

THE BIBLE: AN ORTHODOX VIEW

WHAT THE BIBLE IS NOT

It should be one of the most meaningful phenomena in all Christendom that those churches which claim that they are "founded on the Bible" disagree on everything under the sun while those which can look back to pre-Biblical times agree on so much.

The chaos of today's fundamentalist groups should be adequate proof to any impartial observer that churches are not to be founded by men, and that it was not the divine will that they be founded outside of Holy Tradition so that the Bible is divorced from the Church in which it truly comes alive.

That a Christian Church was founded by Jesus Christ is apparent to anyone who wishes to consider the facts. And it is historic fact that a Christian Church existed for several years before our present New Testament books were written.

Those who feel that their church was "founded on the Bible" would have been quite out of place in the Church founded upon the apostles and prophets, having our Lord as its chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:19).

The absurdity of this position is attested by the facts of history, the internal evidence and the intent of the sacred writers.

First of all, the Scriptures of the first Christians were what we call the Old Testament, that is, their inherited Scriptures as Jews. It is to them that our Lord alludes and from them that he read.

Nothing is said about writing Christian Scriptures, and it is always supposed that the faith is to be conveyed verbally. Even when the sacred writers' very purpose in writing is to adjure their readers to stand firm in the faith and to resist novelties and private speculations, only meagre references appear as to what is to be preserved, the details having been verbally conveyed (e.g. I Timothy 6:20).

Not until the middle of the second century were the books of our New Testament regarded as Scriptures, nor were they ranked with those of the Old Testament until about the turn of the third century. Doubts about those properly included among them persisted until the late fourth century.

Indeed, the primitive Christian attitude toward the sacred books is utterly unintelligible to us today. Some works of importance, including the source of much material in our first three gospels, was lost entirely and other documents barely escaped oblivion.

The point is that the early Christians, who presumably knew more about the matter than self-constituted modern authorities, did not consider their faith the *product* of a literature at all, nor did they regard it as *depending upon* books.

It was centered in an historic figure whom they

recognized as God come in the flesh, assuming human nature in its entirety for the reconciliation of fallen mankind.

The internal evidence is equally definite if we face it squarely. For the modern protestant-fundamentalist idea of the Bible as a sort of dogmatic textbook, a series of letter-precise instructions, is totally at variance with its contents and with the clear intentions of the authors.

The epistles were letters written to Christians of the time for their guidance, exhortation and instruction. Their content reflects contemporary problems and conditions, and it seldom reveals any technicalities, except indirectly.

Incidentally, it is also worth observing that the epistles were the first of our New Testament books to appear, not the gospels. Those to the Thessalonians were first of all, written about AD 53. Since this was about 20 years after the Ascension, and since a Christian church had been a going concern in full operation, with its established procedures, organization and sacraments during that period, it is clear enough that the Christian Church wrote the New Testament, and that the Church was not "founded on" it!

The earliest of the gospels was that ascribed to St. Mark and it seems to be drawn in part from other written or oral sources which predated it, another indication of how little thought was given by the first Christians to the documentation and preservation of their own history! Even though the gospel probably dates from the first century, our first allusion to it appears in the work of Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis, who only reaches his maturity toward the end of the century.

No original manuscripts are traceable, of course, of Mark or any other New Testament book, until centuries later. We have only passing references to them in the extant writings of the Church Fathers.

Now, once again we have the clearest possible evidence that the Bible was not written as a basis for a new Christian religion. Had that been the divine purpose, it would have appeared earlier, it would have been referred to as such by the Church's founder, and it would have exhibited the technical precision which we expect in authoritarian manuals.

This is why it can be quoted in support of every absurd notion under the sun, and why the devil can quote it with such effect. Perhaps because it is the greatest and most important of all books, the Bible is exposed to the greatest abuses.

Certainly no one would presume to speak with authority on any other group of ancient documents of whose beginnings, purposes, authorship, language, in-

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tentions and milieu, he was uninformed. To understand any document we must first know why it was written, know the language in which it was written, and ideally, know the background, circumstances and environment in which it was written.

Yet, in the case of the Bible, we have every person considering himself an authority. And so it is not surprising that we have about as many varieties of "Bible-believing Christianity" as there are adherents.

If such "Christianity" has proven to be one thing more than anything else, it is an open door to schism and chaos while unity, on the other hand, is to be found only where it started - the Church established by Christ, upon which human wisdom has not presumed to improve.

The Bible is the written word of God. Notwithstanding its evident ambiguities and imprecision to those outside the Orthodox Church, the Bible commands a unique veneration by all Christians who will even stretch the manifest meaning of its content to justify their private notions.

This remarkable fact enhances its spiritual authority. When we consult a work for information and it leaves matters uncertain, we do not normally regard it as a model reference for that for which we are trying to use it. Yet, open to all manner of abuse, the Bible occupies a unique position in the life of all Christians. This points to the basis of the Bible's authority, which is only dimly sensed by those who have separated themselves from it, but which is more clearly known to those who continue to share the life inherent in the mystical Body of Christ, the Church.

As the Church wrote our Scriptures, so it is by the Church's decision that we know its books truly to be Scripture. Many works of varying value and authorship circulated in the early Church, and it was not a zeal for documentation which led to the official selection of some and the rejection of others. It was rather because spurious works were advanced in support of various heresies which the Church was called upon to combat.

Thus, the Bible is a product of the Christian life

The Bible comes alive only in the Church

RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD

The Oriental Orthodox Churches

While the adjective *oriental* conjures up images of the Far East, this is the name of the family of churches to which we, the Armenian Church, belong. The Oriental Orthodox Churches are the smaller (numerically) of the Orthodox churches, and include, beside ourselves, the Ethiopian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, the Syrian Orthodox (sometimes called Assyrian) and Indian Orthodox (sometimes called the Indian Malabar) Churches. This family of Christians shares the same theology, the same teachings, and the same doctrine, expressed in different and diverse national traditions.

What primarily ties us to the other four churches is our understanding of the nature of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. We believe that God the Son had *one nature* that was both human and divine. Our position is rooted in the teachings of the Church, as expressed best by St. Cyril of Alexandria, in the 430s. In 451, at the Council of Chalcedon, the position of the Church was articulated that Christ had *two natures* one human and one divine. Suffice it to say that political and other non-theological considerations affected the decision of Chalcedon, causing a division in the Body of Christ which has persisted to this day.

We are the most prominent of the Oriental Orthodox Churches in this country. Our Primate, Archbishop Torkom, is Chairman of the Standing Conference of Oriental Orthodox Bishops of America. We are "in communion" with these four churches, which means that we can receive Holy Communion (and the other sacraments) at each other's Divine Liturgies only. While external differences of language, custom, dress,

etc. may seem to separate us from these Christians, our faith had been the same for centuries and has bound us together, no matter where in the world we have found ourselves. We have always welcomed one another in faith and in love, to serve together our Lord Jesus Christ.



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