

Paramount  
and  
Permanent Authority  
of  
The Bible

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## PARAMOUNT AND PERMANENT AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE

By John A. Broadus, D. D., LL. D.

This is a subject of no small importance to all Christian people, if we are to have any Bible at all. Without disrespect to other Christians, I may say that the subject is peculiarly important to Baptists. Two or three years ago, I sat at table by the side of one of the most honored Presbyterian ministers in America, who came across the Atlantic, and from a high position has looked widely and kindly over the state of religion in this country. He remarked that an interesting religious phenomenon in the United States is the unity of the Baptists, while having no central authority, and no common creed; and then asked: "Don't you think it would be well to get some common creed that would signalize this oneness of Baptist doctrine?" I replied: "That would be glorifying the remarkable phenomenon by destroying it." How can we account for this unity? Our churches are independent—quite sufficiently so. Our unity results from emphasizing downright conformity to the Bible itself. This is vital to the existence of Baptists. By ignorant or prejudiced critics it is often charged that we make much ado about mere ceremonies. To us it is not a question of ceremonies, but of insisting upon obedience to the Scriptures. That is the link that binds our independent churches together. Of all people, Baptists are peculiarly interested in the authority of the Bible, because this causes them to exist, and keeps them united.

Whenever men attempt to discuss a subject, it is needful to be agreed upon a starting point. Now, I address myself to people who believe that the Bible is the word of God; not merely that it *contains* the word of God, which wise persons may disentangle from other things in the book, but that it *is* the word of God. If you do not believe this, I am not now arguing with you; I speak to those who do so believe. It does not follow that our interpretations are infallible. It is entirely possible that we may have no creed nor system of theology, no professors, nor even preachers, nor even newspaper writers, nor writers of tracts, that can always interpret the Bible with infallible success. But our persuasion is that the real meaning of the Bible is true. This being the case, something else immediately follows, viz., the Bible is to us the highest authority for religious truth. Wherever it undertakes to teach, its teachings are true. It does not attempt to teach on all subjects. It uses popular language, which must be interpreted accordingly. But, whatever it intends to teach, that is paramount in authority. If this were not so, we should really have no Bible.

Other authorities may be recognized and duly regarded; but not on any equality with the Bible. There is *the authority of Reason*. Let everyone of us beware, lest we despise reason. That were a blunder. It is reason that must ascertain for us that there is a revelation, and must determine that meaning of revelation. Reason is greatly guided by piety, which brings us into general sympathy with revelation; and aided by the special influence of the Holy Spirit. Thus reason has a high and important office. But, when it

has ascertained the existence and the meaning of revelation, it must stand back and acknowledge itself subordinate in authority.

There is *the authority of Christian Consciousness*. This phrase was, I believe, made current by Schleiermacher, and is oftenest used to-day in the line of its original employment. Schleiermacher did not believe in the inspiration of Scripture, in any strict sense. He accepted the facts of Christianity as he found them in the “Christian consciousness” of the community. But where did this consciousness come from? The Brahmin’s elephant upheld the world rested on the back of a turtle, and the turtle swam in the ocean; but where did the ocean come from? The Christian consciousness must have derived its impressions from the Bible; and yet Schleiermacher took this consciousness as authority, rather than the Bible itself. Wherever I find much use made of this phrase, I find a similarity to Schleiermacher’s views of inspiration. Now, we must not make light of Christian consciousness. It is entitled to respect, and may be instructive; but it cannot be for us an authority co-ordinate with the Bible.

Another authority with many persons is the *tendency of the times*. It is an attractive idea to most people that our age is far in advance of all others. Macaulay said that a school boy twelve years old now knows more of geography than Strabo. Yes, and no. In some respects he knows more, but in others not half so much. The nineteenth century is far superior to the other centuries in some things—as in physical science, and the practical applications of science to invention,—or in politics and social philosophy. But it does not follow that this century is superior to all previous centuries in thinking. In some respects our age has not time to be wiser. But it is so pleasant to persuade ourselves that “wisdom will die with us,” and that it was born with us too; to think that all that has preceded was but preparation for us, and that all that follows will be but a reminiscence of what was known and done in the fag<sup>1</sup> end of the nineteenth century. A celebrated preacher (recently passed away) was fond of saying that we are wiser than the apostles. We do more than the apostles in chemistry and geology, in mathematics, and perhaps in politics. But it does not follow that we know more than they of the real nature of man, and of our essential relations to God. That a gifted man who professed to believe in the Bible should fall into the fallacy of confounding these things is a wonder of wonders.

Many persons declare that what calls itself *culture* is the highest source of information; especially those who have the form of culture, but deny the power thereof. As in all such cases, they are apt to insist upon the form just in proportion as they lack the spirit. Real culture is the modestest of all graces; slowest to imagine itself superior to all things, human and divine.

For some, “*the church*” is an authority. That wonderful compound of many elements of Christianity with the genius of ancient Rome, which calls itself the Roman Catholic Church, claims inspiration, and practically assumes to be superior to the authority of the Bible. Well, to those who believe in an inspired church this may seem true. But if you do not believe it is inspired (as I do not), the church in whatsoever sense is not an authority parallel with the Bible.

There are persons who claim *individual inspiration*, and insist upon its dictates as authority for themselves and for others. Those who call themselves “Friends,” believe

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<sup>1</sup>Fag-end: “The last part or remnant of anything, after the best has been used; the extreme end, e.g. of a portion of space or time, a collection of persons, a written composition, volume, etc.” *Oxford English Dictionary* (2006).

that they are inspired, when they say “the Spirit moves me”; that is claiming inspiration. I need not argue that question. But you can observe something like this in certain good people among us. Some devout man will say: “I have made this project a matter prayer. You must not oppose this; it is an answer to prayer.” That comes a great deal nearer to Quaker ground than the excellent man is aware.

Now, as to all these real or supposed authorities, we must take heed that we do not place them on a level with Scripture, or make them a ground for setting Scripture aside.

But some will ask, Is there to be no progress? There was progress in giving revelation; in adding to; modifying; completing the earlier by the later revelation, even as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “I came not to destroy the law, but to complete.” But it is another thing to claim that there must be progress after the revelation had been completed. This point is alluded to in the latest Epistle of the New Testament. They speak of “the word which ye heard from the beginning;” and urge that we must “contend earnestly for the faith delivered once for all.” In the Second Epistle of John we are told (Revised Ver.), “Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God.” A “progressive orthodoxy” that forsakes or adds to the teaching of Christ becomes heterodoxy.

But is there to be no kind of progress now in regard to religious truth? Certainly there should be progress in knowing what revelation means, and in doing what revelation requires. Progress! It is a noble, inspiring thought. But human nature may err about this, as elsewhere. Some are crazy about “advanced thought,” about keeping up with the times. They do not ask in what direction all this advance is tending. We often see a sort of craze for following the newest fashion in religious thought, that almost equals—I will not complete the comparison. On the other hand, there are people who cannot in any respect progress beyond the opinions of former times—the teachings of the “Fathers.” Norman McLeod remarked that some bid us greatly reverence the Fathers, and yet two hundred years from now they will be quoting us as Fathers. The great Charles Hodge said he thanked God that no new idea in theology had started from Princeton. With all respect, I doubt the wisdom of that utterance. Why may we not hope to improve in the understanding of the Bible? My sympathy is rather the Pilgrim pastor who said: “I am very confident that the Lord has more truth yet to break forth out of his holy word.”

In our own century, we have seen as much real progress in the interpretation of Scripture. Researchers in the valley of the Nile and the plain of Mesopotamia have thrown light on Scripture history, not only helping it substantiate its truth, but to illumine its meaning. Our modern scientific syntax has favored the understanding of Scripture. Those who dislike orthodoxy cannot now be so loose in their exegesis; and consequently they have become more loose as to the authority of the Bible. We have also learned from physical science. The world was once aghast at certain statements of astronomy; but no one now imagines that the ordinary astronomy teaches anything contrary to the Bible. The same thing is largely true of geology. It is amusing to look back upon the successive theories of theology in our century, and then to remember how certain superserviceable apologists have busily reconciled these now exploded theories one after another, with the Bible. The cloud is like a camel—yes, like a camel. Nay, it is like a whale—yes, very like a whale. These experiences should help us as to another matter. I believe in—something about evolution. I do not know how much to believe about it. I am waiting for evolution

to evolve itself. Let us not be over hasty to reconcile the Bible with the present theories of evolution.

Social and political changes have also prepared us to interpret the Bible more wisely. This is no new thing. Even in the days of revelation, men were taught by Providence. John the Baptist has no special revelation as to how his mission was to end. He did not know, till he found himself in the dungeon—not till the executioner entered his cell. He learned from Providence. The first Christians agreed to disagree about certain things. The Jewish Christians were to continue practicing circumcision and observing the ceremonies; the Gentile Christians not so. They received no revelation as to the termination of this state of things, but learned through the destruction of Jerusalem, when the Temple was overthrown, and the ritual became impossible. So, in later times, has the light of Providence assisted men in the interpretation of Scripture. Three centuries ago, the divine right of kings was taught, and the passive obedience of subjects. The English Jameses and Charleses trampled on the people, because “the powers that be are ordained of God, and he that resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God.” But the slow unfolding of the ages has taught us to understand differently. The first Christians, like the Jews, questioned whether it was right to serve heathen rulers. It was this idea that the apostles undertook to correct; and their sayings must be interpreted accordingly.

Another illustration belongs to our own times. Forty years ago there was a great controversy concerning the teaching of Scripture as to slavery. Francis Wayland advocated one view, Richard Fuller another. Neither of them was extreme enough to satisfy a large proportion of his followers. Ten years later, and calm interpretation on either side was made nearly impossible by the fires of passion. How strangely Scripture was then handled, both North and South! But Providence has cleared the atmosphere. We are no longer considering a living question of politics and morals, but a question of ancient history. And if I remember aright the great President Wayland’s view, it is probable that many of us, in all parts of the country, are coming around to about that conception. Providence changes our stand-point, and we see Scripture in a different light.

So as to some burning questions of to-day. One of the phenomena of present Christian feeling is a great sensitiveness as to suffering. Some good people can scarcely bear the idea of punishment at all; and many are utterly opposed to capital punishment. This extreme sensitiveness about human suffering, in conjunction, I fear, with a diminished sense of the awfulness of human sin and the holiness of God, has led many to shrink from the idea of eternal punishment. Such feelings naturally occasion a re-investigation of Scripture. It is right thus to look at Scripture in connection with current convictions and feelings. There is, to be sure, a great danger of perverse interpretation. Our inquiry ought not to be whether Scripture does not teach what we would have it teach; we must try to let the Bible mean on any question what it wants to mean. For example, some have devised a theory of “a second probation” for the heathen in the future life. In such a case, it would be allowable, if we find even a few hints in the Bible regarding a tenet which there appear to be strong outside reasons for accepting; and if there be no positive Scripture teaching to the contrary, that we should rely on the hints. So we do, as to the recognition of friends in heaven. There are a few hints—we strongly incline to believe it—there is nothing in the Bible to contradict. Now, if the same were true as to future probation, we might accept it. But what is the fact? The application of this theory to the heathen is flatly contradicted in Romans 1 and 2. When men argue that

divine justice requires a second probation for the heathen, then how about those in Christian countries, who never knew of Christianity, except in forms so corrupted as to be a hindrance instead of a help? Carry this out logically, and you reach Universalism in one way or another. But God's word opposes itself to Universalism, by all its solemn utterances about eternal life and eternal punishment. So this theory of a second probation, for which no Scripture proof can be even claimed beyond a few obscure and dubious hints, I, on the other hand, contradicted and forbidden by plain teachings of the Bible. Let us never forget, in our disputations, that this is an unspeakably solemn subject. Eternal punishment, in itself an awful thought, carries with it eternal sin. Across this great darkness, I see but two rays of light. One consists of the truth, too often overlooked, that there will be immensely different degrees of punishment. The other relief is found in the thought that we of to-day may carry the blessed gospel to the heathen who are now living.

The great principle, in all such inquiries, is that, while it is lawful to re-investigate the meaning of Scripture in the light of current opinion and feeling, it is not lawful to put anything as authority above God's word. Many people fail to make this distinction, and glide insensibly from re-interpretation of the Scriptures, into setting the Scriptures aside. This, you will hear some persons say of Paul, as he speaks in Corinthians of marriage: "Oh, Paul was an old bachelor." They do not know that they are not only guilty of shocking bad taste, but of rationalism of the most offensive kind. There is great danger, when we do not find Scripture to suit us, that we shall unconsciously pass from the task of interpretation to the liberty of setting aside.

Take another case, in which careful interpretation will correct a common error. How often we hear people saying that the early Christians were Communists. This was formerly for us a mere speculative question. But communism now approaches us as a practical matter; and a new investigation of Scripture will speedily show that the early Christians were not Communists. The words of Peter to Ananias, "While it remained, was it not thine own? And after it was sold, was it not in thine own power?" necessarily involve private ownership on the part of Ananias. The fault found was simply with his lying. The phrase, "had all things in common," is simply a strong expression for extraordinary generosity, which answered to an extraordinary demand. Many from Galilee, and from foreign countries, were tarrying several years at Jerusalem, till Providence taught them through persecution to go forth; and meantime, they had no means of support. Multitudes of the poor in Jerusalem were habitually supported by contributions from foreign Jews; and their share in these was cut off when they became Christians. This situation called for great generosity. And you find a string of Greek imperfect tenses in the record (Acts 2 and 5), showing that from time to time, one disciple or another would even sell real estate in order to meet the pressing need. They regarded their property as held by them for the common benefit. This is the only meaning possible, in light of Peter's words to Ananias. So, likewise, as to the questions of divorce, temperance, etc. It is one thing to re-interpret the Bible, and another thing to set aside its authority.

Many persuade themselves that some particular departure from the Scripture requirement is, after all, but slight, and seems, at present, a practical necessity. Such was evidently the feeling of some Christians in the second century, whose apparently slight deviations have since grown to vast proportions. In the portion of Asia Minor where

Ignatius dwelt early in the century, and which was the home of the earliest heresies, one of the elders seems to have been exalted over the others as a means of maintaining unity, and keeping out heresy; and he alone was to be called bishop. This probably seemed a necessary, and not a very important, change. But behold how this bishop business spread and grew, until it filled almost the whole Christian world; and even passed in the might power claimed by the Bishop of Rome. Justin Martyr, near the middle of the century, in his beautiful description of the worship of the Christians, uses some obscure expressions about the bread and wine in which we can now discern the germ of transubstantiation. The so-called "Teaching of the Twelve Apostles," probably belonging to the second half of the century, in giving instructions about baptism, says that if enough water cannot be had for baptism, they may pour water three times upon the head. This might seem to the writer only a slight alteration, for convenience; but see how it grew and expanded, and what consequences it has had throughout Christendom! These things show us the importance which may attach to small beginnings in departure from the word of God.

Look at the lower Mississippi in the time of flood. Its turbid waters rush along between levees, while fair fields spread away far below the surface of the stream. At a certain point, the water begins to trickle through the topmost soil; and, being neglected, it cuts a little channel. Look! it grows! it deepens! it widens into a great crevasse! Now bells are rung! The neighboring planters gather, and seek to stop the break; but it is too late! The waters pour through, and all the homes are islets, and the fair land is desolated; and long will it be before the great inundation subsides, and the vast break in the levee can be filled. Yet it all began in a slight trickling through the soil. O brother, *principiis obsta!* Let us stop the beginnings departure from the teaching of God's word.