to me that the christological approach is a matter of attitude, a matter of worship, certainly a matter which lies at the heart of christian living. One needs to be refreshed in it partly because questions arise and doubts assail, but also for the simple reason that study of the Bible, such as is demanded by a preaching and teaching ministry, involving as it does close attention to the text with its numerous problems and difficulties, calls for a sense of direction, an idea of the import or thrust of the whole, lest one lose one's way.

Spirit and Scripture

One of the pillars of the evangelical understanding of scripture is, of course, the doctrine of the testimony of the Holy Spirit. Christ gave the Spirit to his disciples to guide them into all truth and that same Spirit, working in people's hearts, brings them to a firm persuasion of the faith of the Gospel and sustains them in that conviction, causing them to have confidence in the Bible as a whole and thereby opening to them the possibility of a lifelong adventure of learning about God. Perhaps I may be permitted to quote some works of mine on the subject of the growth of the believer's knowledge of God: "He sees Christ as the One 'in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Col. 2:3), as the One who meets his own personal need of forgiveness and new life, and makes sense of his previous experience, and his heart begins to move out, as it were, in trust towards him. From this centre-point of confidence his assurance starts to grow outwards as if concentrically, just as wavelets move outwards from the point in the water where the stone is dropped. It grows to cover more and more of the teaching which the Bible contains. This understanding of divine truth develops and its range increases. Bit by bit, under the direction of the Spirit, he begins to see something of the 'breadth and length and height and depth' (eph. 3:18) of the love of God in Christ. It does not happen all at once. It is a process which spans all the years of his life but it could never happen at all unless that simple beginning had been made when the Gospel 'dovetailed into his soul'." (That last expression is from the testimony of a convert from Islam to Christianity whom I mention earlier in the chapter). I am here stressing, of course, the cognitive side of the process but I also try to show in the context that the intellectual activity is in no way separate from the spiritual development of the Christian in faith and obedience. I quote the passage now to underline the point that the Christian's confidence in the contents of the Bible comes as a happy concomitant of his experience of the Gospel, occasioned in him by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Bible is given to him, as it were, by the God of the Gospel and his desire to know more and more of God's mind and God's ways leads him to read it and ponder it and to find, as he does so, that his knowledge of God is enhanced not just in terms of intellectual possession but more importantly in terms of a whole-of-life experience.

Christological Interpretation

A further point concerning the evangelical doctrine of Scripture is this: it leads to a christological kind of interpretation (I include mention of this for completeness). Christ is seen as the key to the Bible. The Old Testament points to him and the New Testament declares him. It is commonplace to say that God's self-revelation in deeds is illuminated by an accompanying God-given interpretation in words, but it is true and important. It is also important to say that the revelation is both informative and redemptive and finds its culmination and its consummation in Christ who is the very Word of God expressed in deeds and words. So when we say that the Bible should be interpreted christologically we are just bearing witness to the fact that Christ is the climax of the whole activity of God which the Bible records.

Much attention has been given during the last few years to the question of biblical interpretation and the discipline now known as hermeneutics has brought to the forefront the question of the situation or the condition of the interpreter, his culture, his rationality, his receptivity, and so on; in short, all that he brings personally to the text he is handling. I don't want to say any more about this. I just want to say that, however the matter is approached, it is essential to observe the direction in which all Scripture moves. H.D. McDonald, in some paragraphs on interpreting the Bible christologically quotes Norman Geister as follows: "Viewing the Old Testament christologically is not an interpretative (hermeneutical) option; for the Christian it is a divine imperative".³ This must not, of course, be done woodenly or literalistically, finding hidden references to Christ at every turn. It must be done with due regard to the drift of the recorded history and to the contemporary reference of, for instance, the prophetic message, and so on. But it must be *done*, if the Scriptures are to be seen as the expression of a single mind and a single purpose, that of the Lord God himself, despite all their obvious diversity.

Primary and Secondary Emphases in the Christological Approach

I come finally to a brief consideration of what I think to be an implication of this general approach to the doctrine of Scripture. Although it leads (as we have seen) to high views of inspiration and authority, the actual working out of these ideas reveals differences of opinion. I can indicate one of the major differences like this. Some evangelicals believe that this position includes a clearly defined doctrine of inspiration, derived from Scripture itself, which carries with it the corollary of inerrancy in all that Scripture touches. Jesus's own use of Scripture along with passages like 2 Tim. 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:21 are adduced in support. Others, while holding firmly to the plenary inspiration of Scripture as taught in the New Testament, demur at the term 'inerrancy' and prefer to speak of the trustworthiness or reliability of Scripture or of its infallibility in the sense that it will not deceive. The human side of the phenomenon of Scripture, say they, is entirely consonant with its divine origin (as the 'inerrantists' also argue) but, they go on, this human side makes its inspiration an "impenetrable miracle and mystery". Such evangelicals will not indeed speak readily of 'errors' but they do not think that Scripture requires "the extension of these divine attributes of infallibility and inerrancy to the whole human process involved in revelation or to the total phenomena of Scripture".⁴

Now there are those in the first group who see enormous dangers in the position of the second and vice versa. I wonder whether the debate has not sometimes got away from concern with the christological/religious rootage for which I have argued and which I regard as primary in this debate. Ultimately, one's confidence in Holy Scripture as the Word of God is a matter of faith. Certainly, one's reason, working on the Scriptural evidence, corroborates the testimony of the Holy Spirit, as one commits oneself in humble obedience to the teaching of the Lord and his apostles. But never must the primacy of faith be lost sight of. By grace through faith one is caught up into a truth which is not just a great fact (it has its factual side) but also an eternal salvation. One is given new eyes with which to discern spiritual realities and new ears with which to hear the divine voice. It is a matter of being in relationship to the revealing and redeeming God in Christ.

Hence I believe that the groups whose views I have all too briefly mentioned can stand side by side on *basically the same ground* in so far as they are genuinely evangelical in intent and method in the way I have described. The first group, if heeded, will save the second from undervaluing the divine character of Scripture. The second group will save the first from giving less than full value to the actual phenomena of Scripture, bearing as those phenomena do the marks of humanness upon them.

It is the christological orientation that matters ultimately, an orientation which has, at its spiritual heart, a desire to bow down before the Christ who is presented to us in the Scriptures.

Notes

¹ Institutes I, 7, 5 (Library of Christian Classics edition).

² Institutes I, 8, 13

³ N.L. Geister, *Christ, The Key to the Interpretation of the Bible* (Chicago, 1968), p.38 quoted by H.D. McDonald in: *I Want to Know What the Bible Says about the Bible* (Eastbourne, 1979), p.134.

⁴ Both quotations are from the *Acts and Proceedings of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America* 1963.