

The Bible Alone?

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Australian Catholic Truth Society No.1304 (1959)

IF the average man were asked what was the main achievement of the Protestant Reformation, he would probably reply that it substituted the Bible for the Catholic Church as the final authority in religion. Chillingworth (1602-1644), in his "Religion of Protestants a Safe Way to Salvation," summed up the position by giving us his famous declaration: "The Bible alone is the religion of Protestants." And to the Bible Protestants have ever tended to attribute all the blessings, even in temporal things, which have seemed to come their way.

Thus it became traditional for Englishmen to say that the secret of England's greatness and tolerance was to be found in the "open Bible." They were, of course, insular in their outlook, not adverting to the fact that lesser Protestant countries, equally devoted to the "open Bible," did not reap the same material benefits and apparent prosperity as that which fell to their own lot. Nor did they see the danger of linking the truth of their religion with their progress in earthly wealth and power, an argument which would prove the Catholic religion of Spain the true religion when she was the dominant nation in the world; and which would prove Protestantism false with the decline of England's prestige! As for the Bible being the source of England's love of freedom and spirit of tolerance, history scarcely vindicates its possession of such attributes. It was to escape intolerance and to enjoy freedom of religion for themselves that the first English settlers fled to America.

But there have been delusions here also. Those first settlers were children of their age; and the Protestants among them still subscribed wholeheartedly to Chillingworth's dictum that "the Bible alone is the religion of Protestants." They brought their Bibles with them; and they honestly believed that they had come to America to escape tyranny and to practise the freedom and liberty which they had learned from the Scriptures. But if they declared themselves to be "free men in Christ and determined to remain so," history shows that they too, failed, as England had failed, to apply their principles impartially. Their concern was to have freedom themselves, not to grant it to others who did not happen to share their own religious convictions.

All that, of course, at least to a very great extent, belongs to a past age. No one could say that religious intolerance no longer exists; but it is undoubtedly much less than it was even a generation ago. Yet it has often been observed that, although there is no necessary connection between the two things, the growth of a spirit of tolerance has been accompanied by a decline of interest in the Bible and an increase of indifference to religion generally.

For example, recently in England the Most Rev. Dr. Garbett, Anglican Archbishop of York, painted a depressing picture of the average Englishman's attitude towards the Bible today. Addressing a meeting of the British and Foreign Bible Society in London, May 1952, he said: "it would be sheer wishful thinking to imagine that everything is right in our own land, and that the Bible in our own country is as widely read as in the past. There are many of our fellow countrymen who have not read it at any time in their lives, and have no intention of doing so. Today there are many houses without a Bible, and in some of those where it is found it is not used except where it is opened for

some help in a crossword puzzle. To millions it is an unknown book." ("Church Times," May 9, 1952.)

Without fear of being accused of exaggeration, one could certainly speak in a similar way of America; and this state of growing indifference to the Bible surely compels us to ask ourselves whether there has not been something radically wrong with an approach to the Bible and to the reading of it which did away with the traditional safeguards and guidance accepted throughout the whole of Christendom until the sixteenth century reformers persuaded their followers to stake everything on the Bible alone, each man reading it for himself and making of it what he could.

THE "OPEN BIBLE" AS GUIDE

In the first place we must ask whether the Bible alone was ever meant by God to be the one and only authentic source of doctrine for Christians. No question here arises as to the truth of what is contained in the Bible. If a Protestant declares it to be the inspired Word of God, containing the "untold beauties and glories of Christ," no instructed Catholic would dream of disagreeing with him. Difficulty arises only when the claim is made that the Bible is complete, simple and clear, telling us all that we need to know as regards doctrines to be believed, and all that we need to do in order to conduct ourselves as Christians should throughout our lives in this world.

From the outset, for those willing to think into this matter, the claim that the Bible is a complete guide creates an insuperable problem owing to the fact that it expressly declares that it is not complete. All that is in the Bible is true; but not all that is true is to be found written within it. Christ commanded His Apostles to teach mankind "all things whatsoever I have commanded you." (Matt. 28:20.) Yet St. John concludes his gospel by saying: "There are also many other things which Jesus did; which, if they were written every one, the world itself, I think, would not be able to contain the books that should be written." (Jn. 21:25.) One who declares that the Bible by itself is a complete guide is therefore professing a doctrine not only not contained in the Bible, but one at variance with it. In the last analysis, we cannot escape the conclusion that he is but voicing a purely human and Protestant tradition, strongly as he may protest against the reliability of any tradition.

Again, the claim that the Bible is simple, is negated by the Bible itself. Far from supporting that idea St. Peter, in speaking of St. Paul's epistles, declares that in them there are "things hard to be understood, which the unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, to their own destruction." (2 Pet. 3:16.) That does not sound as if the Bible were so simple.

Finally, if the Bible were indeed clear, how can we account for the fact that Protestants who have taken it as their only authentic guide have so failed to agree among themselves as to what it means that they have split up into over four hundred different and conflicting sects ?

THE WILL OF CHRIST

It can be said here, a thought to which we shall return later, that the man who declares that he accepts only the Bible as his authority in religious matters does not really mean it. For he really believes in what he himself thinks any given passage of the Bible to mean, which might not be what the Bible means at all. For such a person, the only ultimate authority in religious matters is not that of the Bible, but that of his own judgement concerning it; and he has no assurance that his own judgement is any more reliable than that of others whose interpretation differs from his and who honestly believe his interpretation to be quite mistaken.

I mention this here merely to bring out the fact that the Catholic position is not affected by such difficulties. For it holds that Christ never intended the Bible alone to be each man's "Guide Book" to religious truth. His method was to establish a Church authorized by Him to teach mankind in His name. He chose His Apostles, trained them, and commissioned them to go and to teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, "teaching them all things whatsoever I have commanded you." He did not tell them to write any books. No books of the New Testament were written until years after His death. But the first Christians were not without guidance. The Acts of the Apostles tells us that they "were persevering in the doctrine of the Apostles." Acts 2:42.

Christ, therefore, meant the official teaching of the Apostles and of their successors in the Church to be our guide, not the written Bible which is so liable to misinterpretation by its various individual readers, however sincere they may be. The Bible, as the very Word of God, is true in itself; but not all the conclusions people choose to draw from it are necessarily right. And this brings us to a further and very vital point of divergence between the position of Protestants generally and that of the Catholic Church.

"PRIVATE INTERPRETATION"

Apart from the question of the adequacy or inadequacy of the Bible, the problem of its interpretation is one of the first importance. It can have authority for us as the Word of God only provided we rightly grasp exactly what God intended to say. No meanings other than those He intended to be read into the text by men have any divine authority at all.

It has been said that once one admits that the Bible contains the revelation of God Himself, then we have to admit that no man can go wrong if he is guided by it. If he were really guided by it, that would, of course, be true, at least as regards that part of divine revelation which has been recorded in its pages. But the trouble is that a man can wrongly think he is being guided by the Bible when in reality he is not, owing to his having misunderstood it. And is it not true, passing over for the moment the fact that for over a thousand years before the invention of the printing press it was impossible for each man to have a Bible, that when universal distribution became possible, sincere and earnest Bible-readers arrived at a multitude of conflicting conclusions? If private interpretation were God's way, the same Holy Spirit would have led all confiding in His assistance to one and the same truth.

Against these considerations, the command of Christ has been urged that we "search the Scriptures." Jn. 5:39. But the thousands of well-intentioned Protestants who have quoted those words as if indeed they were a command have been led astray by the translation in the Protestant Authorized Version of the Bible, a translation which has been corrected in the Protestant Revised Version to: "Ye search the Scriptures." Christ was stating a fact, not giving a command. He was addressing a group of Jews and blaming them for not recognizing Him as the fulfilment of all that the Scriptures had predicted about Him. The most recent Protestant Revised Standard Version describes Him as saying: "You do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He has sent. You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me."

As a matter of fact, the whole passage is fatal to the contention that by searching the Scriptures one will necessarily arrive at the truth. The very ones to whom Christ was speaking had searched the Scriptures in the sincere belief that by such means they would learn all that was necessary for

eternal life. Christ acknowledged that they really thought in such a way. And yet they had not arrived at the truth!

"BIBLE ITS OWN INTERPRETER"

A way out of these difficulties was thought to be found in the contention that the Bible, as no other book can boast, is its own interpreter. After all, it was urged, since the Bible contains the inspired Word of the Infinite God, no interpretation of it by any finite mind could possibly do it justice. We must therefore hold that the Word of God interprets itself to each sincere reader of the Bible.

It is really impossible, however, to maintain such a position. Although Sacred Scripture is inspired by the "Infinite God", we cannot escape accepting the interpretation placed upon it by finite minds. After all, Scripture must mean something. To declare that meaning is to interpret it. And as human beings have only finite minds, they must either rely on meanings derived from it by their finite minds or refuse to attribute any meaning to Scripture at all.

No book, even one inspired by God, can be its own interpreter; and the very suggestion that the Bible is self-interpreting is opposed to its own teaching. For not only does the Bible nowhere claim to be "its own interpreter", it declares the very opposite. Thus we read in the Acts of the Apostles that, when Philip found the Ethiopian reading the Bible, he said to him: "Think you that you understand what you read?" The man replied: "And how can I, unless some man show me?" Then Philip, in the name of the Church, interpreted the Scriptures for him. (Acts 8:27-39.)

Writing to Timothy, St. Paul tells him that it is the Church of the Living God which is "the pillar and the ground of truth." (1 Tim. 3:15.) Again, he tells him, as a Bishop of that Church, to "keep the good thing committed to your trust by the Holy Ghost.... Preach the word... reprove, entreat, rebuke in all patience and doctrine." (2 Tim. 1:14; 3:2.) What does that mean but to interpret Scripture correctly and insist on the acceptance of the true interpretation declared in the name of the Church wherever it is a question of such doctrines as are contained in the Bible ?

The choice, then, is between interpretations proposed by unauthorized and fallible human minds and those of an authorized and infallible teacher in this world if such exists. The Bible contains the truth; but not everyone, even with the best of good will, is able to discern the truth it contains. The Bible needs an authoritative teacher to explain its meaning in innumerable passages if misunderstandings are to be avoided. If a teacher is needed in schools to explain the text-books dealing with the mysteries of nature itself, how much more necessary is a teacher to explain the mysteries of divine revelation contained in Holy Scripture! The Catholic Church, and the Catholic Church alone, claims to be the divinely-appointed and infallible teacher at hand for this purpose; and hers is the only truly biblical position.

"HOLY SPIRIT SPEAKS!"

Lacking faith in the Catholic Church and not finding her claims acceptable, Protestants go on to declare that even if the Bible as a book cannot be its own interpreter, at least the Holy Spirit is infallible, and He can render each reader infallible in his interpretations provided he has faith in Christ and is prepared to rely entirely upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But if each sincere reader of the Bible is rendered infallible by the Holy Spirit in discerning the meaning God intended to reveal, what is this but to claim for each believer an infallibility before which the much more modest claims of Catholics to one infallible Pope pale into insignificance!

But descending from the ideal plane to that of the real, is it not astonishing that millions of would-be infallible readers of the Bible are not dismayed by the fact that they arrive at a multitude of mutually-exclusive conclusions? Results in practice make it almost a blasphemy to say that the Holy Spirit has anything to do with such a host of contradictory interpretations. Just consider the multitude of different Protestant Churches which have been established in accordance with the immense variety of opinions arising from the private interpretation of Holy Scripture! Thus we have Lutherans and Calvinists, Anglicans and Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Methodists; and the host of more recent sects, such as the Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons, Christian Scientists, Witnesses of Jehovah and an almost unending list of others, each claiming to be based upon the Bible.

The height of absurdity is reached by such extravagances as those of the Kentucky snake cults whose members believe they can be bitten at will by poisonous reptiles without any ill-effects, thinking their practice to be justified by a passage in St. Mark's gospel: "They shall take up serpents... and it shall not hurt them." (Mk. 16:18.) In reality, they base their practice on their own wrong interpretation of those words. Christ did not say that the miraculous sign He promised would be always operative for everybody. Among the signs shown by His followers sometimes even such things as being unharmed by serpents could be expected. But always it would be a miracle wrought by God when God willed, not a kind of magic within the power of deluded people when they willed. The Acts of the Apostles tells us that St. Paul was bitten by a viper, and that God preserved him from harm. (Acts 28: 5) But St. Paul was not guilty of presumption, deliberately allowing himself to be bitten and then challenging God to protect him - a form of presumption which Our Lord expressly condemned. When the devil told Christ to cast Himself down from the pinnacle of the temple, quoting Scripture to show that no harm would come to Him, Our Lord replied: "You shall not tempt the Lord your God." (Matt. 4:7.) Men have not the right to dare God to do even what they think, rightly or wrongly, that God has promised to do.

Even in the earliest years of the Protestant reformation, during the Elizabethan era, Shakespeare made Bassanio say:

In religion, What damned error, but some sober brow Will bless it, and approve it with a text.
("Merchant of Venice," Act III, Scene II, Lines 77-79.)

But it is doubtful whether Shakespeare himself foresaw such grotesque outbreaks resulting from the so-called principle of private judgement as those of the Kentucky snake cults! What has to be noticed, however, is that such fantastic cults are the effect of the same principle as that claimed for themselves by the more sedate and respectable Protestant denominations which reject the authority of the Catholic Church and declare that they have the right to be guided by their own individual interpretations of Holy Scripture.

BIBLE AND REUNION OF CHURCHES

There is a growing consciousness of the evil of all these divisions among Protestants today. They pay much more attention than they once did to the prayer of Christ "that they all may be one as You, Father, in me, and I in You." (John Chapters 17-21.) More and more we hear them speaking about "the sin of our disunity." But the astonishing thing is that they still believe that the only thing needed to bring about unity is for all men to take up the study of one and the same Bible for themselves.

This is merely to propose as a remedy for their divisions the very thing that caused them in the first place.

A few years ago a series of letters on this very subject appeared in the British "Spectator." Towards the conclusion of the correspondence a most significant comment was sent in by Mr. Hamilton Fyfe, of the Rationalist Press Association; by a man, therefore, who, far from being a Catholic, repudiates all belief in the Christian religion. Here is what he wrote to the Editor of the "Spectator":

"Sir, - I felt sure someone would write to you in answer to the astonishing suggestion of W. L. C. Bond that more intense study of the Bible would lead to a reunion of all the Christian sects. As no one seems to have done so, may I point out that it was precisely Bible-reading which created this disunion ? As soon as people were allowed to interpret the Scriptures according to their own fancies, prejudices or craziness, a great many sects were formed, and the unity of Western Christendom, which had prevailed until the sixteenth century, was broken forever. To suppose it could be restored by further doses of the poison which killed it is fantastic. Yours faithfully, HAMILTON FYFE. Rationalist Press Association, Fleet Street." ("Spectator," March 30, 1951.)

Not for a moment does the citation of that letter imply approval of the unbelief of so-called "rationalists." But this particular rationalist has seen at least how inevitably divisions must result from the Protestant principle of the private interpretation of the Bible.

CATHOLIC ATTITUDE

In the light of all this, surely it is not difficult to understand the objections of the Catholic Church to the idea that each reader individually should constitute himself an independent judge as to the meaning of the Bible. As I have suggested earlier, this is practically to claim that each reader is rendered infallible by the Holy Spirit as often as he devotes himself earnestly to the reading of Holy Scripture, a claim far in excess of any claim made by Catholics even for that one man only, the Pope, whose infallibility is exercised on isolated occasions only and within the limits of the most exacting conditions. Even Bernard Shaw was fully alive to this aspect of the subject. "Perhaps," he wrote, in the Preface to his play, "Saint Joan," "I had better inform my Protestant readers that the famous dogma of Papal Infallibility is by far the most modest pretension of the kind in existence. Compared with our infallible democracies, our infallible medical councils, our infallible astronomers, our infallible judges, and our infallible parliaments, the Pope is on his knees in the dust confessing his ignorance before the throne of God, asking only that as to certain historical matters on which he clearly has more sources of information open to him than anyone else his decision shall be taken as final." (Preface to "Saint Joan," sect. "The Church Uncompromised by its Amends.")

What, then, does the Catholic Church say ? She permits and encourages the private reading of Scripture. But she says definitely that no one has the right to interpret the Bible for himself in any way opposed to the official teachings of the Catholic Church.

Passing over the fact that the majority of people lack the required training in the many different sciences bearing upon scriptural interpretation necessary even for a merely natural understanding of the Bible, we have to reckon with the positive provision made by Christ for our instruction in His religion.

The Bible itself tell us that "no prophecy of Scripture is made by private interpretation." (2 Pet. 1, 20.) It tells us that Christ established and guaranteed His Church; that He commissioned that

Church to "teach all nations" (Matt. 28:19.) in His name; and that He said of it: "He that hears you, hears me;" (Lk. 10: 16.) and also: "If a man will not hear the Church, let him be to you as the heathen." (Matt. 18:17.) No wonder St. Paul declared the "Church of the Living God" to be "the pillar and the ground of truth." (1 Tim. 3:15.)

That, then, is the Catholic position. Christ never made His religion dependent upon each individual's private interpretation of the Bible. His infinite wisdom would not choose a method which would lead, and has led, as we have seen, to division, chaos and driftage from religion altogether. He established the Catholic Church; and that Church can say with her Divine Master to those who profess to believe in the Bible that the very Scriptures upon which they claim to rely bear witness of her. (Jn. 5:39.) She is the appointed guide to which, in obedience to Christ, we Catholics submit.

Speaking of the sixteenth century reformers the eminent Congregationalist Scripture scholar, Professor C. H. Dodd, says:

"In placing the Bible at the disposal of the uninstructed they took a fateful step. It could now be read, and was widely read, 'without note or comment,' without the guidance which had been supplied by tradition. To allow and encourage this was inevitably to admit the right of private judgement in interpreting it. (It was now) exposed to the possible vagaries of private interpretation, an absolute authority displacing the authority of the Catholic Church. The Church of Rome replied by an increased rigidity in its control of Bible-reading. The cleavage which ensued had unfortunate results. In the Churches of the Reformation... the claim that the Bible could be read, just as it stood, without the guidance of tradition... exposed it to the dangers of a chaotic individualism. Where there was no longer any common standard or perspective, the line was not easily drawn between a just freedom of responsible judgement and the play of arbitrary preference.... The demand for unqualified freedom opened the way to limitless aberrations. An extreme example is to be found in the exploitation of the more obscure 'apocalyptic' writings such as the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament and the Book of Revelation in the New, which became the licensed playground of every crank." ("The Bible Today," pp. 21-23.)

It is true that Professor Dodd stops short of the final goal to which such thoughts should logically lead. But that merely means that he has not yet attained to the positive and supernatural grace of the Catholic faith in all its fullness. What is encouraging is to find a Protestant biblical scholar glimpsing something of the Catholic outlook on this subject.

DIVINE TRADITION

Professor Dodd has spoken of the guidance "which had been supplied by tradition;" and a word must be said here concerning the nature of tradition in relation to the transmission of Christian doctrine.

The assumption of the Protestant reformers that the Bible contains an adequate account of all that it is necessary for a Christian to believe accounts to a great extent for the wide-spread Protestant prejudice against "tradition," which unfortunately is understood by them as implying a merely human tradition, far removed from Catholic doctrine on the subject. For where it is a question of the transmission of revealed truths in the Church the Catholic doctrine is concerned, not with any merely human traditions, but with what is known as divine tradition - that is, with truths originally revealed by God and handed down in the Church under the protection of the Holy Spirit against all dangers of distortion or perversion.

Now it is certain that there were many important doctrines taught by Christ and by the Apostles which were not written down in the books of the New Testament, books which were essentially of a fragmentary character. As a matter of fact, as we have already seen, it was not until some twenty or thirty years after the foundation of the Church that even part of the Apostolic preaching which we have in the New Testament was committed to writing. What the first Christians treasured was the Apostolic teaching, a teaching which has been preserved in the Church partly by the New Testament writings, partly by tradition. So St. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: "Brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which you have learned, whether by word, or by our epistle." (2 Thess. 2:14.) St. Jude speaks of the necessity of maintaining "the faith once delivered to the saints." (Jude, 3.) He does not speak of that part of it only which was written in the books of the New Testament. Christian teaching in its fullness, not merely the part of it which was written in the New Testament, has been preserved in the official teachings of the Catholic Church.

The transmission of traditional doctrines, however, must not be thought of as a kind of mechanical and continuous handing on by word of mouth from age to age of every express teaching of Christ and of the Apostles, over and above that written down in the New Testament.

Some of these doctrines may be found recorded in the writings of the early Christian Fathers, but only those which came within the scope of the particular subjects which happened to engage their attention. Others may be discovered from a study of archaeological inscriptions, or of religious customs prevailing among the faithful, or of disciplinary canons and liturgical books. But all these are only points, as it were, where the living consciousness of the Church breaks through to the surface. Tradition is essentially the living memory of the Church, manifesting itself primarily in her authentic and infallible teachings, in which the Holy Spirit, according to the promise of Christ, preserves her from the possibility of error and leads her into "all truth." (John 16:13)

Those who will not hear the infallible voice of the Catholic Church and who take the Bible only as their guide are committed to a merely partial presentation of Christianity, even granted that they do accurately understand so much as is contained in the written Word of God.

"CONTROLLED BIBLE-READING"

Let us here go back to one other thought expressed by Professor Dodd. He tells us that to the irresponsible aberrations resulting from the "open Bible" theory of the Protestant reformers "the Church of Rome replied by an increased rigidity in its control of Bible-reading." Such a reaction is surely not unintelligible.

It was William Tyndale who imagined that even "the boy that drives the plough," if given the Bible in his own language, would find no difficulty in discovering its true meaning. But things have not turned out as he expected. And how differently Protestant scholars speak today! Thus we find Dr. W. K. Lowther Clarke writing: "To understand the Bible thoroughly one needs an equipment of wide and varied knowledge compared with which that needed by, say, a Shakespearean scholar is modest.... We see men with their limited capacities grappling with ideas which they comprehend only in part; obscurities, misapprehensions, even contradictions, are inevitable." ("Concise Bible Commentary," (1952), p. 1.)

In the first place, it must be remembered that, where it is a question of translating from one language into another - and it is still more difficult in translating ancient languages into modern speech - it is not always possible to convey to us exactly what the original writers meant. It is this difficulty which has given us the Italian proverb: "Traduttore traditore" - a "translator is a traitor."

In many passages, it is true, substantial accuracy can be attained; but in others, and very important ones, the true sense will almost necessarily be obscured in any other language than the one originally spoken. For even when words of practically identical meaning are chosen in the new language to translate words of the original language, there are characteristic differences of thought and culture between the two languages which introduce variations of meaning. Besides a knowledge of Hebrew and Greek words and grammar, therefore, one who would understand the sense intended by the original writers of the books in the Bible needs a thorough knowledge of the ideas current in their time.

A further element of difficulty also arises where the Bible is concerned from the fact that it is not an ordinary book. It contains a mysterious revelation of God; and the wisest men, left to their own resources, are not competent judges of revealed truth. So we see even the most learned Scripture scholars, men profoundly versed in Hebrew and Greek, the fruit of years of study, falling into innumerable and serious errors, contradicting one another and engaging in endless controversies.

There is but one way out. The interpretation of Scripture must be controlled by the constant Christian teaching handed down in the Church from the very beginning, if it is not to go astray; and only the authoritative voice of the Catholic Church can give us absolute certainty as to what that authentic and traditional Christian teaching really is.

Is it any wonder that those brought up in a Protestant environment should be bewildered by the host of conflicting sects confronting them; or that they should be dismayed when they come across such words in their Bible as those of St. Paul: "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no division among you; but that you all be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgement?" (1 Cor. 1:10.)

In sheer despair, seeing the diversity of denominations, some have decided that it is wrong to belong to any of them; and they have washed their hands of them all, determined to live their own lives, attached to no particular Church, but just following out the teaching of the Bible as they themselves have conceived it to be. Yet what, more often than not, has happened in such cases? Again and again the same phenomenon has occurred. Unable to keep their ideas to themselves, such people have gathered around them others whom they have persuaded to adopt their views; and the result in the end has only been to add further new denominations to the already existent multitude of sects, rendering "confusion worse confounded."

All the while, however, the ideal of unity stressed by St. Paul is realized in a quarter where, owing to their upbringing, these people have never thought of looking for it - in the Catholic Church from which the first Protestant reformers so mistakenly departed. There, in that Catholic Church, despite the fact that its four hundred and fifty millions of members [in 1959, it is now well in excess of one billion members today 2004,] belong to very different nations, all speak the same thing where the Christian Faith is concerned. Catholics are of the same mind and of the same judgement on all essential religious matters; and by this one characteristic, apart from all other considerations, the Catholic Church justifies her claim to be the true Church established by Christ Our Lord. Had the Protestant reformers been true to St. Paul's admonition they would never have left that Church in order to set up rival Churches, with all the divisions and sub-divisions to which they have led. And those among their later followers who have realized this have returned to the Catholic Church as converts, now from this Protestant denomination, now from that, as the writer of this booklet himself has done from the Anglican Church to which he originally belonged.

LINGERING PREJUDICES

One can understand, of course, the reluctance of present-day Protestants to turn back to the Catholic Church for the solution of their difficulties, however disconcerting the position at which they have arrived. They still treasure the thought of the "open Bible," and the whole of their tradition is that the reformers had to leave the Catholic Church in order to give it to them. Moreover, they have inherited the idea that if they returned to the Catholic Church they would have to abandon such devotion to the reading of the Bible as they may have retained. If we add to these the many charges they have heard or read of actual hostility to the Bible on the part of the Catholic Church, we are still less surprised by their refusal to so much as consider her claims to their allegiance. Yet the fact remains that all such impressions are based upon a misunderstanding; and that much more thought needs to be bestowed upon the subject than is usually given to it.

There is no need to dwell at length upon the antiquated charge that the Catholic Church used to burn all the Bibles she could lay her hands upon in pre-reformation times, in order to keep them out of the hands of the people. What the Catholic Church did condemn and order to be burned were false translations of the Bible; and that was out of her sheer reverence and respect for the Bible as the Word of God which she positively refused to allow to be corrupted.

Always the Catholic Church has held the Holy Scriptures in the highest esteem as constituting one of the greatest gifts of Almighty God to mankind. Through the centuries before the invention of the printing press her monks carefully multiplied copies of the Bible by hand in beautifully illuminated manuscripts, thus preserving Holy Scripture for later ages. Had the Catholic Church wanted to destroy the Bible she could easily have done so during the millennium and a half before the Protestant reformation, when all the manuscripts of it were practically in her sole possession! Nor were manuscript translations into the vernacular wanting in pre-reformation times, although naturally they could not be widely diffused before the invention of the printing press. But these versions were known and read, and quoted by the writers of all the countries both in the East and in the West. Many people have laboured under misconceptions on this subject, but as the facts are becoming better known less and less is heard of any charges that the Catholic Church has ever wanted either to suppress or destroy the Bible.

"BIBLE NOT NECESSARY"

Even so, it is urged, although the Catholic Church has no wish to suppress or destroy the Bible, she does not regard it as necessary. Here we come to an impression which is not without some grounds for it. Indeed, Catholic apologists themselves have stressed the fact that even if the Bible should suddenly perish from the earth, through some great calamity, it would not affect one single doctrine of the Catholic Church nor imperil her existence. It is to be noted that such a loss would, in the estimate of Catholics, be a great calamity. They regard the possession of the Bible as a very great blessing. At the same time, they declare that the Bible is not necessary to the existence of the Catholic Church or to the continuance of her mission to mankind; and it is that which needs to be understood.

We could be reminded from the outset, as mentioned above, that if the Bible has not perished from the face of the earth we owe it to the Catholic Church; for, as we have seen, she it was who preserved it in manuscript form through all the earlier centuries. But a much more important aspect of the subject must here be considered.

The actual statement under discussion is quite evidently true; for the Catholic Church existed before a line of at least the New Testament was written; and if she could exist then, she could undoubtedly exist and have continued existing had not a line of the gospels and of the rest of the New Testament ever been committed to writing.

We must remember that the tremendous tidings of the birth of our Saviour and of His accomplishment of our redemption were made known from the very beginning by the preaching of the Apostles; and certainly the three thousand converts from St. Peter's first sermon in Jerusalem were not given New Testaments! In the Acts of the Apostles, written about sixty-three years after the birth of Christ, we have the remark added that when St. Peter had completed his first discourse in public "the Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved." (Acts 2:47) And we have already seen the statement in an earlier verse that the first Christians were "all persevering in the doctrine of the Apostles." (Acts 2:42.) So the Church existed then, even though not a line of the New Testament had then been written. Yet those first members of the Church were equally Christians with those of later centuries who had the good fortune to possess copies of the gospels.

Nevertheless, although it was not absolutely essential to the existence and mission of the Church which Christ had founded, as an additional advantage to her in her work, God was pleased to inspire the Apostles and Evangelists in their later years to commit the main part of their teaching - not all of it - to writing. Even so, a general diffusion of the documents they left as a legacy to the Church, documents which had to be laboriously transcribed by hand, was not possible. The vast majority of Christians had still to depend on the teaching of the Church as their immediate guide to an understanding of their religion. And the invention of the printing press some fifteen hundred years later, which did make the distribution of printed Bibles possible, could not alter the age-long and God-appointed method of dependence upon the authority of Christ's Church as the authentic source of doctrine.

There is a great difficulty here for Protestants who base their religion on the written gospels. They are naturally puzzled by the period which elapsed between the death of Christ and the writing of the New Testament. How did Christians manage without the New Testament in the days when it did not exist? Acutely aware of this difficulty, the prominent American Baptist, Dr. Stanley I. Stuber, declares that Protestants "believe that the New Testament preceded and paved the way for what we know today as the Church. If it had not been for the letters of Paul, the Gospels, and the Book of Revelation, there might have been no Church at all." ("Primer on Roman Catholicism for Protestants," (1953). p. 115.) But that is simply to defy the facts of history. If there is one thing certain, it is that the New Testament depicts Christ as having called His twelve Apostles and as having personally founded His Church upon them, although not a book of the New Testament was written until some twenty or thirty years after the death of Christ.

The Catholic, who accepts the Church as his guide and knows that the Church existed before the New Testament was written, has no difficulty in this matter. If, however, a man thinks of the New Testament as his only guide, the difficulty for him is insuperable. But he has a mistaken notion. Not the reading of Scripture, but the teaching of the Church, was intended to be the guide of Christians: That is why Christ said: "I will build my Church," and later commissioned that Church to go and to teach all nations. (Matt. 16: 18; 28: 19-20)

CATHOLICS AND BIBLE-READING

To complete our brief study of these matters, it is now necessary to consider the actual attitude of the Catholic Church in our own days towards Bible-reading. For there are many misconceptions prevalent among non-Catholics from this point of view also. One can understand that this is almost necessarily so. The still-accepted idea that the Bible should be an "open book" and that everyone is capable of reading and interpreting it correctly for himself must make it difficult for those brought up as non-Catholics to understand the much more guarded attitude of the Catholic Church towards Holy Scripture. As a result of such an outlook, wise control is almost inevitably interpreted either as a prohibition of Bible-reading, or at least as reluctance that it should be engaged in at all. In this matter, however, difficulties are due above all else to one's initial mental approach to the subject, and to keep one's mental outlook balanced it is necessary to take comprehensive historical views.

In the first place, all thought that the Catholic Church, during the centuries before the invention of printing, kept her people in ignorance of the contents of Holy Scripture must be abandoned. Educated Protestants are more and more altering their conclusions on this point.

Thus Dr. Cutts writes:

"There is a good deal of popular misapprehension about the way in which the Bible was regarded in the Middle Ages. Some people think that it was very little read, even by the clergy; whereas the fact is that the sermons of the mediaeval preachers are more full of Scriptural quotations and allusions than any sermons in these days; and the writers on other subjects are so full of Scriptural allusion, that it is evident their minds were saturated with Scriptural diction." ("Turning Points of English History," p. 200.)

From Germany comes similar testimony. The Lutheran, Kropatscheck, says:

"It is no longer possible to hold, as the old polemics did, that the Bible was a sealed book to both theologians and laity. The more we study the Middle Ages, the more does this fable tend to dissolve into thin air." ("Das Schriftprincip der Luth. Kirche," p. 163.)

Another German Lutheran scholar, Dobschutz, writes:

"We must admit that the Middle Ages possessed a quite surprising and extremely praiseworthy knowledge of the Bible, such as might in many respects put our own age to shame." ("Deutsche Rundschau," p. 61.)

A great deal of nonsense has been written on the subject of translations of the Bible into the vernacular or current speech of the people. It is often asked whether it is not true that, before the Protestant reformation, the Bible existed only in Greek and Latin manuscripts. It is forgotten that the Latin manuscripts themselves were translations from the Greek into the vernacular or current speech of the Latins. And from the earliest times, in all countries, there were further translations of Scripture into their various languages.

Restricting ourselves here to England, we find St. Thomas More writing in the sixteenth century that "the whole Bible was long before his (Wycliffe's) day, by virtuous and well-learned men, translated into the English tongue; and by good and godly people, and with devotion and soberness, well and reverently read." ("English Works," p. 235.)

The Venerable Bede died in A.D. 735 as he was finishing the translation of the Gospel of St. John. A manuscript containing a complete Anglo-Saxon interlinear translation of the Book of Psalms, dating from A.D. 825, is still preserved in what is known as the Vespasian Psalter. King Alfred the Great

also undertook the work of translating the Psalms into the vernacular English of his time. The Abbot Aelfric, about A.D. 990 translated many parts of both the Old and the New Testaments into English.

It is true that the Bible of about A.D. 1382, attributed to Wycliffe and made into English about a century and a half before the Protestant reformation, was indeed the first full and complete English version of the whole of the Latin Vulgate. [Provided you ignore the evidence of St. Thomas More] This translation was condemned by the Catholic authorities mainly because it was issued with a Prologue containing the heretical views of the Lollards. Later editions of it, without the Prologue, escaped ecclesiastical censure and attained to a wide. general use even among Catholics - as far, of course, as the laborious transcription by hand in the pre-printing-press days would permit the multiplication of copies.

THOSE "READING-PERMITTS!"

From the time of the Lollards onwards, and above all during the first years following upon the invention of the printing press and the flood of Bibles which then began to be circulated, Catholics had to obtain ecclesiastical permission to possess and read vernacular translations of Holy Scripture. But it was wisdom itself on the part of the Catholic Church to condemn unauthorized translations, and to insist that those who did read approved copies must interpret them in the light of consistent Catholic teaching through the ages, granting permits for such reading only to those sufficiently well-instructed in the faith.

The Catholic Church had learned by long experience the danger to the faith of the people themselves if, without sufficient knowledge and instruction, the reading and interpreting of Scripture without reference to any authoritative guidance became widespread.

The history of the heresies in the first years of the Church, and in the earlier and later Middle Ages, long before the Protestant reformation, had amply proved the fallacy and danger of the private interpretation of Scripture. Every heretic made the Bible mean just what he wished. Misuse of the sacred text by the Albigensians in France, by the Lollards in England, by the Hussites in Bohemia, and by other heretics, compelled the Church to adopt a conservative attitude and restrict permissions for Bible-reading to persons qualified according to the judgement of local ecclesiastical authorities.

The results which followed almost immediately among Protestants after the reformation and their general acceptance of the "open Bible" theory are really the best possible vindication of the prudence exercised by the Catholic Church in this matter. The more thoughtful among Protestant scholars are themselves beginning to see this. Thus the Anglican Canon Wilfrid L. Knox wrote:

"There can be no doubt that the Catholic claim that the Bible without some standard of interpretation cannot be applied to the daily life of the Christian individual was true. The Reformers' claim that the Bible alone is the final and sufficient guide for Christian belief and morality was entirely untenable. In actual fact it involved not the appeal to the Bible, but the appeal to the Bible as interpreted by some particular reformer. The result was a multitude of warring bodies, each holding a different system of belief and anathematizing all others; the only ground of agreement being their denunciation of the errors of Rome." ("Essays Catholic and Critical," Third Edition, 1950, p. 99.) CATHOLIC POSITION TODAY

To a great extent the heated controversies of the sixteenth century belong to the past, together with all the actions and reactions they provoked. In many matters accordingly the disciplinary laws of the

Catholic Church have become much milder than those designed to meet emergencies then; and here it will be of interest to ask what the Catholic position is today where Bible-reading is concerned.

In the first place it must be said quite frankly that it is not customary in Catholic Churches to lay stress on the practice of Bible-reading, although Catholics are certainly in no way discouraged from engaging in it. [and in the decades since this was first written, the Church rejoices that more Catholics DO take the time to read the Scriptures and fertilize the plant so lavishly cultivated by the Liturgy of the Church, which includes a super-abundance of the delectable Word of God.]

In Catholic Churches stress is naturally laid on the fulfilment of necessary duties, attendance at Mass on Sundays and other days of obligation, reception of the Sacraments, the duties of personal prayer, the observance of the ten commandments and fidelity to the precepts of the Church. Outside these basically necessary duties, Catholics are encouraged to participate in extra and optional devotional functions, and to increase their knowledge of their religion by keeping up their Catholic reading of religious books, magazines and newspapers. They cannot do all this without growing in their understanding of the religion of the Bible, even though they do little or no direct reading of the Bible itself.

It is not an exaggeration to say that if a Catholic knows his religion well he knows the religion of the Bible; and that is far better than reading the Bible yet not understanding what it really means. How many non-Catholics there are, hosts of them, who do give themselves to Bible-reading and who end by being able to quote a veritable torrent of Scripture-texts they misunderstand, and who equally end therefore with very little real knowledge of the Christian religion! Who has not encountered Christadelphians, Seventh Day Adventists, Witnesses of Jehovah, and others like them, who pour out streams of Scripture-texts without rhyme or reason, and who seem to make almost the whole of their religion consist in their ability to do so!

It would, however, be an understatement to say of Catholics merely that they are "not discouraged" from taking up the study of Holy Scripture for themselves, leaving it at that. They are positively encouraged to do so. Thus it is usual to find in the introductory pages of Catholic translations of the Bible various Papal commendations of the regular habit of Bible-reading. Catholics are there informed that Pope Leo XIII granted an indulgence of 300 days to all the faithful who devoutly read the Scriptures for at least a quarter of an hour each day; that Pope Pius X conferred special blessings upon Catholic societies established to propagate ever more widely among Catholics the reading of the Bible; and that Pope Benedict XV declared: "Our one desire for all the Church's children is that, being saturated with the Bible, they may arrive at the all-surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ."

We must not, of course, misinterpret these exhortations as constituting a law. The reading of Holy Scripture for themselves still remains optional for Catholics, not necessary. There is no room in the Catholic religion for the "Bibliolatry" which would like to make Bible-reading the very foundation of the Christian religion. It is not. We must not lose sight of what has been said earlier in this booklet. Christ never ordered a line of Scripture to be written. He did not command His Apostles to go and distribute Bibles. He commanded them to teach all nations as He had taught them, and said to them: "He who hears you, hears me." (Lk. 10:16.) His religion is not the "religion of a book," but the "religion of a Church," - the religion of the Catholic Church founded by Himself.

Catholics who know and love the teachings of their Church will be "saturated with the Bible," even if they never look at an actual Bible themselves; and they can thus attain to "the all-surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ." St. Francis of Assisi, who spent his life in utter poverty, prayer and self-

denial, and who devoted himself to preaching the love of God and the love of our fellow-men, lived in the thirteenth century, long before the invention of printing and when personal copies of the Bible were not easily obtained. He was no Bible-student in the sense of being given to the direct study of Holy Scripture. But he knew the religion of the Bible by his understanding of his Catholic Faith; and few men have attained as he to "the all-surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ." And the Catholic Church has canonized him as a Saint because of the way in which he radiated Christ in word and deed.

At the same time, while it is not necessary, Bible-reading is good as a source of additional spiritual inspiration, if it be read with humility and piety, prayer and due prudence. The rules of prudence have been laid down by the Church.

Catholics must restrict themselves to versions of Holy Scripture which have been approved by their Church. They are well provided with reliable English translations of both Old and New Testaments, whether in the Douay-Rheims version; or that published recently by Monsignor Ronald Knox, a version which has won the unstinted praise of all scholars, Catholic and Protestant alike. In addition to these translations of the complete Bible, there are available to Catholics two other versions of the New Testament in English, the Westminster version made directly from the Greek by a group of English Catholic scholars, and the version published in America by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. [And, since this was written a large number of new and approved versions have been made along with several in co-operation with non-Catholic scholars. In addition, a prudent loosening of the restrictions on non-Catholic versions has also been permitted.] Non-Catholic translations of the Bible, over which the Catholic Church has been able to exercise no supervision and to which she has not granted any authorization, may not be used by Catholics unless they are professional students of Sacred Scripture or have obtained special permission for reasons deemed sufficiently serious from the appropriate ecclesiastical authorities.

Even in reading approved Catholic versions, since there is always the possibility of individual readers misinterpreting the Bible, Catholics are obliged to make sure that they do not adopt any interpretation which is opposed to the defined teachings of the Catholic religion. Catholics at least have the humility to admit that, where it is a question of the meaning of Holy Scripture, they themselves are more liable to be mistaken than the Catholic Church, with its accumulated wisdom of two thousand years, and the abiding protection of the Holy Spirit promised to their Church by Our Lord Himself.

CONCLUSION

It is sometimes said by non-Catholics that Catholics do not read their Bibles, or that at least they give no signs of being familiar with them. Now it is true that Catholics do not make a fetish of memorizing an endless list of isolated Bible texts in order to be able to quote them, whether intelligently or unintelligently, whenever an opportunity occurs. But in the majority of Catholic homes, if not the complete Bible of both Old and New Testaments, there would be at least copies of the New Testament. And far more Catholics read Holy Scripture for themselves than is commonly supposed by non-Catholics.

But, as we have seen, it would not really matter if they did not. Bible-reading is not necessary for salvation; and it is even better not to read it than to read it and be led astray through one's own incompetence, "wresting it," as St. Peter says, to one's "own destruction." (2 Peter 3: 16.)

If any individual Catholic is ignorant of any particular aspect of biblical knowledge, it would obviously be because he had had neither the time, nor perhaps the ability, nor even perhaps the inclination to devote himself to the study of the particular aspect in question. But whatever may be said from that point of view, no ordinarily well-instructed Catholic is ignorant of the substantial contents of the Bible. Even though he does not devote additional time to reading the Bible for himself, he has been taught his Bible history during his schooldays; he hears the Bible read and explained to him at Mass on Sundays; [and he has now more of it read to him at daily Mass;] he finds biblical truth enshrined in all forms of Catholic devotion; and he knows how to live the faith which the Bible teaches.

In conclusion, let us sum up briefly the position maintained in this booklet. Firstly, without the authority of the Catholic Church there can be no absolutely certain guarantee that the Bible is the Word of God. Secondly, the Bible is a book which needs an interpreter. Thirdly, the Bible itself tells us that it is not the only source of religious truth, and that Christian tradition is also a source from which we can learn what God has revealed. Fourthly, the Bible tells us that Christ instituted His Church to teach us in His name what we must believe and do in order to be saved. Our immediate standard, therefore, is the official teaching of Christ's Church. The Bible and Tradition are remote standards of doctrine, to be understood as interpreted by the Church.

The Catholic Church insists that all men must accept the true religion of Christ; and that all those teachings she has defined as articles of faith truly represent the religion of Christ. And, however else they may differ, she does secure the complete unity of over four hundred and fifty millions [in 1959] of Catholics throughout the world where the essential teachings of their religion are concerned. She outnumbers in membership all other Churches separated from her; and these other Churches are ever lamenting their divisions among themselves and their inability to devise ways and means to attain to a unity which is a reality in the Catholic Church. It is in the Catholic Church, then, and in the Catholic Church only, that the unity for which Our Lord prayed is to be found; and the innumerable converts who have become Catholics in order to share in that unity are unanimous that the Bible itself, properly understood, leads only in the direction they took, and which led them to that "peace of Christ in the kingdom of Christ" which He wills all His followers to possess.

Nihil Obstat: Percy Jones Censor Deputatus. Imprimatur: +D. Mannix Archiepiscopus
Melbournensis. 11th February, 1959
