

## The Rule of Faith

We are considering under this heading the question of what is the source and final authority in respect to Christian knowledge and practice. This is an important subject;

*"One of the primary causes of the confusion within the church today is its lack of a valid authority."*  
J.M. Boyce Foundations of the Christian Faith p.46

There have been differing attempts to answer and resolve this question. On the one hand there has been an attempt to supply this authority through the pronouncements of an infallible church, i.e. the Roman Catholic solution, and on the other hand to claim authority through direct "words" from God, what we might call "existential encounters", i.e. the Charismatic solution.

The classical Protestant answer to the question of the final authority on matters of faith and practice is that the Word of God, the Bible is the final authority.

*"The Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible, is the religion of the Protestants."*  
The Religion of Protestants, A Safe Way to Salvation. Chillingworth 1638

The Westminster Confession states:

*"The whole council God, concerning all things necessary for its own glory, and salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men."*

The Confession teaches that God's finished revelation as far as what we need to know in this life is concerned is now inscripturated i.e. given to us here in the Bible. We do not say the Bible contains the Word of God rather that the Bible is the Word of God. The Bible is entirely sufficient for all man's spiritual needs in time, it cannot be added to. It is sufficient and complete we might add in terms of principles rather than details, we arrive at some truths by deduction by comparison of Scripture with Scripture rather than from direct texts.

We might contrast the Protestant position on this with the Roman Catholic position as follows;

## The Protestant Teaching on Authority

*"Whatever God teaches or commands is of sovereign authority. Whatever conveys to us an infallible knowledge of his teaching and commands is an infallible rule. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the only organs through which, during the present dispensation, God conveys to us a knowledge of his will about what we are to believe concerning himself, and what duties he requires of us."*

This is expressed in the great confessions of faith as follows;

*"The Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of faith or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation."*

The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England

*"Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testament, which are these:....."*

*All which are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life. The whole council God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture unto which nothing at any time is to be added whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men. All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all, yet these things which are necessary to be known, believed, and are preserved, for salvation, are so closely propounded and open in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned in a due use of the ordinary means, may obtain unto a sufficient understanding of them."*

The Westminster Confession of Faith

From these statements we may deduced three vital points that Protestants hold in respect to the Rule of Faith.

1. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament is of the Word of God, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and are therefore infallible, and of divine authority in all things pertaining to faith and practice, and consequently free from all error whether of doctrine, fact, or precept.
2. That they consist of and contain all the extant supernatural revelations of God designed to be a rule of faith and practice in his church.
3. That they are sufficiently perspicuous to be understood by the people, in the use of ordinary means and by the aid of the Holy Spirit, in all things necessary to faith and practice, without the need of any infallible interpreter.

See Hodge Systematic Theology Volume 1 p.152

### **The Canon of Scripture**

We might ask the question which books are entitled to a place in the Canon or rule of faith and practice? The Roman Catholic would answer this question by saying, that all those books which

the Church has decided to be divine in their origin, and none others, are to be accepted as part of the Canon. The Protestants however would answer by saying, that so far as the Old Testament is concerned, those books and only those books which Christ and his Apostles recognised as the written Word of God, are entitled to be regarded as canonical and are to be included.

The question arises how do we know which books of the Old Testament were recognised by our Lord and the apostles?

1. Many of the books of the Old Testament are quoted as the Word of God and being given by the Spirit by our Lord in his apostles.

2. Secondly Christ and his Apostles refer to the sacred writings of the Jews-the volume which they regard as divine-as being what it claimed to be, the Word of God. They quote the "Scriptures," or the "law and the prophets," and speak about volume as the Word of God. All therefore that is necessary to determine for Christians the Canon of the Old Testament, is to ascertain what books were included in the Canon by the Jews of that period. The Jewish Canon of the Old Testament is exactly the same as that which Protestants have recognised as constituting the Old Testament Scriptures.

On this ground Protestants reject the so-called apocryphal books. They were not written in Hebrew and were not included in the Canon of the Jews. They were, therefore, not recognised by Christ as the Word of God. This reason is of its self, sufficient. It is however confirmed by considerations drawn from the character of the books themselves, in them are found errors, and statements contrary to those found in the undoubtedly canonical books.

The 39 Articles of the Church of England state the matter as follows;

*"And the other Books (The Apocrypha) the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners; but yet doth it not apply them to establish any doctrine; such are these following:*

*The third book of Esdras*

*The fourth book of Esdras*

*The book of Tobias*

*The book of Judith*

*The rest of the book of Esther*

*The book of Wisdom*

*Jesus the son of Sirach*

*Baruch the Prophet*

*The Song of the Three Children*

*The Story of Susanna*

*Of Bel and the Dragon*

*The Prayer of Manasses*

*The First Book of Maccabees*  
*The Second Book of Maccabees*

*The principle on which the Canon of the New Testament is determined is equally simple. Those books, and those only which can be proved to have been written by the Apostles, or to have received their sanction, are to be recognised as a divine authority. The reason of this rule is obvious. The Apostles were the duly authenticated messengers of Christ, of whom he said, "He that heareth you, heareth me."*

Hodge Systematic Theology Volume 1 p. 152

*"The Canon was not established by some authoritative measure either for the New or for the Old Testament; the Canon was the fruit of divine inspiration. It was not a matter of councils, either Jewish or Christian, imposing on the Church books first thought of as human, which they later by some sort of decree, lifted up to what they claimed to be a divine level. Quite the contrary: works born out of supernatural inspiration, through the silent work of the Holy Spirit, were made acceptable to the whole Christian community. In fact it is important to point out Scripture antedated the Church and furnished its foundation, framework, doctrine and spiritual strength. Practically all the apostolic writings were recognised by the great majority of believers before the Nicean Council in 325, to the point where that Council did not even need to debate the Canon, any more than did subsequent councils (Constantinople, in 381; Chalcedon in 451 etc) It is worth noting that when the Council of Carthage in 397 made the decision to limit public reading to the "divine Scriptures that this Council did not create the Canon. Its action rather shows that at that time the Canon was clearly enough understood so that all uninspired books were excluded."*

The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture, Rene Pache p.178

## **The Roman Catholic Position**

We now can briefly state the position taken by the Roman Catholic church on the matter of authority. The Roman Catholic position is that the complete rule of faith and practice consists of Scripture and tradition, i.e. the oral teaching of Christ and his apostles, not written by them but handed down through the Church.

Tradition it is taught is necessary because-

1. There are necessary truths not contained in Scripture.
2. To interpret Scripture: The Church being the divinely constituted depository and judge of both Scripture and tradition.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994 states that;

1. The sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the

Holy Spirit.

2. The Holy tradition transmits in its entirety of the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. It is transmitted to the successors of the apostles so that, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they may faithfully preserve, expound and spread it abroad by their preaching.

3. As a result the Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of revelation is entrusted, does not derive its certainty about all revealed truths from the Holy Scriptures alone, **Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honoured with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.**

4. The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome.

Page 25-26 Catechism of the Catholic Church

We might note therefore that traditional Roman Catholics believe in the inspiration of Scripture as we do. However they do not believe in the sufficiency of Scripture. This must be supplemented by Tradition. Moreover they deny the believers right of private judgment, as it is called, in that they say that the believer cannot rightly understand Scripture without the Church acting as its interpreter.

We can also note that RC's believe that this hidden body of teaching said to come down from the apostles only comes to light at certain points in the Church's history. One such point was when it came to be believed that the Virgin Mary was immaculately conceived by her mother St Anne. This became a decree of the Roman Church in December 1854. Rome did not decree the Immaculate Conception to be an article of faith until that date although violent controversy had for centuries existed on the subject within her pale. Later in 1870 fresh so-called apostolic revelation came when the Pope was declared infallible when he spoke from the papal chair.

Interestingly such teaching has been rejected as historically untenable even by some teachers within the Roman communion itself such as for example Henry Dollinger and John Henry Newman.

*"The Roman Catholic system is certainly the result of development, and it has worked out with great consistency and thoroughness a body of fundamental principles. But the further question arises as to*

*whether the principles which underlie and condition the various lines of development have all alike been derived from Christian sources, and make up a homogeneous Christian whole. It is generally granted from the Protestant side that the doctrines of the Trinity and of the Person of Christ have been collected by way of necessary inference and development from the facts of revelation attested in the original records. But it is a much more difficult task to show the doctrines which have been elaborated to form the Roman Catholics scheme of salvation, including its developed sacramental theory, are an explication of the original deposit of the teaching of Christ and the Apostles. They represents the implications of and the deductions from, a medieval conception of Christianity which has been modified by the intrusion of elements alien to the original genius of the Christian religion. They largely failed to satisfy Newman's first test of a true development-that is the preservation of type or idea."*

The Rule of Faith WB Paterson p. 38

**In summing up the difference between the two positions we might say that the Protestant theory rested on the same general presupposition which underlies the Roman Catholic scheme i.e. that the general revelation in nature and in the constitution of man has been supplemented by a special and absolutely necessary revelation in Christ. Secondly that the work of Christ is the ground of our salvation, and that consequently the necessary provision was made for preserving and guaranteeing the knowledge of the divine and saving truths of the Gospel.**

**The special feature of the Protestant position is the conception that the sole provision made for the transmission of God's revealed truth is the written Word of God; and that it is the perfect instrument, requiring no addition to its contents from an alleged tradition. Moreover these same Scriptures are capable of being understood by all devout believers with the aid of the Holy Spirit without the pronouncements of a pretended "infallible" Church.**

## **The Perfections of Scripture as affirmed by Protestantism, including the Four Aspects of Authority, Sufficiency, Perspicuity and Efficacy**

### **1. Supreme Authority**

The authority of Scripture was seen to be exclusive, complete, lacking nothing has opposed to the limited authority of the Roman system. We can see this authority under four points;

A. The Scriptures always speak in the name of God, and command faith and obedience.

B. Christ and his apostles always referred to the Scriptures then existing, as authoritative, and to no other rule of faith whatsoever- Luke 16: 29; Luke 10:26; John 5:39; Romans 4:3; 2 Timothy 3:15

C. The Bereans are commended for bringing all questions even apostolic teaching, to this test.- Acts 17:11; Isaiah 8:20

D. Christ rebukes the Pharisees for adding to and perverting the Scriptures.-Matthew 15:7-9; Mark 7: 5-8; see also Rev 22: 18-19, and Deut. 4: 2 , 12:32; Joshua 1:7

From Outlines of Theology page 83

## **2. Total Sufficiency**

In complete contrast with the R.C position the Reformers emphasised that Scripture is a complete revelation and is marked by the note of sufficiency. The Reformers did not assert that Scripture has recorded all the sayings of our Lord and his apostles. Nor was it asserted that it sets forth explicitly and so many words, a proof text for every theological truth or aspect of conduct in the Church's or individuals life. It recognised that there is legitimate work to be done in reasoning inferentially for the data of revelation, and in applying its principles in detail to the spiritual and moral sphere.

The sense in which it was declared sufficient was that it contains and makes known all that is necessary to salvation. This is stated in the words of the Helvetic Confession as follows:

*"In Sacred Scripture, the universal Church has a most full exposition of whatsoever pertains both the saving faith, and to the right moulding of the life which is pleasing to God."*

The Rule of Faith W.P. Paterson p. 60

Significantly many of the Church fathers stated this same truth in the early days of Christianity but this was lost sight of by the medieval church.

## **3. Its Perspicuity or its Clarity**

Protestants do not affirm that the doctrines revealed in the Scriptures are level to man's powers of understanding. Many of the doctrines of Scripture are clearly beyond man's understanding. Nor do they affirm that every part of Scripture can be certainly and clearly expounded, many of the prophecies being perfectly enigmatical until explained by the event. But they do maintain that every essential article of faith and rule of practice is clearly revealed in Scripture, or maybe deduced therefrom. It is not denied that the Christian church is constantly making progress in

the accurate interpretation of Scripture nor that God has yet more light to break forth from his Holy Word. It is however strongly affirmed that the individual seeker after God can take up the Scriptures and find there in the way of salvation and all that is necessary to pursue the Christian life.

*"In opposition to the view that Scripture is an obscure record which calls for a clear commentary in tradition, and also for an infallible interpreter i.e. in the Church, it was maintained that Scripture has the note of perspicuity. It was granted that its meaning is hidden from unregenerate men and that even to spiritual men different passages of Scripture shine with varying degrees of brightness, while some may seem altogether dark. But it was held that it is clear as the sun in the general tenor of its teaching as to the scheme of salvation, and that the difficult passages can be understood by the help of those which are plain and easy. In virtue of its perspicuity Scripture was declared to be its own interpreter. It was of course held that the Church has the power and the duty of defining doctrine, and of judging controversies of faith, and that the organised Christian Society is bound to exact from its members respect for its decisions. But Protestantism was quite clear on the general principle that the Church may not claim inerrancy for creed or confession on the ground of any inherent infallibility, and that the ultimate criterion of the truth of its doctrinal determinations must be their conformity or disconformity with the Word of God."*

ibid p. 60

#### **4. The Efficacy of Scripture**

Protestantism affirms the efficacy of Scripture in the sense that Bible reading is a chief means of grace, and in accordance with this principle it has promoted the circulation of the Bible amongst both believers and unbelievers. That the Scriptures are efficacious in the sense that they are able to make men "wise unto salvation" is amply attested in Christian experience. There is inherent power in the Word of God, independent of any human agency, to quicken the conscience and renewed the heart.

Revive Thy work O Lord,  
Thy mighty arm make bare;  
Speak with the voice that wakes the dead.  
And make the people hear.