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The nature of the Bible

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In the discussions that have ensued since Church Society and Reform declared themselves opposed to the views held by Rowan Williams we have been told that the underlying issue is the interpretation of scripture. The implication, sometimes stated, is that members of the Society are out-dated or naive in their principles of interpretation. Whilst it cannot be denied that interpretation is an important issue the problem runs much deeper. The heart of the matter is the nature of the Bible.

The Church of England is perfectly clear in its formularies as to the nature of the Bible. The Bible is the Word of God (eg. Articles 19 & 20). This is not just a title. It recognises that the Bible is what God has spoken. Therefore in the Homily entitled 'An Information for them which take offence at certain places of the Holy Scripture' it is plainly stated that 'the whole Scriptures, saith St. Paul, were given by the inspiration of God.' Inspiration in the 16th Century was not a slippery term as it is today but was much closer to the actual bible meaning - God breathed. This fact is spelt out in homily. 'The Scriptures were not brought unto us by the will of man; but holy men of God, as witnesseth St. Peter, spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit of God.'

The fact that the Bible is the Word of God has a very important consequence - it is without error. The homily speaks of the 'infallible word'. Prior to the 20th century this word was perfectly well understood as meaning without error. Unfortunately, it is often now necessary to use the word inerrant because some have hijacked 'infallible' to mean true in spiritual matters but not in matters of fact. The character of the Word of God as infallible or inerrant derives from the very character of God Himself. No-one can claim to have proved that the Bible is true, such a claim would be ludicrous since much of what it says concerns events still in the future. Rather the Bible is accepted as utterly true and utterly trustworthy because that is the character of its author. There are solid grounds for asserting that the Bible has been shown to be reliable when it has been tested. But, ultimately, it is a matter of faith that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is true in his very character and therefore His Word is Truth.

Because the Bible is God's Word and is without error it is the supreme authority for the Church. The Thirty Nine Articles are very plain on this point. The Church can err (Articles 19) and therefore it is not lawful for it *to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written* (Article 20). Indeed because of the supremacy of the Word the Church must ensure that it doesn't set one part of scripture against another (Article 20). Today Church leaders often recite the mantra 'scripture, reason, tradition' to describe the Anglican Church. However, these are not equal partners. Reason and tradition are subordinate to scripture. This is abundantly plain in the Articles, in the writings of the oft quoted Richard Hooker (with whom the mantra is often linked) and in the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888.

The modern liberal is no different to the old liberal (there is nothing new under the sun). There were many heretics in the early church who would not accept the teaching of the Bible. Some accepted certain books but would not accept the rest. Others, such as Marcion, took particular books and cut out from them all the bits they didn't like. This has been a common practice amongst some academics and many church leaders for the last century and a half.

More difficult to comprehend are the now widespread open evangelicals. Since there is no agreed definition of this term some care is needed. Many call themselves open simply because they wish to be more open to new ways of doing things and more open to people of other backgrounds than their forbears were. However, some open evangelicals consciously define themselves in relation to biblical inerrancy. They are not prepared to accept that the Bible is true in all its detail. They may accept that the fundamental spiritual truths are true, but not the detail.

There is no shortage of variations on this theme but all boil down to the same thing. The Bible is not reliable in all that it says. Surely the inference of this is that either the Bible is not the Word of God in its entirety, or God is not reliable. Either way this is a significant departure from historic evangelicalism and from historic Anglicanism. Is the Bible the Word of God in its entirety or is it not? This is the issue that confronts us today.

Until it is clear what the nature of the Bible is there is no point in arguing about methods of interpretation. If someone thinks that the Bible simply contains the Word of God then presumably they will make it their utmost priority to determine what exactly is God's Word and what is not. Their approach to interpretation will depend upon the extent to which the extent a particular passage is God's Word and to what extent they think it is something else. Those who are loyal Anglicans will be adamant that the Bible is, in its entirety, the Word of God. For us this dominates our interpretative method. We cannot entertain that one part is repugnant to another and will not try always to uphold the harmony of the whole. We will approach the Bible with a great deal of reverence and humility knowing that we are handling the oracles of the living God. As Justin Martyr commented when dealing with difficult passages; *since I am entirely convinced that no Scripture contradicts another, I will rather acknowledge that I do not understand what is written.* We will also believe that God has spoken and presumably wished therefore that we should hear and has spoken in ways that are at least intelligible to us. On the whole we should not expect the Bible to be difficult or to require immense expertise to understand it. We will believe that because God has spoken then what matters supremely in interpreting the Bible is not how we read the Bible, but what God its author intends to teach us through it. This will make us particularly eager to test our understanding today against that of Christians through the ages. Finally, we will want to ensure that if God has spoken, we are eager to listen. As the Homily says *the Holy Scriptures are God's treasure-house; wherein are found all things needful for us to see, to hear, to learn, and to believe, necessary for the attaining of eternal life.*

God therefore, for his mercies' sake, vouchsafe to purify our minds through faith in his Son Jesus Christ, and to instil the heavenly drops of his grace into our hard stony hearts, to supple the same, that we be not contemners and deriders of his infallible word; but that with all humbleness of mind and Christian reverence, we may endeavour ourselves, to hear and to read his sacred Scriptures, and inwardly so to digest them, as shall be to the comfort of our souls, and sanctification of his holy Name: to whom, with the Son and the Holy Ghost, three persons and one living God, be all laud, honour, and praise, for ever and ever. Amen.