

THE AUTHORITY OF THE WORD

by Ray C. Stedman

In these last few weeks I have learned of five cases of Christians, some of whom were rather prominent Christian leaders, who have suffered total moral collapse, having made shipwrecks of their lives and marriages. In each case the first sign of impending disaster, the first outward mark of inward deterioration, was a shift in their view of the authority of the Word of God. There is a very definite link between moral decline and the authority of Scripture, and I would like to begin this message with a passage which underscores that line.

Reading from Paul's second letter to Timothy, chapter three, the first five verses, the apostle says,

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of stress. {2 Tim 3:1 RSV}

Now, do not regard this as a prophecy to be fulfilled only in the end of the age. "The last days," as Scripture uses this term, encompasses the whole period from the first coming of Christ to the second, that is, the present age in which we live. Paul is simply saying here that during the whole time of the last days there shall come recurring cycles of distress. He continues:

For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, fierce, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding the form of religion but denying the power of it. Avoid such people. {2 Tim 3:2-5 RSV}

In the remainder of the chapter he goes on to specify two individuals who fit this pattern and to give us by contrast his own way of life. Then he closes the whole section with a personal exhortation to Timothy, beginning in Verse 12:

Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and imposters will go on from bad to worse, deceivers and deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. {2 Tim 3:12-17 RSV}

Notice how he moves from the theme of deterioration of faith and moral collapse to the one remedy and cure for the believer, an adherence to the written word of God. As Paul outlines it here, the defense of a Christian in a day of moral decline is a thorough acquaintanceship with the written Scriptures, while any defection from faith which may occur is made possible only by an abandonment of these writings, in attitude, at least, if not in act.

Now, you know well that the Word of God has been under attack for many centuries. Like an ancient castle it has withstood many assaults. Up to and through the 17th century these attacks were primarily outward. That is, they were an assault from without by men who tried to destroy the Scriptures by rather direct methods. History is full of accounts of book burnings, papal interdicts, and even the murder of translators of the Word of God. But these outward attacks against the Bible utterly failed. In the 18th century a new approach was made by the enemies of Scripture. Instead of sending soldiers to attack the castle (to revert to my figure), the

enemies of the Bible sent workmen -- carpenters, bricklayers and masons -- who came offering to remodel the whole structure. They said, in effect, "This is a good, strong building. It simply needs a bit of renovation here and there." They began to rearrange the structure of the castle of God's Word. They drained the moat, tore down the wall, removed the doors, and when they were through everything was quite different than it was before. There was no longer any castle there and no longer any defense for those who would seek a refuge.

As to any permanent or lasting effect on the church as a whole, this attack from those who stand in pulpits and those who sit in theological chairs in seminaries will, and has, utterly failed. For Jesus said, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it," {Matt 16:18b KJV}. No force will really overthrow the Word of God; we never need to fear that. But as far as individuals are concerned, it is possible for these attacks against the Scripture to upset their faith, and it is this that Paul warns about as he writes to his son in the faith from his prison in Rome.

Without attempting an exposition of this passage, I would like to declare to you four propositions which I feel must govern our thinking as we approach the subject of the authority of the Scriptures in this 20th century.

The first of these propositions is this:

1. As Christians (and I am speaking now only to Christians), we have no right to hold a different view of Scripture than that held by Jesus himself.

That is the first fact we must hold in mind as we come to this subject of the authority of the Word. To put it another way, the authority of the Bible rests squarely upon the authority of Jesus Christ himself. To be a Christian at all means that we have fully accepted the authority of Jesus. If we have not, we are not Christians -- except in name only. It is an utter inconsistency to say that we accept what the Bible says about Christ and reject what he says about Scripture. We cannot say of Jesus that he is the image of the invisible God, the bodily expression of the fullness of God, that in him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and that he is before all things and by him all things hold together -- but he is quite wrong about Adam and Noah and Jonah and the rest of the Old Testament. You see the utter inconsistency of that position? We cannot call him Lord, and say he has the right to choose our mates, and to pick our line of work, and to govern our life in all its attitudes and ways -- even to trust our eternal destiny into his hands -- but we cannot believe him when he speaks of the creation of man, or the sanctity of marriage, or the sinfulness of certain sexual acts. We are utterly inconsistent if we do.

We need only to read the New Testament to see that the Lord Jesus casts the mantle of his authority over all of the Old Testament, and, by anticipation, over all of the New. Remember he said, speaking of the Old Testament, "the scripture cannot be broken," {John 10:35b}. Over and over again he quotes from the Old Testament, usually the very books and passages which the scholars say are in dispute. But our Lord receives them, quotes freely from them, uses them as authority. In his own ministry, you remember, it was with the written Word of God (incidentally from the Book of Deuteronomy, which is often under attack) that our Lord turned the tables on the enemy when he came to tempt him in the wilderness and utterly defeated Satan in his attack upon him.

Then there is that remarkable passage in Luke, the 24th chapter, when the Lord Jesus is speaking to his disciples after his resurrection and he takes them to task for their failure to believe the Scriptures. He says (Verse 25):

"O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. {Luke 24:25-27 RSV}

Now, if we were to read that from the viewpoint and in the language of those who are attempting to tell us today that the Scriptures are no longer authoritative, we would read, I am afraid, something like this:

And beginning with Moses, he demythologized all the legends to unveil to his disciples epistemological

concepts of inauthentic being.

But this kind of language, so frequently employed today, does not illuminate the gospel -- it destroys it. It substitutes an incomprehensible jargon for the clear word of Scripture.

Imagine, for instance, sitting down beside a naked savage in some South American jungle and trying to explain existential concepts to him. You would simply have no gospel to preach. Yet it is this that is being widely touted today as a necessary requisite to the proper understanding of the Scriptures. But it is utter nonsense.

It completely destroys the essential message of the gospel in its simplicity. You may be an old and experienced Christian with a thorough knowledge of the Bible, or you may be a brand-new Christian who hardly has any knowledge at all of what it says, and have many questions about various aspects of it, but if you are a Christian at all, and have received eternal life through believing on Jesus of Nazareth, you must, by that very act, also be subject to his authority in this matter of accepting or rejecting the Scriptures. That is the first proposition.

The second one is somewhat similar and grows out of it. It is this:

1. As Christians, we have no right to views of Scripture which are different from the apostles' view of Scripture.

The apostles, like our Lord, are our teachers. We are not theirs. It is Karl Barth who says, "We cannot stand and look over the apostles' shoulders, correcting their work. It is they who stand looking over our shoulders, correcting our work." The apostles, in writing the New Testament, everywhere declare that their authority is simply the Lord's authority. They, too, rest the authority of their words squarely upon the authority of the Lord Jesus. Paul says repeatedly, "I have declared unto you only that which I have received," {cf, 1 Cor 15:3}. In other words, this is not a fabricated message. It is not something borrowed from this philosophy, and that authority, and this way of thinking. It is not, Paul says, received from men at all. He specifically and clearly declares that he did not in any way receive his message from men, or even from the other apostles, but from the Lord Jesus Christ directly {cf, Gal 1:12}.

The apostles, as they write, are very conscious that the words of the message they preach are the words of God. Listen to Paul as he is writing to the Thessalonians, in his first letter, Chapter 2, Verse 13:

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, ... {1 Th 2:13 RSV}

There is a clear declaration that he was conscious of speaking more than his own thoughts, more than his own ideas, more than his own theological concepts. The apostles regarded each other's words in this same light. There is that striking passage in Second Peter 3:15 where Peter says,

And count the forbearance of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. {2 Pet 3:15-16 RSV}

Peter makes very clear that he accepted Paul's writings as Scripture, and the early church accepted these apostolic writings as the very words of the Lord Jesus right from the beginning. In view of this, when a professor behind a desk in Chicago or New York or London makes a pronouncement that differs from what Paul or Peter or James or John has said, then reject it, for that professor is some thousands of miles and some two thousand years too far away to make an adequate and proper judgment. These men who lived in the 1st century and associated with the Lord Jesus, who heard his words, and who so ministered in power throughout the world of their day as to transform the generation in which they lived, knew far more about what God thought and said than any man studying theology today. So our second proposition is that, in thinking about the authority of the Word, we must remember that, as Christians, we have no right to a different view of

Scripture than that held by the apostles, or we cannot consistently call ourselves Christians.

Here is the third proposition:

- 1. We can never discover the depths of Scripture's insights into life without first accepting it as true and authoritative.**

What I am saying is that we must first believe Scripture before we can understand it. As long as we keep asking,

"Should this passage be here? Is it genuine, is it real? Has it been inserted? Is it a legend? Is it a fairy tale? Is it something that is merely the thinking of the apostles and was never in the mind of Christ?"

-- if this is our constant approach then we can never get around to asking, "What does this say to me? What does it mean? Where is the wisdom hidden in this that I need so desperately in my life?" Those students and pseudo-scholars who feel they are a final authority on what ought to be here, and what ought not to be here, never seem to be able to understand what is written. They never seem able to say anything about the depths of Scripture or the teaching of it, for they exclude themselves from understanding by their attitude of judgment over it.

Let me clarify myself: There is, of course, a legitimate place for what is called "textual criticism." We do not have the original documents of the Scriptures available and, because we do not, we must reproduce them as nearly as possible by a painstaking, careful comparison of one document with another. We must compare and decide what is the proper text. We are deeply indebted to scholars for the incredibly painstaking work that has been done in this area. The entire Bible has been examined like no other book ever written, word by word, letter by letter, by the greatest body of scholars that has ever concentrated its knowledge upon one subject. The task has been done, and it has been well done, and we can trust our scholarly Greek texts and the careful English versions that are based upon them. There are paraphrases today that are helpful for reading but not necessarily trustworthy in the actual communication of truth, because they are only paraphrases. But a scholarly version, such as the King James or the Revised Standard Version or some of the later ones, can certainly be trusted.

Of course, there are problems. There are certain minor inconsistencies in our texts today. There are difficulties in reconciling certain passages with other passages and certain accounts with parallel accounts, but these are simply the normal difficulties that obtain when you have more than one witness to an event, and they are differences of observation rather than differences of fact. Or they are failures in transmission of the text, scratches and stains which time puts upon any object, which neither impairs its beauty nor affects its utility. The texts that we have, therefore, can be trusted.

But my point is this: We can never understand the Scripture until we believe it first. You cannot understand nuclear physics unless you first believe the underlying axioms that have to do with this realm of human knowledge. You cannot understand chemistry unless you are willing to accept certain of the chemical formulas that have been proposed. You cannot believe anything until you accept it as genuine and put it to the test of experience, and this is true of the Word. When you believe that this book is from God and, as Proverbs says, "Cry out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures" {Prov 2:3:4 RSV}, then this book will reveal to you the marvels of a deliberately patterned structure that can only be of God's making, and reveal to you astounding grasps of life and explanations of how the human heart operates.

Many of you may have read Billy Graham's testimony in this regard. He says that as a young man, early in his ministry, there came into his life a time of doubt as to the authority of the Scriptures. There came questions as to whether the text as we have it could be trusted, whether this was the Word of God or merely the ideas of men about Jesus. He was troubled by the questions that occur so frequently in these days. He went away by himself up into the mountains, taking his Bible with him, and there began to read it, and read it, and read it. He came at last to the place where he said to God,

"I have seen enough of the transforming ability of this word to know that you are behind it. I know, Lord, there are many questions, many areas that I do not understand about this book, and take it by faith that it is your word and believe it and preach it as your word and trust that you will make clear to me what it means."

It was from that time that Billy Graham's world-wide ministry of evangelism began. You well know that his favorite expression is, "The Bible says." He does not debate it with anyone; he does not question it; he simply declares it.

Which brings me to my fourth, and last, proposition concerning the Word. It is simply:

1. Scripture does not need to be defended, but simply declared.

Charles Spurgeon's classic maxim puts it very forcefully. He said, "The Bible is like a lion. Who ever heard of defending a lion? Just turn it loose, it will defend itself." And so will Scripture!

I must confess that I have totally changed my view on the place of apologetics in the defense of faith. I once thought that apologetics, the science of the defense of Scripture, was especially needed to answer the skeptic and the agnostic. I remember how I would turn to archaeology, to logic, or to some of the scientific confirmations of Scripture to try and convince a skeptic that the Word was true. But I have learned to do differently. I know now that apologetics may be very helpful for a Christian who is confronted with honest problems, but it is almost totally useless in appealing to a skeptic, or to an honest agnostic. I once would approach such people with the question, "Do you believe that the Bible is the Word of God?" Of course, they would say, "Yes I do," I was on solid ground. I knew where to go from there. But when they said to me, as they so frequently did, "No, I don't," I did not know what to say next. Where do you go if people reject what you must use as your authority?

But I know now that it was a mistake to ask the question in the first place. Why should I ask whether they believe the Bible is the Word of God? How could I expect them to believe it? It is only the Christian who can have the necessary proof that this is the Word of God for he has believed it enough to put it to the test. Therefore, to make this whole matter of the inspiration of the Scriptures a fundamental of the faith that someone must agree to before he can become a Christian is absolutely wrong. It is putting the cart before the horse. No, all that is necessary is to *use* the Scriptures. If it is the word of God it will confirm itself. It will have in itself inherent authority. For after all, a word has power only because of who utters it. The word itself is useless.

If a man who is a congenital liar utters a statement, it may be very true but it is of no effect because he is a known liar. Mark Twain tells, in one of his books, of a man who committed suicide and hung a note on himself saying he had taken his own life. But the coroner's jury declared it must be false, he must have been murdered, because he said he had killed himself and he was known to be an habitual liar, therefore it could not be true.

So a word has power, any word, only by virtue of the one who utters it.

The word of Lyndon Johnson has power not because Lyndon Johnson is a man (there are a lot of other men), not because he is a Texan (that authority has diminished considerably since Alaska entered the Union), not because he is a Democrat (their hour is coming), but the word of Lyndon Johnson has power because he is the President of the United States! As long as he remains President, there is an inherent power in the word that he speaks by virtue of his office. Now if Scripture is from God, it will have inherent power. When I talk with someone who does not accept the Christian message, who challenges the Bible, I do not bother with apologetics, I go right to the Book. I quote the words of the Lord Jesus. I say "Well, Jesus said so-and-so." I confront that individual directly with the compelling truth that Jesus uttered and I find, again and again, that this has a power to go deep into the human heart, to pierce beyond all the surface objections which may be raised and to bring men face to face with the choice that they must make. I tell them of the change that this word has made in my own life, how this book has explained life to me, how it has led me from uncertainty and self-distrust into a place of certainty, into a rich awareness of life, into a place of rest and peace of heart and freedom from the fear of what is taking place on earth.

The whole testimony of this church is to the fact that it is the preaching and the exposition of the Bible that establishes its authority. We do not need to defend it, just declare it, proclaim it. Nothing explains the world situation as the Bible does. No philosophy that is current among men today ever comes to grips with international affairs like Scripture. Take even the question of the origin of the world and the nature of it, let alone matters of political and international importance. Only in the light of Scripture can one understand the total process of history. The very fact that in this ancient book, coming through such feeble and thoroughly human instruments, we have that which twenty or more centuries later is an adequate explanation of the things that are taking place in our own time, is a tremendous, powerful, compelling argument that this book is more than man's.

Now there is more I could say. There is the whole realm of the usual arguments for the inspiration of Scripture, but I do not want to go into that now. I am talking primarily to Christian hearts who, like Timothy, are attacked by a subtle and devious philosophy which is attempting to undermine the authority of the Word of God, especially in the realm of morality. Much of the moral revolution of our day, the awful collapse of moral standards in great sections of human life, is directly traceable to false concepts concerning Scripture. We need again to hear the word of the apostle to his son in the faith, "Remember the things which you have learned from childhood, these sacred writings which are able to establish you, to keep you, to thoroughly prepare you for every good work."

The choice that is left to us as Christians is very simple; it is always the same in every generation: either we accept the Bible as God's word to us, his own self-revelation, his own explanation of the affairs of life and of human history, or, as the only other alternative, we must rest our faith upon the shifting, complex, ever-changing authority of modern knowledge and human ability. It is either Christ or the critics, one or the other. One way leads to moral decline and final collapse; the other way brings us to illuminating insights into our own hearts, and into the processes of history and to the place of integrity and character.

Remember that the Son of God himself said, "I come not to judge the world, but to save the world. He that rejects me and receives not my words has one who judges him; the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day," {cf, John 12:47b-48 KJV}. That is because the Word of God is truth, it is reality, and the one characteristic that marks reality is unchangeability. Truth is always truth. If it were true ten thousand years ago, it is still true today. That is why a two thousand year old book is as valid today as it ever was, for truth is simply unchangeable. And it is the final measuring stick of any civilization or any individual life.

Prayer

Our Father, what a marvel this book is. How wonderful that we should have it in our hands, and what a terrible tragedy that we should let it lie unopened, unread, unstudied week after week. Wake us up Lord. Help us to realize that here, by means of the Spirit interpreting it to us, you have given adequate and full knowledge to meet every devious and subtly deceitful philosophy in our world today. Make us men and women of the Book. Bring us back to it. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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