

THE AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURE

“He has said one, I have heard two.”

(Psalm 62:12 in the Hebrew text, 62:11 in the Greek text.)

I. THE AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURE

This translation is based upon the Hebrew text.) The living Word of God generates a multiplicity of interpretations. When the Almighty Word gives rise to a rigid dogmatism, it entails the **rigor mortis** of an idol that gets its own life by taking life away from men. Questions, answers, confrontations, and clashes of opinion originate from the encounter with Scripture that is truly an open sea which gives us freedom at the price of the easy certainties of coastal navigation. The encounter with Scripture is an open sea that gives us freedom.

The problem of how to read the Bible (hermeneutics) is undoubtedly one of the most important that the Christian faith in general and evangelical faith in particular has had to face and must face again and yet again: that is, the problem of the authority of Sacred Scripture acknowledged as the Word of God normative for faith and Christian life. This avowal has been common to all Christians from the very beginning, indeed it is a badge of their faith. This was not sufficient, however, to produce in them the same reading of the Bible in every circumstance and on every matter. They have had serious clashes in interpretation that, each in its turn, has divided souls and even churches, starting back in the sixteenth century.

II. A PROBLEM WITH ANCIENT ROOTS

The problem is not just a modern one, and did not originate with the coming of theological liberalism, nor with the appearance of the historico-critical method of reading the Bible, a method that came into being for the most part during the century of the Enlightenment. It is a problem that came about with the Reformation and was experienced in dramatic fashion by the Reformers themselves. All asserted and supported “sola Scriptura”, that is, only the Holy Scriptures have ultimate authority (the authority, indeed, of a divine and not a human word) over faith and Christian life. They, in fact, were the ones who unanimously submitted and proposed this as a constituent and distinctive principle of Christianity. Let us consider, among the thousands that could be cited, this justifiably famous passage of Luther: **“The Gospel, more than the Lord’s Supper and Baptism, is the only, most certain, and most lofty identifying mark of the church, because only by means of the Gospel is she conceived, formed, nourished, born, reared, fed, adorned, fortified, armed and preserved. In short, all of the life and substance of the church is in the Word of God.”**

This passage by Zwingli, in perfect communion of faith and of intent, echoes Luther: **“We must reserve the highest honor to the Word of God (by Word of God is meant uniquely that which comes from the Holy Spirit) and place our faith only in this. For the Word of God is certain, and cannot fail. It is clear and does not leave us wandering in the Darkness. It instructs and explains itself. It comforts and illumines the human soul, communicating all salvation and grace to it, making it trustful of God. It makes man humble, so that at first he feels lost, in fact crushed, and then he can receive God in himself.”** Luther and Zwingli, the two fathers of the Protestant Reformation, profoundly united in affirming the normative authority of the Scripture, were divided, as we know, over the interpretation of the words uttered by Jesus during the last Passover meal celebrated with his disciples, when, offering the bread, he said **“This is my body”**. Luther interpreted these words as meaning a real presence (even though he denied transubstantiation). Zwingli on the other hand attributed a symbolic meaning to them, in the strong sense of the Jewish “memorial”. The Colloquy of Marburg in 1529 ratified their division, and it was not overcome officially until the Concord of Leuenberg of 1973.

III. BOTH FAITHFUL TO “SOLA SCRIPTURA”

Now it would be completely wrong, if not patently factious, to claim that either Luther or Zwingli had abandoned the **Sola Scriptura** principle and no longer recognized in the Bible the normative value of the Word of God, only because they were not in agreement in their interpretation of the words of Jesus during the Last Supper. The

opposite is true: Luther and Zwingli always affirmed, applied and lived out completely the **Sola Scriptura** principle, with exemplary strictness and consistency. With absolute seriousness and with all the intelligence of the faith of which they were capable, thanks to the illumination of the Spirit, they both set about listening to the words of Jesus, which they received and believed as the Word of God. And yet they arrived at two different and even discordant readings. So they were not able to be reconciled, but not because one of the two was unfaithful to **Sola Scriptura** and no longer recognized the Bible as the genuine Word of God, but because two different and even divergent readings of the Holy Scriptures can exist, even where faith acknowledges the Scriptures as the final authority, as the criterion, essence, and guide for thought and behavior. All of this happened in the sixteenth century, long before the historico-critical method and theological liberalism appeared. It happened to Luther and Zwingli, that is, to the fathers of **Sola Scriptura**. It was a bitter experience for them. And it is for us, every time that we live through similar situations as Christians. We all acknowledge and honor in the Bible the revelation of God and therefore the supreme authority of our faith. But we must recognize what happened in the sixteenth century and is continuing to happen today, which is that the existing general consensus (among Christians) on the supreme authority of the Bible does not automatically produce a consensus on the meaning of every statement.

Certainly there is consensus on the central nucleus, on the “heart” of the biblical message, which is also the “heart” of the Christian faith: the free salvation of the sinner by means of the Cross and the resurrection of Jesus. But on specific aspects of the Holy Scripture there can be and there are different and often times conflicting interpretations. This should not surprise or scandalize us. Instead we need to have the patience and the humility to compare the different positions and dialogue about them, in pursuit of a shared truth that is the fruit not of compromise or abdication, but, if possible, of a more profound understanding of the text or of a particular position in the light of the overall biblical message. It is necessary to listen to the text, not alone if possible but with others. It is therefore necessary to listen to the text and listen to the other person who is reading it. It is not a question of two different things but of two different moments in a single process of listening. The Bible is the Word of God for all Christians, not just for some.

No one has a monopoly on **Sola Scriptura**. Luther did not have it, nor did Zwingli. If they had listened to one another more, maybe they would not have been split over the Scripture that they both loved more than themselves. **A reading that is entirely faithful to the Scripture is at once a personal and a community issue.** Every word of God is greater than us, even all of us together, but it could be that a unanimous and brotherly listening would succeed in showing the richness of a given text and the fullness of its truth.

IV. TOLERATING POSITIONS DIFFERENT FROM OUR OWN

So that this might happen we must all, above all in controversial matters, draw near to the interpretation of another not with ill-will or a spirit of judgment, but with willingness to “**examine everything and keep what is good**”, that is, what aids a better understanding of the Bible and its message. And it will be necessary to avoid disqualifying positions that are different from our own, or to consider them as just so many betrayals of the biblical text that are due to an abandonment of **Sola Scriptura**.

The problem remains: **how to read the Bible?** It is, we believe, a false alternative to contrast head-on a “literalist” interpretation with an “historico-critical” interpretation, as if they were mutually exclusive. In reality, every intelligent reading cannot help but be historical and critical, while every “historico-critical” interpretation is indissolubly linked to the (Biblical) letter and is subject to it. We are all in agreement with the apostle Paul when he says that “**the letter kills but the Spirit gives life**” (2 Cor. 3:6), but the Spirit gives life in the first place to the (Biblical) letter, transforming it into the cradle of the Word. Therefore let us not contrast Spirit and letter, but let us seek the Spirit in the letter and through it. To look for the Spirit in the biblical letter means to look for Jesus Christ there, which means to look for the truth, holiness, judgment, salvation, justice and peace of God for every creature and for all humanity. Let us read the Bible in such a way as to know God and his grace and to know ourselves and our need for forgiveness and conversion. Let us read the Bible in such a way as to learn to live as sons and daughters of God and as brothers and sisters of our neighbor.

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