

THE REFORMED VIEW OF THE SCRIPTURES

by J. F. PETER

THE doctrine of Scripture is one of perennial interest to evangelical people, and most properly so, since it is to Scripture alone that they look for the rule of faith and life. Experience suggests, indeed, that some who publish their thoughts on this subject—and not least in THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY—take their lives in their hands when they do so. But we are happy to publish this study by Professor Peter, of Emmanuel College in the University of Queensland, the more so because we think that the opening chapter of the “Westminster Confession of Faith”, which he is concerned to expound in this article, is the finest statement of the doctrine of Scripture that has ever been published.

The article is not presented as a definitive statement, but rather as a contribution to the very important debate now proceeding in regard to the doctrine of Scripture, which has found expression, i.e., in A. G. Hebert’s “Fundamentalism and the Church of God” and J. I. Packer’s “Fundamentalism and the Word of God”, or in the more recent Bristol disputation “Is the Bible Infallible?” by J. W. Wenham and R. E. Davies.

THE best known statement in English of the Reformed doctrine of the Scriptures, and one of the most respected in any language, is that contained in a document which was drawn up by the 121 English clergymen and 30 lay assessors, together with some Scottish commissioners, who assembled at Westminster in 1643. This document is the Westminster Confession of Faith, which holds an honoured place among the formularies of practically every branch of the Presbyterian Church. It forms a sound basis for this discussion of the Reformed view of the Scriptures.

Despite the general agreement in understanding of the proper attitude to be adopted towards the Scriptures among those who in the sixteenth century parted with Rome (a description which includes Lutherans as well as those generally called “Reformers”) and their successors, there was a good deal of variety in their lists of the attributes which the Scriptures display.¹ Crocius, for

¹ See Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, revised and edited by Ernst Bizer and translated by G. T. Thomson (London, Allen and Unwin, 1950), pp. 20 ff. This book will be referred to hereafter simply as “Heppe”.

instance, mentioned four attributes: authority, perfection, clarity of feeling and of interpretation, and effectiveness. Mastricht listed eight: authority, truth and certainty, integrity, holiness and purity, perspicuity, perfection, necessity and efficacy. Many were content to name three: authority, perfection and perspicuity.

My exposition of the Westminster Confession’s teaching on the Scriptures will be made in terms of the four characteristics which, according to Cornelius Van Til², the Reformed view of the Scriptures declares: (1) necessity, (2) authority, (3) sufficiency, (4) perspicuity.

It need hardly be added that not all writers—of the Reformed period or since—would agree with the placing of the material which follows under the headings as I have arranged it. But it should perhaps be made plain that I have taken little more than the four headings from Van Til.

I. NECESSITY

One of the four characteristics of the Scriptures, according to the Reformed point of view, is their necessity. The Bible is necessary, says the Westminster Confession, because it pleased the Lord to commit the revelation of Himself to writing, certain other ways of revealing Himself having ceased (I.i).

(a) The necessity which attaches to the Scriptures is not of an absolute kind, but such a necessity as is consequent upon certain decisions of God. The reason for the committal of His will to writing was that “it pleased the Lord . . . for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church,” while the cessation of “those former ways of God’s revealing His will” is to be thought of similarly as something which it pleased the Lord to bring about.

While, therefore, the Scripture is necessary for the well-being of the Church (and even according to some of the Reformers, for its being at all) it is a *necessitas ex hypothesi dispositionis*³. God could, had He willed, have chosen some other way of maintaining the knowledge of His will.

(b) What “maketh the holy scripture to be most necessary” is the fact that it pleased the Lord, having revealed Himself, “afterwards . . . to commit the same wholly unto writing (I.i). The Westminster Confession thus recognizes that God’s revela-

² In pp. 31-37 of his Introduction to B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (London, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1951).

³ *Dispositio* meant in classical Latin an “arrangement”; in later Latin it was used of the redemptory work of Christ, or of the covenant between God and man.

tion was not first given when the books of the Bible were being written; they are the committing to writing of what had already been revealed.

This attitude on the part of the Reformers—namely, their recognition that the Word of God (i.e., all that it pleased the Lord in divers manners to declare) came to men at one time and was written down at a subsequent time—may be described as their refusal to separate revelation and inspiration. Heppe so describes it on p. 15, while John Macpherson says of the Westminster divines that they “do not seek to affirm at what time revelation first assumed the form of Scripture. They had no interest in doing so, for revelation, though not yet written, being fully inspired, had for them all the authority of Scripture. It was to the revelation rather than to the writing of it that the inspiration belonged.”⁴

I prefer to describe this attitude of the Reformers as one which recognizes a distinction between revelation and inspiration, than as one which refuses to separate them. But the important thing is to note what the Reformers generally, and the Westminster divines in particular, actually say. Some of their critics do not seem to be aware of it; nor do all who seek to champion their cause.

(i) As a matter of fact, the failure to make this proper distinction between revelation and inspiration (or, as Heppe would put it, an unfortunate separation of them) crept in to mar the Reformed doctrine of the Scriptures at a very early date. “As early as the end of the sixteenth century,” Heppe says, “the conception of inspiration had changed; it was now completely separated from the idea of revelation. Scripture was therefore now regarded as inspired purely because it was dictated to the Biblical authors by God”⁵. And G. S. Hendry maintains that “the shadow of this misunderstanding” (i.e., the misunderstanding of the Reformers’ doctrine—as being a doctrine of the inspiredness of Scripture as a quality inherent in itself) “falls very plainly across the Westminster Confession.”⁶

(ii) The misunderstanding of the Reformers’ position which arises when it is not recognized that they distinguished between the revelation and the committing of it to writing is very similar to that which arises when their idea of the *testimonium internum*

⁴ John Macpherson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1882), p. 31.

⁵ Heppe, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁶ *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 1 (1948), p. 39.

Spiritus Sancti is not given full significance. (We shall return to this in II (b).) This latter misunderstanding may be expressed as a failure to recognize that the Reformers distinguished between “The Word of God” and “Holy Scripture.” (Heppe indeed, describes the former misunderstanding in these terms also on pp. 15f.)

(c) The fact that Scripture is necessary does not mean that there is no other avenue left for God’s making himself known.

“The light of nature, and the works of creation and providence” are said to “manifest the goodness, wisdom and power of God” (I.i). And the statement concerning “those former ways of God’s revealing his will” which have ceased evidently refers not to this part of the article, but to the second (“to reveal and declare that his will unto the Church”).

Even this statement is not to be taken at what seems to be its face value. The committing of “the same wholly unto writing” has not silenced God, as the Confession’s references to the “witness” and “illumination” and “speaking” of the Holy Spirit make plain (I. v, vi, x). It is considered, however, that any teaching which claims to be a revelation from God must show itself consonant with the teaching of the Scriptures: it is “by and with the word” that the Holy Spirit bears witness in our hearts (I.v).

II. AUTHORITY

According to the view we are considering the Scriptures have authority.

(a) This authority, the Westminster Confession says, depends on the fact that God is the author (I.iv). He is the author because all the canonical books are given by His inspiration (I.ii). They are “immediately inspired” (I.viii); the apocryphal books are of no authority because they are not of divine inspiration (I.iii).⁷

(b) Under the heading of “authority” we may take up again the question of inspiration, noting that the Westminster Confession seems to say plainly that the canonical books are authoritative because they were produced under the inspiration of God.

It is in my opinion, only among the later, and lesser, Reformers that there arose the conviction (which dominated Christian thought for three centuries) that the Scriptures are inspired because they were dictated to the writers by God, and that the authority of the Scriptures rests upon the manner in which they

⁷ See Heppe, pp. 13 f.

relate certain things. This is the line of Reformed thought which gave rise to the "scholasticism" which considered such questions as whether inspiration extended to the vowel points of the Hebrew text, to the accents of the Hebrew and Greek, and to the titles of the books; whether the sacred writers wrote under compulsion and unwillingly; whether they understood all that that they wrote, and whether their amanuenses were also inspired.

Although those who discussed such questions did not all agree upon the same conclusions, there was underlying the discussion a view of the inspiration which came to be so generally accepted that it was a silent premise in all arguments.

(i) The difference between this attitude and what I myself regard as the true line of Reformed thought may be seen by considering the attitude of John Calvin whose writing on this, as on most other matters, provides the norm for Reformed thinking.

It is true, as T. H. L. Parker says, that "for Calvin the expression 'the Holy Spirit says' is generally synonymous with 'the Scripture says'. Therefore, he calls the Scriptures *oracula dei*, the true voice of God speaking to us." But Parker proceeds to point out on the same page: "it must be remembered that when he speaks of Scripture, he links with it by an unbreakable bond the Holy Spirit. The Scripture is the Word of God because it has been spoken by the Spirit, who continues to speak that same word."⁸ It is the "link" that is forgotten when Calvin is hailed (by friend as well as foe) as adhering without qualification to a view of "verbal inspiration."

Even those scholars who consider that Calvin's attitude to the Scriptures was that of the "scholastic Calvinists", and that he did in fact consider the inspiration of the Scriptures to constitute them the very Word of God, would not all say that it was this fact which endowed them with their authority. Edward A. Dowey⁹ considers¹⁰ that Calvin did regard the original text as inerrant, but contends that he derived Biblical authority from the *testimonium internum Spiritus Sancti*, inspiration as dictation (whether we understand the references to this in a literal or a figurative sense¹¹) being the answer he gives to the subsequent question of how the writings came to be. "Calvin does not accept the Bible as revelation, because it has somehow objectively been proved to be inspired. On the contrary, he finds the Bible to be a revelation

⁸ *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 2 (1949), p. 39.

⁹ *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1952); see especially pp. 89-105.

of God, then he makes the corollary assertion that its writers were inspired, as they asserted, by God."¹²

(ii) Though there may be, as has been suggested, some signs of the Westminster divines having been influenced by the later, and lower, thinking of the Reformation, the Confession displays their grasp of the principle of the *testimonium internum*. "Our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority" of the Scriptures "is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit," it says, adding carefully: "bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts" (I.v). However "many other incomparable excellencies" the Scriptures may display and whatever testimony may be given them by others (such as the Church), the authority of the Scriptures rests ultimately upon nothing save the Scriptures themselves as that fact is witnessed by the Holy Spirit in the believer.

(c) The authoritative Scriptures are the autographs, not any particular manuscript or translation. It is "the Old Testament in Hebrew . . . and the New Testament in Greek" which are immediately inspired by God" (I.viii).

It may, therefore, be assumed that if the Westminster divines had been confronted with results of textual criticism demonstrating that vital texts on which they had based some dogma were in error they would readily have made corresponding amendments in their formulation of doctrine. But, of course, none of the Westminster divines was ever confronted with such a demonstration—nor, it must be added, have any of those who have laboured at doctrinal formulation in the three centuries which have passed since the Westminster Confession was drawn up. It was not the findings of lower criticism which brought about so general a departure from traditional doctrines in the last hundred or so years; and there ought to be wider acknowledgment than there is of the fact that, according to Westcott and Hort, "if comparative trivialities such as changes of order, the

¹⁰ At this point Dowey is in agreement with B. B. Warfield (and, to a lesser extent, with R. Seeberg, O. Ritschl and A. Mitchell Hunter), but against E. Doumergue, Henri Clavier, Jacques Pannier and H. Heppé.

¹¹ For instance, does "dictate" mean literally "articulate the words", and is "amanuensis" to be understood as "one who writes down the very words he hears"?

¹² Dowey, *op. cit.*, p. 90. He adds: "Corollary assertion is not an exact term here, because it denotes subsequence and inference. This corollary is neither subsequential nor inferential. It refers to a prior event which is a presupposition of the revelation, and it is said simultaneously when one speaks of revelation".

insertion or omission of the article with proper names, and the like, are set aside, the words in our opinion still subject to doubt can hardly amount to more than a thousandth part of the New Testaments."¹³ F. C. Grant (one of the editors of the Revised Standard Version) gives a more up-to-date testimony when he writes: "It will be obvious to the careful reader that still in 1946, as in 1881 and 1901, no doctrine of the Christian faith has been affected by the revision, for the simple reason that, out of the thousands of variant readings in the manuscripts, none has turned up thus far that requires a revision of Christian doctrine."¹⁴

While we may not agree with the Westminster Confession's confidence that the Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek have been "kept pure in all ages," if by that is meant "every verse, every syllable, every letter," we have good grounds for the confidence that we have available to us a text which differs from the autographs only in particulars of no consequence.

III. SUFFICIENCY

A third characteristic of the Scriptures which the Westminster Confession declares is their sufficiency. This sufficiency lies in the fact that "the whole counsel of 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" (I.vi).

(a) This sufficiency of Scripture does not mean that no place is left for the practice of theological enquiry. It is declared that some aspects of "the whole counsel of God" are to be deduced "by good and necessary consequence," and that some circumstances concerning worship and government "are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word" (I.vi).

(b) The sufficiency of Scripture is not claimed for anything other than "all things necessary for (God's) glory, man's salvation, faith and life" (I.vi). There is in the Westminster Confession no declaration that the Bible must be authoritative in matters of science and history.

¹³ B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, *The New Testament in the Original Greek* (New York, Macmillan, 1944), p. 568.

¹⁴ Quoted in *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 23 (1951), p. 144.

Seventeenth-century ideology had no ground for thinking that there was any error in the Scriptural statements relating to matters which are now given specialist attention by independent disciplines; there was a general conviction that the knowledge possessed by the writers of Scripture (considered apart from their unique position as recorders of revelation) on all things was likely to be as sound as that of anyone else, and there was no good reason for questioning the accuracy of any of their statements. It is, therefore, all the more interesting that the Westminster Confession's delineation of the sufficiency of the Scriptures should be limited in the way indicated.

(i) It cannot be denied, however, that some such distinction (between the realms in which Scripture is declared to be sufficient and those in which it is not) is necessary today, for it is frequently the discovery in the Bible of what he regards as historical or scientific inaccuracies which leads a man to discard a view of it as sufficient for anything else.

IV. PERSPICUITY

Fourthly, the Westminster Confession asserts the Bible's perspicuity. Those things which are necessary to be known, believed and observed for salvation are understandable by every man who will make a due use of the ordinary means (I.vii), and who will compare Scripture with Scripture (I.ix).

(a) It is to be noted again how the Westminster Confession limits the perspicuity of Scripture to "those things which are necessary . . . for salvation" (I.vii). There is no declaration that the Scriptures give clear and unambiguous instruction on every matter which they have occasion to mention.

(b) Nor is it claimed that each separate word, or sentence, in the Scriptures is self-explanatory to the mind of every reader. "All things in Scripture are not alike plain themselves, nor alike clear unto all" (I.vii); there is a need for the comparing of Scripture with Scripture (I.ix).

(i) The principle of interpreting Scripture by Scripture is sometimes criticized on the ground that it amounts to no more than the editing of Scripture in the light of an assumed core of essential doctrine which the rest of Scripture only exists to explicate.

And some ground for this objection appears in what the Reformers had to say. Bucan states that exegesis of Scripture is to be gained "from attention to and comparison of what precedes and follows with other passages of Scripture," wherein the rule

of the *analogia fidei* is to be insisted upon, "namely, the constant and unchanging sense of Scripture expounded in open passages of Scripture and agreeing with the Apostles' Creed, the Decalogue and the Lord's Prayer, etc;"¹⁵ and Chamier declares that "the analogy of faith is the argument from general dogmas which contain the norm of all that is to be taught in the Church."¹⁶

But some such procedure can hardly be avoided if we are to make sense of the Scriptures. As Cunliffe-Jones says: "not all parts of the Bible have the same weight in setting forth the Gospel, and we must interpret those of lesser moment in the light of those of greater moment. If we attach most weight to the Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament and the Epistle of James in the New, we shall hardly see the message of the Bible in the right perspective, any more than if we attach the greatest importance to the Books of Daniel and Revelation understood as cryptograms concerning the future."¹⁷

What it is important to notice concerning the Reformed view at this point, and what distinguishes it from some other views (such as the liberal view of the Word of God as a "kernel" within the Bible, and some expressions of the "Catholic" view of tradition as determining the sense of Scripture), is that the "central core" is to be found within Scripture, and not to be brought to Scripture, and is itself at every point subject to correction by Scripture.

(c) The fact that there is envisaged the possibility of there arising questions "about the true and full sense of any scripture" (I.ix), and the consequent necessity of bringing into consideration what is spoken of in other Scriptures, suggests that the Westminster divines did not consider the perspicuity of the Scriptures to render exposition of them unnecessary—a suggestion which finds explicit confirmation in another part of the Westminster Confession, where it is said that "the sound preaching, and conscionable hearing of the word" is part of "the ordinary religious worship of God" (XXI.v).

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¹⁵ IV. 21-24; quoted by Heppe, p. 34.

¹⁶ I. 17; quoted by Heppe, p. 36.

¹⁷ H. Cunliffe-Jones: *The Authority of the Biblical Revelation* (London, James Clarke, 1954), p. 76.