

God Never Speaks Nonsense

Every theology is determined by the source or sources from which it draws ideas. Nowadays, there seem to be many sources and opinions that shape and mould theologies. This is a far cry from the Reformation principle "sola Scriptura," Scripture alone.

During the Reformation, the inerrancy of Scripture was not a matter of debate either for the Catholic or the Protestant. The inerrancy of Scripture was accepted: the plenary verbal inspiration of the autographs and their protection from error in origin and transmission. And, Christians of Reformed persuasion accepted Scripture not only as their only source for doing theology, but they also bowed before its authority in matters of faith, morality, science and history. Scripture constituted a single and trustworthy source and norm for faith and practice. The authority was the Bible in its totality. The Bible gave the Word of God in every subject. The Bible was the Word of Life.

As I thought about the developments in the Church today, and in the Christian Reformed Church in particular, John Bunyan's (1628-1688) view of and attitude toward Scripture came to mind. In his "apology" for writing *Pilgrim's Progress*, he said about Scripture:

Were not God's laws, His gospel laws in olden time held forth
By types, shadows, and metaphors? Yet loath
Will any sober man be to find fault
With them, lest he be found for to assault
The highest wisdom. No, he rather stoops,
And seeks to find out what by pins and loops,
By calves and sheep, by heifers and by rams,
By birds and herbs, and by the blood of lambs,
God speaketh to him; and happy is he
That finds the light and grace that in them be.
Dark figures, allegories, -yet there springs
From that same book, that lustre, and those rays
Of light that turn our darkest night to days.

Bunyan's Contribution

English literature can hardly boast of a more remarkable Christian author than John Bunyan. He had little education, was born of poor parents. He had a hyper-conscientious religious sensitivity, which at times seemed almost paralyzing. In his search for salvation, he had as his only companion the Bible. It became inexpressibly precious to him. In time he discovered in Scripture the marvelous gospel of grace. He felt liberated, relieved and overjoyed. He became a lay preacher and was imprisoned for doing so. During his imprisonment he wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*, which is still the greatest book of its kind in English; *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, a spiritual autobiography, and *Defense of Justification by Faith*. It is said of his book, *The Holy War*, written after his imprisonment, that it "would be the best allegory ever written if *Pilgrim's Progress* did not exist." Except for the Bible itself, no book was held in higher

esteem and was more read among the lower and middle classes of England during the 18th century than the *Pilgrim's Progress*. This book has been translated into many languages and is still faithfully read for edification, and inspiration. Its powerful imagery and message are grounded in the classic Reformed view of Scripture. Bunyan read Scripture simply as coming from the hand of God, given by inspiration through the ages to holy men of God. He found Christ, and developed a strong Christian faith simply through the reading of his Bible.

Bunyan never questioned Scripture. His mind and heart were shaped and inspired by the Word. He believed the Bible totally as the inspired Word of God to man--God's message to His people, as valid for the present as the past. He was accustomed to apply texts to himself and his needs, particularly in the time of testing, temptation or sorrow. He held to Peter's word referring to the prophetic writing of the Old Testament, "Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:21).

His View of Scripture

Bunyan is still duly appreciated for his literary genius. However, his view of Scripture does not receive the same appreciation. He was a student of the Bible. As he read it, he discovered the great truths of man's fall into sin, God's gracious redemption in Christ, the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the pursuit of holiness and the glorious return of Christ. And Bunyan discovered all these doctrines WITHOUT THE AID OF THEOLOGIANS! How different from today! I am not saying that theologians are not needed. But I get the impression that without the help of modern theologians and biblical scholars, the ordinary person in the pew can no longer read his Bible. We are told that we need the whole modern scholarly apparatus before we can open Scripture. Do we really need a host of interpreters before the Bible can deliver its cargo? Has our technological secular 20th century made us incapable of receiving it? Many tell us that nuggets of truths are wrapped in culturally conditioned packages. You have to unwrap these packages to get to the truth. For example, in order to understand the first chapters of Genesis, you have to know about the cultural and religious background. You need, of course, someone to teach all this.

The same holds true for the Apostle Paul. We must know his times, his culture, his rabbinic background, and the thought forms of his day, before we can even begin to interpret his epistles. But which interpreter of Scripture do we need or want? Liberation, black or feminist theologies? Bultmannianism? They all have in common that the modern context should determine how we should read the Bible. Take Howard Van Till's *The Fourth Day* and his statements published in *Christianity Today*, August 12, 1988. Van Till is a professor of physics and astronomy at Calvin College. His views have caused quite a stir in the Christian Reformed Church. Van Till doesn't accept the plain language of Scripture. He approaches the first chapter of Genesis with sweeping and unfounded assumptions. He relies only on H.N. Ridderbos' work, "Is There a Conflict Between Genesis 1 and Natural Science?" for his literary framework hypothesis. This leads him to say:

"The seven-day chronology that we find in Genesis 1 has no connection with the actual chronology of the Creator's continuous dynamic action in the cosmos. The creation-week motif is a literary device, a framework in which a number of very important messages are held. "

With this hypothesis, combined with a view of science biased toward an evolutionary model of origins, he seeks to interpret the creation account. Van Till seems to have a deeply felt "respect" for methods and conclusions of "the majority opinion within the professorial scientific community." Though he denies that he is building a theistic evolutionary model, he still proposes that evolution be presented as the ongoing expression of God's strategy. Says Van Till:

"Similarly, I prefer to speak of cosmic evolution not as the method employed by God to form His Creation, but as the 'expression of God's strategy' for the temporal development of His Creation. "

Van Till does not like the term "theistic evolution." He states that this is not an appropriate label for his position. He prefers to call his view "the creationomic perspective."

The Final Authority

Whose authority or view must we accept? None, but the Scripture. We must return to the Reformed principle of perspicuity of Scripture. The Bible is accessible to every believer. The Reformers maintained that the biblical text is basically clear and lucid. It is simple enough for any literate person to grasp its basic message. This does not mean that all parts of Scripture are easily understood. And, of course, some fine points of exegesis are missed by laymen who have not studied ancient languages. But, the essential text and context are clear enough to be understood easily. We don't need a guru to enlighten us in the mysteries of the faith. The Bible speaks in plain and meaningful patterns of speech. And we accept by faith God's message. I believe that R.C. Sproul is right when he writes:

"What kind of God would reveal his love and redemption in terms so technical and concepts so profound that only an elite corps of professional scholars could understand them? God does speak in primitive terms because he is addressing himself to primitives. At the same time, there is enough profundity contained in Scripture to keep the most astute and erudite scholars busily engaged in their theological inquiries for a lifetime. "

We need a theology with God's Word as its source. When we use that Word, we will understand the origin of the world (Hebrews 11:3), and we will also know how to live in God's world. To come back to John Bunyan, I prefer his approach to Scripture. It is thoroughly reformed, and straightforward-Scripture alone, and Scripture is clear. God never speaks nonsense.

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