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## The Finality and Sufficiency of Scripture

IN the Westminster Confession of Faith the finality of Scripture is expressed in these terms: 'The Old Testament in Hebrew . . . and the New Testament in Greek . . . , being immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical; so as, in all controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal unto them' (Chap. I, section viii). 'The supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture' (Chap. I, section x). This statement of the case is oriented admittedly to the refutation of Rome's appeal to tradition and the voice of the church on the one hand, and to the fanatical claim to special revelation by means of mystical inner light on the other. These divergent positions are still with us and the finality of Scripture as conceived of and formulated by the Westminster Assembly more than three centuries ago is still relevant and worthy of careful examination.

There is one clause in this formulation sometimes misunderstood and mis-applied. It is the clause 'the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture'. This does not refer to the internal testimony of 'the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts'. With this the Confession had dealt in section v, which is concerned with the agency by which 'our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority', of Scripture are induced. But in section x the Confession is dealing with the Scripture as canon, and uses the expression 'the

Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture' to remind us that Scripture is not a dead word but the living and abiding speech of the Holy Spirit. The Reformers needed to emphasize this quality of Scripture in order to offset the plea of Rome that a living voice is necessary for the faith and guidance of the Church and also to meet the same argument of enthusiasts for the inner voice of the Spirit in the believer. The Confession had earlier in section vi enunciated the sufficiency of Scripture. In section x it is the correlative quality, the finality, that is reflected on, but formulated with a finesse of expression that is of relevance for us today in a context that the divines of the Assembly could not have anticipated.

As we read a great deal of the theological output of the present day, the output that claims the greatest amount of attention, we find that one of its most striking features is the well-nigh total absence of any attempt to expound or be regulated in thought by the Scripture itself. This is because the regulative principle of the Reformation, especially of its Reformed exponents, has been abandoned, and with it, by necessity, the finality of Scripture. No one has been given more attention in the last two years than John A. T. Robinson, Bishop of Woolwich, and perhaps no one has been given as much. We are shocked, no doubt, when we read *Honest to God* and *The New Reformation?*, and we wonder how far removed from the whole biblical framework of thought and feeling a bishop of the Church of England can be. While we may be in sympathy with Dr. Robinson in his devastating criticism, for example, of the colossus of organizational structure found in so many denominations and particularly in his own, while we must agree that the professing church has failed to meet the situation of a secularized generation, and while we may admire his courage in exposing the sterility of a church that has lived on its fat and the fat is running out, yet we cannot but be appalled by the complete disparity between the basic patterns of his thought and those that Scripture would dictate and create. All of this lies on the face of the books I have mentioned.

But perhaps we should not be surprised. Our surprise arises, I fear, from our failure to assess the significance of what has been going on for a hundred years or more within the Protestant camp. We are suddenly awakened by the outspokenness of John Woolwich. But all of this and more is implicit in seeds sown long before we were born, when the

axe was laid at the root of the tree in the denial of the veracity of Scripture. Incipient denials may take decades to work out their consequences and bear their bitterest fruit. But the fruit is now being borne, and we can see it not only in the realm of doctrine and faith but in the staggering proportions of moral disintegration.

When we speak of the sufficiency and finality of Scripture, we must, first of all, assess what Scripture is. There is no validity in the claim to finality unless the high estimate involved in finality is grounded in our conception of what Scripture is. It is here that we must appreciate the significance of inscripturation. For when we speak of Scripture we refer to what is written and, therefore, to inscripturated word as distinguished from word communicated by other means. The finality of Scripture has for us a distinctive import because of the place we occupy in the history of God's unfolding redemptive will. There is a term that is much in use, *Heilsgeschichte*, salvation history. I want to make use of that concept in its true and proper application. It is all-important in our theme.

There were periods in the history of God's redemptive revelation when the finality of Scripture had no meaning. There was no inscripturated revelatory Word. God's mind and will were communicated and transmitted by other methods. Even when revelation began to be committed to writing and was therefore to some extent inscripturated, there were centuries of redemptive history in which the finality of Scripture did not have for the church the precise import it has for us today. Undoubtedly there was a finality to what had been written. This is evident in the finality which our Lord himself attached to what was written. 'It is written' and 'Thus saith the Scripture' were for him the formulae of irrefutable appeal. And yet his own teaching was, in terms of his own claims, invested with a finality. 'Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away'. And beyond what he had taught them he gave to his disciples the assurance that, when the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth would come, he would guide them into all truth, and that it was, therefore, expedient that he himself should depart in order that he might send the Spirit unto them for this purpose.

It is apparent that revelation was not complete even with the advent

of the Lord of glory himself. And so when he ascended on high there was not to extant Scripture the finality of which we speak now, the reason being that the revelatory process was still in operation. Unless we believe that revelation is still in process as it was in the days of the prophets, in the days of our Lord, and in the days of the apostles subsequent to our Lord's ascension, then Scripture occupies for us an exclusive place and performs an exclusive function as the only extant mode of revelation. It is granted by those with whom we are particularly concerned in this address that Scripture does not continue to be written, that it is a closed canon. Once this is admitted, then we must entertain, what our opponents are not willing to grant, namely, that conception of Scripture taught and pre-supposed by our Lord and his apostles, and insist that it is this conception that must be applied to the whole canon of Scripture. Since we no longer have prophets, since we do not have our Lord with us as he was with the disciples, and since we do not have new organs of revelation as in apostolic times, Scripture in its total extent, according to the conception entertained by our Lord and his apostles, is the only revelation of the mind and will of God available to us. This is what the finality of Scripture means for us; it is the only extant revelatory Word of God.

There is a position pleaded with a good deal of plausibility and with vehement insistence, that this view of Scripture incarcerates and petrifies the Word of God, particularly that it deprives revelation of its personal character and thus of the personal encounter which revelation involves. The argument is that Christ is the incarnate Word, that he is the revelation of God, and that he is the centrum of Scripture itself. Scripture is the medium of encounter with him, and only in him is God manifest. All that is claimed for the centrality of Christ we not only admit but unreservedly proclaim. But with all this emphasis, and even more respecting the uniqueness of Christ in the history of revelation and redemption, can we fail to discern the place of Scripture in the revelation that Christ is, and in the encounter with him? It is only in and through Scripture that we have any knowledge of or contact with him who is the image of the invisible God. As in the days of his flesh the disciples had no understanding of Jesus, or faith in him apart from his spoken word, so we are wholly dependent upon their witness,

witness indeed anticipated and foreshadowed in the Old Testament, but embodied and inscripturated in the New. Without Scripture we are excluded completely from the knowledge, faith, and fellowship of him who is the effulgence of the Father's glory and the transcript of his being, as destitute of the Word of life as the disciples would have been if Jesus had not disclosed himself through his spoken word; and not only from the knowledge, faith and fellowship of the Son, but also from the knowledge and fellowship of the Father and the Spirit.

Our dependence upon Scripture is total. Without it we are bereft of revelatory Word from God, from the counsel of God 'respecting all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life.' Thus when the church or any of its spokesmen fails to accord to Scripture this eminence, and fails to make it the only rule of faith and life, then the kind of affront offered to Father, Son and Holy Spirit is that of substituting the wisdom of man for the wisdom of God, and human invention for divine institution. As we read the literature that claims the admiration of so many, we discern the tragedy of Satanic deception that can be indicted as no less than apostasy from the simplicity that is unto Christ. And this is apparent not only in the overt divergences from and denials of the witness of Scripture, but also in the confused conglomeration of ideas and proposals, confused and self-contradictory to some extent because of the attempt to fuse a modicum of Christian tradition with what is derived from the fountains of unbelief.

The finality of Scripture, if it has any meaning, demands that those who profess commitment to Christ and the church in its collective capacity, direct all thought, activity, and objective by this Word as the revelation to us of God's mind and will.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the situation in which we are placed today is one of peculiar gravity. There is, as the spokesmen of heterodoxy are constantly reminding us, the intense secularism of the man of today. To this mentality the supernaturalness of the gospel and of the revelation that embodies the gospel is wholly irrelevant. The leading writers of the Protestant fold are doing us the service of dinning this into our ears, and we may not close our ears to the thunder. They have, to a large extent, analysed this modern framework of thought and attitude in a way that we must reckon with in our

witness to the gospel. It is, however, as we are confronted with this mentality that we must appreciate with renewed confidence the implications of the finality of Scripture and the correlative doctrine of its sufficiency. It is the challenge of the secularized mind, the technologically conditioned mind, and the supposed irrelevance to this outlook of the gospel as historically understood, that have constrained the leading exponents of today's Protestantism to reconstruct the gospel so that it will be relevant. This is the capital sin of our generation. Taking their starting point from the modern man's mentality they have revised the gospel to meet the dilemma in which the church has found itself in the face of wholesale indifference and hostility. But the question for us is: how are we, holding to the sufficiency and finality of Scripture, going to meet the secularism, or whatever else the attitude may be, of this modern man?

Here, I believe, we have too often made the mistake of not taking seriously the doctrine we profess. If Scripture is the inscripturated revelation of the gospel and of God's mind and will, if it is the only revelation of this character that we possess, then it is this revelation in all its fulness, richness, wisdom, and power that must be applied to man in whatever religious, moral, mental situation he is to be found. It is because we have not esteemed and prized the perfection of Scripture and its finality, that we have resorted to other techniques, expedients, and methods of dealing with the dilemma that confronts us all if we are alive to the needs of this hour. Some of us may have relied upon our heritage, our tradition, and may have been content with the reiteration of certain traditional formulae prescribed for us by our forefathers in a noble tradition, and with the reproduction of patterns eminently appropriate and fruitful in past generations. I do not say but signal blessing from God attends such a ministry. God blesses inadequate witness in the sovereignty of his grace. Some, on the other hand, may be so enamoured of modernity, that without abandoning a basically sound proclamation of the gospel, they have nonetheless been to such an extent influenced by the flabbiness of present-day thinking that witness to the whole counsel of God has suffered at the points of both breadth and depth. Again, I do not say that God does not bless such witness though it be impoverished and to some extent compromising.



But what I do say, and with all due emphasis, is that both are failing to bring to faithful expression the finality and sufficiency of Scripture. Let us learn from our tradition, let us prize our heritage, let us enter into other men's labours; but let us also know that it is not the tradition of the past, not a precious heritage, and not the labours of the fathers, that are to serve this generation and this hour, but the Word of the living and abiding God deposited for us in Holy Scripture, and this Word as ministered by the church. And we must bring forth from its inexhaustible treasures, in exposition, proclamation, and application—application to every sphere of life—what is the wisdom and power of God for man in this age in all the particularity of his need, as for man in every age. There will then be commanding relevance, for it will be the message from God in the unction and power of the Spirit, not derived *from* the modern mentality, but declared *to* the modern mentality in all the desperateness of its anxiety and misery.

Likewise, let us not refuse any of the parcels of enlightenment on many aspects of truth which even this confused generation may bring us. But let us beware of the controlling framework of modern thinking lest its patterns and presuppositions become our own, and then, before we know it, we are carried away by a current of thought and attitude that makes the sufficiency and finality of Scripture not only extraneous but alien to our way of thinking. Sadly enough this is what has taken place so often, and there comes to be no basic affinity between the faith entertained and proclaimed, on the one hand, and that which the implications of the sufficiency and finality of Scripture demand and constrain, on the other.

Let us reassess the significance of *Scripture* as the Word of God and let us come to a deeper appreciation of the deposit of revelation God in his grace and wisdom has given unto us as the living Word of God, sharper than any two-edged sword, and let us know and experience its power in its sufficiency for every exigency of our individual and collective need, until the day dawn and the day-star arise in our hearts. 'All scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for the instruction which is in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto every good work' (2 Tim. 3:16).

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### The Unity of the Old and New Testaments<sup>1</sup>

THERE are certain texts that are familiar or at least ought to be. They teach us the place in history occupied by the New Testament or, more precisely, the new covenant economy (Gal. 4:4; Heb. 9:26; 1 Cor. 10:11). The New Testament era is 'the fulness of the time', 'the consummation of the ages', 'the ends of the ages', the consummating era of this world's history. Correlative with this characterization is 'the last days' (Acts 2:17; Heb. 1:2; 1 John 2:18). These began with the coming of Christ: So the world period is the last days.

This implies ages of this world's history that were not the last days; they were prior, preparatory, anticipatory. The last days are characterized by two comings, notable, unprecedented, indeed astounding—the coming into the world of the Son of God and the Spirit of God. In order to accentuate the marvel of these comings we must say that God came into the world, first in the person of the Son and then in the person of the Holy Spirit. They came by radically different modes and for different functions. But both are spoken of as comings and they are both epochal events. These comings not only introduce and characterize the last days; they create or constitute them.

Nothing in the history of the world could be comparably significant, and that is why the era is invested with such momentous finality so as to be the fulness of the time, the consummation of the ages.

These comings are not to be conceived of as continuous with and an extension of creation, as if the revelation given in creation required

<sup>1</sup> From the author's notes of an address given to the Christian Union of the University of Dundee, 1970.