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The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture

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1 The Bible and Jesus Christ

The Old and New Testaments so plainly belong together (as promise and fulfilment; as Act 1 and Act 2 in the total 'drama' of the acts of God) that the unity of the Bible can be readily affirmed. Yet in another sense the relationship of the Testaments is better expressed as that between a document and the seal placed on it to give it authority and legality. The authority of Jesus, the incarnate and risen Son of God, expressed in his words and deeds, confirms the Old Testament as God's written word. Within the New Testament, the same authority is applied to the Scriptures yet to be written, so that the apostolic testimony to divine inspiration brings to fulfilment what Jesus promised. By the close of the apostolic period the new totality, comprising the inherited Scriptures and the apostolic Scriptures, were seen as equally partaking of a 'God-breathed' origin and quality – guaranteeing the inspiration of both their truths and the words in which those truths were expressed.

2 The Bible and Inspiration

The evidence of the Bible indicates that the work which resulted in the production of the Word of God in the words of God did not bypass human reason, research, and artistic skill. Nor did it debase human personality to the level of God's typewriter or tape-recorder. Man's true nature is the image of God. The nearer a man comes to God, the more completely he grasps and expresses the mind of God, the more obedient he is to the will of God – the more truly human he becomes. Jesus, the Son of God, totally like the Father, totally obedient to his word, is also the Son of Man, perfectly expressive of true human nature and life. Similarly, it was by enhancement of their humanity and by the depth of their moral fellowship and walk with God that, under the driving force of the Holy Spirit, human beings spoke from God.

3 The Bible and inerrancy

The Word of God does not lie and cannot lie. Put in a positive way, the Bible is true and trustworthy. This claim applies first of all to the documents composing the Bible in their original spoken and then written form. As with all God's good gifts, the Scriptures were perfect when they came from God. Thereafter they were subject to the general operations of divine providence whereby anything which is given into the care of man both retains its original glory and also suffers the wear and tear of inadequate human trusteeship. The circumstances of transmission have taken their toll, but the glory remains and encourages the student to make every sacrifice in the work of understanding because of this unique origin in God.

Secondly, in the practical use of the Bible, inerrancy is claimed for anything which the Bible is discovered to affirm. The revelation of God as Creator, Lord of history and source of all truth, means that no aspect of Bible teaching is excluded from the claim to inerrancy. The work of interpretation, validly pursued, always yields truth. But the need for humility is paramount and ceaseless. As the Word of God, Scripture is fathomless; at every point there is much still to be discovered. Furthermore, the onward march of truth in other disciplines (such as scientific and historical research), as well as the stimulating of human insight under the influence of the Scriptures

themselves (as in the case of racism) often expose the imperfections of current interpretation and cause fresh light and understanding to emerge from the Bible. Yet the touchstone for all is that which God has spoken in his Word.

4 The Bible and the liberated mind

The seeking mind, devoutly submitting itself to the authority of Scripture, opens up and enlarges as under the influence of a true educative process. For all true education follows the sequence of enquiry (what are the facts?), appraisal (what do they mean?), hypothesis (how are they to be expressed as truth?) and experience wherein the hypothesis is tested and approved – or else, being disproved, the enquirer is sent back to try again. By offering principles for doctrine and practice, examples in which the doctrines and practices may be examined in the lives of others, and guidelines whereby its truths may be experimentally and personally applied to life, the Bible claims to educate for righteousness so that the man of God can reach maturity.

5 The Bible and the church

What is true for the individual is true for the whole body of the people of God. The long years during which the canonical Scriptures emerged and took shape were not a period in which the church conferred authority on these books, but one in which the church came to recognise and confess these books as having unique authority over its life and beliefs. The church is the people of God under the Word of God. Not only must every development in the church be brought to trial before Scripture, but the Scriptures must so dominate life and thought that they are themselves the motivation of reformation, change and progress. Equally, they must provide the boundaries within which the unity of the people of God is defined, enjoyed and pursued. Furthermore, the Scriptures constitute the face which the church displays to the world, offering as norms the truths and the categories of truth which each generation of Christians is to communicate to its own time in such ways as that time will most readily understand.

6 The Bible and its application

As man's true nature is the image of God, and the Bible is the full and final revelation of God for the church on earth, true humanity is experienced and demonstrated through the exercise of obedience to God's word, both in its commands and its prohibitions. The spontaneous and proper longing of the individual to 'be myself' needs the control of a true definition of selfhood (the image of God) and the revelation of a true pattern of life for that selfhood (the Word of God) in order to be realised in experience.

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