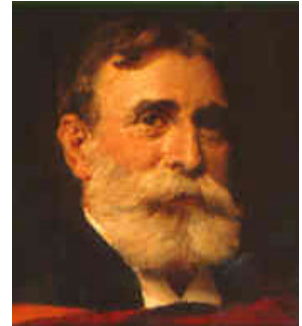




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The Authority & Inspiration of the Scriptures



by Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921)

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Christianity is often called a book-religion. It would be more exact to say that it is a religion which has a book. Its foundations are laid in apostles and prophets, upon which its courses are built up in the sanctified lives of men; but Christ Jesus alone is its chief cornerstone. He is its only basis; he, its only head; and he alone has authority in his Church. But he has chosen to found his Church not directly by his own hands, speaking the word of God, say for instance, in thunder-tones from heaven; but through the instrumentality of a body of apostles, chosen and trained by himself, endowed with gifts and graces from the Holy Ghost, and sent forth into the world as his authoritative agents for proclaiming a gospel which he placed within their lips and which is none the less his authoritative word, that it is through them that he speaks it. It is because the apostles were Christ's representatives, that what they did and said and wrote as such, comes to us with divine authority. The authority of the Scriptures thus rests on the simple fact that God's authoritative agents in founding the Church gave them as authoritative to the Church which they founded. All the authority of the apostles stands behind the Scriptures, and all the authority of Christ behind the apostles. The Scriptures are simply the law-code which the law-givers of the Church gave it.

If, then, the apostles were appointed by Christ to act for him and in his name and authority in founding the Church--and this no one can doubt; and if the apostles gave the Scriptures to the Church in prosecution of this commission--and this admits of as little doubt; the

whole question of the authority of the Scriptures is determined. It will be observed that their authority does not rest exactly on apostolic authorship. The point is not that the apostles wrote these books (though most of the New Testament books were written by apostles), but that they imposed them on the Church as authoritative expositions of its divinely appointed faith and practice. Still less does the authority of the Scriptures rest on the authority of the Church. The Church may bear witness to what she received from the apostles as law, but this is not giving authority to that law but humbly recognizing the authority which rightfully belongs to it whether the Church recognizes it or not. The puzzle which some people fall into here is something like mistaking the relative "authority" of the guide-post and the road; the guide-post may point us to the right road but it does not give its rightness to the road. It has not "determined" the road--it is the road that has "determined" the guide-post; and unless the road goes of itself to its destination the guide-post has no power to determine its direction. So the Church does not "determine" the Scriptures, but the Scriptures the Church. Nor does it avail to say in opposition that the Church existed before the Scriptures and therefore cannot depend on them. The point is, whether the Scriptures are a product of the Church, or rather of the authority which founded the Church. The Church certainly did not exist before the authority which Christ gave the apostles to found it, in virtue of which they have imposed the Scriptures on it as law.

Apostolicity thus determines the authority of Scripture; and any book or body of books which were given to the Church by the apostles as law must always remain of divine authority in the Church. That the apostles thus gave the Church the whole Old Testament, which they had themselves received from their fathers as God's word written, admits of no doubt, and is not doubted. That they gradually added to this body of old law an additional body of new law is equally patent. In part this is determined directly by their own extant testimony. Thus Peter places Paul's Epistles beside the Scriptures of the Old Testament as equally with them law to Christians (2 Peter iii. 16); and thus Paul places Luke's Gospel alongside of Deuteronomy (1 Tim. v. 18). Thus, too, all write with authority (1 Cor. xiv. 37; 2 Cor. x. 8; 2 Thes. ii. 15; iii. 6-14)--with an authority which is above that of angels (Gal. i. 7, 8), and the immediate recognition of which is the test of the possession of the Holy Ghost (1 Cor. xiv. 37; 2 Thess. iii. 6-14). In part it is left to be determined indirectly from the testimony of the early Church; it being no far cry from the undoubting universal acceptance of a book as authoritative by the Church of the apostolic age, to the apostolic gift of it as authoritative to that Church. But by one way or another it is easily shown that all the books which now constitute our Bible, and which Christians, from that day to this, have loyally treated as their divinely prescribed book of law, no more and no fewer, were thus imposed on the Church as its divinely authoritative rule of faith and practice.

Now it goes, of course, without saying, that the apostles were not given this supreme authority as legislators to the Church without preparation for their high functions, without previous instruction in the mind of Christ, without safeguards thrown about them in the prosecution of their task, without the accompanying guidance of the Holy Spirit. And nothing is more noticeable in the writings which they have given the Church than the claim

which they pervasively make that in giving them they are acting only as the agents of Christ, and that those who wrote them wrote in the Spirit of Christ. What Paul writes he represents to be "the commandments of the Lord" (1 Cor. xiv. 37), which he therefore transmits in the name of the Lord (2 Thess. iii. 6); and the gospel that Peter preached was proclaimed in the Holy Ghost (1 Peter i. 12). Every Scripture of the Old Testament is inspired by God (2 Tim. iii. 16), and the New Testament is equally Scripture with the Old (1 Tim. v. 18); all prophecy of Scripture came from men who spake from God, being moved by the Holy Ghost (2 Peter i. 20) and Paul's Epistles differ from these older writings only in being "other"; that is, newer Scriptures of like kind (2 Peter iii. 16). When we consider the promises of supernatural guidance which Christ made to his apostles (Matt. x. 19, 20; Mark xiii. 11; Luke xxi. 14; John xiv and xvi), in connection with their claim to speak with divine authority even when writing (1 Cor. xiv. 37; 2 Thess. iii. 6), and their conjunction of their writings with the Old Testament Scriptures as equally divine with them, we cannot fail to perceive that the apostles claim to be attended in their work of giving law to God's Church by prevailing superintending grace from the Holy Spirit. This is what is called inspiration. It does not set aside the human authorship of the books. But it puts behind the human also a divine authorship. It ascribes to the authors such an attending influence of the Spirit in the process of writing, that the words they set down become also the words of God; and the resultant writing is made not merely the expression of Paul's or John's or Peter's will for the churches, but the expression of God's will. In receiving these books from the apostles as law, therefore, the Church has always received them not only as books given by God's agents, but as books so given by God through those agents that every word of them is God's word.

Let it be observed that the proof of the authority of the Scriptures does not rest on a previous proof of their inspiration. Even an uninspired law is law. But when inspiration has once been shown to be fact, it comes mightily to the reinforcement of their authority. God speaks to us now, in Scripture, not only mediately through his representatives, but directly through the Scriptures themselves as his inspired word. The Scriptures thus become the crystalization of God's authoritative will. We will not say that Christianity might not have been founded and propagated and preserved without inspired writings or even without any written embodiment of the authoritative apostolic teaching. Wherever Christ is known through whatever means, there is Christianity, and men may hear and believe and be saved. But God has caused his grace to abound to us in that he not only published redemption through Christ in the world, but gave this preachment authoritative expression through the apostles, and fixed it with infallible trustworthiness in his inspired word. Thus in every age God speaks directly to every Christian heart, and gives us abounding safety to our feet and divine security to our souls. And thus, instead of a mere record of a revelation given in the past, we have the ever-living word of God; instead of a mere tradition however guarded, we have what we have all learned to call in a unique sense "the Scriptures."

A Remembrance of Warfield

When I returned from Germany in 1906, I entered, as instructor in the New Testament department, into the teaching staff of Princeton Theological Seminary....Warfield was Professor of Systematic Theology (or "Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology," as the chair was then more sonorously and vigorously called). And what a wonderful man he was! His learning was prodigious. No adequate notion of its breadth can be obtained even from his voluminous collected works. Consult him on the most out-of-the-way subjects, and you would find him with the "literature" of each subject at his tongue's end and able to give you just the guidance of which you had need. Now and then, in wonderfully generous fashion, he would go out of his way to give a word of encouragement to a younger man. The old Princeton was an environment in which a man felt encouraged to do his very best.

J. Gresham Machen

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