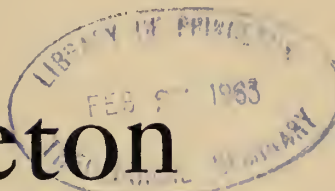


The Princeton Theological Review



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JULY, 1925

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 cases¹ 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

¹ 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 But two of them (Nos. 2 and 5 on the docket) were apparently withdrawn, since the Commission presented no preliminary judgment to the Assembly regarding them.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURES*

The liberal Protestant churches are slowly losing their faith in the Scriptures, and as they lose their faith in the Scriptures they are slowly losing their religion. The Protestant churches came into existence as a sublime witness to the Bible as the only rule of faith and practice. That was many centuries ago. But now it has come to pass in the strange revolutions of the wheel of history that some of the Protestant churches and many Protestant scholars and theologians are the most determined and dangerous enemies of the Bible. It is four centuries since our noble pioneers of the Reformed Churches gave to the world the Bible as the only rule of faith. Today no one will deny that at a meeting of representatives of the churches throughout the world holding to the Presbyterian system the question of the authority of the Bible is timely and critical.

The whole issue of Christianity and the spiritual destiny of mankind depend upon the answer to this question, Has God spoken to man? This fundamental question of religion is admirably stated by Bishop Gore in his book, *Belief in God*: "This then is the question—Has the Divine Mind, or Spirit, taken action on His side to disclose or reveal Himself to those who are seeking after God?"

From the very beginning the unfaltering answer of the Christian Church has been that God has spoken to man, and that we have an infallible record of that revelation in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. This has been the ground upon which the Church, Catholic as well as Protestant, has stood from the very beginning. The only alternative for an infallible record of a divine revelation for our salvation is human reason, and human reason is as the eloquent American agnostic, Robert Ingersoll, declared it to

* An address delivered at the Quadrennial World Convention of the Alliance of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System, Cardiff, Wales, June 29, 1925.

be, "a flickering torch, borne on a starless night, and blown by the winds of prejudice and passion."

Enemies of the Bible today within the Protestant Church are trying to create the impression that the idea of an infallible Bible goes back only to the Reformation, and was foisted upon Christianity by extreme Protestants who set up an infallible Bible in the place of an infallible Pope.

Nothing could be more preposterous. The Roman Catholic view of the Scriptures is summed up by the declaration of the Vatican Council of 1870, which, having named the books of the Bible, declares them to be sacred and canonical, not because approved by the Church, nor because they contain a revelation with no admixture of error, but "because having been written by the Inspiration of the Holy Ghost they have God for their author." In his Bampton Lectures of 1893 Dr. Sanday says of the traditional Protestant view of the Bible, as expressed in the great confessions of Protestantism; "This was the view commonly held fifty years ago. And when it comes to be examined it is found to be substantially not very different from that which was held two centuries after the birth of Christ."

This idea of a true Bible, of course, only with the greatest difficulty can be made to agree with the view that although the Bible contains high moral and spiritual truth, even revelation, it is also a mass of scientific blunders, historical inaccuracies and low moral views. The difficulty as between the Bible and science is probably not so acutely felt today as it once was. Men are beginning to realize that we know very little about the beginnings of life and of human history, and that while we talk learnedly about the Rhodesian man and the Pithecanthropus, we are merely decorating the impenetrable veil of silence and mystery with the trinkets of human fancy.

At the same time, although the so-called war between religion and science has abated, we must face the fact that a Bible which is childish, grotesque and absurd as to its astronomy, geology and biology can never exert the moral authority over the minds of men that the Bible did exert over those

heroic souls who established the Reformed Churches and built up the civilization of the Protestant nations. You can never open the door to the reception of the Bible as a spiritual authority and guide by first of all describing it as a collection of myth and folklore, silly notions of the earth and of man, with here and there very low ideas of God. Yet this is the impossible task that many of our so-called "liberal" Protestants are attempting. But it can never be done until the east meets the west.

The solution of the scientific difficulty lies elsewhere. What we are so sure is experimental and established fact today, may assume a different aspect tomorrow, and the last word will be God's. The remarkable thing is that in a book written so many ages ago there should be any ground for a dispute as to whether or not this book is in agreement with the latest findings of physical science. The grand steps in creation outlined in the Bible are so in keeping with those outlined by science that, as a President of the British Association, Sir William Dawson, once put it, "It would not be easy, even now, to construct a statement of the development of the world in popular terms so concise and so accurate."

The most dangerous attack on the Bible is made by those within the Churches who claim that only by such reinterpretations can we mediate between the Bible and the "modern mind," that terrible monster which now threatens to destroy Christianity after it has survived the shocks and the storms of the ages. Perhaps the best key to the whole liberal and modernistic method with the Bible is what is called "Progressive Revelation."

That has a good sound. We all believe in progress and we all believe in revelation. Therefore, Why not Progressive Revelation? But as used by the modernists, Progressive Revelation is not the true Biblical teaching that God has revealed His will successively and increasingly through patriarchs, prophets and the Gospel, culminating in Jesus Christ. On the contrary, it is an idea of revelation and inspiration which has been invented to give the Bible some shadow of

divine authority after it has been convicted of scientific blunders, historical inaccuracies, and low moral views.

How does this theory of the Bible work? It claims to save the Bible for intelligent faith. But how? In brief it is this:

We find in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, conceptions of God that are crude and low, narratives of impossible transactions, and statements about the world and its physical history which even a child in the grammar school knows to be absurd. But we are not to let this shake our faith in the Bible as the revealed will of God. The solution of our difficulty is "progressive" revelation. It is the philosopher's stone which transmutes the base metal in the Bible to purest gold.

Apply this stone to Genesis, and the whole difficulty is gone, for now we see how God could, for good and sufficient reasons, reveal Himself as the Creator of the world, and at the same time permit man to imagine and to record a way of creation which is childish and absurd. But we must not let that trouble us. What God had in mind was to tell us about Himself, not about the heavens and the earth.

The Bible says that God commanded Abraham to offer up Isaac on Mt. Moriah. But God was only adapting Himself to the prevailing low ideas of God and of what pleased Him, and only by the medium of a contemplated sacrifice could God reveal Himself to Abraham. The stupendous miracles of Moses, Elijah and Elisha did not really take place. But God did speak to and through these prophets, and after generations added the miracles. The Old Testament attributes to God the sanction and approval of acts which are repugnant to the conscience of this generation, such as the judgments upon the Canaanites. But these commands and sanctions were put in God's mouth by men whose moral ideas were those of their own age only, and to whom God Himself, apparently, could not give any higher ideas.

Such is the modernistic idea of the Bible. As one of their most popular preachers has phrased it, "To take a trip through the Bible is to move from the presence of primitive religion

to the noblest expression of the religious spirit that the mind of man can take." But we fear that this tour through the Bible, personally conducted by the Modernists, proves too expensive. What the average man wants to know is this: "Where does your primitive religion come to an end in the Bible and where does your true and divine revelation commence?" Does primitive religion end with Genesis, or with Judges, and true religion commence with the Psalms, or with the Prophets? Evidently not, for all that is taken exception to is scattered through the Bible, and not the most expert of reinterpreters and restorers can reconstruct the history of revelation showing where the human stratum of misinformation is succeeded by the strata of divine truth.

In short, this popular theory of progressive revelation gets rid of the difficulties in the Bible by getting rid of the Bible. These learned men are simply saying in high sounding terms what the child said in its naive comment, "I suppose God wrote the Old Testament before He became a Christian!" Why use the word revelation at all, progressive or otherwise? For what such an interpretation of the Bible means is that the Bible is largely made up of the guesses or opinions of fallible men about God, and is not the Word of God.

There is a true and Scriptural idea of revelation, but it is remote from what I have just sketched. The true revelation in the Bible marks a progress from the partial to the complete, from the transient to the abiding, from what was suited for a people hardly touched by the gracious rays of revelation to what could be received by a people who had been trained for centuries to hear the voice of God, from the law to grace, from patriarchs and prophets to Jesus Christ Himself.

This is the progressive revelation to which John referred when he said the Law came by Moses, but grace and truth by Jesus Christ. And this was the progressive revelation the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews had in mind when he said in the sublime prologue, "God who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in times past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son."

But the progressive revelation of the modernist would compel a revision of the passage in Hebrews, making it read something like this: "God who at sundry times and in divers manners deceived mankind in times past, giving them false and cruel and ridiculous notions of Himself, of man, of the history of the earth, finally decided to tell the truth in Jesus Christ."

But has He told the truth in Jesus Christ and in the New Testament? Progressive revelation at once raises that question. Does progressive revelation stop with the New Testament? Or will it go on indefinitely? And will the unknown revelation of centuries hence make obsolete the revelation of the New Testament as, according to this theory, the revelation of the New Testament has negated the revelation of the Old Testament?

Let no one imagine that the Old Testament difficulties are the only ones which are to be treated with this theory. The idea of Abraham offering up Isaac is disposed of; but so also is the idea of God offering up His own Son for the sins of the world. The great New Testament idea of the Atonement, as explained and proclaimed by St. Paul, and the other apostles, is just as repugnant to the modernist as the sacrifice of Abraham. One distinguished theologian goes so far as to brand the Pauline idea of the satisfaction of Christ for our sins as comparable to a "frame up" in the criminal courts, where, for evil purposes, or to satisfy the demand for the punishment of a crime, the perpetrator of which has not been apprehended, the police "frame" an innocent man!

And so this theory would deal with other New Testament facts and doctrines. The story of the Incarnation is not a revelation, but just man's way of trying to account for the preeminent personality of Jesus; the story of the Resurrection does not represent an actual historic fact, but merely represents the only way in which the minds of that day could account for the continuing personality of Christ; and so His Second Advent is only the phrasing of man's hope for the triumph of righteousness. Thus the glory of revelation fades

from the pages of the New Testament as well. That great and tremendous music, "Thus saith the Lord!" shaking the earth with its echo, casting down kingdoms and empires, ushering in the glory of redemption in Christ, dies out of the Bible, and in its place we hear only this: "Thus saith the mind of man."

We go back to the question with which we started, with which all discussion of religion must start, Hath God spoken to man? And if He has, do we have a true record of what He has said? All the hopes of mankind depend upon the answer. The Scriptures say that God has spoken, spoken through men who were moved by the Holy Ghost, and for centuries the Christian Church has dared to speak to humanity only upon this ground, that it possessed and declared the Word of the Living God.

But now, if we adopt the idea of the Bible that is rapidly and fatally gaining ground in the Protestant Church, then the Church can no longer arrest the attention of a fallen race with that ageless cry, "Thus saith the Lord!" At first hearing, it seems very easy to take a trip through the Bible and mark when we leave the territory of primitive religion and pass into the true religion. But what is to be our guide? If some parts of the Bible are false, and others true, if this is only tribal religion and stone-age morality, and this the highest and the purest, what is to be our guide in judging, and in distinguishing the one from the other? Ah, there is the fatal question, and the fatal answer must be, "Man's reason!" And this, in turn, means that ultimately we depend not upon revelation, but upon human reason. The final authority is not the Word of God, but human reason. Thus the world is plunged back into the abyss of human ignorance and despair where we can hear only the taunting, mocking echoes of our own cries in the darkness.

As to the practical effect the "new view" of the Holy Scriptures is having upon the Christian Church, there could be no more striking evidence than the sad subsidence of redemptive teaching and preaching in the Protestant Church.

The great question of the Reformation was this: What shall I do to be saved? and the great answer went with it, Through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Wherever a Protestant church lifts its spire towards the heavens it stands as a monument to the doctrine of salvation by faith. Historically, this is so. But alas! if we enter the churches and hear the message and read the sermonic output of the pulpits, we must conclude that in many churches there are now more important questions to be answered than the old question which rang out on the midnight air at Philippi so many years ago, "What shall I do to be saved?"

A deleted Bible means a diluted Gospel. The Bible as the Word of God and the proclamation of the Cross as the power of God unto salvation, stand or fall together. Men and brethren, what shall we do? What *can* we do but *pray* that the Holy Spirit who gave the Scriptures to our fallen humanity, and who has used them through the Church unto the salvation of souls and the glory of God in Jesus Christ, may again be pleased to revive in the Church a great faith in the Bible as the Word of God. Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live! Awake, O north wind, and come, thou south, and blow upon our garden that the spices thereof may flow forth!

I conclude with these noble words from the hymnal of the Lutheran Church:

God's Word is our great heritage,
And shall be ours forever.
To spread its light from age to age
Shall be its chief endeavor.
Through life it guides our way,
In death it is our stay.
Lord, grant while worlds endure,
We keep its teachings pure
Throughout all generations.

Philadelphia, Pa.

CLARENCE EDWARD MACARTNEY