

# THE BIBLE AND THE CHURCH

Church Association Tract 234

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THE question for consideration is the true relation of the Bible to the Church, and the Church to the Bible. By the Bible, we understand "God's Word written"; and by the Church, the visible body of professing Christians. The subject lies at the root of most of the controversies at the present day. The subject is not new. At the Reformation, the first question was "The Rule of Faith: what is it?" and the judge of the meaning of that rule—"Is it the Church, or the individual conscience?"

The Church of Rome maintains that we get the Bible from her; that she alone can tell us its "canon," guarantee its correct translation, and give us the certain interpretation.

The Ritualists are not far behind; their claims are substantially the same. For example, in *The Manual of the Catholic Religion*, by Rev. V. Staley (under the auspices of Canon Carter), we are told that "the Bible is the Child of the Church," for—

"1. The Church wrote the inspired books which form the Bible." (Even the Romanists do not go so far as this.)

"2. The Church separated the inspired books from other writings; in other words, determined the canon.

"3. The Church alone can rightly interpret the Bible."

The Jewish Church, it is said, wrote the Old Testament, and the Christian Church wrote the New Testament.

This is simply and absolutely untrue. The Church never wrote a word of either the one or the other. The books of the Old Testament were written by holy men of God, who were inspired by the Holy Ghost to do so, and they gave them to the Church of their age for their permanent instruction and for preservation. To them were committed the Oracles of God. But the prophets were not the Church, nor did the Church write any one of the Oracles. The Church could not do so. The Church was a company of men and women, and it is beyond the power of any company to write a book. The individual prophets, who each wrote the separate books, did so without any authorisation of the Church, but delivered the Message, whether spoken or written, by the express command of God. So far from the Church writing the books, its members mocked, misused, persecuted, and killed the prophets whom God sent to them. The Bible is "God's Word written," but in many cases it was first spoken, and then it, or the substance of it, was written, sometimes by the express command of God, sometimes by the secret inspiration of the Spirit. The Pentateuch was written by Moses. Again and again we read, "God spake to Moses." "Write thou these words; for after the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with thee."—Exod. xxvii.-1, *vide* also Deut. xxvii.-3; xxxi.-19-24; Numb. xxxiii.-2. As for the Psalms, David says: "The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and His word was on my tongue." Our Lord testifies the same—"How, then, doth David in spirit, or by the Spirit, call Him Lord?" &c.

Nearly all the prophetic writings of the Old Testament begin with this formula: "The word of the Lord came to Isaiah," Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, &c. And to some we find an express command to "write," though such was by no means always necessary. The secret inspiration was quite sufficient.

The New Testament was not written by the Church, but by inspired apostles and prophets to the Churches, and for the Churches. For it is ridiculous to speak of “The Church,” as if there was only one visible Church in the Apostolic age. We read of the Churches of Galatia, Asia, and Judea; of Philippi, Colosse, Rome, and Corinth. The visible Christian Church never wrote a line of it. The apostles and prophets of the new dispensation were the organs, as it were, of the new revelation, and the subjects of a supernatural inspiration; and, under the influence of the latter, they wrote the former—*vide* Eph. iii.-3-5, “How that by revelation He made known to me the mystery, which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.”

And again he says, “God hath revealed them unto us by His Spirit . . . which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth, comparing spiritual things with spiritual.”—Cor. ii.-10-13.

It is absurd, therefore, to say that the Bible is the Child of the Church. If for the word “Bible” we used the expression “the Word of God,” its falsehood would be manifest. The “Church” proper, the faithful, are built on Christ by faith. But “Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.”—Rom. x.-17. Preaching, hearing, believing is the order of experience, so that the Church is rather the child of the Word than the Word the child of the Church. Thus Paul, “In Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the Gospel” (1 Peter iv.-15). Thus James, “Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth” (Jas. i.-18). Thus Peter, “Born again not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever” (1 Peter i.-23). As Thomas Rogers, the Reformer, who wrote the first commentary on the Thirty-nine Articles, says: The Word is before the Church both for time and for authority. For time, because God’s Word is the seed; the faithful are the corn and the children. . . . For authority, also, because the voice of the Church is the voice of man, who hath erred and may err from the truth; but the voice of the Word is God’s voice, who cannot deceive nor be deceived.”

Nor is it accurate to say, as many do, that the Church was before the Bible. Such a statement is misleading; for it suggests that the Church is independent of, and superior to, the Bible, whereas two-thirds, at least, of the Bible—*viz.*, the Old Testament—was written four hundred years before the Christian Church was in existence. And as for the New Testament, it was written by the same inspired men who laid the foundations of the Church, and was written—all but St. John’s writings—within thirty years from the day of Pentecost, when the Church was first formally set up on the foundation of faith in Christ crucified, risen, and exalted. For that short period only was the early infant community without the written Word of the New Testament, but they had the personal teaching of inspired apostles and prophets. And, even then, heresies and schisms divided the Church—*vide* Corinth, Galatia, Philippi, and the Epistles of Peter, James, and Jude. Luke wrote “in order that the early converts might know the certainty of the things wherein they had been instructed”; and Peter that, “after his decease, his followers might have his teaching always in remembrance.” Later on, whilst John still lived, Antichrists abounded and false teachers; the Churches of Asia were corrupt, and the mystery of iniquity, which had begun thirty years before, had grown apace.

As to the canon of Holy Scripture—*i.e.* the Books which are to be regarded as inspired, it does not depend in anywise on any decision of the Church; nor do we receive it on the authority of any Council, but on the historic fact that the Books of the New Testament are quoted by an unbroken succession of Christian writers going back from the present day to the very era when the Books were written. Every one of the Books of the New Testament is quoted by the writers of the third and second centuries, and several of them even in the latter half of the first—Cyprian, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Theophilus, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Ignatius, Polycarp, and Clement of Rome, the last a contemporary of St. Paul. We have the same evidence that the Council of Carthage had in A.D. 397—and are quite as competent as they were, perhaps, even more so, to pronounce upon the canon of Holy Scripture. The Council of Carthage gave no

authority whatever to the Scriptures, nor are we indebted to it nor to any Church under heaven for our knowledge of the canon. We get the canon as we get any other historical fact—by examination of historical evidence.

As to the Church alone being able rightly to interpret the Bible, I would simply ask—What Church? Is it the Church of England or the Church of Rome? For they interpret Matt. xvi.-18, 19, “Thou art Peter,” and xxvi.-26-28, “This is My body,” in directly opposite senses. The Church of Rome makes the one teach the Papal Supremacy, the Church of England denies it. The Church of Rome makes the other teach “Transubstantiation,” the Church of England rejects it.

Who is to decide between the teaching of these two Churches? If it be said we are to hold with the Church of England, I ask further—Is it the Church of England now, or as she taught before the Reformation? These are awkward questions.

The Rev. R. L. Ottley, Principal of Pusey House, in his pamphlet *The Bible in the Church*, tells us that Christ is represented in the world by a Church or Society which existed long before there was a Christian Bible, and it is the visible guardian of the revelation made by Christ. The object of this statement seems to be the same set forth more plainly in “The Catholic Religion”—viz. that the Church is prior in time, and superior in authority, to the New Testament. Substitute for the expression “New Testament” the “Word of God,” spoken by the apostles, and the fallacy is perceived. The unwritten Word was before the Church, as some time necessarily elapsed before it could be written; but before the apostles passed away they wrote the Word and left it for the instruction and guidance of the Church.

As to the Church being the representative of Christ, no doubt it ought so to be, and its true members in some measure are; but we here find the usual confusion between the true Church and the professed. These are by no means identical. Ritualists and Romanists seem always to lose sight of the weighty distinction expressed by Hooker: “For lack of diligent observing the difference, first between the Church of God mystical and visible, then between the visible sound and corrupt, sometimes more, sometimes less, the oversights are neither few nor light that have been committed.” Nothing can be more fatal than confusion of this kind, and yet nothing is more common than to find Romanists and others coolly taking the promises and privileges that belong exclusively to the Church mystical, the true and only Bride of Christ, and apply them to a mere branch of the visible Church, which is at best only a mixed body of good and bad: to which, as such, no promises belong at all; and which is too often a mixed multitude of mere professors, steeped in ignorance and sin, superstition and idolatry. The Word of God written is a thousandfold better representation of Christ than any Church, however pure. It is the absolutely pure and perfect representation of Jesus, the unspotted mirror of Divine truth and goodness.

2. The Church and the Bible do not “co-exist in the world as two authorities mutually corroborative of each other, and, so far as individual interpretation of each is concerned, mutually corrective of each other.” The Bible may, and does, where its lessons are obeyed, correct the Church, but the Church cannot correct the Bible; and it is, in my mind, very improper language, if not blasphemy, to make such an assertion. There is a profound difference between the two—the Bible is absolutely perfect; the Church, mixed, imperfect, erring, and fallible.

3. Mr. Ottley says the Church is necessary, in order, first, to impart to her children “the right point of view,” and then impress on them the importance of the private study of Scripture. But are we sure that the Church always gives us “the right point of view”? In the fourth and fifth centuries the point of view varied very much, not only with bishops, priests and churches, but even with Councils; sometimes Arian, sometimes orthodox—now Apollinarian, and again Nestorian, not long after Eutychian. Or, to come lower down, what was “the point of view” at the Council of Constance (A.D. 1414), which declared that Councils were above Popes, and straightway deposed three, and elected another? Or of the Vatican Council in 1870, which declared the personal Infallibility of the

Pope under certain circumstances, his superiority to Councils, and his judgments *ex cathedrâ*, irreformable?

One more case. What was “the point of view” of the Church of England in the reign of Henry VIII., and in that of Edward VI., or in that of Mary, and then of Elizabeth? What was “the point of view” of Cranmer and Ridley, who suffered for denying Transubstantiation, the Real Presence, and the Mass, and that of many clergy of the Church now?

What a strange and uncertain thing is this “point of view,” so necessary, according to the Principal of Pusey House, in order to enable us to understand the Bible aright!

4. He quotes Hooker, that “the authority of man is, if we mark it, the key which openeth the door of entrance into the knowledge of Scripture. The Scripture could not teach us the things that are of God, unless we did credit men who have taught us that the words of Scripture do signify these things.”

This seems to put the authority of man, *i.e.* of the Church, Before the Scripture, but another quotation from Hooker will be useful to the right apprehension of the subject and the relation of one to the other. He says:—“Scripture indeed teacheth us things above Nature, things which our reason by itself could not reach unto. Yet these things also we believe, knowing by reason that the Scripture is the Word of God.”

Here the right note is struck. We do not receive the Scripture merely, or chiefly, on the authority of the Church, but on the authority of reason. “Reason,” says Bishop Butler, “is the only faculty we have wherewith to judge of the evidence or meaning of revelation.” This is a noble principle, a foundation truth. It ought to be written large, in letters of gold, and, better still, on the tablets of the memory and in the convictions of the intellect.

We believe the Bible to be the Word of God, because we have good reason so to do. The historical evidence of its miracles, especially of the resurrection of Christ, the great foundation fact on which the Gospel rests; the fulfilment of its prophecies, of which reason can judge; the scheme of the Gospel itself, which carries its own evidence as the power of God to salvation, and bearing the stamp of its Divine wisdom, in the characters of holiness, wisdom, truth, goodness, and power, which are emblazoned on its every page; its marvellous effects on individuals and on nations where its principles are embraced and obeyed—all these declare the Bible self-evidential; and absolutely independent of all Church or human authority. It proclaims its Divine original as do the works of Creation.

No doubt, as Hooker says, “the first *outward motive* leading men so to esteem of the Scriptures is the authority of God’s Church. . . . Afterwards, the more we bestow our labour in reading or hearing the mysteries thereof, the more we find that the thing itself doth answer our received opinion concerning it, so that the former inducement, prevailing somewhat with us before, doth now much more prevail, when the very thing hath ministered further reason. . . . The ancient fathers were often constrained to maintain the authority of the Books by arguments, such as unbelievers themselves must needs think reasonable. . . . Wherefore, if I believe the Gospel, yet is reason of singular use, for that it confirmeth me in these my beliefs the more; if I do not as yet believe, nevertheless, to bring me into the number of believers, except reason did somewhat help and were an instrument which God doth use unto such purposes, what should it boot to dispute with godless persons for their conversion?”

It might be said with more truth that the authority of our parents is the first outward motive which induces us to believe the Bible to be the Word of God, but afterwards the evidence of its truth. The first outward inducement is one thing, the ultimate reason is another. So of interpretation. Hooker urges the necessity of *reason* thus: “Between true and false constructions, the difference reason

must shew. Can Christian men perform that which Peter requireth at their hands? Is it possible that they should both believe and be able, without the use of reason, to 'render a reason of their belief'? A reason sound and sufficient to answer them that demand it, be they of the same faith with us or enemies thereto?"

5. Mr. Ottley admits that Scripture is "the ultimate criterion of the Church's teaching" on matters of faith; but he pleads hard for the guidance of the Church and its tradition of doctrine. We do not, as he implies, "reject, in the search after truth, the aid of the Church of Christ," but we know that all visible churches are liable to err, and have erred, even in things pertaining to God, and therefore we require proof to be supplied from the Scripture that her teaching is according thereto. We do not feel "encouraged to put ourselves under the guidance of the Church so far as it extends," but only as far as it is in accordance with the Word of God. We admit that we should be "careful not to exaggerate the diversities of teaching which prevail within particular portions of the Church," but we cannot consent to class amongst "minor points of faith and practice," as he does, or seems to, "the Invocation of Saints, Transubstantiation, and the temporal claims of the Papacy" (p. 33).

But to draw to a conclusion. The Church of England, in Articles XIX., XX., and XXI., places the due relation of the Bible and the Church plainly before her members:—

"The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached and the Sacraments be duly administered, according to Christ's ordinance."

This gives us a definition of what the visible Church, or any branch of it, ought to be, certainly not what it always is *de facto*. For the Article proceeds:—

"As the Churches of Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch have erred, so also the Church of Rome hath erred, not only in living and manner of ceremonies, but also in matters of faith." That is, in effect, the whole visible Christian Church, for all was included under this fourfold patriarchate division.

Again:—"The Church hath power to decree rites and ceremonies, and authority in matters of faith." Yes; authority to declare her judgment thereon, yet not an absolute nor an infallible authority. Her authority is limited. For she "may not ordain anything contrary to God's Word written;" nor make the Scripture contradict itself, nor, beside the same, require anything to be believed as an article of faith. Her office is to bear witness to the Holy Scripture, *i.e.* to the fact that such and such books have ever been regarded by her as Divine or sacred from the beginning; and she is carefully to preserve the same and keep them from corruption, and spread abroad their sacred truths. But all this gives her no authority over it, or its interpretation, or its readers. The visible Church ought to be the pillar and ground of the truth, and so far as it is pure and true it is so; but, alas! it is not always so. It has too often been the pillar of false doctrines, the fountain and foundation of error, the buttress of superstition and idolatry.

And to pass from particular Churches to General Councils, composed of, it may be, hundreds of bishops from many churches. "When they be gathered together, forasmuch as they be an assembly of men whereof all be not governed by the Word and Spirit of God, they may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining to God. Wherefore things ordained by them have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be declared' with truth 'that they are taken from the Word of God.'" Six hundred bishops at the Vatican Council in 1870 declared the Pope infallible. Did that make him so?

Lastly, we admit that the Church has a commission and an authority to teach; but she is also bound to prove to the satisfaction of all reasonable men that her teaching is in strict accordance with the infallible Word of God. Her commission does not go beyond that given to the apostles: "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you"—viz. those things we

have recorded by the pen of inspiration in the New Testament, and nowhere else. She may not go beyond the Word of the Lord, less or more. We do not admit the co-equal claim of so-called Apostolic or Ecclesiastical traditions. "The Bible, and the Bible only, is"—or, perhaps more accurately, contains—"the Religion of Protestants."