

Holy Scripture and the Authority of the Church

by J.H. Newman

The Church's authority is derived from Scripture, and it must not enforce as an article of faith any point not contained in Scripture.

Scripture: Proverbs 30:5, Acts 17:11, 1 Timothy 3:15, 2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:20

Topics: "Scripture Authority", "Church Doctrine"

Description

J.H. Newman delves into the significance of Holy Scripture and the Church in teaching revealed truth, emphasizing that Scripture contains all necessary articles of faith and the Church has authority in controversies of faith, yet must not contradict Scripture. The Canon of Scripture is affirmed to be those books that the Church Catholic has never doubted, distinguishing them from the Apocrypha which, though not canonical, are still read for edification. The sermon also explores the relationship between the Church and Scripture, highlighting that the Church derives its faith entirely from Scripture and is tasked with harmoniously interpreting it.

Transcript

Articles vi. & xx.—"Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. The Church hath [power to decree (statuendi) rites and ceremonies, and] authority in controversies of faith; and yet it is not lawful for the Church to [ordain (instituere) any thing that is contrary to God's word written, neither may it] so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another. Wherefore, although the Church be a witness and a keeper of Holy Writ, yet [as it ought not to decree (decerne) anything against the same, so] besides the same, ought it not to enforce (obtrudere) anything to be believed for necessary of salvation."

Two instruments of Christian teaching are spoken of in these Articles, Holy Scripture and the Church.

Here then we have to inquire, first, what is meant by Holy Scripture; next, what is meant by the Church; and then, what their respective offices are in teaching revealed truth, and how these are adjusted with one another in their actual exercise.

Now what the Church is, will be considered below in section 4.

And the Books of Holy Scripture are enumerated in the latter part of the Article, so as to preclude question. Still two points deserve notice here.

First, the Scripture or Canonical books are said to be those "of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church." Here it is not meant that there never was any doubt in portions of the Church or particular Churches concerning certain books, which the Article includes in its Canon; for some of them,--as, for instance, the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Apocalypse--have been the subject of much doubt in the West or East, as the case may be. But the Article asserts that there has been no doubt about them in the Church Catholic; that is, at the very first time that the Catholic or whole Church had the opportunity of forming a judgment on the subject, it pronounced in favour of the Canonical Books. The Epistle to the Hebrews was doubted by the West, and the Apocalypse by the East, only while those portions of the Church investigated separately from each other, only till they compared notes, interchanged sentiments, and formed a united judgment. The phrase must mean this, because, from the nature of the case, it can mean nothing else.

And next, be it observed, that the books which are commonly called Apocrypha, are not asserted in the Article to be destitute of inspiration or to be simply human, but to be not Canonical; in other words, to differ from Canonical Scripture, specially in this respect, viz. that they are not adducible in proof of doctrine. "The other books (as Hierome saith) the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners, but yet doth not apply them to establish any doctrine." That this is the limit to which our disparagement of them extends, is plain, not only because the Article mentions nothing beyond it, but also from the reverential manner in which the Homilies speak of them, as shall be incidentally shown in Section 11. [The compatibility of such reverence with such disparagement is also shown from the feeling towards them of St. Jerome, who is quoted in the Article, who implies more or less their inferiority to Canonical Scripture, yet uses them freely and continually, as if Scripture. He distinctly names many of the books which he considers not canonical, and virtually names them all by naming what are canonical. For instance, he says, speaking of Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus, "As the Church reads Judith, Tobit, and the Maccabees, without receiving them among the Canonical Scriptures, so she reads these two books for the edification of the people, not for the confirmation of the authority of ecclesiastical doctrines." (Praef in Libr. Salom.) Again, The Wisdom, as it is commonly styled, of Solomon, and the book of Jesus son of Sirach, and Judith, and Tobias, and the Shepherd, are not in the Canon." (Præf ad Reges.) Such is the language of a writer who nevertheless is, to say the least, not wanting in reverence towards the books he thus disparages.]

A further question may be asked, concerning our received version of the Scriptures, whether it is in any sense imposed on us as a true comment on the original text; as the Vulgate is upon the Roman Catholics. It would appear not. It was made and authorized by royal command, which cannot be supposed to have any claim upon our interior consent. At the same time every one who reads it in the Services of the Church, does, of course, thereby imply that he considers that it contains no deadly heresy or dangerous mistake. And about its simplicity, majesty, gravity, harmony, and venerableness, there can be but one opinion.

Next we come to the main point, the adjustment which this Article effects between the respective offices of the Scripture and the Church; which seems to be as follows.

It is laid down that, 1. Scripture contains all necessary articles of faith; 2. either in its text, or by inference 3. The Church is the keeper of Scripture; 4. and a witness of it; 5. and has authority in controversies of

faith; 6. but may not expound one passage of Scripture to contradict another; 7. nor enforce as an article of faith any point not contained in Scripture.

From this it appears, first, that the Church expounds and enforces the faith; for it is forbidden to expound in a particular way, or so to enforce as to obtrude; next, that it derives the faith wholly from Scripture; thirdly, that its office is to educe an harmonious interpretation of Scripture. Thus much the Article settles.

Two important questions, however, it does not settle, viz. whether the Church judges, first, at her sole discretion; next, on her sole responsibility, i. e. first, what the media are by which the Church interprets Scripture, whether by a direct divine gift, or catholic tradition, or critical exegesis of the text, or in any other way; and next, who is to decide whether it interprets Scripture rightly or not;--what is her method, if any; and who is her judge, if any. In other words, not a word is said, on the one hand, in favour of Scripture having no rule or method to fix interpretation by, or, as it is commonly expressed, being the sole rule of faith; nor on the other, of the private judgment of the individual being the ultimate standard of interpretation. So much has been said lately on both these points, and indeed on the whole subject of these two Articles, that it is unnecessary to enlarge upon them; but since it is often supposed to be almost a first principle of our Church, that Scripture is "the rule of faith," it may be well, before passing on, to make an extract from a paper, published some years since, which shows, by instances from our divines, that the application of the phrase to Scripture is but of recent adoption. The other question, about the ultimate judge of the interpretation of Scripture, shall not be entered upon.

"We may dispense with the phrase 'Rule of Faith,' as applied to Scripture, on the ground of its being ambiguous; and again, because it is then used in a novel sense; for the ancient Church made the Apostolic Tradition, as summed up in the Creed, and not the Bible, the Regula Fidei, or Rule. Moreover, its use as a technical phrase, seems to be of late introduction in the Church, that is, since the days of King William the Third. Our great divines use it without any fixed sense, sometimes for Scripture, sometimes for the whole and perfectly adjusted Christian doctrine, sometimes for the Creed; and at the risk of being tedious, we will prove this, by quotations, that the point may be put beyond dispute.

"Ussher, after St. Austin, identifies it with the Creed--when speaking of the Article of our LORD'S Descent to hell, he says,--

"It having here likewise been further manifested, what different opinions have been entertained by the ancient Doctors of the Church, concerning the determinate place wherein our Saviour's soul did remain during the time of the separation of it from the body, I leave it to be considered by the learned, whether any such controverted matter may fitly be brought in to expound the Rule of Faith, which, being common both to the great and small ones of the Church, must contain such varieties only as are generally agreed upon by the common consent of all true Christians.--Answer to a Jesuit, p. 362.

"Taylor speaks to the same purpose: 'Let us see with what constancy that and the following ages of the Church did adhere to the Apostles' Creed, as the sufficient and perfect Rule of Faith.--Dissuasive, part 2, i. 4, p. 470. Elsewhere he calls Scripture the Rule: 'That the Scripture is a full and sufficient Rule to Christians in faith and manners, a full and perfect declaration of the Will of GOD, is therefore certain, because we have no other.' Ibid. part 2, i. 2, p. 384. Elsewhere, Scriptures and the Creed: 'He hath, by His wise Providence, preserved the plain places of Scripture and the Apostles' Creed, in all Churches, to be the Rule and Measure of Faith, by which all Churches are saved.--Ibid. part 2, i. 1, p. 346. Elsewhere he identifies it with Scripture, the Creeds, and the first four Councils: 'We also [after Scripture]

do believe the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene, with the additions of Constantinople, and that which is commonly called the symbol of St. Athanasius; and the four first General Councils are so entirely admitted by us, that they, together with the plain words of Scripture, are made the Rule and Measure of judging heresies among us.--Ibid. part 1, i. p 131.

"Laud calls the Creed, or rather the Creed with Scripture, the Rule. 'Since the Fathers make the Creed the Rule of Faith; since the agreeing sense of Scripture with those Articles are the Two Regular Precepts, by which a divine is governed about his faith, &c.--Conference with Fisher, p. 42.

Bramhall also: 'The Scripture and the Creed are not two different Rules of Faith, but one and the same Rule, dilated in Scripture, contracted in the Creed.--Works, p. 402. Stillingfleet says the same (Grounds, i, 4. 3.); as does Thorndike (De Rat. fin. Controv. p. 144 &c.). Elsewhere, Stillingfleet calls Scripture the Rule (Ibid. i. 6. 2.); as does Jackson (vol. i. p. 226). But the most complete and decisive statement on the subject is contained in Field's work on the Church, from which shall follow a long extract.

'It remained to show, he says, 'what is the Rule of that judgment whereby the Church discerneth between truth and falsehood, the faith and heresy, and to whom it properly pertaineth to interpret those things which, touching this Rule, are doubtful. The Rule of our Faith in general, whereby we know it to be true, is the infinite excellency of G

OD..... It being pre-supposed in the generality that the doctrine of the Christian faith is of GOD, and containeth nothing but heavenly truth, in the next place, we are to inquire by what Rule we are to judge of particular things contained within the compass of it

' This Rule is, 1. The summary comprehension of such principal articles of this divine knowledge, as are the principles whence all other things are concluded and inferred. These are contained in the Creed of the Apostles.

'All such things as every Christian is bound expressly to believe, by the light and direction whereof he judgeth of other things, which are not absolutely necessary so particularly to be known. These are rightly said to be the Rule of our Faith, because the principles of every science are the Rule whereby we judge of the truth of all things, as being better and more generally known than any other thing, and the cause of knowing them.

'3. The analogy, due proportion, and correspondence, that one thing in this divine knowledge hath with another, so that men cannot err in one of them without erring in another; nor rightly understand one, but they must likewise rightly conceive the rest.

'4. Whatsoever Books were delivered unto us, as written by them, to whom the first and immediate revelation of the divine truth was made.

'5. Whatsoever hath been delivered by all the saints with one consent, which have left their judgment and opinion in writing.

'6. Whatsoever the most famous have constantly and uniformly delivered, as a matter of faith, no one contradicting, though many other ecclesiastical writers be silent, and say nothing of it.

"7. That which the most, and most famous in every age, constantly delivered as a matter of faith, and as received of them that went before them, in such sort that the contradictory and gainsayers were in their beginnings noted for singularity, novelty, and division, and afterwards, in process of time, if they persisted in such contradiction, charged with heresy.

"These three latter Rules of our Faith we admit, not because they are equal with the former, and originally in themselves contain the direction of our Faith, but because nothing can be delivered, with such and so full consent of the people of G

OD, as in them is expressed, but it must need be from those first authors and founders of our Christian profession. The Romanists add unto these the decrees of Councils and determination of Popes, making these also to be the Rules of Faith; but because we have no proof of their infallibility, we number them not with the rest.

"Thus we see how many things, in several degrees and sorts, are said to be Rules of our Faith. The infinite excellency of G

OD, as that whereby the truth of heavenly doctrine is proved. The Articles of Faith, and other verities ever expressly known in the Church as the first principles, are the Canon by which we judge of conclusions from thence inferred. The Scripture, as containing in it all that doctrine of Faith which CHRIST the SON of GOD delivered. The uniform practice and consenting judgment of them that went before us, as a certain and undoubted explication of the things contained in the Scripture. So then, we do not make Scripture the Rule of our Faith, but that other things in them are Rules likewise; in such sort that it is not safe, without respect had unto them, to judge things by the Scripture alone, &c. iv. 14. pp. 364, 365.

"These extracts show not only what the Anglican doctrine is, but, in particular, that the phrase 'Rule of Faith' is no symbolical expression with us, appropriated to some one sense; certainly not as a definition or attribute of Holy Scripture. And it is important to insist upon this, from the very great misconception to which the phrase gives rise. Perhaps its use had better to be avoided altogether. In the sense in which it is commonly understood at this day, Scripture, it is plain, is not, on Anglican principles, the Rule of Faith."

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