

# THE BIBLE—SOLE AUTHORITY? OR THE BASIS OF THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH?

By Nancy Basmajian

As I travel around the Diocese meeting with Church School superintendents and teachers, a few issues come up over and over again. Among them is the place of the Bible in the curriculum and in the Armenian Church in general. Many teachers complain, and often rightly so, that there doesn't seem to be enough direct Bible teaching in the curriculum. Well, we realize that may be true, and we are now in the process of remedying some of these flaws in our curricula.

But, I have also encountered teachers who feel sincerely that the Bible is the *only* thing we must teach. One even, to my surprise, said that "if it isn't biblical, it isn't relevant". She was referring to the Armenian Church's tradition of blessing water, and she isn't alone. Others don't understand why we teach the Badarak or the hymns of the Church or the lives of saints, etc., when we could be teaching Scripture.

These opinions, expressed by those who are, or should be, the most informed and knowledgeable of our Church members, illustrate a most urgent need for adult education in the parishes. It also points out to us in the DRE what the future direction of our teacher training should be.

Some teachers find it easier to teach Scripture because there's so much information on the subject. Many times a teacher will show me a book he or she has found in their local religious book store and say, "Why can't we use this, it's attractive, it's biblical", etc. Unfortunately, though, there is a scarcity of good material on the Badarak or the saints of the Armenian Church. Because of this, we are using the "Bulletin" to hopefully fill in some gaps. And perhaps the best place to start would be with the source of our faith, of which the Bible is only one part.

As Armenians and Orthodox Christians, we have what is known as Holy Tradition. If we base our curriculum on Scripture alone, we are denying our children a great inheritance from the past; and I'm not talking about pilaf or dancing—that would be tradition with a small "t".

The Bible, while the main source of our faith is not the only source. Even the evangelist John and St. Paul attest to this fact. In John, we read, "many other signs also did Jesus in the sight of His disciples, which are not written in the book". (Jn. 20:30). And St. Paul says, "Brethren, hold the traditions which you have learned, whether by word or by epistle" (2 Thes. 2:15). By

"word", St. Paul is referring to oral tradition. So there is more to our faith, and by limiting our teachings to Scripture, we would be doing an injustice to the past, to the present, and to the future.

Within Holy Tradition, the Bible has a unique pre-eminence but it also includes our liturgical and sacramental life, the decrees of the ecumenical councils, of which the Creed is an important result, the writings of the Church Fathers, the lives of the saints, canon law, our music and architecture and in fact our whole system of Church government. While a canon or a hymn do not have as much authority as a Gospel, all are sources of faith, part of the uniqueness of the Armenian Church. And, as heir and guardian of this great inheritance, it is the Church's role, our role, to share in it and to pass it on to the future.

But, there are those who would say Tradition is too wrapped up in the past, that it involves "going through the motions", repeating meaningless rituals and phrases. We're living in the 80's, they say; the past is dead and gone. I disagree. Tradition is alive because the Church is alive. We're not talking about something that happened in the past; we're talking about something that happens everyday to us in the Church. We come together in community to meet Christ. This is Tradition and it is a dynamic experience that happens in the here-and-now to each one of us who are open to it. It is this which we are called upon to pass on to the future in a creative and dynamic way.

Realizing this, we do not seek to minimize the importance of the Bible, but it is crucial that we know and understand its place in Tradition and in the Church.

Armenians call the Bible "the breath of God" and we are a scriptural Church just as firm as any of the Protestant sects. But it is important to remember that the Bible is not set up *above* the Church but lives and is understood *within* the Church. The Bible ultimately receives its authority from the Church because it was the Church which originally decided which books form Scripture. And, very importantly, it is the Church alone which can interpret Scripture with authority.

This is one of the most misunderstood facts in the Armenian Church. I hear "why should the Church tell me how to interpret the Bible . . . I can do it for myself . . . each person is different and should be free to interpret for themselves the meaning of Scripture in their lives . . ." and so on. But when we say that the Church must interpret Scripture, we do not imply that we must sit and listen passively and accept what we hear without questioning or getting involved in the process. On the contrary, the Church encourages active Bible reading and study.

But there are many Biblical passages which taken by themselves are not very clear and the individual reader may innocently arrive at an erroneous conclusion.

For example, we do not always, as do Fundamentalist Protestants, accept a literal interpretation of Scripture. The Fathers of the Church led us into more of an allegorical method. This means they tried to go beyond the words and phrases in order to find the real meaning of the passage. This method, of course, can be dangerous if carried to an extreme, and that is why we need the guidance of the Church.

In teaching the Creation story, for example, we do not want children to think of these chapters in Genesis as literal history. Rather, instead of getting involved in the details and specifics of these passages, we want to teach that God the Father is Creator. The Old Testament writers didn't want to teach us the "how" of creation but the "who" and the "why". If we interpreted these chapters literally, we would lose sight of what's really important and spend too much valuable time defending ourselves to science. We accept proven scientific data about creation and find nothing that contradicts our belief that God is the Creator.

Another problem with interpretation occurs in Mark 3:31 which makes a reference to the "brothers" of Jesus. If we interpreted this passage ourselves, it would be logical to assume that Mary had other children after Jesus. Yet in the Divine Liturgy, and in hymns and prayers we refer to Mary as "ever-virgin". Anyone might, therefore, conclude that this teaching contradicts Scripture.

But the Hebrew word here unlike "brothers" covers a wider range of relationship including cousins and half brothers. So the intent of the writer was only to show kinship. The Church, which is guided by the Holy Spirit being aware of this, guides us to the correct interpretation and to the ultimate Truth that She who bore God, the All Holy One could not have appropriately born any other children after that immaculate and miraculous birth.

Putting Tradition and the Bible in perspective can only help us in being more effective in our role as teachers, and this is but one area in which there may be misunderstanding. We write about it in the "Bulletin" because it has come up so often. If there are other issues or concerns relating to content, we urge you to write us so that we may respond.