

Bibliolatry

By Adolph Saphir, D.D.

The charge of Bibliolatry (worship of the Bible) has been of late frequently preferred against those who maintain the supremacy of Scripture. As far as this objection is urged by those who do not fully and clearly acknowledge the Divine authority and inspiration of Scripture, it is easily refuted. But as far as we ourselves are concerned, we may do well to consider whether our opponents are not giving utterance to a truth which they themselves do not fully see, and warn us against a danger the existence of which we are apt to overlook. In other words, never mind whence and for what purpose the charge of Bibliolatry is made, --consider the thing itself; is there such a tendency, such an evil, such a danger? I know that many Christians will reply at once, "We cannot value, and reverence, and cherish the Bible sufficiently." And this is quite true. The danger is not of a reverence too deep, but of a reverence untrue and unreal. We cannot speak, think, and feel too highly of Scripture in its vital connection with Christ and the Spirit; but there may be a way of viewing Scripture by itself apart from Christ and the Holy Ghost, and transferring to this dead book our faith, reverence, and affection; and this surely would come under the category of idolatry, -substituting something, however good and great in itself, or rather in its relation to God, in the place of the living God. Gross idolatry is not the danger of the Church. Since the Reformation, idolatry must needs appear in a very subtle form.

On such an important subject it is a duty to be explicit, although one is liable to be misunderstood. Notice, that all points which are of special importance at the present time are always those on which one is most easily misunderstood; the truth which is clearly seen and universally accepted, is not that truth which is specially needed to be pointed out at ' the time. By Bibliolatry I understand the tendency of separating, in the first place, the Book from the Person of Jesus Christ, and in the second, from the Holy Ghost, and of thus substituting the Book for Him who alone is the light and guide of the Church. In explanation of this twofold tendency, I submit the following considerations: --

The Jews regarded Scripture as the Word of God. They revered its very letter, guarding it with scrupulous care and studying it with indefatigable diligence. They were zealous defenders of "the oracles of God" entrusted to them, and boasted of the wonderful treasure in their possession. How then was it, that with such a reverence and knowledge of Scripture, they could not understand the Living Word, Jesus Christ? The Lord explained the fact. While they thought that in the Scriptures they had eternal life, they had not the Word of God abiding in them. Was there not Bibliolatry in their case?

But not merely did they not understand and receive Christ's word, though it was so fully in accordance with the Scripture, but-- they did not perceive the resemblance between Jesus and that picture of the Messiah which Moses and the prophets had delineated. and which was so wonderfully and strikingly manifested before them in glorious fulfillment. They were continually reading that Scripture in which the features of the Messiah, the chosen servant of God, were clearly and fully described; and when the Man stood before them who was the Original of the portrait, they did not know Him; they recognized not who He was; nay, they ended in condemning Him to death "according to their laws" (that is, on Scripture grounds).

How is it, that with all their reading of Scripture, they did not recognize Him of whom all prophets testified? They did not fall down before Jesus in adoration and worship. Then what did they worship? The letter of Scripture they revered; the sum and substance, the reality of Scripture, Jesus Christ, they did not even recognize. Here we have a total misunderstanding of Scripture, combined with an orthodox belief in its authority, and great and zealous defense and praise of the inspired Record. How striking and lamentable is this fact! The Jews believing the Bible and rejecting Jesus; glorying in the written Word, and casting Jesus out of the beloved city; holding the Bible in one hand, and Crucifying Jesus with the other; nay, accusing Him of blasphemy.

Whether there is anything corresponding to this among us, I leave the reader to judge. Whether to many the Bible is as it was to the Jews, not the voice of the living God, but *instead* of that voice, so that *while they believe it contains truth, they do not believe the truth it contains*: whether with the professed reverence for the Bible, there is much real reverence for the word which comes from God, and treatment of it as such, is an inquiry which I simply indicate and suggest.

How can we account for such a nation, Scripture loving and Jesus-hating; reverencing the *letter* of Scripture, but not able to recognize the *voice* of Him who had spoken at sundry times and in divers manners to the fathers, and was now speaking to them by his Son, the Lord Jesus? It is "Bibliolatry" which explains it. They substituted "Bible" for God speaking in and through this book. They thought that instead of a living God guiding them and influencing them, they had now a Book which contained all, and a great thing was to explain it correctly. They asked (as our people ask) "What was the text?" and not "What is the Word, the message of God?" It is evident from the Psalms and the prophets that the books of Moses were diligently read, and yet the constant call to Israel was, "Return to Jehovah." The difference between the true Israelite and the Bibliolater was, --the one looked upon Scripture as leading him to God, as a channel through which God taught, influenced, and comforted him: the other looked upon Scripture as a substitute for God; in other words, it became to him a way of getting rid of God. The spirit of the God-estranged text-worshippers is expressed in the saying of a Rabbi, that now that God has given the Law. He has no more need and right to interfere by further revelations. Under the pretence of honoring the Bible, they virtually treated God as one who had ceased to live and rule among them.

And now the rule of man began. For if instead of God we have the Bible, the task of commentators, interpreters, casuists, commences. For the text is obscure, the commentary distinct; the text is severe, the casuist accommodating; the text is deep and manysided, the interpreter shallow and one-sided; the text desires inward truth and radical cure, the tradition heals the hurt of the daughter of my people superficially and falsely. In course of time the tradition came to be regarded as more valuable, more necessary, more practical, than the Bible. Naturally so. Without a living God, viewing the Bible as God's substitute, a clear and detailed interpretation of the code is in reality of greater importance than the code itself.

This fact, Israel reverencing the Bible and crucifying Christ, is patent and striking to all. But it may not have been sufficiently considered, that it is a fact for all ages. and that the principles involved in it have

a special importance for the Church.

But while this form of Bibliolatry is chiefly among those who have not accepted the message of God (though they accept "the Bible"), and who are often encouraged in their state by not having this dead acceptance of the Bible pointed Out to them, there is another form of Bibliolatry which is more dangerous to the children of God. Such phrases as "The Bible is the religion of Protestants," well-meant, and true to a certain extent, already indicate an incipient decay. Where there is life and life in health. such expressions do not exist. Paul never would have said that the Scripture was the religion of the Christian. Christ was his Light and Life. If asked further about Christ, he would describe Him as the Scripture testifies of Him, and as the Spirit revealed Jesus to his soul. It is not that Paul thought otherwise than we do about the Divine authority, sufficiency, and fulness of Scripture, but he stood to Scripture in a *true relation*.

The Reformation-churches soon departed from the true and living view of Scripture. Luther saw Scripture in its relation to Christ and to the Spirit; indeed, many of his savings err on the side of subjecting the Scripture too much to the testimony of the Spirit to our spirit. They are unguarded, but in reality only strong and one-sided expressions of what he felt so deeply,--that we do not place the Bible as Christ's substitute or the substitute of the Holy Ghost; that the great value of the Bible is that it testifies of Christ; and that the Holy Ghost is the true enlightener and teacher.

While Luther did not sufficiently guard his assertions (forgetting, too, that the testimony of Scripture concerning Christ was much more ample and full than his idea as to what that testimony ought to be), his followers too soon forgot the true position of the Scripture. *The Holy Ghost is above Scripture*. Not that there is anything in the Scripture which is not in accordance with the Spirit's teaching, for all Scripture is inspired of God, but the Church is in danger of ignoring the existence of the Holy Ghost and her constant dependence on Him, and of substituting for the Spirit the Book. And now commences the reign of interpreters and commentaries, of compendiums and catechisms; for if we have the Spirit's teaching in the Book instead of the Spirit's teaching by the Book, men wish to have it extracted, simplified, reduced to a system, methodised. And then, practically speaking, the creed is above the Bible.

Thus there has been, to a great extent, "text"-preaching instead of "Word of God" preaching. The Word was "outside" of us, instead of "dwelling" in us. And our testimony is different in tone and power from that of the apostles and primitive Christians; for their testimony was in the Spirit and of Christ according to Scripture, while ours has become testimony concerning the Bible in reference to Christ and the Holy Ghost. The apostles spoke of Christ, and confirmed and illustrated their testimony by the prophecies of Scripture. They looked to the Man in the first place, and secondarily to the portrait given of Him in the Book. Whereas the pseudo-apostolic preaching fixes its own eye and that of the hearer in the first place on the Book, and deduces from it the existence and influence of the Person. The impression in the one case is: that the preacher announces a message from Christ, who is a reality to him; and this his experience of Christ, he asserts, is according to Scripture. The impression in the other case is: that Isaiah, Paul, John teach, according to the preacher's exposition, such and such doctrine. The one is preaching Christ; the other, about Christ. The one is life and spirit; the other is possible without the spirit and vitality. The one is testimony; the other is an exposition of another man's inspired testimony. The one is preaching the Word (with or without text); the other is text-preaching without the Word. Paul

preached Christ; our tendency is to preach that Paul preached Christ.

Why is it that God, in speaking to his own people, says so often, "I am the Lord"? Why does He speak so frequently and so earnestly against idolatry? Why does He teach us continually that the Spirit quickeneth; that the letter, even the good and inspired letter, killeth? Because the root-tendency of man is to substitute shadow for substance, the form and outline for the fullness, rules for life, and dead things for the living God. Because we like to stand on terra firma, and resemble children, who cannot understand on what pillars earth, sun, and moon do rest. Because we think of catching a sunbeam in a trap, instead of depending on the sun in the heavens, therefore we are always apt to deify "brazen serpents," "Bible doctrine," past experiences.

The man who first made a crucifix, doubtless simply meant it as an aid to his memory and devotion. The thought of the Saviour's love and death filled his heart with contrition, ardent affection, peace, and joy. "Oh, if I could always thus see a crucified Redeemer!" And why not? Is not the same mercy and love, which manifests Christ unto the soul now, continually with us? Will there be no manna to-morrow? Ah, but he wants to fix and secure the impression. He makes the crucifix; and now, instead of Christ, we have an expedient—an aid to devotion, which will soon become an obstacle, and then a substitute for the living Christ. For the process of deterioration is rapid; soon is Christ forgotten, and the crucifix becomes not a symbol, but an idol, and men think not merely of the crucifix, but attach importance to a special crucifix, with wood from such a place, and which has been used by such a saint, etc.

But idolatry, in the large and spiritual sense, is not confined to "crucifixes." The Bible may be the Protestant crucifix.

And then it is that, as with the Jews, so now-a-days, people will say: "If you take away the Sabbath and the Bible, what remains?" And that is just what I ask: What *does* remain?" To a number of "religious people" so-called, what is left? Oh, when the Spirit of thy Lord came unto thee, and made thee see Jesus Christ, the Friend of sinners, and hear his blessed voice declaring peace in his blood, was thy consciousness that of a book or of a person, of a creed or of life, of written guarantees for God, or of that love which passeth knowledge and of that joy which is unspeakable? To us to live is Christ, and nothing else, and our safety is Christ and nothing else. And for this reason, the testimony, which nowhere but in Scripture we have perfect, full, and without error, is to us most precious.

The opinion of the world concerning us is, that we are guided by the Bible: and to defend ourselves and influence the world, we begin to show that we are right logically and historically, and ethically, in believing the Bible. But what we ought to have impressed upon the world is, that we are guided by the Holy Ghost, and that Christ is our center and our life.

The Bible is our storehouse, where we obtain nourishing food (even this illustration is dangerous, for

apart from the Spirit there is no nourishing food, even in the Gospel of John and the very words of Christ). The Bible is our armoury, where there are swords and weapons for our conflict. But what we have to testify is, not that we have food, but that we have life, and that there is a Christ: not that we are equipped for war, but that we have strength, even the Holy Ghost.

And as for defending either the Bible or Christ, who ever asked us to do it? Certainly not Christ, for He told us to be his witnesses and not his advocates, and He has promised that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the Church. The defense is in his own hand, while He has left the testimony in ours. The whole testimony of the Church is Jesus Christ, and that testimony is by the Spirit of God; and those who are convinced and added to our number are so by the preaching, which is in demonstration of Spirit and power. But when the Church argues about and for Christ, and especially- about "the Bible," as if "the Bible" was God's guarantee instead of God's witness, she has insensibly got into a wrong Position. The apostles were witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus but how? Why did Jesus Himself not appear after his resurrection to the unbelieving Jews? The apostles preached—not evidence proving the miraculous fact of the resurrection—but a risen Saviour: resurrection power was theirs, and the Spirit convinced their hearers of that life in a risen Saviour. Our faith is not to stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. When the Word of the Lord comes to the soul, it brings its authority, power, and attraction with it, and the response of the heart is, not "What is this Book?" but, "Who art Thou, Lord?"

Thus even the Bible may become dangerous. When we realize God, when we constantly remember that Christ Himself is All in All, and when we believe that according to the promise the Holy Ghost is the indwelling guide of the Church, then indeed the Bible is most precious to us, Word of the Most High, which we desire to receive with reverence, gratitude, and joy.

This, I believe, is what Edward Irving meant, when he said, "With shame I declare it, they talk more after the style of a Mohammedan talking about the Koran, or a Jew about the Talmud, than a spiritual Christian united to Christ speaking of the Word of Christ. For if I have Christ, I have more than His Word, I have Himself: He dwelleth in me, and I in Him.

"Hence cometh that bastard notion of faith, which I cannot away with, that it is merely the link which joineth the mind of man with the record of the Book. They go about—and men they are, many of them, most dear unto my soul—to speculate concerning Christianity, as they call it: how intellectual, how moral, how political it is, beyond all systems; how it is accommodated to the faculties of the understanding, to the feelings of the heart, to the well-being of the community; it will heal the distemperature of the moral atmosphere of society, and do a thousand fine things; for the sake of which they would pray men to be so gracious as to give ear unto their God. And thus they seek by smooth and flattering words, and well-turned sentences, and well-built arguments, to produce that natural faith, which is no faith, but sight, intellectual, or moral or prudential discernment. But I say unto you, ye

cozeners of human nature, that faith is by pre-eminence the gift of God; and, wherever given, will fight against nature in all its courses; it will beat down the works of the natural man, and your beautiful nature it will conflagrate; your knowledge it will blow away into thin air, and sublime towards the limbo of vanity beyond the moon; your sentimentalists, your men of feeling, your songsters sweet, your novelists your moral scaffolders (for tone in its true place they never build a wall or lay a s' did nor will do), the whole tribe of your naturalists, rationalists, and neologians, with which the sunbeam swarms, and the very glittering element itself in which they flutter, this gospel, whose suitability to improve them all you fondly prate and preach about, will first utterly destroy, as so many gewgaws, which Lucifer, the sun of the morning, hath made to mislead and destroy benighted men groping their way darkly on to death and destruction.

--Adolph Saphir, D.D.