

SCRIPTURE AND THE CHURCH

by
D. B. KNOX

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

One of the leading modern Roman Catholic theologians, Dr Hans Kung, Professor of the Roman Catholic Theological Faculty of the University of Tübingen wrote a book immediately before the recent Vatican Council called "The Council and Reunion". It is an interesting and conciliatory book. In it he discusses Protestantism in a very friendly manner. On page 106 he asks the vital question "Why did the Roman Catholic Church reject the Protestant reformation?" He analyses the answer down to one basic point, and writes, "The actual reason for rejecting Luther was this, for all that it included genuine reforms, and despite his conservatism, often stressed to-day, Luther's reformation was essentially a revolution. He brought the very essence of the Catholic Church into question when (this was the real innovation) he set his personal, subjective, and yet (by his intention) universally binding interpretation of the Scriptures in principle, above the Church and her tradition. This meant that he rejected the whole teaching method of the Church, not only the Pope, but after the Leipzig disputation in 1519, the ecumenical councils as well." Dr Kung adds "The Catholic Church rejected Luther because if she was not prepared to surrender her very nature, she was bound to do so." Dr Kung has put his finger on the crux. Let us look more carefully at what he says. He states that Luther brought the very essence of the Roman Catholic Church into

question "when he set his personal, subjective, and yet (by his intention) universally binding interpretation of the Scriptures in principle above the Church and her tradition." But what does Dr Kung mean by Luther's "personal, subjective, and yet (by his intention) universally binding interpretation of the Scriptures"? His meaning is nothing else than this, that Luther regarded the plain meaning of Scripture, that is, the meaning apparent to every intelligent reader, as binding on himself and on everyone else. Dr Kung designates this plain meaning as Luther's personal subjective interpretation, but such a description is incidental, because it is not primarily Luther's interpretation, for it is also the personal and subjective interpretation of every intelligent and candid reader. To call it Luther's interpretation is beside the point, for the plain meaning of written language is the common possession of every intelligent reader. It was this plain meaning of Scripture which Luther insisted should be universally binding. If the meaning was dubious or uncertain in any passage, then to that extent it was not binding. But where the meaning is crystal clear, as it is in most parts of the Scripture, it is universally binding, for it is God's word written, and this plain meaning of Scripture was set by Luther, as by every other follower of the reformation, "in principle above the Church and her tradition". It is to this that Dr Kung objects.

The question is basic, and yet simple, namely this, Is the plain meaning of Scripture to control, and if necessary, to reform the Church and her tradition, or is the Church and her tradition above the plain meaning of Scripture, so that the Church has the right, as teacher, to explain this meaning so as to make it conform to her tradition? Dr Kung asserts that the essence of the Roman Catholic Church is that she is in principle above the Scripture; so that she may teach, not necessarily in conformity with what appears to be the plain meaning of Scripture, but in conformity with her traditions, and make the meaning of Scripture conform to her teaching. But the Protestant principle is that the Church's teaching must conform to plain Scripture.

To defend her position, the Church of Rome claims that the Scripture has no plain meaning, that it is obscure; but the facts are contrary to this argument. Books are written to be understood, and this is true of the books of the Bible. Anyone reading the Scripture in a good modern translation has little difficulty in arriving at this meaning over a very large area of Scripture.

The principle of the Protestant Reformation is the same as was that of the early Church, namely, the supremacy of Scripture over the Church, so that what the Scripture says we must submit to, and if necessary

reform ourselves in order to submit. Thus the Scripture is in principle above the Church and her tradition.

The essence of the Roman Catholic position is, as Kung rightly says, that the Church and her tradition is in principle above the Scripture as understood by an intelligent Christian reader, so that the intelligent and spiritually minded Christian must refer to the Church to find the meaning of Scripture, and not to the Scripture itself. The creed of Pope Pius IX requires every Roman Catholic priest to promise that he will not interpret Scripture except in conformity with the teaching of the Church. Thus the Word of God is made captive.

Because the plain meaning of Scripture so often seems to be contrary to the teaching of the Church of Rome, that denomination, in the past, has found it expedient to forbid the reading of Scripture by its ordinary members. This prohibition is now being relaxed, and it is interesting to see the consequences for Roman Catholicism. They are inevitable, because "The Word of God is living, and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart."

Historically speaking, the Reformation began through the plain meaning of Scripture convicting the minds

of those who read it; whether they were the Lollards in England, or Martin Luther at Wittenburg, who, when a professor at the University there, read the Bible in preparation for his lectures.

The battleground of the Reformation was the question of how we may be saved and go to Heaven. This is still the question which divides the Protestant and Roman denominations. It is a topic of great practical importance, and it is also one on which the Bible speaks with a great deal of clarity. The Bible says plainly in numerous passages that because of Christ's death on the cross for sinners, salvation is offered to all who ask God for forgiveness, and who put their faith in Christ's death on the cross for them, believing that Christ is Lord of all. Thus, when the jailor at Philippi asked Paul and Silas "What must I do to be saved?" the answer was brief and to the point, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved and thy house".

However, during the Middle Ages there grew up in the Church the teaching that forgiveness could only be obtained through use of the Church ordinances; that is, through baptism and penance and other ordinances. Moreover, the doctrine that our own merits must go hand in hand with those of Christ's for our entry into Heaven also received Church endorsement during this period. The question at the

Reformation was whether the Church teaching as it had been inherited from the Middle Ages was to be brought into line with the plain meaning of Scripture, or whether the meaning of Scripture was to be so explained that it could fit the Church's practice. As Dr Kung's book shows, this is still the crux, for Holy Scripture knows nothing of penance, or of purgatory, and it explicitly denies that our own merits are any part of the ground of our salvation. Scripture insists that Christ's merits alone are the ground of our salvation, and our faith in God's promise, which comes to us as a result of Christ's merits, is the only means of obtaining the benefit of those merits.

The questions for us who accept the authority of Scripture are simple: have we accepted God's proffered salvation? Have we put our faith in Christ as our Saviour? Do we follow Him as our Lord? This is the first question; the second follows, if we accept the authority of the Scripture, which teaches these things, do we read the Scripture regularly for ourselves and do we submit to it?

Those of us in the Protestant denominations whose faith is based on Scripture are greatly at fault if we do not read the Bible and submit to it ourselves as individuals. We need, not only to be regular in attending divine service on Sundays, where the Bible is read and expounded, but also

in our daily life we should make time for reading the Bible ourselves. Why not take as a motto for the New Year to read the Bible before we read the newspaper. If we are heads of families we should certainly read and explain the Bible to our children, for it is through the Word of God being received in the heart, that God fashions us into Christians through His Spirit.

You will remember that St Paul commended Timothy because his parents and grandparents had taught him the Bible from his earliest youth, St Paul's words were:

"..from a babe thou hast known the sacred writings which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness: that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work". (2 Tim. 3:15-17).

The Bible has this power, because it is God's Word, let us see then that we read and submit to it ourselves, and teach it to our families, so that our children may grow up men and women of God, completely furnished to every good work.

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