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F A I T H

THE BIBLE ALONE

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A report in the daily press states that the Roman Catholic council which is at present meeting in Rome has made a rule that sermons should always be preached at Mass and that these sermons should be based on the Bible and that preachers should make extensive use of the Scripture. If the report is correct it is a further indication of what may be called the Biblical movement in the Church of Rome, for which we may thank God and pray that it may continue to extend. The Roman Catholic Church has in theory always had a very high view of the Bible. It regards the books of the Bible (I quote from the first Vatican Council) as "written as the result of the prompting of the Holy Spirit and so they have God for their author". But in the past the Roman Catholic Church has insisted with equal vigour that the Church traditions also have God for their author and so it puts them alongside Scripture. The result is that the uniqueness of the Bible as God's Word is denied and church tradition, because it is more voluminous, in practice replaces Holy Scripture as a source of doctrine, so that as a consequence the Bible has been little read amongst Roman Catholics, and this neglect of Bible reading is defended by some Roman Catholic apologists, even to-day. Thus with regard to the Bible we may say that Protestants and Roman Catholics agree together in their view of the inspiration and authority of Scripture; they agree that it is God's Word written. But they differ on three points of great importance - on the extent of Scripture, on the sufficiency of Scripture and on the clarity of Scripture.

On the first point, the extent of Scripture, Roman Catholics include the Apocrypha of the Old Testament. The Apocrypha consists of books which survive only in Greek, and not in Hebrew, the language in which the Old Testament was written. Moreover the Apocrypha was not part of the Bible as used by our Lord Jesus or by the apostles. Nor

was it part of the Bible used by the early church. Thus St. Cyril of Jerusalem in his Catechetical Lectures warned his hearers against reading the Apocrypha. But it became confused with the Bible later when the knowledge of the Hebrew language was largely lost. At the time of the Reformation, with the revival of learning, the Protestant churches excluded the Apocryphal books once more from inclusion in the Bible and so returned to the example of our Lord and His Apostles and of the early church.

With regard to the second point, the sufficiency of Scripture, the Council of Trent affirmed that in addition to the Bible the traditions of the Church are also the Word of God and are therefore an infallible guide. However the modern Roman Catholics are not united in their view of the church tradition, and it will be interesting to see how the present Vatican Council decides the matter.

With regard to tradition we ought to be warned by the example of the past. Jesus condemned the church of His day because, as He said in Matthew 15:6, it made void the Word of God by its tradition. And St. Paul warned against traditions of men in Colossians 2:8. Only the Bible is an unchanging rock, for tradition fluctuates with the centuries; and if God had left us to the mercy of tradition we would never have any certainty of the truth. Tradition should be constantly brought to the unchanging touchstone of Scripture, and so corrected by the Scripture, rather than that the Scriptures should be themselves submerged and lost to sight through tradition. Church tradition should constantly be reformed by the Word of God. However this is easier to say than to do. We all find it so difficult to give up what we are used to; and we cling so tenaciously to our own way of doing things. We should pray for a willing mind to submit our customs and ideas and our traditions

to the Word of God.

The third point of difference is the Roman Catholic denial that the Scriptures are clear in their meaning. It is asserted that the Bible is obscure and so needs an official interpreter, namely the living voice of the church. To this it may be replied that the facts are against this theory. Any reader can discover for himself that the Bible is not obscure, that is, of course, if it is read in a modern translation. There are, however, some passages the meaning of which is not obvious at first sight. But the solution is not to refer the matter to an infallible interpreter, but rather to use the means of understanding which God has given us. Not only should we use our own thought and prayer, but particularly we should seek the assistance of our fellow Christians within the Christian fellowship. God gives different gifts to different members of His church and he intends that we should all benefit one from another. By so doing we are drawn into a unity and fellowship. Difficult passages of Scripture are occasions for obtaining the help of our fellow Christians, to whom God may have given special gifts of experience or of insight or of scholarship, and by seeking their aid we will deepen our friendship and fellowship. But what we must avoid is the self-willed interpretations of Scripture which lead to sectarianism; but this is an abuse of Scripture, and in avoiding it there is no reason why we should have to run to the other extreme of the Roman Catholic position which requires the Scripture to be interpreted officially or not interpreted at all. For example, every Roman Catholic priest is required to promise that he will not interpret Scripture except in accordance with the church fathers.

It is sometimes said that the many differences among the Protestant denominations are

a proof that the Scripture is not clear. But this is a defective argument; if you examine the differences amongst Protestants you will find that these are not about what the Scripture teaches but rather about points on which the Scripture is more or less silent. We may well regret the rise of these denominations, but they do not result from obscurity of the Scriptures but rather from ignoring the principle that we ought not to insist on points on which the Scripture is silent.

The Roman Catholic view that God would not be consistent if He had not given a living voice in the Church as an interpreter of Scripture ignores the method by which God forms the character of Christ in us, as this is set out in Ephesians chapter four. Here we read that our character is conformed to Christ by our membership of a fellowship, building each other up in the knowledge of God's Word by using all God's gifts of intelligence, scholarship, experience and so on, for in this way we not only grow in knowledge but also in Christian friendship and love among ourselves. In contrast the Roman Catholic concept that the meaning of the Bible is to be declared by the church speaking officially through its officers ignores this method of mutual help. Moreover experience shows that this method binds plain error on the church. I will mention two out of many examples. In I John 5 there is a verse about the three heavenly witnesses. This verse is found in very few Greek manuscripts. Any commonsense knowledge of the facts makes it clear that the verse ought not to be included in a true text of the Bible, and it has not been included in modern texts such as the Revised Version or New English Bible, but as recently as 1896 the Vatican declared that "the genuineness of the passage could not with certainty be denied or doubted" (Ott. p.56). But in 1927 the Vatican reversed this decision and declared that "its genuineness could be denied". Here is a complete change on so important a point as what is to be included in the Bible. Protestants had made up their minds on the matter years ago by using the ordinary gifts that God has given

to us to determine the matter, but for much of this time the Roman church was required to believe what it now admits to be an error. I give another example: for Roman Catholics the question of what makes a man a priest is of vital importance because a priest is regarded as having the power not only to offer Christ in the mass, but also to forgive sins in the sacrament of penance. Now in 1439 Pope Eugene IV declared that the handing to the ordinand of the plate and the cup used in the Holy Communion was the essential action in ordaining a man a priest. This was also the opinion of St. Thomas Aquinas and the Council of Florence. But the historical facts are against this opinion; and so as recently as 1947 in the constitution 'Sacramentum Ordinis' Pope Pius XII has declared that such an action is neither required by the will of our Lord Jesus Christ nor is necessary in ordination. Protestants had been saying the same since the Reformation because commonsense reading of the New Testament showed that this ceremony was quite unknown in the early days, while historical research had shown that it originated in the Middle Ages. Yet for centuries Roman Catholics were obliged to believe an error in an important area of doctrine. We see clearly that the true method of understanding the teaching of the Bible is not to rely upon authoritative decisions which may later be reversed, but rather to grow progressively in knowledge by using the gifts God has given us for that purpose in a spirit of Christian fellowship.

We cannot overestimate the importance of every Christian having a knowledge of the Bible for himself. St. Paul commended Timothy because as he said in 2 Timothy 3:15 ff "from a youth thou hast known the Holy Scriptures 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." This verse brings out firstly that the knowledge of the Scriptures is the source of salvation, "they are able to make you wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus"; secondly, it teaches that the Scriptures are clear in their meaning and do not require any official interpreter, even a child being able to understand them, because from a youth Timothy had known the Holy Scriptures; and thirdly that the Scriptures are sufficient and need no supplementing from church tradition, because three times over St. Paul emphasises that they make the Christian complete, complete for every good work.

It is sometimes said the Scriptures do not teach their own sufficiency but those who say this are themselves ignorant of the Scripture. For our part we must see to it that we read and understand the Bible and accept its authority over our own lives. If we read it prayerfully seeking help from fellow Christians in matters that we do not understand at first sight, God will lead us through His Spirit into all truth, and bind us together in closer Christian fellowship.

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