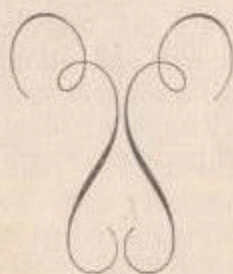


Belfast and

The Bible



By

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FOREWORD

DURING the mission to non-Catholics, conducted recently in Clonard Church, Belfast, I was asked to give a lecture on the Bible. Some of my hearers were good enough to say that they found the lecture very helpful, and in the hope that it may prove helpful to others who were not present, I have been requested to put it in pamphlet form.

An objection was made to the statement that the Catholic Church gave the Bible to the world, on the ground that our Lord had spoken of the Scriptures. The objection was answered in some detail during the mission. Here I can only say that obviously we cannot deduce from our Lord's reference to the Scriptures that He referred to the S.S. as we have them to-day, containing the Old and New Testaments, because we know from history not a single Book of the New Testament was written during our Lord's life on earth.

J. COOGAN, C.S.S.R.

THE BIBLE

"Search the Scriptures, for you think in them to have life everlasting; and the same are they that give testimony of Me. And you will not come to Me that you may have life" (John v., 39-40).

I need not remind you of the importance of the Bible. There is no other book which has exercised such a deep and well-nigh universal influence over the minds and hearts of men. In century after century distinguished men of every race and every creed have expressed their admiration of the transcendent beauty of the Bible, and have justly given it first place amongst the literatures of the world.

But we Christians venerate the Bible not merely because of its literary beauty, or the grandeur and elevation of its teaching—we venerate it for reasons of a higher and more sacred order. Whether we consider the Bible in its human or divine character, it has for us Christians a meaning and importance which no other book can have.

I.

As a Human Book.

I say, first, in its human character. For the Bible considered as a merely human Book, as a merely historical Book, gives us the authentic history of the foundation of the Catholic Church. The Old Testament foretells its foundation, the New Testament announces its establishment.

If a Catholic is asked: Why are you a Catholic? Why do you believe in the authority of your Church? He will answer: Because I find in the pages of the New Testament the most convincing proof of the divine origin of the Church, of her divinely accredited mission to teach the Truths of Christ to all the nations of the earth.

The words of our Lord are clear: there can be no mistake about His meaning. Speaking to His Apostles, He says: "Going, therefore, teach ye all nations; baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and

of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and behold, I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world" (Matt. xxviii., 18-20).

These words constitute the charter, the credentials of the Catholic Church. By these words Christ our Lord invests the Church with her divine mission to teach in His Name and with His authority until the end of time.

And our Lord makes it equally clear that those who hear this divinely authorized teaching are not free to accept or reject it. He tells them they must accept it. Speaking again to His Apostles, He says: "Go ye into the whole world, and preach the Gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved; he that believeth not shall be condemned" (Mark xvi., 15-16).

And in the Gospel according to St. Luke, He says that those who refuse to accept the teaching of the Church are contemning its Divine Founder Himself. "He that heareth you, heareth Me, and he that despiseth you, despiseth Me" (Luke x., 16).

There is no alternative then. No man is free to choose his own religion, his own church. He must accept the teaching of the Church founded by the Divine Master and duly authorized to teach in His Name. This is the clear unmistakable lesson taught us in the pages of the New Testament, and if a man refuses to learn that lesson, the Bible has lost its chief meaning for him.

II.

Divine Book.

But the Bible is something more than a merely human Book: it is a divine Book: it is the inspired Word of God, or, as St. Augustine so beautifully puts it, "It is God's letter to us men."

This leads me to another question which I am sorry I have not time to discuss fully, for it brings out a very important difference between Catholics and non-Catholics. The question I mean is this: Why do we call the Bible the Word of God? What authority have we for saying that the Bible is inspired?

If I ask a non-Catholic that question the only answer he can give is the one given by the writer quoted in the standard work among modern Protestant scholars—"Hasting's Dictionary of the Bible." "If I am asked," says the writer (Robertson Smith), "why I receive Scripture as the Word of God, and as the only perfect rule of faith and life, I answer with all the Fathers of the Protestant Church: 'Because the Bible is the only record of the redeeming Love of God . . . and this record I know to be true by the witness of His Spirit in my heart.' . . ."

The only comment I will make on that answer is the comment made by another Protestant scholar, Robert Horton, in his Essay on "The Inspiration and the Bible." Treating of the critical grounds on which non-Catholics rest their belief in the Inspiration of the Bible, he writes: ". . . all the statements put together and harmonized may still leave one in some astonishment; how a conviction so sure and so momentous should rest upon so slender and wavering a foundation."

If I ask a Catholic the same question, he will answer: "I believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God because the Church, by her divine authority, tells me that it is the Word of God." The Catholic does not put his trust in his feelings or in the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. He knows how deceptive such tests can be. He puts his trust in the unerring teaching of the Church, and no one can say that that is a slender and wavering foundation.

St. Augustine, the greatest Doctor of the early Church, declared that he would not believe the Gospel if the authority of the Catholic Church had not convinced him to do so.

III.

Bible is not the sole Rule of Faith.

But while the Catholic Church holds the Bible in the highest veneration, it does not admit that the Bible alone is a sufficient guide in matters of religious faith: and here is another point on which Catholics and non-Catholics differ widely. Non-Catholics claim that the Bible alone is a sufficient rule of faith. There is no need of anyone to teach them religion as long as they can read the Bible for themselves.

Now, let me put before you the reasons why the Catholic Church holds that the Bible alone is not a safe and sufficient guide in matters of religious faith, and you can judge for yourselves if these reasons are convincing.

(1) First, if the Bible alone were a sufficient rule of faith, obviously it should be within the reach of every seeker after Christian Truth. But, as a matter of fact, the Bible is not and never was within the reach of every seeker after Christian Truth.

To begin with, it was not within the reach of the first Christians at all, for the simple reason that the Church was already in existence long before the first Book of the New Testament was written, and the last Book of the New Testament was not written till about sixty years after the foundation of the Church.

And for the next two hundred years the Gospels and Epistles were practically unknown outside the particular Churches to which they were addressed, and it was not until the Council of Hippo in 393 that the Church gathered all these Gospels and Epistles together and placed them on the official list of Scriptures, and thus gave the Bible to the world. From all this, it follows that during the first four centuries, the golden age of Christianity, there was no officially recognized Bible to serve as a guide in matters of religious faith.

And, coming to a later age, the art of printing was not invented until the fifteenth century. Hence between the fourth and fifteenth centuries the only Bibles available were those copied by hand. And I am sure you don't need to be told that it was impossible to copy a sufficient number to distribute one to every member of the Church. Therefore, during all those centuries, many saintly members of the Christian Church lived and died without ever having a copy of the Bible in their hands.

And even to-day, when we have Bible Societies spreading the Bible everywhere, there are millions of people who cannot read it. If the Bible is the only rule of faith, we must conclude then that these unfortunate people are left without any light and guidance in matters of religious faith.

Now, I ask you, in view of this, can any reasonable man believe that the Divine Founder of Christianity would have made His religion dependent on a Book which millions could never get, and millions of others could not read?

(2) There is another reason why the Catholic Church holds that the Bible alone is neither a sufficient nor a safe guide in matters of religious faith. The reason is this: It would not be enough to give every inquirer after truth a copy of the Bible: he would need also the gift of infallibility so that he would make no mistake in reading it, or, at all events, God should have made the Bible so perfectly clear and intelligible that no one, not even the most ignorant, could mistake its meaning.

There are many non-Catholics, I know, who believe that God has actually done so: that He has made the Bible clear and intelligible to all. The people who believe that evidently have not spent much time studying the Bible. If the Bible is clear and intelligible to all, why is it that the ablest and most highly-trained Biblical scholars find so many passages and texts in Scripture so difficult to understand? Open any of the great commentaries on the Bible and see the endless discussions on certain passages in Scripture, and you will realize how childish is the statement that the Bible is clear and intelligible to all.

St. Peter did not think it was clear and intelligible to all. He says that in the Epistles of St. Paul there are certain things hard to be understood, which the unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other Scriptures, to their own destruction (2 Peter iii, 16). And he says, also, that no prophecy of Scripture is made by private interpretation. The Apostles did not think the Bible was clear and intelligible to all, for, as St. Luke tells us in Chapter xxiv., 43, they needed our Lord's special instructions to understand the Scriptures.

That should be a sufficient answer to the question sent in last Sunday: "Why do we need learned men to explain the Bible when the Apostles, who were not learned, understood it?" They did not understand it: they needed our Lord's personal instructions. And so we need His instructions, which He gives us through the Church.

The man described in the Acts of the Apostles as reading the Prophecy of Isaiah, while riding on his chariot, did not think the Bible clear and intelligible to all. When St. Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading, he answered: "How can I understand unless some man show me." St. Augustine, one of the greatest geniuses of Christianity, did not find the Bible clear and intelligible to all. On the contrary, he expressly states that he found it a most obscure and difficult Book.

It is a mystery how any man can persuade himself that the Bible can be interpreted by everybody. It was Luther who started that silly

idea. In the first years of his revolt against the authority of the Church, he declared that the Bible could be understood by everyone, "even by the humble miller's maid, nay by a child of nine." But later on, when he saw the religious anarchy to which his principle of private interpretation gave rise, he changed his mind, and called the Bible a "heresy Book," most obscure and difficult to understand.

Luther saw the folly of his principle of private interpretation in the religious anarchy it produced even in his own day. And, so, every intelligent man ought to see its folly in the religious anarchy in the world to-day. We see literally hundreds of Churches, all professing to be Christian, and all professing to get their doctrine directly from the Bible, and yet all contradicting one another on the most fundamental doctrines of Christianity.

A few months ago 146 delegates from 44 nations, and representing the various Christian Churches, exclusive of the Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox Churches, met in Amsterdam. The American correspondent who was present wrote: "They met, they planned, they prayed, but they could not agree even on the definition of the word 'Church.'"—*Time*, September 13th, 1948.

It is this hopeless confusion amongst the Christian Churches that is causing such widespread irreligion to-day. When serious-minded men look around in search of Christianity and see several hundred contradictory forms of it, they give up the search in despair, shall I say in disgust, and abandon religion altogether. It is hard to blame the honest searcher after truth for his occasional jibe and sneer at Christianity, when he sees the truth presented in so many mangled forms by the Christian Churches themselves. On the other hand, Christianity would be a mighty force in the world to-day if it were not split up into several hundred fragments by the false principle of private interpretation.

Now, in view of all that I have said, let me ask you a few plain questions. Can any man believe that the Divine Founder of Christianity left the poor simple uneducated masses of humanity to find out the truth for themselves, in a Book which the ablest men have candidly declared they found most difficult to understand? Can he believe that the Divine Founder of Christianity left His doctrine to be interpreted by everyone as he pleases? Can we accuse the Divine Master of such little foresight? Surely He knew what men are capable of? Surely He knew the wild extravagances of the human mind when left to its own whims and delusions?

Is every man allowed to interpret the laws of the land according to his own lights? Why, even the most expert lawyers cannot sometimes give a satisfactory decision. The cases have to be referred to the Supreme Court, or the Court of Appeal. Are we to suppose then that the Divine Teacher and Lawgiver left His doctrine and His laws to be interpreted by every man according to his fancy? No. There must be a final court of appeal, and that final court of appeal is the

infallible Church of Christ. That is why the Church condemns certain Bible Societies, not so much because they spread the Bible, but because they hold that the Bible is all-sufficient and that it needs no interpreter.

(3) There is one other reason why the Church does not admit that the Bible alone is a sufficient rule of faith, and that reason is that the Bible does not contain all the truths of the Christian Faith. St. John ends his Gospel with the words: "There are many other things which Jesus did, which are not written in this Book."

And St. Paul tells the Thessalonians that they must hold fast to the teaching transmitted, not only by writing, but by word of mouth (2 Thess. ii., 14).

Clearly, then, there are certain Christian truths and practices handed down by tradition and not recorded in the Gospel. An example of these practices is the Sunday Observance, which is common to all Christian Churches, but which is nowhere mentioned in the Bible.

And, I may add, our Lord never wrote a line of Scripture, and neither did He command His Apostles to write. He did not say to His Apostles: Go out into the world and give a copy of the Bible to everyone you meet. No. He told them to go and teach and preach, and that is how the Apostles understood their mission. "Faith cometh by hearing," says St. Paul (Rom. x., 17).

IV.

What the Church has done for the Bible.

Perhaps you will conclude, from all this, that the Church has no use for the Bible. Luther spread that falsehood against the Church. He said that before his time "the Bible lay under the bench forgotten in the dust."

Every student of history knows that statement is a falsehood. Not only Catholic, but distinguished Protestant historians have shown up its falsehood. Time will not permit me to quote in detail the testimonies of Protestant historians, but you will find them given at considerable length in a book, entitled "The Faith of Millions,"* which I earnestly recommend you to read, if you wish to know something about Catholic doctrine and practices.

But the best refutation of Luther's calumny is the age long practice of the Church. It may interest you to know that the Mass—the greatest function of Catholic worship—is taken almost entirely from the Bible. And from the earliest ages the Gospels and Epistles were read at the Sunday Mass and explained to the people. Again, the Office, which every priest has to recite for more than an hour daily, is taken almost entirely from the Bible. Every student preparing for the Priesthood must spend two years in close study of the Bible.

* "The Faith of Millions," by John A. O'Brien, Ph.D.

Every preacher begins his sermon with a text of the Bible, and supports his teaching chiefly by the Bible. In every college and Religious House the Bible is read daily in public, and the reader stands during the reading, out of respect for the Word of God. Every child in the catechism class must have at least an elementary knowledge of the history of the Old and New Testaments; and you will find in many Catholic homes the family Bible which is treasured with the greatest reverence.

Indeed, it must be admitted that only for the Catholic Church there would be no Bible at all in the world to-day. In this age of printing, we may forget the labour it cost the Catholic monks and scribes to preserve and perpetuate the Bible. If the Bible has survived the wars and revolutions and barbaric invasions, which have destroyed so many treasures of ancient literature, we owe it to the Catholic Church.

And to-day, when Modernists, Rationalists and Higher Critics, and even leaders of Christian Churches, are rejecting or belittling the Bible, the Catholic Church stands forth as its greatest defender.

Conclusion.

I began this lecture with a text taken from the Gospel according to St. John. I gave the text according to the Douai translation, the Catholic Version. I now give it according to the Protestant Version, the Revised Version: "Ye search the Scriptures, because ye think that in them ye have eternal life; and these are they which bear witness of Me; and ye will not come to Me that ye may have life" (John v., 39).

This is the more commonly accepted translation. And the meaning of the text according to this translation, and according to the context also, is far from commanding all men to read the Scriptures. Our Lord reproaches the Pharisees for continually poring over them, thinking to find salvation thereby, while they were refusing to accept the Divine Truth of which they gave testimony.

We should not deserve that reproach. We should not spend our time searching the Scriptures, and at the same refusing to see what is the beginning, the centre and the final aim of all the Scriptures—namely, Jesus Christ and the Church which He founded.

All of us here this evening are united in our love for the Holy Scriptures. They are the lamps, as St. Augustine calls them, given us by God to guide our steps during the night of this life; but, when the day dawns, we shall no longer need the lamps, for we shall see the Lord Himself, in the brightness of His Glory.

NUM. ORSAT :

JACOBUS HENDLEY,

Censor Deputatus.

IMPRINATUS :

✠ DANIEL.

Erud. Dominici et Conventus.

Belfast, die 15a Decembris, 1948.

JOHN HENDLEY