

[1949. Authority in Religion. The Witness Jul: 5-6.]

AUTHORITY IN RELIGION

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THE pastor of a country church who thought that his people needed instruction called upon an outside speaker for a series of meetings. When the speaker arrived, he looked through the church building. It was a substantial, but in no way outstanding, country church. The windows were of colored glass, the seating capacity was about two hundred, the organ was suitable, the pulpit commodious – but something was wrong: there was no Bible on the desk.

The pastor explained that the previous minister at that church did not use a Bible very often, and this was one reason for having these instructional services. The present pastor used his own Bible and had not yet found a pulpit Bible for the desk. In fact, the pastor confessed, the whole denomination has given up the Bible. At the three-day ministers' conference in the spring the Bible was never used, except on one occasion when a very old minister from England read a bit from a Testament for the morning devotions.

The situation this pastor faced in his church and in his denomination is the result of modernism, and it is modernism. This modernistic age has largely rejected the Bible. While in previous ages those who rejected the Bible were at least honest enough to leave the church, now the unbelievers have stayed in the church and have gained control of it. The result is that religion in America today is not the religion of the Bible.

This rejection of Scripture is to be met partly by the archaeological discoveries of recent times. The rejection of the bible by the churches came about by the repeated assertion that there are many errors in the Bible. It was asserted that the first five books of the Old Testament could not have been written by Moses, as they claim because writing had not been invented in Moses' time. And since no one knew when writing had really been invented, the defenders of Scripture had no answer to this accusation. It was also asserted that there never was a nation of Hittites; and since the Bible believers could not produce evidence outside of the Bible, many people accepted the conclusion that the Bible was wrong. But the evidence was discovered later. It is

now perfectly well known that writing was invented long before the time of Moses; and today the Hittite language is taught in the great universities. The Bible was right all the time. But the people who have rejected the Bible either do not know what has been discovered, or they prefer to hope that the Bible is wrong in other places if not on these points. This is modernism, and it is to be answered partly by showing the recent discoveries of archaeology.

But archaeology is only part of the answer, for underlying modernism and becoming more and more apparent is the assumption that God has given man no definite revelation. The modernists do not deny that God has given some sort of revelation. Only the humanists, who deny the existence of God, deny all revelation. The modernists talk a good deal about revelation, inspiration, worship, and other religious concepts. But more and more they deny that God's revelation is definite.

The modernists are quite happy to talk of God's revelation in nature. And it is true that God has revealed himself in nature. The Bible reminds us that the heavens declare the glory of God. The microscopic world, the structure of the tiny parts of plants, the marvelous forms of crystals and snow flakes, all show the manifold wisdom of God. The Christian as well as the modernist believes that God has revealed himself in nature. But if this is the only revelation, if this is the most definite revelation there is, men soon begin to see in the marvels of nature, nature and only nature. A real, living, personal God recedes into the dim, unnecessary background. At a girls' camp there was a large poster on the lodge wall with the title, "A Camp Girl's Prayer." The prayer spoke of "God of the mountain," and "God of the pine tree," and the resulting impression was one of nature rather than one of God. To avoid naturalism one must have a more definite revelation of God than is found in nature.

The modernists also hold that God has revealed himself in conscience. And the Christian is willing to agree that this is true. But one may well question whether conscience is a clearer, more definite revelation than nature is; indeed one may wonder whether or not conscience is even more obscure than nature. The pigmy in the interior of Africa has a conscience; the lama or sorcerer of Tibet has a conscience; and the New York business man has a conscience. But is it not clear that these three consciences do not give the same message? If we know God only through conscience, we are puzzled by the discordant revelations.

If these consciences agree on anything definite, it is at most the idea that there is a distinction between right and wrong, and that God punished the wrong and reward the right. Now this is true so far as it goes; and the Apostle Paul makes the point in the first two chapters of Romans. But beyond this point there is little agreement as to what is right and what is wrong. Man's conscience is perverted by sin, and while God originally inscribed his law on the heart of man, and while that law is still on man's heart, the writing is now blurred; and not only is the writing blurred – man in his enmity against God does all he can not to read it, or to misinterpret it when he is forced to read it. The net result is that conscience is not a sufficiently definite revelation of God.

But nature and conscience are the most definite revelations that the modernists admit. Or, more in keeping with contemporary developments, revelation, in modernistic terminology, is not supposed to be definite. The American Theological Society was meeting in Chicago. Present were professors from McCormick Theological Seminary, Garret Biblical Institute, the Chicago Divinity School, and other institutions. One of the gentlemen was reading a paper emphasizing the idea that "Revelation is not a communication of truth." In the discussion that followed several of the professors expressed agreement with the proposition that "Revelation is not a communication of truth." Now this is an interesting idea. Nature may reveal the truth that God is powerful and wise. Conscience may reveal the truth is righteous. And these truths stand as revelation even if man cannot read them or distorts them when he reads them. They are truths, they are definite, they are understandable. But what sort of a revelation is it that is not a communication of truth? Is it some emotion or inspiration? Is it enthusiasm, or a feeling of optimism? Is it just being happy? Now, under certain conditions, enthusiasm and happiness are desirable. Surely no one is urging people to be despondent and miserable. But enthusiasm and a feeling of happiness are not a sufficient revelation of God nor a sufficient basis for religion. Enthusiasm is not sufficient for running a business or baking a pie. Few men would care to eat the pie that was produced with enthusiasm apart from certain knowledge usually written down in a recipe. And an enthusiastic business man who follows a course of action without definite knowledge will not remain in business long. We cannot govern life by inspiration and joy. We need norms that are true. We need definite propositions. We need truths that can be understood. Without these there can no more be religion than there can be pie.

Therefore the modernist without the Bible can never have a satisfactory religion. The Christian with the Bible has a definite revelation; he has truth; he knows what principles God wants him to recognize. That is, he may know them if he takes the time to read and study what the Bible says.

There is, however, a further reason why the Bible must be accepted as authority in religion. It may be that nature says something definite about God; it may be that conscience also says something definite about God; but neither of them says enough. The one may speak of God's power; the other of God's righteousness. The Bible, however, not only mentions these things, but it contains additional truths. The other sources of information may give us some knowledge, but the Bible gives us more. Let the revelation of nature and conscience be ever so definite; let men read these revelations with much more understanding than is now the case; still these revelations could produce only despair. What can human frailty do before such a powerful God; and what can sinful humanity do before such righteousness? It is only in the bible that man can discover that God is gracious. Search the Scriptures, said the Lord, for in them ye think ye have eternal life. This makes the Scriptures most necessary; without the Bible there can be no satisfactory religion. The modernist may plan beautiful worship services that obscure the need of salvation, that lull the already complacent sinner to sleep; but how can the modernist without the Bible give any assurance at all that God is gracious. As a matter of fact he hopes God is gracious; or perhaps he hopes that there is so much good in the worst of us, that all of us can lay claim to heaven. He hopes. But has he any knowledge? Has he a message from God that this is so? And his answer is that revelation is not a communication of truth.

The Christian with the Bible has a message from God, and it is a message of salvation through the finished work of Christ. How amazing it is that anyone should be modernist! There is some rugged consistency in abandoning revelation and God together, and abandoning hope, too. But to keep God and abandon truth, to cling to hope and repudiate knowledge, is a confusion born of desperation. The humanist commands a certain respect; the modernist is an object of pity. Maybe the humanist, recognizing his hopelessness, like the publicans and sinners of Christ's day, will finally listen to the message of grace. Maybe the modernist may come to recognize that he has been deceiving himself and seek for a basis of true hope. These things are in God's hands. But however all this may be, the Christian accepts a definite revelation, he has God's truth

written down in propositions that can be understood, he has a basis for his faith. Only so can there be a satisfactory religion. Only so can one know that God is gracious. Only so can one come to accept Christ's sacrifice for sin and be received into the family of God.