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GOD'S WORD ALONE INFALLIBLE

D.B. KNOX

"THE CHRISTIAN FAITH"

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The Bible has always been the basis of the Christian faith. Jesus Himself held the Bible in the highest honour and gave it absolute authority. Thus to each of the devil's temptations He answered simply "It is written", as He quoted from the Bible. He told the Jews that the Scripture could not be broken (John 10:35). After His resurrection He expounded the Scripture to His disciples (Luke 24:32, 45).

The apostles had the same high view of the authority of the Bible. St. Paul called it the oracles of God (Rom. 3:2) and said that all Scripture was inspired by God and was profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). It is important to notice that this testimony of Jesus and His apostles was to the written words of Scripture. These written words were God's words, although of course, remaining the truly human words of the writer. God is able to overrule all things for His purposes, and the Bible makes clear that He overruled the words that were written by His servants so that they would be His words also, giving clear and true teaching about Himself and His will for us.

Nowadays it has become popular to disparage the authority of the Bible, and to say that it is not the words of Scripture but that the events described by the Bible were the things which God controlled for the purpose of revealing Himself to men. But though of course God controls all things including the events which lay behind the record and also the thoughts of the writers before they put pen to paper, yet the testimony of Scripture is that the written words are God's words, and not merely the events nor the thoughts of the writers; that is, the Bible testimony is that God's control extended right

up to the end product, to the written word itself, so that the words of Scripture are what God wanted them to be. They are His words revealing truth about Himself and about how we ought to live with regard to Him.

If we reflect for a moment we will see why it was necessary that the very words should be inspired. The very existence of the Christian religion depends on the infallibility of Scripture for unless we have a sure word from God it is not possible for us to be Christians, for the Christian religion consists in our giving God absolute faith, leading to absolute obedience. Of course we never completely attain to this ideal, but this is what is set before us as our duty - absolute faith in God and absolute obedience. Now it would be wrong to ask for or to give this absolute obedience if we did not have an absolutely trustworthy word from God, for it is wrong to put absolute trust in something which we are not quite sure about. Faith is not intended to fill up the gaps where something comes short of full reliability. Blind faith of this sort is not Christian Faith, which is quiet restful trust on the sure word of God in His clear promises.

There is another reason why the infallibility of the Bible is required if we are to be Christians in the way that God's people in the past have been. For if the Bible were not utterly reliable as God's word we would be in a worse relation to God than the people of the Old Testament who heard God speaking to them directly at Mount Sinai, or to whom God sent His prophets saying "Thus saith the Lord". The people of God in Old Testament times had in this way a direct word of God which they could trust and obey absolutely. Similarly the apostles, when they realised that Jesus was indeed the Son of God, knew that what He had said to them was God's word absolutely.

So they too could put their absolute trust in Him and obey Him implicitly, with unwavering hope in the certainty of the fulfilment of His promises.

Now unless we in our time have an equally sure word from God in Holy Scripture we would not be able to exercise a religion of absolute faith and absolute obedience, nor could our life for the future be fully confident and firm, and thus we would not be in a position to be Christians in the way that the apostles were, or those of Old Testament times. But God has given us in the Scriptures His infallible word and this means that He has inspired the words themselves. If He had merely controlled the events or inspired the thoughts but left it to the writers to write down His message as best they could in their own imperfect words, we would never be in a position to recover God's word, because the events and thoughts would have passed into history, beyond the reach of our recovery. But God has not left us in this position of uncertainty about His word, but His Spirit has directed the very words that were written down so that they can be said to be His words, the oracles of God. Thus following the example of Christ and the apostles we may put our complete reliance in the truth of the Bible; accepting what it teaches us about God and how it directs us to live.

Up till recent times all Christians were united in this view of Holy Scripture. It has never been put better than by the Roman Catholic Council of the Vatican in 1870 which stated that the Scriptures are "sacred and canonical because they were written as the result of the prompting of the Holy Spirit. They have God for their author". However, the Roman Catholic Church is not content to affirm the

infallibility of Scripture, but it goes on to add the infallibility of the church and the infallibility of the Pope. It is not content to allow God's word to stand on its own authority but insists that it requires the Church to say (1) where it is to be found and (2) how it is to be interpreted. This has led the Roman Catholic Church into untenable positions. For example, with regard to the actual text of the Bible, Pope Sixtus V In 1590 took it upon himself to declare authoritatively by "a perpetual decree", to quote his words, what was the original text of the Latin vulgate as translated by St. Jerome. Of course he was in no position to know this, but using that supreme authority which the popes claim he declared in the preface of the edition he authorised: "by the fulness of apostolic power we decree and declare that this edition approved by the authority delivered to us by the Lord is to be received and held as true, lively, authentic and unquestioned in all public and private discussion, reading, preaching and explanation"; and he went on to declare that any edition which differed from his edition should have no credit or authority for the future and that if anybody should disregard this declaration of his they would "incur the condemnation of Almighty God and of His blessed apostles Peter and Paul". However, the edition was recognised by the experts as full of errors, and on his death was withdrawn, in spite of the high sounding words of the preface, and a new edition was published by the next pope which differed from it in more than a thousand places. Thus Papal infallibility failed in its attempt to declare what was the word of God. The fact is that God has given us in our intelligence all the gifts necessary for discovering the true text of Scripture and the Roman Catholic claim that the church alone has authority to declare what is the Scripture is without foundation, as this incident illustrates.

Secondly, the Roman Church states that the Church alone has authority to interpret Scripture, and the first Vatican Council stated "no-one is allowed to interpret sacred Scripture contrary to the sense which holy mother church has held and now holds, nor contrary to the unanimous agreement of the Fathers". Of course, the Fathers, that is the early Christian writers, are seldom in unanimous agreement about the interpretation of a passage and even when they are modern research has shown that this unanimous agreement of the Fathers may be mistaken. Modern Roman Catholic scholars get round the point by making verbal distinctions. A good example is the way modern Roman Catholic scholars deal with the traditional interpretation of the Genesis account of creation. All the early Christian writers took Genesis quite literally. There was no reason why they should not, but modern discoveries suggest that some of the details should be taken pictorially rather than literally. Now on page 295 of "Beginnings" by the Roman Catholic writer Charles Hauret we read "At the tenth biblical week held at the Pontifical Institute in Rome in 1948, Father Bea, S.J., 'discussed certain questions of the interpretation of Genesis'. In the discussion which followed his paper the patristic argument favouring the traditional position was raised in objection. Bea was asked by a member of the conference: 'If the consensus of the Fathers and of Tradition is invalid in this question, then that is the end of every argument drawn from Tradition and the consensus of the Fathers'. Father Bea (later Cardinal Bea) replied 'This consensus of the Fathers cannot be considered as the authentic interpretation of the text as the Fathers here merely repeat what the text says, having no doubts as to the literal understanding of the biblical narrative'. Thus by a merely verbal distinction Roman Catholic exegetes set aside the

unanimous traditional interpretation, when in view of new light it is seen no longer to be a possible interpretation. The doctrine that the church alone has the right to interpret scripture breaks down in practice.

The fact is, of course, that God has given us in our native intelligence and in our Christian fellowship all that is needed to arrive at the true text of Scripture and also its true interpretation. We do not need the infallible authority of the church and since we do not need it, God has not ordained it, and when it seeks to interpose its authority it has to withdraw as in these two instances I have given.

The Bible as God's word stands on its own authority and speaks directly to our minds and hearts. We, and the church as a whole, must sit under the authority of the Bible and not attempt to make the Bible conform to our traditional outlook. God's word is powerful, for it is God's word and needs no support from the church, and if we read it God's Spirit will lead us to Himself. It is our part to read it and to trust and obey the God revealed in its pages.

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