

The Authority of the Bible Today

Churchman 75/3 1961

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All Christians agree that their ultimate authority is God. But to the question, "How is this ultimate authority mediated to men?" various answers are given. Broadly speaking, these reduce to three according as most weight is given to the authority seen within the believer (the consecrated reason, or the believer's experience of God), within the Church, or within the Bible. In practice we all give some allegiance to all three. Thus evangelicals who put their emphasis on the Bible come behind no man in their insistence on the full exercise of reason, on the necessity for a personal experience of Christ and His Spirit, and on the fact that the Bible must be read in the fellowship of the Church. Nevertheless, the distinction is a valid one. In the last resort what counts with the evangelical is the authority of the Bible, just as what counts with the liberal is the exercise of reason, and with the "catholic" the authority of the Church.

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There cannot be the slightest doubt but that from the earliest times Christians have conceived of their authority as rooted in the Bible. The New Testament writers recognized that of themselves they were not sufficient, but they claimed that they had a sufficiency which came from God (II Cor. iii. 5f.). Peter said they spoke "by the Holy Spirit" (I Peter i. 12). The claims they made were not exclusively for the spoken word, for Paul specifically referred to the things which he was writing as the command of the Lord (I Cor. xiv. 37), and II Peter iii. 16 classes the Pauline writings as scripture. More could be cited. The men of the New Testament recognized that all that they did rested on the fact that in Jesus of Nazareth God Himself had become incarnate. The salvation He wrought was consequently God's salvation. It was a salvation that God commanded to be proclaimed to men. And God Himself was in the proclaiming as in the accomplishing of this salvation. His Spirit superintended all that was done. Before the apostles were taken away He guided them as they wrote words which should be authoritative for all that came after.

Nobody recognizes this more clearly than the immediate successors of the apostles. "As if by some providential instinct, each one of those teachers who stood nearest to the writers of the New Testament contrasted his writings with theirs, and definitely placed himself on a lower level."¹ They see in the apostolic writings the authoritative deposit of truth, and they make their appeal to it. It is important to be clear on this. There never was a time when the Christian Church appealed to any other authority.

Throughout the early centuries of the Church it is the same story. Appeal is constantly made to the Old Testament, and to the apostolic writings. It is true that Marcion rejected a good deal of what the rest of the Church counted as scripture, but this serves only to underline the fact that common to him and his opponents was a deep respect for the authoritative writings. The difference of opinion was as to how the canon was to be delimited. The Church found it necessary to repudiate Marcion, but the whole incident emphasizes the continued stress placed by all on the Bible as the supreme authority to which Christian men appeal.²

However, through the centuries the Church tended to extend her own authority and correspondingly to minimize that of the Bible. Respect was paid to tradition, though at first tradition was subject to the Bible, and when admitted was for the purpose of showing the teaching of the Bible. But teachers were alive and the Bible was not. Indeed, in time it really became a dead book, as people no longer spoke the languages in which it was contained. By the middle ages the Church as represented by the hierarchy, whatever her theory, was supreme. There was no appeal from her ruling. In practice the Church was now the supreme authority. But to exalt men, even holy men, in this way is disastrous. It led to the corruptions of the medieval Church, corruptions which included doctrinal error, liturgical obscurantism, and moral failure.

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It was the work of the Reformers to call men back to the Bible and to the faith that it teaches. They vigorously repudiated any idea that there could be a supreme authority other than God's word written. This brought determined opposition from the ecclesiastical authorities, with far-reaching consequences. Even the possibility (and sometimes the actuality) of martyrdom was not allowed to stand in the way of their witness to the Scriptures. Not many of them worked out in detail a doctrine of the authority of the Bible. The point was not really in dispute, for the hierarchy professed to accept this. The trouble was that in practice they denied it. But, though few of them had occasion to set forth their views of the Bible in systematic form, there is no great difficulty in ascertaining the main drift of the Reformers' thought on this matter. The following seem to be the important points.³

1. *God is the Author of the Bible.* The Bible is not a human product, but a book which has God as its ultimate Author. Thus Zwingli can say, "The Scriptures come from God, not from man; and even that God who enlightens will give thee to understand that the speech comes from God. The Word of God is to be held in the highest honour and to no word is such faith to be accorded as to it."⁴

2. *The Bible is thus Reliable and Authoritative.* It follows from this relationship to God that the scriptures are to be accepted as completely reliable. Appeal to them is final. Thus Luther: "I will not waste a word in arguing with one who does not consider that the Scriptures are the Word of God: we ought not to dispute with a man who thus rejects first principles."⁵ The quotation of individual passages, however, can never convey the strength of the Reformers' convictions on this point. Their whole position depends on the Bible. They refer to it constantly. Unless it is reliable and authoritative, their position falls to the ground.

3. *The Testimony of the Holy Spirit.* A book of divine origin does not yield up its secrets to the natural man. As the Spirit of God is the Author of Scripture, so He is its Interpreter. Unless He add His testimony, men cannot understand it aright. Cf. Calvin: "as God alone is a sufficient witness of himself in his own word, so also the word will never gain credit in the hearts of men, till it be confirmed by the internal testimony of the Spirit."⁶ This is not the modern view that the Bible becomes the Word of God only as the Spirit is active in men's hearts. Whether they hear or whether they forbear, it is the Word of God. But Calvin is saying that this Word of God has no effect unless the Spirit works in their hearts.

4. *The "Literal" Sense.* Men must not impose their pattern on the Bible, but understand it in its natural sense. Tyndale says, "The Scripture hath but one sense which is the literal sense . . . the Scripture useth proverbs, similitudes, riddles, or allegories, as all other speeches do; but

that which the proverb, similitude, riddle, or allegory signifieth, is ever the literal sense, which thou must seek out diligently.”⁷ This rule excluded the fantastic allegorisms and the like which sometimes distorted interpretation of the Bible. The warning is not yet out of date.

5. *The Fathers are subject to Scripture.* The Reformers honoured men like Augustine, Jerome, and the other Fathers. But they make it clear that these are not to be revered in the same way as the Bible. There is but one supreme authority. Tradition cannot compare with it.

6. *The Church is subject to Scripture.* The Roman hierarchy claimed that men could not know the Bible without the Church, nor could they know the meaning of the Bible without her authoritative guidance. The Reformers’ stress on the witness of the Spirit flatly contradicts this. It is the Spirit, not the Church, that makes the message of the Bible real to men. The Church is no more than “a witness and a keeper of holy Writ”. Its functions are limited, for “it is not lawful for the Church to ordain 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.”⁸

7. *The Scripture is Dynamic.* The Bible is not simply so many dead words. It is the means God uses to bring men to Himself.

There are many statements which emphasize this function of Scripture, and also which emphasize that the Bible gives authoritative guidance for living out the Christian life. No part can safely be neglected, for all is profitable (II Tim. iii. 16).

It was the achievement of the Reformers to rescue the Church from its dependence on tradition and to turn it back to the Bible as its authoritative guide. They highlighted the errors which follow when the final authority is rooted in the Church. They made the Bible their constant court of appeal, as it was their unfailing source of inspiration and strength.

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But the lessons they taught were not permanently heeded. With the “Enlightenment” there came a readiness to reject the supernatural and to depend on the reason. In biblical studies this led to liberalism. This movement had as its laudable aim the statement of the faith in terms that modern man can understand and accept. This is a duty which each generation must face. None may shirk it. But the liberals went too far. They were so concerned for modern man that in effect they gave him a larger place than they did the Bible. While they professed to expound the Word of God they yet found such a large place for reason that it became their real authority. Whatever did not accord with reason they rejected. And what they retained they interpreted not in the light of its original meaning, but in the light of the reason of modern man.⁹

But just as the Reformation put an end to the exaggerated emphasis on the Church so common in the middle ages, so in recent times there has been a reaction against the excessive veneration paid to reason. Two world wars have shattered the liberal legend of the perfectibility of man. And recent theological writing has shown up the limitations of the liberal school so clearly that very few care any longer to call themselves by this name. We are all “biblical theologians” nowadays!

This change is one which may be welcomed by evangelicals. It is good that the limitations of liberalism are so widely recognized.¹⁰ It is good that men are seeing once more that

Christianity is essentially the religion of a Book, and that they are turning to that Book for guidance and enlightenment. It is good that over so wide an area the old terms of orthodox theology are once again being heard.

But it is possible to make too much of all this. Before we assume that modern talk about the Bible means that Scripture is being recognized once more as the final authority, it is necessary to ask not only what recent writers say, but what they mean by the words they use. For the uncomfortable suspicion persists that, while the terms employed may be impeccable, the meaning is not the historic meaning. The old liberalism may indeed have been pronounced dead, but the corpse is uncommonly lively.

The trouble, as conservatives see it, is that the positions favoured by recent writers seem in the last resort to amount to a renewed emphasis on subjectivity. Sometimes they boil down to an appeal to reason and sometimes to religious experience, but these, and not the Bible, seem to be the final authority. Take, for example, William Temple's

oft-quoted dictum: "What is offered to man's apprehension in any specific Revelation is not truth concerning God but the living God Himself."¹¹ Now if no "truth concerning God" is revealed it follows that we apprehend the revelation by our personal experience of God. There seems no alternative. A similar highly subjective process is the divine-human encounter so typical of the Barthians. According to Karl Barth the Bible is not the revelation. It simply attests the revelation. It is "God's Word so far as God lets it be His Word".¹² Emil Brunner speaks of man experiencing "the working of the Holy Spirit as a real utterance of God", and goes on: "Only in this Word of the Holy Spirit does the Divine revelation in Jesus Christ become the real, actual word of God to man."¹³ For all these theologians' protestations about objectivity it is difficult to see how we are to understand all this apart from the individual's subjective experience of the Spirit of God. There seems no way we can know what is revelation other than by introspection.¹⁴

A favourite device in recent writing is to shift revelation from words to deeds, from the words of Scripture to the deeds those words record. As Leonard Hodgson puts it, revelation "is given primarily not in words but in deeds, in events which become revelatory to us as the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see their significance as acts of God".¹⁵ This view is certainly every bit as subjective as those we have been considering. Indeed, Hodgson himself admits as much, saying, "such objectivity as we have a right to expect will come as a result of scholars putting alongside of one another their various readings of the evidence, each saying to the rest: 'This is how I see it. Cannot you see it too?'"¹⁶

But quite apart from this there is a critical objection to this view which is not usually faced by its exponents. A series of unexplained acts is not revelation. Some Hebrews escaped from Egypt rather against the will of the reigning Pharaoh, a certain Amos denounced the evils of his day, a peasant of Nazareth was executed by crucifixion during the governorship of Pontius Pilate. But these facts, of themselves, are not revelation. The great majority of contemporary people in point of fact saw no revelation in them at all. Some people still see them that way. For them to be seen as revelation, an interpretation is necessary. Orthodox Christianity has always understood that the Bible writers were inspired to give this interpretation. The revelation is in the recording of the acts and the inspired interpretation, rather than in the acts themselves.

Another common element in modern discussions is the idea that inspiration should be posited not of the Book, but of its authors: God gave to certain men a vision of Himself—but then they were left to write it down, and this they did with what faulty words they could muster—they are often wrong and their vision at best is partial—but this does not vitiate the fact of the God-given revelation, nor the other fact that the Holy Spirit enables us to see through the imperfect words something of the divine splendour. Let us hear the objection to this in the words of one who expressly repudiates plenary inspiration, John Baillie: “Nothing could be more artificial than to suppose that these writers were endowed with infallibility in all that they had in mind to say, while the Holy Spirit left them to their own devices as to how they should say it. Hence on the other hand we should have no hesitation in affirming that inspiration extended not only to the thought of the writers, but to the very words they employed in the expression of these thoughts.”¹⁷

In the face of all such theories as those we have noticed it must be insisted that it is only in the measure that we can trust the record that we can apprehend the revelation. If we cannot believe the record we cannot recover the acts of God, nor the inspired thinking of the writers. We are dependent on the Bible for our reception of the revelation. Apart from that we do not know the revelation. If the Bible does not give the revelation in trustworthy form, we do not have it in trustworthy form. Karl Barth may distinguish between the Word of God and the Bible, between a *Deus dixit* and a *Paulus dixit*. But we know the *Deus dixit* through the *Paulus dixit*, and we know it in no other way.

The trustworthiness of the Bible is differently estimated by different critics. Thus there are some things that Fr. Gabriel Hebert feels called upon to contend for. “If the Exodus story were not in substance true,” he writes, “the faith of Israel about its vocation would be grounded on a falsehood; and the same is true of our Lord’s resurrection.”¹⁸ But other things, he thinks, are not necessarily to be accepted, such as Absalom’s rebellion and the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. Errors are to be discerned in the Bible, but only “provided that they are not such errors as would make the Bible no longer the Bible”.¹⁹ Now this distinction between big mistakes and little ones is not made in the Bible (the author of the Apocalypse issues a stern warning against taking anything at all away from his book). Nor is it made by the writers of the early Church, nor by those of the medieval church, nor by many in the modern Church. It is a view which has no claim to be catholic. And the great objection to it is the difficulty of knowing where the line is to be drawn. Fr. Hebert will not surrender the exodus or the resurrection. Others cheerfully abandon both. How are we to know what makes an error such “as would make the Bible no longer the Bible”? We are back in the subjectivity that characterizes so much of modern writing on the subject. The criterion is in the reason of the individual critic and there are as many opinions as there are critics. There is no real authority here.

In the light of all this it is very curious that theologians like Hodgson object to the conservative view that it demands from God the kind of revelation we think we ought to have, rather than being content to accept the kind of revelation God has seen fit to grant us.²⁰ The truth of the matter appears to be the other way round. The conservative is not *a priori* committed to any particular view of inspiration. He sees it as quite possible that it might be, if you like, a revelation in deeds, not words, or the curious mixture of truth and error that so many find in the Bible these days. It might be so. If God has chosen to give us this, then we can only accept it. But has He? Your conservative at this point refuses to manufacture a theory of revelation out of his own head. He turns to Christ and to Christ’s apostles, and asks what they have to say on the matter. He fears that the same cannot be said about his more

critical brother. The latter makes no pretence of submitting to Christ or to anyone else in this matter. Rather he works out his own idea of revelation and interprets the Bible, including the words of Christ Himself, according to this idea. Not Christ's view of revelation, but that of the modern scholar seems the important one. And when we ask what authority such a scholar has for his view, the answer comes back, as it must come back, in subjective terms. This is the way it appears to Hodgson. There is no more final authority than that.

In view of the popularity of demythologization and the like, it may be as well to add a few words about symbolic expression. We are often assured that, while the Bible cannot be accepted as it stands, its language can be regarded as conveying truth in symbolic form. Under the forms of myth, legend, and so forth, deep spiritual truth is set forth. We are, it would seem, to reject the message, but to accept the faith the message expresses. Now it is one thing to use parable and the like to convey spiritual truth, and quite another to use historical narrative for the same purpose. Both are legitimate. But we must not overlook the difference between them. When I use a parable I am saying, "This illustration will help you see the way God works. It will help you to grasp my thought." The story does not convey information about historical fact. It conveys information, and is understood by all to convey information, only about my ideas. Its truth or otherwise is quite irrelevant.

But if I take an actual happening and say, "Here is how on one particular occasion the grace of God has worked in practice", then I am on different ground. Now I am telling you, not about my ideas, but about what God has done. I am telling you that His grace has worked in that situation, and reasoning that we may well expect it to work in others also. Now if it can be shown that my story is not true, my whole argument falls to the ground. If the grace of God did not work in that situation, we do not know whether it will work in another similar situation. My story may have beauty. It may even be edifying. But if it is not *true*, I have no justification for saying that the grace of God *does* work that way. It may. It may not.

The Bible has a good deal of symbolism and this must not be treated with wooden literalism. But it also has a very great deal which purports to be historical. It is concerned with God's mighty acts. It tells us what God has done. Every time we reject such a story we remove it from the sources of our knowledge of God and restrict it to telling us the ideas of the author. If what the liberal scholars say is true, we must do this often. But let us not delude ourselves. To say airily that though the story is not factually true it conveys a true meaning is to miss the difference between parable and history, between illustration and statement of fact, between "God's grace is like—" and "God's grace has been shown in—".

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Evangelicals, then, are called to bear their witness to the authority of the Bible in a world in which subjectivism is rampant. For most scholars, the determining factor in deciding what is and what is not revelation is reason, or else the outcome of a personal encounter with the Holy Spirit of God. There is no objective certainty. Indeed, many pride themselves on just this. They rebuke Roman Catholics for finding certainty in the Church, and evangelicals for finding it in the Bible. If it were the case that evangelicals began by clamouring for some absolute authority, and in their desperate search lit upon the Bible, there might be justification for the criticism. But that is not the case. As I have had occasion to point out already, and as others will do with greater force and clarity before this Congress is over, evangelicals do not hold their position on *a priori* grounds. Whether there is an infallible authority or not, they do not know until they find Christ teaching them so. Their crime is that

they prefer to find their guidance in the words of their Master rather than in the assured results of modern scholarship.

It is especially important in the contemporary situation that evangelicals bear their witness to the authority of the Bible. Men have lost their best certainties, and in many cases are groping for an authority they can trust. One result of the work of modernists and extreme liberals has been to undermine men's faith in the Bible. Ordinary men do not trouble themselves with the qualifications the scholars introduce, such as that truth that is conveyed under the guise of myth. They fasten their attention on terms like "myth", and regard the Bible as of no use to them when they are seeking divine truth. And at the same time as trust in the Bible has been shattered, other troubles have arisen. The wars of our generation have shaken men out of their complacency, and we know that the threat of the extermination of the race by the release of nuclear energy is no idle threat. Ideological conflict and nationalist rivalries have made their appearance. In some places men are suffering the privations of want, and in others their moral fibre is being sapped by the insidiousness of prosperity. Thinking men are concerned, and they are looking for something better. There is a vacuum in the life of modern man and he does not know how to fill it. Man is not self-sufficient, and, for all his bluster, deep down he knows it. It is sufficient to point to the high incidence of mental breakdown to show that man is not able to cope with the conditions of life that he has brought about.

In these circumstances there is a special responsibility resting on believers to point men with clarity and with certainty to the only source whence their need may be supplied. The situation is complex, and a call to the true source of authority is not all that is needed. But it is surely part of the remedy for the plight in which we find ourselves. The fact that men flock to any crank who will offer the security of an authority shows that there is a sad lack, and that it can be filled. I am not arguing, of course, that because there is a lack of a sense of authority, therefore we ought to proclaim the Scriptures as such. I have already made it clear, I trust, that we proclaim the Bible as our authority because our Saviour, and the prophets before Him, and the apostles after Him, so proclaimed it. We proclaim it because it is true, and not because we think it useful. But the facts of modern life show that our emphasis is timely.

There are two further points I want to make. The first of them is that we as evangelicals have a proper concern for the question of authority, and that this matters more to us than does inerrancy. It is all too easy when we are caught up in the modern debate to be found putting our emphasis on the importance of contending for this or that passage and the way in which difficulties are to be resolved. This, of course, has its proper place. But I am suggesting that we are primarily concerned with authority. Our particular solution of a difficulty may not be very important, but it is important that men go to the Bible with a firm trust in its authority. Our energies must be concentrated on showing that the Bible is an authoritative Book, not on contending for a correct understanding of comparatively minor points.

The second is, that in our insistence on propositional revelation we ought not to go too far and overlook the present work of the Holy Spirit. There is a witness of the Spirit, and we do not recognize the truth of Scripture apart from His work within us. A too narrow insistence on the revelation of divine truth is apt to become a barren affair, lacking the warmth and power of genuine Christianity. It is well that, while we insist that God has made His truth known, we also make it clear, that the Spirit is at work when we apprehend the truth of God. In other words, while we contend for the objective character of revelation, we should not overlook the values in the spiritual experience which mean so much to our contemporaries.

God has spoken to man. That is the great truth behind our concern for the Bible. And because He has been pleased to speak to us we dare not neglect His Word. May I conclude with the challenging words of the Doctrinal Basis of the Association: "It is the confident hope of the Association that God will grant to the Church of this age the gifts of the Holy Spirit, in order that, in obedience to Holy Scripture, it may respond to the needs of this age, as our fathers in the faith responded to the needs of their age".

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Endnotes:

- 1) B. F. Westcott: *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*, Cambridge, 1889, p. 57.
- 2) Cf. H. J. Carpenter: "In all the doctrinal disputes of this period, the theologians appealed to the authority of the Bible as decisive; it contained God's Word of revelation as the guide and standard of faith" (*The Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. C. W. Dugmore, London, 1946, p. 20).
- 3) In this section I depend heavily on the excellent article by Dr. Philip Hughes, *Westminster Theological Journal*, xxiii (May, 1961), pp. 129-150.
- 4) Cited by A. W. Renwick, *Evangelical Quarterly*, xix (April, 1947), p. 118.
- 5) Renwick, *op. cit.*, p. 114. In view of claims made that Luther had a light view of inspiration it is worth noting that he also said, "it is impossible that the Scriptures should contradict themselves, save only that the unintelligent, coarse, and hardened hypocrites imagine it" (*op. cit.*, p. 115).
- 6) *Inst.*, I. vii. 4; cf. also I. vii. 5.
- 7) Hughes, *op. cit.*, pp. 133f.
- 8) Article 20 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England.
- 9) Since ordinary men do not have the leisure or the equipment for the sifting process engaged in by the liberals another effect was to elevate the place of the scholar. Cf. R. S. Paul: "the effects of Liberal biblical criticism have been to take the Bible out of the hands of ordinary Christians and put it back into the control of the scholar" (*The Atonement and the Sacraments*, London, 1961, p. 188).
- 10) Cf. T. W. Manson's lecture entitled, "The Failure of Liberalism to Interpret the Bible as the Word of God" (*The Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. C. W. Dugmore, London, 1946, pp. 92-107). He asks at what point liberalism took the wrong turning and answers, the mischief was begun when the working hypotheses of natural science were allowed to become the dogmas of theology. At that moment God's revelation of Himself gives way to man's thought about God" (*op. cit.*, p. 101).
- 11) *Nature, Man and God*, p. 322. He also says plainly, "there is no such thing as revealed truth" (*op. cit.*, p. 317).

- 12) *Church Dogmatics*, I. i, Edinburgh, 1955, p. 123. Cf. I. ii, p. 537, “by the Holy Spirit the witnesses of His humanity became and are also the witnesses of His eternal Godhead, His revelation was apprehended by them, and through them it is apprehended by us.”
- 13) *The Christian Doctrine of God*, London, 1949, p. 30.
- 14) Cf. E. G. Homrighausen: “Whether the Christian revelation is only personal and not to some extent propositional is another question, for if God reveals Himself adequately, man’s mind must be satisfied” (*Theology Today*, i (1944) p. 137).”
- 15) *On the Authority of the Bible*, London, 1960, p. 4. A curious illustration of this kind of thinking is seen in William Nicholls, *Revelation in Christ*, London, 1958, where the writer so emphasizes deeds that he mentions the Bible but rarely (except to denounce propositional revelation or the “fundamentalists”, whom he gives no sign of having read).
- 16) *Op. cit.*, p. 10. Cf. C. H. Dodd: “Not God but Paul is the author of the Epistle to the Romans”; “the words of the Epistle to the Romans carry just as much weight as we are prepared to allow to Paul as a religious teacher” (*The Authority of the Bible*, London, 1947, pp. 16f.).
- 17) *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought*, Oxford, 1956, p. 115.
- 18) *Fundamentalism and the Church of God*, London, 1957, p. 43.
- 19) *Op. cit.*, p. 139.
- 20) *Op. cit.* C. F. Evans takes up a similar position: “we must also beware of any sentence which begins with the words ‘Surely God would have . . .’ for it is a religious *a priori* sentence. ‘Surely God would have seen to it that the Bible would have been preserved from error.’ ‘Surely God would have seen to it that there would be an instrument on earth which would teach without error.’ This is how the sentences run which are spoken from the embattled positions. But for all their impressiveness must they not be judged irreligious and heretical sentences?” (*ibid.*, p. 73; cf. D. E. Nineham, pp. 89f.) This would make impressive reading except for the fact that the orthodox do not, in fact, reach their position this way.