

# The Princeton Theological Review

JULY, 1925

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## THE JUDICIAL DECISIONS OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF 1925

The most dramatic moment in the sessions of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A., is the report of the Judicial Commission. The members of the Commission, fifteen in number, file solemnly in and take their places behind the Moderator. The Assembly is then constituted a "court of Jesus Christ" by prayer offered by the Moderator; and sitting as the supreme court of the denomination, it hears the preliminary judgments of the Commission and decides whether its decisions shall become the final judgments of the Assembly.

There was more than usual interest this year in the cases<sup>1</sup> brought before the Assembly because of the importance of the matters under adjudication. The doctrine of the Virgin Birth, with all that it involves as to the sinlessness of Christ and His Deity, the authority of the Holy Scriptures which record it, especially the credibility of that pervasive supernaturalism which is characteristic of the Scriptures and of which the Virgin Birth is an outstanding illustration, and the authority of the Confession of Faith in which this doctrine is expressly stated; the right of the Assembly to review the acts of Presbyteries, the obligation of Presbyteries to be faithful to the standards of the Church, the right of direct appeal to the Assembly in cases involving doctrine—all this was involved in the cases decided by the Columbus Assembly.

The cases were the following: Case No. 1 was known as

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<sup>1</sup> These cases were six in number. But two of them (Nos. 2 and 5 on the docket) were apparently withdrawn, since the Commission presented no preliminary judgment to the Assembly regarding them.

## NOTES AND NOTICES

### “THE REFORMED PRINCIPLE OF AUTHORITY”

This is the title of a recent book which deals with the all important question of the seat of authority in religious knowledge.<sup>1</sup> The author, very properly, seeks to discuss the matter in its fundamental and underlying principles and to keep this discussion to these principles by showing how mediating standpoints are inconsistent. It is a vindication of the principle of external authority against the subjective principle of Rationalism. To put it more concretely, the author vindicates the Reformation principle of the authority of Scripture over against Modernism which he classes as a form of Rationalism. Mr. Hospers goes to the bottom of the matter and perceives at once the issue when he says that without external authority, without the Bible, we could have natural religion because man is naturally religious, but we could not have the redemptive religion of historical Christianity. The attack on the objective side of redemption and the factual basis of Christianity, when logically carried out, will leave us with natural religion just because Christianity is the product of an objective and authoritative Divine revelation in the Scripture, and is the product neither of reason nor feeling.

We believe that Mr. Hospers is right on this point. Of course Modernism so-called is of an infinite variety of types, and consequently many mediating modernists will object at once to being called rationalists, and their objection, no doubt, will be based upon the fact that they appeal not to the human reason, but to Christ and the experience of the “Saviourhood of Christ,” as their authority in religion. This sounds plausible. Their principle of authority is Christian feeling or the Christian consciousness “refracted,” as Dr. Kuyper would put it, in the light of modern knowledge. This goes back to Schleiermacher, the father of modern theology. It is claimed that Schleiermacher’s great work was to overcome Rationalism. It is true that he did attempt to overcome the rationalism of his day. But it is also true that the “Christian consciousness” gives no norms of truth, but results from faith, a faith whose doctrinal content must be derived either from the Word of God, or from that Word sub-

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<sup>1</sup> *The Reformed Principle of Authority*. By G. H. HOSPERS. Grand Rapids: The Reformed Press. 1924. 8 vo. Pp. XVI, 245.

jected to the test of reason or the "modern consciousness." This latter method gives not a "pure" and unmixed principle of authority, but an impure or mixed species of Rationalism. It must also be stated that our author is not dealing with the myriad forms of Modernism, especially not with its so-called more "evangelical" types, but with its more logical and radical expression which he derives largely from *The Christian Century* where it finds its more consistent and radical expression. We have not space to give examples of his many quotations, but if any one will refer to them he will see that they subject the Bible to reason, not simply in the sense that reason must judge the evidences of Revelation, but that it must pass upon its content, and this is Rationalism.

Dr. Kuyper insisted that a true theology, being the science which deals with the knowledge of God, must rest upon an objective revelation from God, and consequently that any so-called theology which denies supernatural revelation is really a "philosophy of religion," and with this view *The Christian Century* apparently would agree, because it calls itself "A Journal of Religion." Also Professor Kirsopp Lake in an address before the Harvard Divinity School asserted that the term "theology" presupposed a divine revelation which "we" (the Unitarians) do not accept, and proposed the term "philosophy" in its place.

Mr. Hospers rightly concludes that theology rests on revelation, that Christianity as a redemptive religion depends on the New Testament, and that the Scripture is the Reformation principle of authority in religious knowledge.

In the following chapter he discusses the divine origin and unique character of the Scripture. He takes the position of the Reformers that the ground of belief in the divine origin of Scripture is that it itself bears the marks of its divine origin because God speaks to men in it, but that the natural man is spiritually blind, and that the witness of the Holy Spirit is necessary to produce in the heart the conviction of the divine origin and authority of the Scripture. So far we agree with the author, and although his statement of the nature of this witness of the Spirit appears to us lacking in clearness of definition, we agree with what he appears to maintain as to its nature. It is not the revelation to the Christian of a proposition that the Scripture

is God's Word. This is the misconception upon the basis of which Strauss attacked this doctrine, though Mr. Hospers does not refer to this attack. This conception of the witness of the Spirit is a form of mysticism and this supposed revelation would itself need to be validated and so we would be involved in a *regressus ad infinitum*. Neither is the witness of the Spirit the cause of the emergence in consciousness of an ungrounded conviction of the divine origin of the Scripture, because the regenerate heart sees the mark of divine authorship in the Bible. On the other hand the witness of the Spirit is not to be reduced to the argument for the divine origin of the Bible from Christian experience. On this point the author might have been more explicit. There is such an argument. It has been developed by such theologians as Frank, Köstlin, and Ihmels, and has been identified with the witness of the Spirit by H. Cremer<sup>2</sup> and by Wiesinger.<sup>3</sup> Our author does not distinguish his view sharply enough from the one to which we have alluded. But that he has not fallen into this mistake is sufficiently clear from his idea that the witness of the Spirit is a witness of God to the Christian, and not an inference from the witness of the Christian's heart to the Scripture. In speaking of it as a deep mysticism of the heart, however, he might give rise to such a misconception of the doctrine. It simply expresses the truth that in Regeneration the Holy Spirit removes the spiritual blindness of the natural man so that he apprehends the marks of God's hand in the Scripture. It is thus that the doctrine was developed by Calvin and received full recognition by Ursinus, Piscator, Zanchias, Wollebius, Wendelin, Maresius, Maccovius, and Heidegger.

But this conception of the nature of the witness of the Spirit to the Bible necessarily determines two further questions concerning which our author seems not to be entirely clear. These questions are the object of this witness of the Spirit or to what the Spirit witnesses and the relation of this witness of the Spirit to the grounds of belief. Concerning the former point he seems to include not only the divine origin of Scripture but also the questions of Canonicity and Inspiration. Concerning the latter point, he states and accepts Dr. Kuyper's view of the Inspiration

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<sup>2</sup> *Rcalency, f. prot. Theol. u. Kirche*, vi. p 760.

<sup>3</sup> *Neue Kirchliche Zeitschrift*, ix. pp. 778, 779.

of Scripture, and then follows him in saying that we obtain divine certainty because the Holy Spirit guarantees the truth of the contents of the Bible and also produces assurance of its truth in the heart. This, we think, confuses the question of the divine origin and truth of Scripture with that of the nature of Inspiration. We cannot agree with our author that the Bible gives no data for a definite view of the nature of Inspiration. We do agree with him that the truth of Scripture rests ultimately on the fact that God speaks in it, and we agree that the Spirit produces assurance as to this truth. But all this, we believe, concerns the divine origin of Scripture, not the nature of Inspiration or of the divine influence under which Scripture was written. The latter is an exegetical question and is to be determined exegetically, just as any other Scriptural doctrine. When it has thus been determined, we must then raise the question as to our grounds of belief that the doctrine thus ascertained is true. These grounds are, in a word, all grounds of belief in the divine origin and truthfulness of Scripture. The witness of the Spirit enables us to see their force and be convinced by them. It is thus indispensable, but it does not include matters of exegesis. The witness of the Spirit, then, is not to the inspiration of the Bible, since this witness of the Spirit is not the revelation of a truth to the mind or heart. An examination of the doctrine in the old Reformed theologians we have cited will show that they did not conceive the witness of the Spirit as a testimony to the inspiration of the Bible. It is true that Piscator used the term *θεόπνευστος* in speaking of that to which the Spirit bears witness;<sup>4</sup> but the passage shows that he did not refer to a doctrine of Inspiration, but to the divine origin of the Scripture. In this he agreed with the other theologians above referred to who constantly spoke of the "divinity of Scripture" and said that this shone forth from it like the rays from the sun.

Neither does the witness of the Spirit have reference to the question of the Canon, as Mr. Hospers seems to imply in his chapter on the divine origin of the Scripture. He objects to American theologians reasoning from "historical criticism" and asserts that this is going over to the "liberals" and to the principle of rationalism. Here again we think there is some confusion of the matter. Mr. Hospers is correct in his criticism of those who

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<sup>4</sup> *Explicatio Aphor. Doct. Christ. Aph. vi, p. 94.*

contend that this necessitates a change of view as to the authority of Scripture. Any so-called historico-critical discussion which does this must be predetermined by an anti-supernaturalistic bias. On the other hand Mr. Hospers' comment on a quotation from B. Weiss' *Manual of Introduction to the New Testament* appears to us to go over to the enemy and land us in subjectivity. He quotes Weiss' statement to the effect that a judgment on the Canon based on historical research is "dependent on the doctrinal construction of the conception of the Canon, that is to say, on the question whether such construction makes the criterion of Canon to consist in that which is genuinely apostolic, or in a wider sense memorials of apostolic times, attesting each individual writing before the tribunal of the religious consciousness of the ancient Church or of the present." And he adds "It will be noticed that the last clause of this quotation virtually recognizes the testimony of the Holy Spirit." This is not the fact at all. Mr. Hospers here gives adherence to the view that the Church was inspired to select certain books as Canonical from a mass of ancient literature. The Canon would, therefore, be an inspired collection of books instead of a collection of inspired books with apostolic sanction. Also the testimony of the Spirit is reduced to the witness of the consciousness of the Church. This is a misconception both of the nature of Canonicity and of the witness of the Spirit. As to the question of the Canon, we must distinguish between the principle of Canonicity which is apostolicity or apostolic sanction, and the question what books come under this principle. The latter is an historical question, and is to be determined by asking what books were imposed by the apostles upon the infant Church to be its rule of faith. This latter question can be determined by actual New Testament evidence in some cases, and in others by asking what books were thus received by the Church. But their canonicity does not depend on the fact that they were received. On the contrary this fact warrants the inference that these books had apostolic sanction. Mr. Hospers seems to accept the subjective view that the Christian consciousness of the Church is the test of the Canon.

Moreover the witness of the Spirit, not being a mystical communication of knowledge, does not inform the Christian what books had apostolic sanction. Of course Mr. Hospers realizes this; it is specifically for a mystical view of Canonicity

that he is arguing as against rationalism as he supposes. But the appeal from historical and objective considerations to either the Christian consciousness or to the testimony of the Spirit in this matter is not only vain; it has been used in the interests of a rationalistic and subjective view of the Canon. It is true that the old Protestant theologians did sometimes speak as if the Holy Spirit bore witness to the Canonicity of the books of Scripture, as does also the Gallican Confession (Art. 4), and the Belgic Confession (Art. 6), which our author cites, not however the Westminster Confession (Chap. i, Sec. 5) which is also cited. In regard to the latter it is the "infallible truth" and "divine authority" of Scripture which is explicitly stated to be the object of the Spirit's testimony. As regards some statements of the Reformers and the Gallican and Belgic Confessions, two things should be noted. First, this is not their prevalent way of stating the matter. They almost invariably conceive of the witness of the Spirit as being to the "divinity," *i.e.*, to the divine origin of Scripture. Secondly, when they employ the terms Canon and Canonicity, they use them in a twofold sense to denote both the idea of the extent of the Canon, and the idea of the divine origin and authority of Scripture. And when they speak of Canonicity as the object of the witness of the Spirit, it is the latter idea to which they usually refer. This is true of Quenstedt the Lutheran theologian and of the old Reformed theologians. Calvin has been supposed to have taught that the Spirit testified concerning what books are canonical, but this supposition rests upon a misapprehension. Reuss<sup>5</sup> and Pannier<sup>6</sup> have misapprehended Calvin on this point, owing to their misunderstanding of two passages from Calvin, as Dr. B. B. Warfield clearly showed.<sup>7</sup> In the *Institutes* (I, 7, 1), attacking the Romish idea that the Scripture has only such weight as the Church gives it, Calvin says, "For thus dealing with the Holy Spirit as a mere laughing stock, they ask, who shall give us confidence that these (Scriptures) have come from God—who assure us that they have reached our time safe and intact—who persuade us that one book should be received reverently, another expunged from the number—if the Church should not

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<sup>5</sup> *History of the Canon*, Chapter 16.

<sup>6</sup> *Le Temoignage du Saint Esprit*, p. 252.

<sup>7</sup> This REVIEW, viii. pp. 283ff.

prescribe a certain rule for all these things. It depends, therefore, they say, on the Church, both what reverence is due Scripture, and what books should be inscribed in her catalogue." Thus the Romanists argued that the Church assures us of the contents and even the integrity of Scripture. But Calvin does not say that we are assured of the Canon by the Holy Spirit. He says that the Romish view is wrong, but does not imply that the witness of the Spirit assures us of all that the Church pretends to determine. This is made clear from the concluding sentences of this section where Calvin asks what will be the condition "of those wretched consciences seeking assurance of eternal life" if the claims of the Romish Church are valid. Evidently he is speaking of the "assurance of faith," not of canonicity, though he does deny that the latter rests on the witness of the Church. The following section (§4) also bears this out. Since the Church is "built upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles," this prophetic and apostolic doctrine "has preceded" the formation of the Church. Hence Rome is wrong in contending that "the power of judging of the Scriptures belongs to the Church, so as to make the certainty of it dependent on the Church's will." It is evidently certitude as to the divine origin of the Bible of which he is speaking. This is put beyond doubt by his concluding sentence of this section when he says of the original, to ask how we can be "persuaded" of the "divine original" of Scripture without resort to the decree of the Church, is "just as if any one should inquire, How shall we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter? For the Scripture exhibits as clear evidence of its truth, as white and black things do of their colour, or sweet and bitter things of their taste." Evidently he is speaking, not of Canonicity, but of the marks of divinity in the Bible, and of the Christian's assurance of them.

The other passage is in the *Confession of La Rochelle*, and does apparently attribute to the witness of the Spirit the determination of what books are Canonical. But this article was not written by Calvin; it was added to a draft of his which did not contain this idea. Calvin's whole discussion shows that he takes the Scripture as a whole, conceives it as given on historical grounds, and conceives that the Spirit witnesses to its divine origin.

The other point concerning the doctrine of the witness of the Spirit in respect to which we differ with the author concerns the relation of this witness to the grounds of belief. He apparently regards it as a "proof" of and ground of belief in the divine origin of the Bible. Here again, it is true, he might appeal to one statement of Calvin (I, 8, 13) where, after enumerating reasonable "proofs" for the divine origin of Scripture, he speaks of the witness of the Spirit as "that first and principal proof." But this is a mere mode of speech. He devotes this entire chapter to setting forth reasonable grounds of belief in the divine origin of Scripture, and his idea as expressed at the close is that these proofs though numerous and objectively valid, will not be convincing to the sinner apart from the witness of the Holy Spirit in removing the spiritual blindness from his heart.

We are following Calvin, then, when we regard the witness of the Spirit as the removal of the spiritual blindness due to the effects of sin and hence as giving the spiritual discernment necessary for one's being convinced by the grounds of belief. These grounds of belief, it is true, were regarded by the Reformers as within the Bible. But these internal evidences of its divine origin are the grounds of belief, and the witness of the Spirit simply enables us to apprehend them and appreciate their force. If this is so then we may extend these grounds of belief in the existence of God, the divine origin of Scripture, and the supernatural origin of Christianity, so as to include the rational grounds of theistic belief and the historical evidences of the supernatural origin of Christianity and the divine origin of Scripture. In a word the doctrine of the witness of the Spirit does not dispense with the necessity for philosophical and historical Apologetics. The author's view is that of Drs. Kuyper and Bavinck. The latter is discussing the "certitude of faith."<sup>8</sup> His argument is that Christian certitude does not spring from Christian experience but that the latter springs from the former which is the product of a faith due to the work of the Spirit. Also rational and historical arguments cannot produce true faith. With all this we agree heartily. But because arguments cannot produce the conviction of a Christian, it does not follow that rational and historical grounds of faith can be dispensed

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Zekerheid des Geloofs* pp. 63ff.

with. Dr. Kuyper worked these principles out fully in his *Encyclopaedie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid*.<sup>9</sup> It is a profound discussion. The unregenerate and the regenerate form two classes, distinct in kind and hence totally separate in their intellectual processes and results. The one class is thinking under the obscuring effects of sin, the other class under the illumination of the Spirit. Hence no arguments for the science of the regenerate can be regarded as universally valid. Apologetics is for the benefit of the Christian and for the purpose of defending Christian faith, not for grounding it.

But we do not think that the Reformed doctrine of the witness of the Spirit implies this attitude to the arguments for the divine origin of Christianity and the Bible. It is true that saving faith cannot be produced by arguments, nor even by the revelation of God in Christ, because faith and unbelief depend on the condition of the heart. The source of faith is the Spirit of God working in the heart. But faith is not blind trust, and reasonable grounds may underlie saving faith. Without grounds valid at least for the subject of faith, it cannot arise. The grounds of belief and even of Christian certitude ought to be universally valid ones, since the trouble is not in these grounds, but in the blindness of the sinful heart. Furthermore the subjective condition of these two classes of men is not absolute. In the unregenerate no faculty of the soul has been destroyed and some religious sense has been preserved by Common Grace. In the regenerate the blinding effects of sin have not been removed altogether and all at once. This does not imply that there is any passage from one class to the other except by Regeneration. We are fundamentally at one with Mr. Hospers and Dr. Kuyper. It is only intended to indicate that the evidences for the divine and supernatural origin of Christianity are universally valid and indispensable, and that we believe that the doctrine of the witness of the Spirit does not involve the minimizing of the importance of Christian Apologetics, nor relegate it to the function allotted to it by Dr. Kuyper. Neither does it involve any concession to Rationalism to take the position of certain American Reformed Theologians. Charles Hodge in his *Way of Life* showed that since the Bible makes an absolute demand on faith from everyone to whom it comes, learned or unlearned, the Scripture

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<sup>9</sup> II Afd. 1 pp. 52-129.

must contain in itself the marks of its divine origin. Also he showed that the witness of the Spirit is necessary to enable the sin blinded man to see these marks. At the same time he set forth fully the rational basis of theistic belief in his *Systematic Theology* and gave great importance to historical criticism and historical evidences. The same is true of Dr. B. B. Warfield who magnified both the Reformed doctrine of the witness of the Spirit and at the same time held that Apologetics is a distinct discipline from Dogmatics and that it lies at the foundation of the theological sciences.

We have used far too much space in speaking of our points of difference with Mr. Hospers. We do it only because we believe that the task of Christian Apologetics is vital and fundamental against the very attack on Scripture by modern forms of rationalism which he is combatting. We agree with him fully as to the absolute necessity of taking our stand on the Scripture as the Word of God, as to the absolute necessity of the witness of the Holy Spirit to the Bible, but we would add the need of a full grounding of the principle of Christian Supernaturalism, and we believe, as our author doubtless does, that this Supernaturalism can only be successfully vindicated against Modernism by an adherence to its consistent and thorough expression in the Reformed Faith.

We wish we might give an account of the remaining chapters of this book and express our agreement with its fundamental positions. There is a chapter on the significance of creeds. A creed is simply an expression of Scripture doctrine. Does Christian life precede and determine Christian doctrine or is truth the condition of life? If the former, then doctrines or truths can have no permanent or objective validity, and we end in utter scepticism as to any valid truth. This is the logical result of modern pragmatism and modern mysticism. Some who call themselves Modernists do not carry out this logic, but Mr. Hospers is right in his contention that to take this position will do away with historical Christianity. But if Christian truth conditions life, then the Bible and the Christian creeds based on it are of essential importance. We think he is right also in his agreement with *The Christian Century* that the differences in the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy are deep seated, involving two world-views, two religions, two attitudes to the

Bible. Christianity is a historical, supernatural, redemptive religion with a basis in great redemptive facts authoritatively recorded and interpreted in the Scripture. Modernism, in its pure and *principial* expression, in abandoning the authority of the Bible and the historical and doctrinal basis of Christianity, must end in natural religion only. Even the theistic basis of natural religion cannot be maintained if Modernism adopts the agnostic position involved either in pragmatism, or in the view that truths are but symbols of a preceding life.

Consequently in the chapters on the Nature of Christianity, the Ministry of the Word, and the Program of the Reformed Churches, the author makes it perfectly clear that two opposite views are in conflict in each case.

The merit of this book consists in the fact that it starts out with the exhibition and discrimination of two opposite principles of knowledge—the Bible, and the human reason, and then shows that each principle in its pure and unmediating expression must lead to opposite results. With the Bible as our authority we have the redemptive religion of Christianity and its purest expression in the Reformed Faith; with reason as our source and norm of truth we have only natural religion. Types of thought which are mediating will not like this book because they are regarded as impure mixtures and passed over without much discussion.

*Princeton.*

C. W. HODGE.