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FOREWORD

Although the phrase “crisis of authority” has developed almost the status of cliché, the phenomenon to which it refers is nonetheless very real. We are clearly living in a time when the foundational values of Western civilization have eroded to a dangerous degree. This development, auguring the descent of a new Dark Age, presents the church with both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is that Christians no longer may merely assume that the momentum of Western Christendom will continue to provide an environment favorable to Christian faith and life. The church is challenged to re-examine and perhaps totally to rebuild a foundation capable of supporting free and faithful lives.

Yet, the erosion of traditional values also offers the church an opportunity to commend Christian faith to those who, in Isaiah’s words, “grope for the wall like the blind.” In unparalleled fashion, the present situation calls for the church to demonstrate the relevance of Christian faith. These essays are presented toward the end of encouraging Christian reflection regarding the many issues associated with the loss of authority in the wider society and in the church.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE IN THE RESTORATION MOVEMENT

By Tony Ash

I would like to discuss the Bible's authority as I think it has been understood in the Restoration Movement. Furthermore, these comments should not be taken as the conclusions of an historian who has explored all aspects of the movement, but only as questions for further consideration.

I think that churches of Christ today are really a schizophrenic people, with not just two but a number of different personalities. One of the best ways to illustrate this is to ask you to look at the congregations in the town where you live, and to realize what a diversity we have under the umbrella of the "Church of Christ." There are strengths in the fact we can be a brotherhood and still tolerate this diversity, but I also think it creates some very real problems for us.

In large part, I think this diversity is caused by different understandings of the authority of Scripture. Few, if any people in the church today would deny the authority of the Bible. But we do find people who disagree markedly about who we are and what we are doing. Yet people holding these varying points of view staunchly affirm they are

taking their positions upon the basis of Scripture. “A” says, “I go by the Bible, and “B” says, “I go by the Bible,” but “A” and “B” aren’t going the same way. Therefore there must be some difference between the two in their views of the Bible. I suspect when the Restoration Movement began, in the times of Barton W. Stone, Thomas and Alexander Campbell, that their view of the Bible was largely the standard Protestant view of that day. There really was no occasion to challenge that aspect of Protestant thought. That view would probably come close to seeing the Bible as something like a code of laws. Any statement in any part (within reasonable limits) could be taken as an authoritative guide for Christian people.

Some of these things were set forth by Thomas Campbell in the Declaration and Address. I want to quote a short section from Bill Humble’s comments on the Declaration and Address. In his book, The Story of the Restoration, Humble writes:

By “express term” Campbell meant a direct command, and by “approved precedent,” he meant New Testament examples. Campbell also believed that the New Testament taught by inference, but he did not believe that truths known only by inference should be bound on the conscience of others. Here, then, is one of the key concepts in Thomas Campbell’s formulation of the restoration principles--whatever is not expressly authorized in the New Testament either by command or example cannot be a test of fellowship. Here is the way Campbell put it, “nothing ought to be received into the faith or worship of the Church, or be made a term of communion among Christians, that is not as old as the New Testament.”

Thomas Campbell believed that the New Testament was a divine pattern for what God expected the Church to be in every age. He described the New Testament as “a perfect constitution for the worship, discipline, and government of the New Testament Church,” and a perfect rule of faith and practice for its members, just as the Old Testament had been for the Old Testament community (p. 20).

There may have been a break in this principle, as the Protestant world understood it, when on August 30, 1816, Alexander Campbell gave his famous Sermon on the Law. He spoke at a Baptist Association meeting, and his sermon hardly looks like something written on the back of an envelope while listening to the speeches that morning. Actually, there is evidence that Campbell may have worked out these views as early as 1813. In his Sermon on the Law, he said that the Law of Moses is not binding on the Church, and that the Church goes by the New Testament, not by the Old Testament. Whatever Campbell meant by what he said in 1816, I think the common interpretation of it in years since has been that we are not an Old Testament people, and that we are really not terribly interested in the Old Testament.

A few years ago I surveyed the literature in the Restoration Movement from 1870 down to 1950. Three things were done with the Old Testament in those years. First, the stories were told for their own sakes. Secondly, the stories were used to illustrate New Testament principles, as did J. W. McGarvey when he used the story of Elijah to illustrate his sermon on prayer. Thirdly, Old Testament prophetic passages were used for their predictive value as evidences of the divine inspiration of Scripture.

People in the Restoration Movement have said that the Old Testament is not authoritative in the same way as the New Testament. To us that is a very familiar concept but for people in 1816 it was almost heretical. Numerous charges were hurled and a number of people were very upset with the view of the Old Testament that derived from Campbell's Sermon on the Law.

Then, toward the end of the last century, there was a division in the brotherhood. We have usually said that churches of Christ were one of the two groups not to divide as a result of the Civil War. But the truth of the matter, as David Edwin Harrell points out in his two-volume Quest for a Christian America, is that the Civil War promoted feelings and created a matrix which made doctrinal issues divisive that might otherwise have been handled amiably. This can be documented with regard to the Missionary Society controversy.

Tolbert Fanning, appearing before the Society in 1859, said on behalf of the southern brethren, "We don't agree with this." But he added, referring to Christians north and south, "We are one people." Quotations from Fanning following the Civil War, after the Missionary Society had passed pro-northern resolutions in 1861 and 1863, show him changing significantly. They reveal considerable rancor toward northern brethren. This bad feeling from the Civil War interacted with theological and other sociological factors (e.g., urban/rural differences) to create division in the church. Issues were the Missionary Society, instrumental music, elegant church buildings, paid ministers, and full-time ministers. Debates over these issues developed a point of view that has characterized churches of Christ to the present day, viz., the conviction we are to be guided by the examples in the New Testament. Examples tell us what way to go and what to do in being Christians. Furthermore, it was advocated that when Scripture is silent, there is no authority. Thus the effect of silence is to be prohibitive. Whatever is not allowed is prohibited.

I suspect these ideas about examples and silence were in the Restoration Movement from the beginning, as part of the understanding of the authority of the New Testament. But I also suspect someone should study this further to see if they were applied in any consistent way. If one looks at the literature from the Christian Baptist in 1813 down through the beginning of the Civil War, one finds references to this kind of thing, but no one was trying to make application to every aspect of the church's life. However, when the controversies arose after the Civil War, these arguments were used in debate by brethren, particularly in the South, and they eventually came to assume an almost semi-canonical status, and were thus extremely important in the movement from that time on.

But we also see, in the latter part of the last century, a significant change among northern brethren in their views of the nature of the Bible. This took place, as churches became more sophisticated, wealthier, more urban, and as young men pursued graduate studies in religion, at Yale, Harvard, the University of Chicago, and other leading educational institutions in the country. There they were exposed to different ideas. When they returned to the churches, their influence gradually came to be felt. New perspectives were adopted regarding the nature of the Bible. One result of this was that some people completely left the early understandings of the Restoration plea while others still clung to it but with different emphases. Finally, in 1906, there was a religious census which officially recognized what had been happening for a number of years. Churches of Christ

(largely in the South) were seen as a separate body of people, and so to the present day.

I suspect that the viewpoint of southern churches (who were led by David Lipscomb and the Gospel Advocate) was fairly well insulated from the kind of thinking that had come into the northern churches largely through educated ministers.

If you would look at the literature in churches of Christ from 1906 through 1950 (which I see to be another watershed), you will generally find a uniform point of view. There is little exploration and little change as far as basic convictions about the authority of the Bible are concerned. Perhaps the formula which best expresses our view of the authority of the Bible is that the Bible teaches us by command, example, and necessary inference. (To be sure, some of us have never quite figured out what “necessary inference” is. We always say, “I’m not sure what that one is, but I know what command is,” and then we add various adjectives to command. We say “approved” command, or “approved apostolic” command, and have a whole number of ways to describe that.)

But in the 1950’s some things began to happen in churches of Christ that have produced profound change in the last 30 years. Our schools began to offer graduate degrees in Bible. First, I understand, was Pepperdine. Very soon after that were Abilene Christian and Harding. Young men received their doctorates. Some of these men have stayed with the church and have made great contributions. But we have also paid a terrible toll in the loss of some of our brightest and more promising young men.

As a result of this educational emphasis, we have explored and thought through many things in the past three decades. Thus we have come to the point where we are today--characterized by schizophrenia. One question to which we are obtaining different answers is--“What kind of book is the Bible?”

Let me raise some questions for you to consider. What kind of reality lies behind the Bible? Is it meant to be seen like a book of law? Is it a document in which we turn to the appropriate page, paragraph and sub-paragraph to find the rule for a particular life situation? Is this what the authors of the Bible intended? Is this what God intended? Or is the Bible a different kind of a book that we deal with in other ways? Do all parts of the Bible bear their authority in the same way? Are the law of Moses and the ten commandments authoritative in the same way as the Psalms? How do we account for the fact that the ten commandments come from God while the Psalms are prayers going from man to God? Do we deal with this material the same way we deal with Proverbs? Do we deal With the Prophets the way we deal with the Book of Ruth?

In the New Testament, do we see the Sermon on the Mount speaking to us with the same authority as an example of Christian behavior or church life in some chapter of Acts? Do we deal with Acts the same way we deal with a letter written into a particular local circumstance, and even containing personal references? Do we deal with all parts of a given letter in the same way?

I am saying, essentially, that we have many different kinds of literature in the Bible. As we consider the Bible as an authoritative volume, shouldn't each of these different kinds of literature be evaluated in its own terms as to the nature of its authority? What is more authoritative within the Bible and what is less? Or should we say there is no more and less. The Bible is level. Every statement bears as much authority as every other. Or should we say that rather than seeing the authority just in a book, we must look to see from whence each word comes--from Jesus, or Paul, or John, or the author of Job, or Moses, or David, etc.? Are all these at the same level, or should some kind of distinction be made? Did Paul expect every word he wrote in his every letter be received like the Decalogue or like the Sermon on the Mount?

I hope you won't read things into these questions I don't intend. I am simply urging that people who are really serious about the Bible must honestly face issues like these. If we take the Bible to guide our lives individually and in the church, and if we are a Bible-centered people (and this is one of our strengths) then we can't ignore the need for this kind of examination of the authority of the Bible.

Now let me narrow this down and briefly discuss two issues that have been of special concern in the Restoration Movement. The first of these is the examples in the New Testament. What do they teach us? In the orphan home/Herald of Truth controversies of the mid-forties, we had a whole spate of articles and books on "when is

an apostolic example binding?” I remember when every periodical you opened had a chart or charts with circles and lines trying to prove someone’s view of when an example is or is not binding.

Milo Hadwin, a student at Abilene Christian a few years ago, wrote a Master’s thesis on this question. He concluded no apostolic example, by itself, is binding. We are not bound by examples standing alone, but are bound by commands and by commands only. Most people don’t know about Hadwin’s work, but it has been published by Firm Foundation. In terms of “traditional” brotherhood thought, this is, I think, an explosive document. So there is now among us a volume which is saying our view on examples is open to challenge. We need to look again at the issue. No one will say every example is binding. We have tried to say “These are” and “These aren’t,” and to tell why. Hadwin has said, “Let’s say none are and see where we end up, and see if that isn’t more biblical.” This issue, in my opinion, has something to do with our schizophrenia.

The second issue is the silence of the Scripture. Is it prohibitive or permissive? I don’t know of anyone who has made a study of this issue comparable to Hadwin’s work on examples. Some graduate student ought to make this a project. He could examine the concept that silence is prohibitive, as it has developed historically among our people, to see whether it is taught in Scripture or whether it is an interpretative method that we have imposed upon Scripture. Has the Bible made this an authoritative principle or have we? Have we forced the Bible to fit into our own mold at this point?

Both of these questions deal with matters which are intrinsic to our traditional plea. Some of the answers that could be reached might be shattering to certain of our traditional understandings. Now I don't think that we ought to shatter traditions just to shatter them. But on the other hand, these thoughts are being thought, and these discussions are going on in living rooms, in church classes, and elsewhere. We need to face up to these problems. There are matters here that must be thought about.

Out of all of this, then, my call is for honest examination. It is not a call to depart from the Bible. It is a call for a re-evaluation of the nature of Scripture in order to understand what God put there. It is a call for discussion, but not for over-reaction or for castigation.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS VOLUME

The contributors to this issue of the Faculty Bulletin are all members of the faculty at the Institute for Christian Studies,

Ash, Anthony Lee, B.S., Florida State University; M.A., Abilene Christian University; Ph.D., University of Southern California. Old Testament, Church History.

McNicol, Allan, B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Yale University; M.A., Ph.D., Vanderbilt University. New Testament, Intertestamental Literature.

Thompson, James W., B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Union Theological Seminary; Ph. D., Vanderbilt University. New Testament, Hellenistic Literature.

Watson, Paul, B.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., M.A., M.Ph., Ph.D., Yale University. Old Testament.

Weed, Michael R., B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary; Ph.D., Emory University. Ethics, Theology.