

FAITH AND THE WRITINGS

Chapter 11, *A Little Book about Christian Faith*

Why does a Christian accept the Bible as authoritative?

That is a very important question and a lot depends upon the way you answer it. Since so much is at stake, we had better try to give a good answer to it.

We shall remember that people of other religious faiths accept other books as having authority. The Moslem, for example, accepts the Koran as authoritative, and the reasons he gives in his terms sound very much like the reasons the Christian gives in his terms.

This means that just as the Christian faith is one among alternatives, so the Christian writings are one among alternatives. So the Christian must ask the important questions about his faith in view of such alternatives. Why are you a Christian believer in God rather than a Moslem believer in God? Why do you accept the Bible as authority, rather than the Koran? Since the answer which the Moslem gives to the question is so similar to the answer sometimes given by the Christian to the question about the authority of his book, the Christian must tackle this problem very seriously.

There is a difficulty with the obvious answer to the question. The Moslem says, 'I accept the Koran as the revelation of God because it claims to be the revelation of God and to have been inspired by God.' The Christian sometimes says, 'I accept the Bible as the revelation of God because it claims to be the revelation of God, and to have been inspired by God.' If it is a sufficient reason for accepting a book as the revelation of God that it claims to be the revelation of God, then why not accept the Koran instead of the Bible, or both the Koran and the Bible, or any other book which makes the same claim. Suppose when I finish writing this book I end by saying: God inspired me as I wrote, so this book is a revelation of God, would you accept it as such, because the claim was made within it? Any book might make such a claim. The point is that, even if the claim were true, we would not accept it simply because someone made it. One cannot accept the argument: The Bible claims to have authority. Therefore it has it. And for good reason. The reason why we cannot accept that argument is that we would have to accept any argument of the same kind. We would have to accept the reasoning that whatever claims to have authority has it. In fact that is the assumption behind the argument. And that of course, is false.

The fact that there are rival claims makes it impossible to accept them all. Take another example. Suppose three people came forward when an inheritance was at stake and said, 'I am the next of kin.' This particular claim could not be true in each of the three cases, since the claim to be next of kin is an exclusive one. You either are or you are not. One of those who make the claim may well be truthful and in that case the claim is justified. But the claim must be checked out to see whether it is in fact justified, and in a case of this kind there are accepted procedures for doing that. When that is successfully done, and it may take time and effort, then the acceptance of the claim is seem to t reasonable.

Now there are two possible alternatives with reference to the Bible. One is to say that the Christian claim that the Bible has authority is an exclusive claim. You cannot allow other similar claims to be valid at the same time. In that case it is like the claim which the rightful heir makes when he says, 'I am the next of kin.' But since there are other such claimants, the Christian's claim that the Bible is exclusively the revelation of God and has a unique authority will have to be

established on grounds other than the claim itself. What these might be we shall discuss shortly.

The alternative is to say that there are many revelations of God and that none of these is exclusive. But most Christians would find it impossible to say that because they are convinced that the Christian revelation is in some way unique and incomparable. They would be willing to admit, I think, that for the one who accepts it as such, as in the case of the Moslem and the Koran, written Scriptures have the same kind of authority for him as the Bible does for the Christian.

Now, in order to get a satisfactory answer to our question we have to raise another one. We have to ask the Christian believer not only, 'Why do you as a Christian accept the Bible as authoritative?' but also and just as important, '*What sort of authority do you believe the Bible to have?*' Let us pursue this question for a moment.

Let us suppose I purchase an almanac, and find to my surprise that everything which it predicts, in due time comes to pass. Whenever there is a prediction I make a check and find an accurate fulfilment. Or, let us suppose that I know someone who foretells the future and what he says always comes to pass. In every case his prediction comes true. In both cases the book and the person would have authority, and make a fortune into the bargain. But there would be nothing particularly religious about that authority. I would go to the book when I wanted to know about the future, but there is nothing necessarily relevant to faith about that. I do not think that you can have any question about that.

That is not the kind of authority the believer ought to be claiming as distinctive for the Bible either. Just suppose that whenever it made a prediction, everything which the Bible predicted came to pass. That would not make it a *spiritual* authority, but a kind of super-almanac, and a super-almanac is not a religious book. So, simply to appeal to the fulfilment of prophecy to establish the authority of the Bible is not at all sufficient, since it does not say anything about the unique *kind of* authority which the Christian finds the Bible to have.

That *kind of* authority is a spiritual authority. The unique kind of authority which the believer finds in the Bible is a religious one. He reads it as a Christian not primarily for its historical information or its literary qualities but because it is the means through which God reveals himself and through which faith is nurtured. That is to say, the Bible for the practicing Christian has authority because of its connection with his faith. The worshipping Christian sometimes knows better than the theologians at this point. It is Scripture which is read and expounded for the nurturing of faith, and the reason for this is that the Scripture does nurture faith. It becomes under the providence of God the means through which faith is nurtured and becomes mature, just as it is the means through which faith comes into being. In the words of the hymn:

'The Spirit breathes upon the Word,
And brings the truth to sight;
Precepts and promises afford
A sanctifying light' (William Cowper).

It has been that way from the very beginning. Certain writings were recognised as having the capacity to edify, to instruct and to build up the faith of the community. These writings came to constitute the New Testament. Out of the new experience which had come to them with their faith in Jesus Christ the early believers looked back on the long history which had preceded them and were able, because of their faith in Jesus Christ, to see that God had been active in the

preceding centuries. Indeed they could see the former doings of God with the Jewish people as an 'Old Testament.' That is a Christian term. So they did what no other religion has ever done. They simply took over a whole body of literature and incorporated it into their body of sacred writings, and called the whole selection, 'The Bible.'

So, the unique authority which the Bible has for the Christian is one which he confesses. He cannot prove it. He cannot by a process of reasoning bring someone to the place where he is logically forced to accept its authority. Indeed, it is only as the believer acknowledges that God is made known to him that he can come to an appreciation of the authority of the Bible, and when he does so the word 'authority' does not seem to be quite the right one.

The authority of the Bible is the authority of God whom it mediates to the believer. The Christian finds that the decisive revealing of God took place in Jesus Christ. Now this is a fact not to be taken for granted. It was certainly not taken for granted by those of the earliest days of Christianity. Someone for the first time said that Jesus was Christ. Someone, for the first time, claimed that Jesus' death was not the end and the despair of any hopes for God's future. Now that is a very important consideration. There was a point in human history when someone or some group of people began to believe in Jesus' death, and in the Jesus who had died, as the revealing, the revealer of God, who began to believe in Jesus as the unique and incomparable act of God. There was a point at which Christian faith came into being.

The question about the Bible is the question about how Christian faith today in the twentieth century, is related to that very earliest Christian faith. How is contemporary Christian faith, when do very much has been written, connected with that earliest Christian faith when nothing had been written?

Put in a word, the writings express the faith in God through Jesus Christ which at first is spoken about and only later is written down. These writings thus become a kind of bridge between our faith and Jesus. This can be shown with a little thought. Ask yourself, 'How did it come about that I believe?' You will answer this question by saying that someone spoke to you. You either heard or read something. And how did the person who wrote or spoke to you himself come to believe? Someone spoke to him. And how did that person come to believe? The chain of witness goes back to the very earliest times when the word of witness was beginning to be spoken and heard in the world, the word about Jesus, which was at the same time the word about God. There is an essential connection between the faith of the Christian in the twenty-first century and the earliest Christian faith in the first century. Moreover, we must go one step further and say that there is a bridge between our faith in Jesus as the Christ and Jesus himself. It is in the line of witness going back historically to the first witnesses, the first Christian believers.

This is not to be taken for granted. Nothing about Christian faith should be taken for granted. But especially not this! We are bound to focus upon the first period of Christian witness if we do not take *our* faith for granted and here we find that the first period of Christian witness was a coming to terms with the resurrection reality. In various ways, these earliest Christians deliberately made the attempt to see and to interpret life on many different levels in relation to the newly emerged reality of faith in God through Jesus Christ. They asked all kinds of questions about Jesus and about themselves. The fundamental question was, 'What does Jesus mean?' What does faith in Jesus mean for this situation and for that one, for the community with this kind of problem and for the community for that kind of problem? This crucial and central question, 'What does faith in Jesus mean?' was asked in different contexts and was given different answers as occasion demanded.

The immediate concerns of the early church to witness, to live in community and worship God as a new community, to be brave in view of the threat and the reality of persecution, to understand what to believe and to think and to teach in view of alternative positions — these immediate concerns dominated the life of the leaders of the church. Slowly the writings which we now call the New Testament emerged out of these complex situations in the life of the community of Christian faith. What we have in the New Testament is a chunk out of the life of the earliest Christian communities, as they wrestled to find and to express the meaning of the demand of Jesus Christ.

Not everything that was written survived. Not everything which was written in the earliest times was accepted as authoritative. The fact is that there came a time when the judgment was made that some but not all writings were accepted. That was an early judgment. Once made it was followed. The writings which were accepted as having authority continued to be accepted because they had been accepted. That was the kind of authority which they had. They were read widely in the Christian communities and were most readily received as they were found to have the capacity to edify and to instruct, to mediate the 'word of Christ.' Indeed, from the beginning, as has always been the case later, some of these 'New Testament' books were seen to be more important than others. So the formation of the New Testament represents the acceptance, which constituted a judgment, that these and no other writings were the primary means for the mediation of the reality of God in Jesus Christ. They have a quite unique historical priority.

The voice of the earliest witnesses ceased, but what was written continued to influence the way the Christian church lived and thought. The question was still asked, What does faith in Jesus Christ meant, in new and different situations for the individual and for the community. Sometimes there was a word directly relevant in the writings. Sometimes there was not. But the fact that the old word was applied to the new situation meant that it had been interpreted. In fact the word of Scripture has meaning only as it is interpreted. The process of interpreting and understanding still continues. It continues on two levels. The first is that of understanding their understanding. This issues in the careful study of the text in order to understand what they understood, what they meant, to get at the intention and the mind of Paul, in what he said to so many different situations, for example. The second is the understanding of the reality to which they bore witness and which, so the contemporary Christian believes, is a reality which must ever and anew be responded to.

It is a fact that what they wrote has served to mediate to others the reality of which they wrote, the reality of God in Jesus Christ. It is the fact that the words mediate the Word, that the writings are the means through which Christian faith is nurtured that ensures the authority of these words, the Bible. The authority of Scripture is the authority of the God who acted in Jesus Christ and whose reality is mediated as the words are read. Otherwise the words are religiously a dead letter.

