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THE RULE OF FAITH

AUGUSTINE maintained that the Scriptures were the Rule of Faith for the Church, and summed up the position by stating: "In those things which are plainly laid down in Scripture, all things are found which embrace faith and morals." This position was re-affirmed at the Reformation, when the Scriptures were declared to have authority, sufficiency, perspicuity, and efficacy. This paper is an attempt to clarify the fundamental implications of this position, and to restate the belief in opposition to rival schools of thought.

The Westminster Confession states: "We may be moved and induced by the Church to a high and reverent esteem of Holy Scripture, and the heavenliness of the matter, and the efficacy of the doctrine . . . whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the truth and divine authority thereof is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts." This statement declares that the principle of authority is neither purely subjective nor purely objective: it is subjectively realized, but depends on objective conditions.¹ In other words, the Rule of Faith is historically grounded on the Word of God, but it is also personally realized in experience.

It is essential to realize that both the objective and subjective aspects are necessary for a balanced and adequate interpretation. Neither aspect alone is sufficient. The various Rules of Faith which have been proclaimed throughout the Christian era, have generally developed as the result of an undue emphasis on either one aspect or the other.

The assertion is frequently made that the Protestant conception of the Rule of Faith is impersonal. Such an assertion is based on a superficial understanding of the Protestant point of view. The Scriptures are accepted as authoritative because they awake a response in the heart of believers, and so evidence

¹ Galloway, G., *The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 321.

themselves to be the veritable Word of God. An inner assurance confirms the fact of their inspiration. Barth makes a reference which is relevant to this point. He says that knowledge committed to man through Scripture is made his own through the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit the human word becomes in the existential moment the Word of God to us.¹ While we may disagree with the full implications of this statement, there is one important truth enunciated. The Scriptures must be personally appropriated through the Holy Spirit. Thus while they are authoritative in themselves, their authority to be spiritually valuable must be accepted by the spirit. The inward response is necessary to make the outward claim really effective.

The Scriptures demonstrate their adequacy as the basis for our Rule of Faith, because they satisfy us from the objective point of view by providing a reasonable basis for our beliefs, and they satisfy us from the subjective point of view by creating assurance and trust in our hearts. The word "faith" historically has been associated with the twofold meaning of trust and belief. The word has both an emotional and intellectual significance. It is noticed that our Rule of Faith includes both these aspects, and the external standard is confirmed by an inner and personal confidence which it creates. Philosophically there is a self-revelation of the objective in our subjectivity.

It is further objected that the Scriptures are a complete and final revelation, and that they are therefore static. The implication is that progress and development are incompatible with a final and complete revelation. Such an attitude does small justice to the work of the Holy Spirit, Who continually reveals the Word to the hearts of true believers. He guides into all truth, but only through and according to the Scriptures of truth. Real progress can only take place through and with the true findings of the past, and in the spiritual realm progress can only take place through and with the eternal Word of God. God is always "the speaking Subject", (Barth) so that while the Scriptures remain the complete revelation of God, there is need for continuous spiritual enlightenment through the Holy Spirit.

I

The Roman Catholic Church accepts a supernatural revelation, and maintains that the channels of revelation are the

¹ Barth, *Dogmatic*, quoted McConnachie, p. 123.

Scriptures and tradition. The traditions are officially claimed to date from the time of Christ. This claim has proved untenable, as there have been many late innovations. To extricate themselves from this impasse,¹ the Roman Catholic theologians have exalted the Church as an infallible interpreter of doctrine. One of their leading advocates admits that they claim the Church is for God "a special abode, an organised and visible agency for distributing a higher and supernatural order of grace". (Martineau.)² The logical development of such a conception is the doctrine of Papal Infallibility. This dogma is supposed to derive its validity from Apostolic authority, which it is claimed has been exercised by the Roman Pontiffs continuously throughout the Christian era. But when one man claims infallibility, he renders himself independent of the past. He thereby destroys the basis of his own authority. This constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* of Church authority.³

Evangelicals feel that the Roman Catholics, like the Pharisees of old, "make the Word of God of none effect through their traditions". (Mark vii. 13.) Jewel rightly declared that the Bible is "the very sure and infallible rule" of doctrine, and that nothing can be rightly imposed on the consciences of men as truth or duty which is not taught directly or by implication in the Holy Scriptures. St. Cyril of Jerusalem set a commendable precedent when he said, "Do not believe me simply, unless you receive the proof of what I say from Scripture".

The Roman Catholic Church over-emphasises the intellectual aspect of faith. Aquinas, who first made the doctrine of the Pope a formal and integral part of dogmatic theology, defined faith in his *Summa Theologica* as an act of the intellect which is moved to assent through the will. Faith is thus intellectualized, and is conceived not as a matter of insight and independent conviction, but of mental submission. The Rule of Faith is to be received only on the ground of an external authority. Such a view ignores the vital necessity of an inner assurance responding to the external revelation. It is inadequate because it leaves unmoved the heart and conscience.

The Anglo-Catholic party of the Church of England adopts a modified version of the Roman Catholic claims. The theory is that "the Church was before the Bible", and that without

¹ Inge, W. R., *Faith and its Psychology*, p. 105.

² *The Seat of Authority in Religion*, p. 130.

³ Inge, W. R., *op cit.*, p. 107.

the Church there would have been no Bible. The implication is that the Scriptures cannot be interpreted apart from the guidance of the Church. The view that the Church originated the Bible involves a confusion of thought between the recognition of authority, and authority itself.¹ The Church recognized the Scriptures as being God's message to man; but that conviction could only find a sound basis in the inherent power of the Scriptures themselves.

The Scriptures were accepted on their own intrinsic worth as authentic and reliable. The Report of the Commission on Christian Doctrine appointed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York confirms this fact, although the Commission hastens to qualify its acceptance of the authoritative nature of the Bible by the addition of numerous Appended Notes. The Report says: "The Bible has been and is for the Christian Church the primary criterion of its teaching, and the chief source of guidance for its religious life." This statement confirms the traditional attitude taken by evangelicals towards the Word of God. It is significant that the Commission also lays stress on the need for a "personal appropriation of what is believed in", as "belief resting on external authority alone cannot have the full value of faith".² It is regrettable that the Report does not more consistently follow the Rule of Faith when formulating its doctrinal findings.

II

There is, on the other hand, a conception of the Rule of Faith which tends towards subjectivism. This view has been predominant in the thought and writings of the Quakers, the Intuitionists, and the Mystics. This conception has been advocated in many forms, but basically its exponents exalt feelings as the criterion of faith and practice.

Schleiermacher contends that faith is a pure mystical experience uncontaminated by thought and will. Faith is a spontaneous immediate feeling of the Infinite and Eternal, with which the human spirit identifies itself. This feeling must be wholly general and undifferentiated; the experiences must be pondered over rather than analyzed.³ It is further claimed that the religious ideas of Christianity are a deposit from devout feeling.

¹ Hammond, T. C., *Inspiration and Authority*, pp. 55-56.

² Pp. 31, 36.

³ Paterson, W. P., *The Rule of Faith*.

Mystics have a similar experience. They feel they are in union with the Absolute, and that they have an insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect.¹ William James says that in these states they have "illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for aftertime". Some memory of the content of the mystical states always remains in some form, and with this a profound sense of its importance, which is absolutely authoritative for the individuals concerned.

Religious experience does not necessarily mean that it has any logical validity. The subjective feeling of certainty is no adequate guarantee of truth. Experience involves interpretation and inference, and it is here that the possibility of error and illusion is given. Moreover the emotional certainties of one individual are not the same as those of another individual, and it is futile to suppose that the feelings of one individual should be authoritative for another.²

The immediate feeling of an Eternal World is insufficient as the primary ground of faith. As Dean Inge justly remarks: "The religion of feeling cannot become true till it has passed through the crucible of the will and of the intellect." Feelings may give intensity, but unless based on objective reality, will result in instability. There must be something to give continuity in the history of the race. This objective reality we find in the Bible. Our inward feelings respond to this outward reality. Our feelings are not the basis of our belief, but are a result of our belief. The contention, therefore, that feelings are the basis of the Rule of Faith is not valid. It is essential to insist on the true objective element.

In conclusion, it is sufficient to reiterate that the Scriptures are the Rule of Faith, and that they are adequate for the Church and for the Christian both intellectually and experimentally. This claim is substantiated by the fact that they are permanently satisfying from the objective and subjective points of view.

S. BARTON BABBAGE.

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¹ James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 380 ff.

² Galloway, G., *op. cit.*, p. 318.