

A Report on the Bible

Today I want to give you a Report on the Bible. What is its place in the world of today? What do people think of it? What authority has it over us who are Christians? What do we mean when we call it God's revelation to us?

Until about a hundred and fifty years ago all Christians were agreed that the Bible was the infallible revelation of God. Roman Catholics believed - and still believe - in the infallible Bible, interpreted by an infallible Church. Protestants believed only in the infallibility of the Bible. Thus all of them - Protestants and Roman Catholics - agreed about the Bible. God was its real author, working through human minds. Therefore it was true from cover to cover. There could be no mistake in it. The Bible, for instance, says that the world was made in six days. That may not mean days of twenty-four hours duration, but six periods of time. Modern science does not agree. It tells of countless years the world was being made, and not in the same order as the Bible's six stages. Then, on the old view, science must be wrong, for the Bible could not be wrong.

There was another feature of this belief of all Christians. Early Christians of the Middle Ages, and later Protestant and Roman Catholics, believed that God's revelation in the Bible came in the form of statements, of propositions. Every sentence of the Bible came from God. Therefore, once we understood what each sentence was saying, we had a truth direct from God.

About the year 1800, people began to study the Bible in a different way. What probably started them off was a new spirit in the world, called by historians the spirit of the Renaissance, which first made itself felt about the same time as the Reformation. This spirit, or general attitude to life, made much of humanity and its' powers. Along with that went a feeling of freedom from the authorities to which humanity had been subject. Also there was in it the scientific attitude, the desire to take everything apart to see how it ticked. People began to examine the Bible, not as if it were the authoritative word of God, but a book like any other book. For centuries there had been a study called textual criticism, which is the patient study of the oldest manuscripts of the Bible to determine the correct text of the Bible. This new study was called "higher criticism" to distinguish it from textual criticism. It was really of two kinds.

First there was literary criticism. This is the examination of the books

of the Bible with whatever information could be collected from outside sources. Literary criticism asks questions like these: "Who wrote this book? When was it written? If more than one person had a hand in it, how and when were the different parts put together? What was the author's purpose in writing the book?"

For instance, take the first four books of the Bible. For a number of centuries before Christ the Jews believed that Moses wrote these books of the Bible, even though at the end of them is an account of Moses' death. The Christians accepted this Jewish tradition. But the literary critics questioned the accepted tradition and examined the books themselves. They found that in different parts there were different Hebrew names for God - Yahweh, Elohim, and so on - and that if you put together the parts using Yahweh they were a unity, and had a style and language different from that of other parts.

They found that sometimes they could disentangle two accounts of the same event which have been woven together in the Bible narrative. In the Story of the Flood, for example, you can extract from the Bible two different accounts of it, each complete in itself, each with different details, one simple and vivid, the other somewhat pompous and overloaded with facts.

Thus literary criticism led these students to declare that Moses was *not* the author of Genesis to Deuteronomy. They stated that these books are made up of at least four or five older writings which were written long after Moses and which were subsequently collected and woven together. The whole was finally put together to make the books now in the Bible some *eight hundred years after Moses*.

Those were the findings of literary criticism. But there was also historical criticism, which studies the stories in the Bible to determine whether or not they happened, and if they did, whether or not they happened in the way the Bible describes. Historical criticism could draw upon a great new and growing store of information to check the accuracy of the Bible. For the early days of the world they had the conclusions of geology and biology and anthropology. For the historical facts there were the records of Egypt, Assyria, and other countries. There was all the information dug up by the archeologists. There was also a vast new store of information about other religions, with religious ideas and practices remarkably like the ideas and practices of Christianity.

So these Bible critics said bluntly that as history the Bible was not

always reliable. Some of the critics were more extreme than others, but all of them admitted that at least some of the Bible history is not accurate. For instance, according to the Bible, Ezra's work in re-establishing the Jews in Jerusalem after their exile comes before Nehemiah's work. But most scholars are agreed that on the contrary Nehemiah came first in the story, around 444 BC, and Ezra followed in about 400 B.C.

Now all these new discoveries about the Old Testament might not worry us very much. But these scholars also worked on the New Testament. Their studies led them to conclude that the Gospels were written *after* most of the Epistles, certainly after St. Paul's. They also found that the first three gospels were composite works made up of earlier Christians records. They all agreed that St. Matthew did not write St Matthew's Gospel, and many of them said St. John was not the author of St. John's Gospel.

Many of these scholars had a special purpose in their work on the New Testament. It was very hard to believe in miracles in the nineteenth century. One by one things that people had thought miraculous were being explained by science as simply a part of the orderly working of nature. The habits of thought in those days, created by science, did not make it easy to believe in the supernatural religion that Christianity had always been.

Many of these scholars had this point of view. They felt that if they could only get behind St. Paul's Epistles and the Gospels to the earliest records of Christianity, they would find an *historical Jesus* over which the supernatural Christ of Faith had been overlaid. They would, they thought, find a simple Prophet of Nazareth teaching simply about the fatherhood of God, with no claims to be divine and no working of miracles.

One of the greatest of these scholars, a man named Harnack, said, "We are firmly convinced that what happens in space and time is subject to the general laws of motion, and that in this sense, as an interpretation of the order of nature there can be no such thing as Miracles."

Another, a man named Strauss, said bluntly that Jesus only claimed to be "a patient teacher exercising a quiet influence". He also said that Jesus, in dying on the Cross, was not dying to save humanity, but only "reckons on the influence which a martyr-death has never failed to exercise in giving momentum to a lofty idea."

Now why do I tell you all this? Because for better or for worse, that is the way the Bible has been studied for two centuries, and we Christians who use the Bible should know about it. Also, because whether you know it or not, you may easily have been influenced by all this. You may never have heard of literary criticism or historical criticism. You may be one of whom Bishop Gore wrote, "Even half the attendants of our Church are enfeebled in their spiritual life. They entertain a suspicion that what they hear from the pulpit is not true."

Then I tell you this because the methods of literary and historical criticism are taken for granted in our theological colleges. Some of the results of that century and a half of study are taken for granted in what I learned at college and what people today are learning. I do not believe in the clergy using the Bible one way and the laity in another. Ours is not a religion in which the priest must have a secret doctrine that they cannot share with the people.

Certainly I do not tell you all this in order to unsettle your faith. In what I am going to say now I may give pain to a few faithful souls who have been taught to believe that the Bible is God's word and have used it as such. They know the Bible is true and came from God because they are like the young man who said to Spurgeon "I know the Bible is inspired because it inspires me." I ask such folk to be patient. My teaching of the Bible is in the end, not so different from theirs.

I am concerned primarily with the people who rarely think about the Bible, to whom it is a holy book but also a dusty book, and on the few occasions when they read it an incomprehensible book. One of the reasons it is such is because these people are infected unknowingly with a disturbance about the Bible following from all this criticism I have been telling you about.

So I come now to ask, were these Bible critics right? The answer is that they were right and they were wrong.

They were right in this. No great scholar and no leader of your Church today claims that the Bible is infallible. It is a human book, charged and electric with the power and presence of God. But it is human, and there are mistakes of history in it, and there are lower as well as higher conceptions of God. The people who wrote it were children of their time. God used their knowledge, imperfect and fragmentary as it was, to show his hand upon the lives of humans, to reveal his will in

history, his purpose and his truth. Look in the Bible for an accurate science on the evolution of the world and you won't find it. Look in the Bible for accurate history, correct in every date and every detail and you won't find it. But look in the Bible for the Presence and Power of God and *you will find God*.

It is a serious step to give up a belief that Christians have held for eighteen hundred years which is the length of time that Christians believed the Bible to be infallible. But when we look back we find we are not so different from them. Those earlier Christians said that the Bible is true from cover to cover, but they did not use it as if it were. Some parts of it, on its surface meaning, they could not accept. So they gave an allegorical interpretation to them. Again every Christian of all ages has had favorite parts of the Bible and parts he did not really care about. Martin Luther was just more honest than the rest when disliking the epistle of St. James he called it "the Epistle of Straw."

No, the Bible is not an infallible collection of propositions directly from God. It is rather the record of a people through whom God was working. The revelation is not in *the words* so much as in *the activity, the mighty acts of God*, with which the words deal.

Further, these critics, by telling us how the books of the Bible came to be written have opened their meaning tremendously. It is much easier now to understand the Bible and so to hear God's voice in it.

Thus far I will go with the critics But now I must criticize them. For it would be a sad mistake to substitute the infallibility of the critics for the infallibility of the Bible.

First, by their emphasis on humanity, they got completely away from the God of the Bible. As one writer puts it, "they established a plate-glass window between God and the world. From their teaching you could see through the window that there is a God and that he appears to be good to us. But he never touches our lives and we never touch him."

I told you about their attempt to get to the Jesus of history, the prophet teaching simple truths - and to get away from the Christ of faith. Well, they analyzed the Gospels and analyzed them, but the miracles and the stupendous claims of Christ just would not cancel out. In the earliest sources they could detect they found a Christ who demanded faith. Today they admit this. For the God of the Bible, the God of Jesus Christ, is a God who does work miracles, who interferes

in human lives and will interfere in yours, who demands your trust and obedience. These critics watered down the God of the Bible until he becomes a benevolent absent deity - and no one who thinks of God thus can understand the Bible.

So they missed another quality in the Bible. It is explosive material. You never know what is going to happen when you read the bible ready to be touched by God. P.T. Forsythe said once to preachers:

"We are not the fire, but we live where it burns. The matter we handle in our theological thought, we can handle only with some due protection for our face. It is one of the dangerous industries"

Again, one of the modern translations of the New Testament confesses:

"The translator is continually struck by the living quality of the material to which he is working. Again and again the writer felt rather like an electrician rewiring an ancient house without being able to turn the mains off."

So what is the Bible position today? We no longer regard it as infallible, we know more about how it came to be written, and what were its authors purposes and views in writing, But we find on reading it, that we come up against God, the living God, working, judging, saving, in the lives of humans.

You may have one last objection. You may say "But I haven't the time to read all these critics. Do I have to know what they say to understand the Bible?"

That is a real point. Any way of reading the Bible, if it be the right way, must be one that the simplest mind may follow. Lady Blennerhassett said once about Father Tyrrell, "I know he must be wrong because my washerwoman could never understand him and I must have the same religion as my washerwoman."

She was right. And I say to you that you may read your Bible without the help of any book. Only do not read it as infallible, expecting to find some sentence that will tell you exactly what to do. Do not read it as science, not even as history. Read it listening for God. Let the Bible tell you of the God who cares, the God who works, the God who will not leave you alone, the God who claims you through Jesus Christ.

Then pray God you will be able to say with Coleridge: "I have found words for my inmost thoughts, songs for my joy, utterances for my hidden grief, and pleadings for my shame.

In short, whatever finds me, bears witness of itself that it has proceeded from a Holy Spirit."

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IMPORTANT NOTE:

This sermon was preached by Howard Hewlett Clark, on December 14th, 1949, Second Sunday in Advent, 11 a.m. at Christ Church Cathedral Ottawa, while was the Dean. He later went on to become the Ninth Primate of the Anglican Church, serving in that position from 1959-1971.

I have placed this sermon of Archbishop Clark's on this Website because its message is timeless. I also hope that his words will give you a better understanding of the Anglican Way of using the Bible to seek answers for today's issues.

Reverend Elizabeth +