THE STATUS OF THE SCRIPTURES

After many months of struggle, meditation, study, inquiring, and prayer, the writer of this brief treatise finally believes he has come to some kind of clarity on the question of the status of the Bible, its general definition as being synonymous with the Word of God, what place it has in man's knowledge of God, and how it serves the function of a Means of Grace. In the following paragraphs he would like to set forth his position for the examination of the reader, realizing fully that he is a tender theolog, one which has not come to completely definite concepts of truth, one also who is willing to make necessary adaptions in his thinking if these alterations come nearer ultimate reality.

The problem of the status of the Scriptures is a very real one. No time in history has shown this as conslusively as the one in which we are living. Mergers within single denominations have hinged upon variant concepts concerning the Bible. In fact, one's whole philosophy is altered one way or the other by his attitude concerning the Bible.

And there is good reason for the existing problem. Some centuries agoi it would have been more easy to accept whole heartedly the idea of an inerrant, strictly infallible and verbally inspired Bible, literally (word-forword) correct in every detail--although evidence has it that this view has gained prominence during the century following the Reformation. Now scientific evidence has indicated that quite conclusively the world is older than earlier conceptions realized, that the first man might have been on earth before the traditional 4004 B.C. that is usually given as the date of Adam's birth, and that more time has elapsed than the traditional six days of twenty-four hour periods in creation.

The reader is left with two alternatives. If he is avid scientific devotee, he probably will thrust out the Bible, and insist that if can be fallible on some ideas, then it must hold only an inkling of truth. On the other hand, one can overlook the facts of science, believing all things to be heretical which detract from the authority of the Bible. On the one hand man by his reason loses contact with that means by which spiritual growth is made possible, and probably drifts away from Christianity; at any rate, his Bible is less meaningful. On the other hand, man becomes almost intellectually dishonest--in good faith, of course--but can this be satisfying even to the most sincere Christian.

This writer believes there to be a third alternative, one which neither does damage to the greatness of the Holy Scriptures, nor remains blind to the findings of science. In fact, this writer has the audacity to suggest that the view he sets forth does much to enhance both of these, both the Bible and scientific discovery, at neither's expense.

Christian people---in all good faith---have committed a fallacy. They have confused the words "authority" and "revelation". This is the heart of the problem, the root of misconceptions.

Philosophical inquiry sets forth a variety of methods of ascertaining knowledge. Means by which man gains knowledge and abstractions of truth are these: rationalism, empiricism, mysticism, pragmatism, skepticism, etc., and authority. (For our purposes it will suffice to speak only of authority as a means of apprehending real knowledge.) Truth is given by authority, it is knowable on the basis of authority, and this authority many people hold to be the Scriptures. Naturally it is an authority. But when it is held to be the authority, and when is then shaken by the results of scientific discovery, faith crumbles and the Christian becomes distressed. Naturally, when man pins his hopes upon a book which is found possibly to be not quite infallible, he can't help but react violently: this shakes the very foundation of his believing. "If the Bible has errors, then what?" he asks.

Let us think carefully! Is the Bible really the authority?

We are concerned with the knowing of spiritual truth, that which can neither be discerned by means of reason, nor by any other philosophical means, but that which must be revealed, revealed only by God. Revelation is the means by which man can know things spiritual, for the spiritual things are spiritually discerned.

Now are the Scriptures and God's revelation exactly synonymous terms? One gets into all kinds of difficulty if he makes no distinction here. We attempt a distinction: The Scripture is really quite a different thing from God's exact voice. (Naturally, it is an anthropomorphism to even speak of God's voice.) At any rate, that which is all important is God's revelation. This is a prior thing, something which occurs before the actual writing of Scripture. One might say that the Bible itself is God Himself---the book is a god---or that inspiration and the Scriptures are synonymous terms, but these views are untenable. Inspiration is something which occurs prior to the writing of Scripture; in this sense it is true that revelation occurs at the time of inspiration by God---the two are identical terms. But inspiration, revelation, and the Scriptures are not the same kinds of things. Inspiration precedes the Bible. Revelation precedes the record of that revelation.

Certainly the Bible is divinely inspired. Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. But God and men are two separate entities. It would again be anthropomorphistic to ascribe to God attributes which belong to creature-man. Here is where a difficulty lies. God revealed Himself and His Will to man in concepts which man understood, perhaps, well enough to further transmit to others of mankind via the medium of the sacred book, the Holy Bible. But God doesn't have a human voice; he doesn't speak in human words. And the transmitting of revelation presents the problem of the endeavor to put into human terms, into words and symbols that which man can understand, that which is divine and passesx human knowledge and transcends human understanding.

We use an example. Say, for instance, that God wills to reveal to man the great truth that He is creator of all, and that He is man's sovereign: He made man and for fellowship with Him man was made. Certainly we could never expect that person inspired by God to transmit this great spiritual truth to have a thorough knowledge of Einstein's physics so that when he came to describe the cosmology, he would completely forget about his current view that the world was flat, that water was above the earth and below,—his limited vision. Who could read the message? Who could understand? Wouldn't relativity, monads, space bubbles, etc., place one in delirium if he hadn't even a concept of outer space and a world that was round.

What is the essence of this? God has revealed spiritual truth, truth which is knowable only because God has revealed it. But this revelation, because it comes to man, must of necessity be couched within human terms and human phraseology. And because spiritual truths and eternal concepts completely transcend the most limitless bounds of human words and human thought, one must recognize that the trappings or that within which God's message is couched contains a bit of that which is human and certainly fallible. This does nothing to hamper the greatness of the Bible. If it did not contain that which is human with the human possibility of error—for even the very fact that Paul's writings possess a style different from John's, for example, eradicate the idea that holy men were simply and only God's stenographers repeating word for word God's message—it would not have been understood. Who can read the mind of the Lord? God's message must be set forth in human terms with all of those fearful implications in order that it might be understood by man.

We have an authority for our faith. Certainly it does not rest upon flimsy foundations. But the Bible is not that supreme authority. If it were, then how would one know why to select the Bible above The Koran, for example. Both can be foundational and authoritative, but one, in making this selection, reveals that the authority of the Bible would of necessity rest upon another authority, that of reason, the instrument which would decide between the Bible and other claimants. And surely reason cannot fulfill the role of being authoritative for the discernment of spiritual truths. But what else in this situation? Even the Bible makes no such claim to authority.

What is our authority? That which is authoritative is God's own revelation. He revealed Himself in the manner of inspiring prophets to bring His message to the people. But that supreme act of self-revelation which makes all other aspects of His revelation tenable is His own Incarnation, when He came to earth in human form. Jesus is truly the Word of God, for this is God's revelation of Himself, God "in self-expression", or that Eternal Logos.

It is this divine act of self-disclosure (the Incarnation) which gives the Holy Scripture its great divine worth. It is the Word of God in a derivative sense because it is given this status by the truth of the Word of God Himself; the converse is not true. In other words, God's message is only in one sense a message in human words. Rather, His Message to the world is He Himself as He comes in His divine love and mercy. The Scripture is a word of God because it testifies of this.

We really can derive the greatest benefits from the Bible and hold it at the highest level humanly possible---and it isn't God---without blinding ourselves to the facts revealed in the modern world especially through the findings of physical and biological science. If the Bible is the authority, then serious consequences result and one must make his choice: either science or the Bible. But when one remembers that revelation is authoritative, and that the Bible and science operate in two different spheres, the difficulties cease. Reason cannot condemn in any way the fact of revelation as that authoritative power by which spiritual knowledge is brought to man, for reason has no jurisdiction in this field; truths spiritual are spiritually discerned. And, by the same token, the Bible cannot dictate to science its findings and discoveries, for the Bible has no power in this domain; this is out of its field. That the Bible does border on subject matter treated by scientific thinkers does in no way alter this concept, for the Bible is the possessor of scientific verbiage only insofar as it becomes necessary to tack down the truths of God's revelation in a human, creature-like, and scientific environment. That which harbors revelation, that in which God's authoritative revelation is couched, need not be the revelation itself.

Naturally it would be presumptuous to suggest that this brief essay has solved all the problems concerning the Scriptures. Even the writer makes no such pretence. But he does desire that his conception has been of help to the solving of the problem, a solution which he sets forth in an endeavor to make good use of the facts of scientific discovery without doing one iota of violence to Scripture itself. His idea set forth here he believes to be one which even the man of science could in intellectually honesty ascribe to while at the same time being a belief which is entirely in accord with Biblical teachings concerning the Bible.

He invites the reader, if the reader disagrees, to point out to him his fallacies, either on the basis of logic or upon the basis of Scripture. He welcomes honest criticism, that which leads to greater truth and greater spiritual growth. And of course, an evidence from the reader of some concurrence---not, however, for concurrence's sake alone---would be extremely gratifying!

Never Completed

The Status of the Scriptures Reconsidered

Several months the writer prepared an essay on the status of the Scriptures. Realizing that it was incumbent upon him as one about to enter into the Christian ministry to have a clear, precise, and accurate understanding of this important concept within the Christian message, he endeavored to probe by means of a distinction drawn between the Revelation of God and the environment into which this Revelation comes. He felt that this would alleviate much of the concern by sincere believers over the fact that the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, seems to be advancing a world view which is pre-Ptolemaic and therefore not in harmony with the present scientific world view. It was not his intention to attempt a reconciliation between Scripture and scientific facts. He was only endeavoring to demonstrate that those who believed it the 'spiritual' and right thing to do to uphold the scientific views advanced in Scripture, while being sincere, were making an unnecessary defense, for God was not responsible for the understanding of the world which those possessed to whom his revelation came: His revelation was not identical with the environment into which it came.

All of the problems have not been solved, however. Though one distinguish between revelation and envirnnment, he still has not answered perhaps a more basic question.: What position does the Bible have within the Christian faith? What is the status of the Scriptures?

It is a raging controversy. On the one side are those who believe that the Bible is verbally-inspired, God-dictated, and therefore God's self-revelation, the unmistakable truth upon which all must be judged at the forsaking of reason when this becomes necessary. On the other sides are those who confess that the Bible is certainly inspired but that its writers could have made mistakes, etc.

What is the result? Those of the first category have an authority, an empirical guide upon which to stand, an objective criterion for the measuring of truth, yes, Truth itself. And their attitude is one of outright protest, even indignant polemics) against any who would seek to pull the Bible from this sacred position. On the other side a variety of diferent types of people can be viewed. For some, who readily admit errors in the Bible, no problem has resulted for they still possess an objective criterion for the measuring of truth. It is no longer the Bible, but it is the Church, which, they say, is even that which gives the Bible its authority. There are others, however, of this category, who realize that the Bible contains mistakes, but who also realize that the Church itself is not completely inerrant and is not therefore a safer objectivization of Truth than the Bible itself. And these are the ones caught in the dilemma.

Before diagnosing the problem any further, it would be well for us to listen to a quotation from Karl Heim:

> The Word is that element of my consciousness-world which has the prerogative, above everything else, of being the place at which the Other and his consciousness-world is disclosed to me.

Heim states that one can never understand the meaning of a "Word" until he ceases trying to conceive it as being "an already-become element of the objective world." He believes that discourse, written or spoken, can only become for us a "Word" when we hear or read when the living act of speaking comes to my consciousness, the act of which the spoken word is the precipitate.

> When I hear a word, there is always a two-fold process:
> 1) there is an objective recognition of a content which belongs to objective space, the sound of the word or the printed letters which represent it;
> 2) associated with this is a meeting in the non-objective space of the Real Present. In this meeting the Word is not a spoken word for me, but an act of speech, in which the Word first comes to be.

And this is important: "It is only when there is such a non-objective meeting behind the hearing or reading of the uttered word that the sound of the word, or the assemblage of letters which compose it, attains the invisible distinction by which it is lifted ouf of its whole material environment, and so distinguished from all other sounds and figures, as the place at which the other person opens himself to me."

Crux: It is the ~~Word which~~ the dynamic act ~~which~~ concerning which the Word is the precipitate is the essential thing. The character of the Word consists in this that I know that the very same performance ~~xi~~ which in my consciousness-space is passive is active in the consciousness-space of the other person, and vice versa. There has to be a real meeting in the non-objective space of the Real ~~xxxxx~~ Present in which the Word is not a spoken word but an act of speech which is directed to me. (see above) Also, "I am addressed by another only when he makes himself known to me as conscious will, with an aim to be discerned ~~xthx~~ at the back of all his words, and when he calls on me to make this aim mine also. Otherwise, there is nothing more than an impersonal delivery of facts, observations, and results of investigation. Real speech can take place between two persons only when they are in action, when they meet each other on the plane of the Present---that is, on the common battlefield where the responsible decisions are made which determine the shape of the future. When I say of a person belonging to times gone by that he "being dead, yet speaketh," all I can mean is that I experience him as a will which summons me to a definite decision in my present situation.