
SCRIPTURE, FAITH & REASON

By Robert L. Dabney¹

The sacred Scripture's authority as our rule of faith is inferred immediately from their inspired character; for if God is perfect truth, as must be assumed, or else all search for truth anywhere is preposterous, and if the Bible is God's word, then it is infallible, and of course authoritative over the soul. But is the inspiration of the Bible self-evident to its readers? I answer, it is not immediately self-evident—that is to say, the proposition, “The Bible is inspired,” is not axiomatic—but it is readily found to be true upon bringing the internal and external evidences of it under the light of our self-consciousness, our mental and our moral intuitions. This is but saying that God, in revealing himself to man, has clothed his revelation with an amount of reasonable and moral evidence adapted to the creature's nature, and sufficient, when inspected, to produce a perfect conviction. Thereupon the word of God assumes its place as of plenary authority over the soul in the department of which it professes to teach, that of our religious beliefs, duties and redemption.

Let me here request your attention to two vital remarks. One is, that the fullest and most submissive faith is supremely reasonable. This is demonstrated by the fact that the postulate from which the authority of the Word over the soul inevitably arises (this, namely, that the Bible is inspired) has been irresistibly commended to the reason itself. Hence it is simply impossible there should be any competition between right reason and true faith. This is the Protestant, or, in other words, the Bible system. It does not demand the reception of the Scriptures as God's word in advance of rational evidence that it is such, upon the pretended authority of the Church, or on any such illogical pretext. But it presents to the reason and conscience credentials which triumphantly establish the claims of revelation, and then it places the Bible on the throne of the soul as authoritative witness for God—authoritative because proved true. The enlightened reason now delights to bow implicitly to it, and in doing so it finds the highest consistency with its own nature.

The other statement is this: Intelligent faith is still not rationalistic, in the vicious sense of that term. The basis of faith is not human speculation, but God's infallibility. It may be asked, “Did we not just now require the Scriptures to submit its claims of infallibility to our reason? Is not the authority which the Scriptures exercise, then, only that which reason has conferred upon them?” I answer, No; the point is only a verbal fallacy. If a trope must be suggested, it would be far more correct to say that the Scriptures impose their irresistible evidences upon the reason. The Scriptures exercise all that authority which their own intrinsic truth confers; this reason does not confer, but receives. Here, then, is the radical difference between intelligent faith and rationalism.

¹ From *Sacred Rhetoric*, or, A Course of Lectures on Preaching: delivered in the Union Theological Seminary of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S., in Prince Edward, Va. (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1870; reprint (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), pp. 187-189.

Faith makes reason the recipient of revealed light; rationalism makes it the source. Faith begins by recognizing, on reasonable grounds, the infallibility of the Word, and thence forward bows to it implicitly. Rationalism denies that infallibility, and calls the Word in question at every step, making reason the source and measure of authority in every doctrine. In the true believer the reason receives the teachings of the Word as the eye receives the light of the sun. There are certain actions of the eye with reference to the light, the raising of the lid, the direction of the axis, the refraction of the rays. But these actions are merely receptive. The light is from the sun, not from the eye. So the light in the soul is from the Word; the actions of the reason touching it are only receptive, not productive; the authority which the reason recognizes is that of God, and not its own.