

THE CHURCH AND THE BIBLE

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What is the church's actual practice with regard to the use of the Bible? Are all portions of the Bible from beginning to end given the same attention in the public and private reading and upon the occasions where there is opportunity for exposition? Does the reading and exposition of certain books and passages assume greater significance than others? Are there passages and portions of the Bible which are never read at all and so play an insignificant part in the church's understanding? Are there other passages which are used over and over again in public worship, private reading and in exposition and in the construction of doctrine? What is the significance of these practices for an understanding of the Bible?

It is to such questions that we shall address ourselves as we discuss the issues of the interpretation and the authority of the Bible. By 'Bible' we mean *the whole* of the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments. This whole we call the 'canon.' These are the books the Christian church agreed upon. It agreed and agrees that it is right to set them apart from all other books. The church of today is one with the church of yesterday in so acting. It affirms the distinctiveness of *these* books. The church of today goes on endorsing the decision which was made long ago that these books, and these books only, should be separated out from all others and given a special place in the Church. They are, in some sense, primary. That is a tradition all Christians accept, one tradition upon which they agree. But it is a *tradition*. It is a tradition which most Christians go on accepting without asking about it, without asking why it should be so, and without asking who made the decisions that it should be so.

Now an interesting development has taken place in the last two hundred years in regard to the study of the Bible. Serious, dedicated, intensive and methodical study of the Bible has taken place and is taking place independent of the particular and partisan interests of any particular church. You can undertake study of Scripture without having the particular doctrinal concerns of a particular section of the Christian community in mind. Such biblical studies have developed in non-church related institutions and without the special interests of particular denominations. Many churches have gradually come to recognize that they must take the results and the methodologies of such studies seriously.

What this means is that there is a need to consider older positions, such as for example were proposed at the time of the Reformation. Gone is the time when a sarcastic cartoon, a cliché, or a label was enough to dismiss such analytic work on the Bible. Such work has in some form or other influenced all Christian churches. Gone is the time when it was enough to *assert* a non-historical interpretation of the Bible, to entrench behind a dogmatic position, and stop one's ears and hide one's eyes from the obvious progress which historical study of the Bible involved. Fortunately, we may now say, an analytic method of Bible study is now very widely accepted. Recognition and acceptance of this fact has meant renewed understanding of the Bible in our time. It is not to be thought abstract, 'clinical,' and remote from the concerns of the church. Nothing could be more misleading than such an unsympathetic prejudice.

So in our introductory chapter let us point again to the importance of *what the church actually does* with Scripture. We may here, as in other spheres of our experience, often learn

more correctly what the attitude of the group is from what it actually does, from its actual practice, than from what it says, what it proposes as its formal belief or attitude. For example, statements of doctrine in some churches propose that the Bible is in all its parts the Word of God, and have a quite specific way of understanding that claim. That has appeared in official statements and widely held as a formal belief. In actual practice the situation may be very different from what the formal doctrine would lead us to expect.

What then of the practice of the church in its actual attitude to and use of the books, chapters and verses of Scripture? Here are some pieces of evidence:

- (1) The church makes selections from the Scriptures, giving greater importance to some passages than to others.
- (2) It often employs Scripture to support and to endorse the doctrines it teaches.
- (3) Certain of these doctrines come to have an importance above others. Hence the Scripture which 'supports' such central doctrine assumes special significance.

All Christians in fact do what Luther did. They do not all admit, as Luther did, what it is they are doing.

' . . . Luther, who mightily invoked the authority of Scripture to challenge that of Rome, yet who dismissed the Letter of James as an "epistle of straw," declared that the Word of God to Moses was not the Word to Luther, therefore not binding upon him A fundamentalist today may claim that no one should "tamper with God's Holy Word," yet he or she will by no means feel obliged to obey all the laws of the Old Testament.' 'As the New Testament advises us to 'test the spirits to see whether they are of God,' so I think we need to test the Scriptures. Indeed, I believe we already do this. As I have already pointed out, people pick and choose their levels of authority in the Bible, *yet we rarely confess that we are doing so*. It takes a Luther, a Sölle, and other bold people to say of a certain part of the Bible, "I won't pay any attention to that," though this is what the rest of us are doing all the time. The New Testament writers, in their use of the Old, did the same.'⁶

The process of selecting from Scripture what appeals to us and of neglecting the rest is made not only for the sake of building up a doctrinal system, but also in the public and private worship of the church. Some Christians make the discussion of faith central and so appeal to the writings of Paul. Others concern themselves primarily with the apocalyptic books. In such a case *Daniel* and *Revelation* become *effectively* more important than the Gospels for that community. For others contemplation of the life of Jesus is of first importance. Then the Gospels are of primary importance. If we ask: 'As a *matter of practice* what actually happens?' we must have regard for what the church does rather than what its formal teaching might lead us to think.

Since it is clear that use of the Bible is selective, we certainly must take that into account in developing a doctrine of the authority of Scripture. What this means is that in giving an account of the church's practice we shall point to two facts: first, the church claims that the Bible has unique authority; and second, in her practice and her use of Scripture some parts are more frequently referred to, some are built into a doctrinal scheme, others are passed over. The Bible, whose uniqueness the church acknowledges in her doctrine, is never uniformly treated as equally important in all its parts. If it were it could not support the doctrine of the uniqueness of Scripture.