

The Primacy of the Holy Bible in the Reformed Episcopal Church



I. On December second, 1873, Bishop George David Cummins and other clergy and a number of laymen met in New York City and organized the Reformed Episcopal Church. Their first official act was to prepare and adopt a "Declaration of Principles," which should be unalterable. That statement, couched in language of classical simplicity and beauty, was so brief that we have it printed on a single page of our Prayer Book. Let us note how it opened:

"The Reformed Episcopal Church, holding 'the faith once delivered unto the saints,' declares its belief in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the Word of God, and the sole Rule of Faith and Practice."

Thus the Bible was given primacy both of position and time in our beloved Church.

Two years later the third General Council adopted the revised Articles of Religion, of which the fifth reads, in part:

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God. Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost: Holy Scripture is therefore the Word of God; not only does it contain the Oracles of God, but it is itself the very Oracles of God. And hence it 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 faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation."

Thus our official doctrine of the supreme authority of Holy Scripture was established.



II. Meanwhile, at the second General Council, in 1874, the revised Book of Common Prayer was adopted. Our fifth revision, dated 1930, makes no doctrinal changes; in it, let us turn to the Ordinal to see what was done to make secure the primacy and paramountcy of the Bible in our Church for all time to come. (See pages 515-540.)

A young man is presented for ordination to the diaconate. Immediately the bishop charges his presenting presbyter: "Take heed that the person whom ye present is apt and meet for his learning in the Holy Scriptures." A little later the bishop questions the candidate in part as follows: "Do you unfeignedly believe all the Canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments? Will you diligently read and expound the same to the people among whom you minister?" The answers must be affirmative. Then, having ordained the young man, the bishop charges him: "Take heed unto thyself and unto the doctrine. I charge thee, therefore, before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ: Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of truth."

Ordinarily a year or more of service passes before the deacon is presented for his final orders as presbyter. Now more explicit questions are demanded of him: "Are you persuaded that the Holy Scriptures contain all Doctrine required as necessary for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ? And are you determined, out of the said Scriptures to instruct the people committed to your charge, and to teach nothing, as necessary to salvation, but that which you shall be persuaded may be concluded and proved by the Scripture? Will you be ready, with all faithful diligence, to banish and drive away from the Church all erroneous and strange doctrines contrary to God's Word? Will you be diligent in Prayer, and in reading the Holy Scriptures, and in such studies as help to the knowledge of the same?" Having answered these and other questions in the affirmative, the bishop in ordaining him says: "and be thou a faithful Dispenser of the Word of God."

In the course of time a presbyter may be chosen to fill the office (not a separate order) of bishop. His previous vows and service will not suffice; he must be re-examined and respond to questions similar to those asked at his presbyterial ordination, one of which is significantly expanded: "Will you then faithfully exercise yourself in the Holy Scriptures, and call upon God by prayer for a true understanding of the same; so that you may be able by them to teach and exhort with whole-

some Doctrine, and to withstand and convince the gainsayers?" Then, having set him apart, the bishop presiding charges him in words which must remind him of those which he heard at the beginning of his ministry as deacon: "Give heed unto reading, exhortation, and doctrine;" then, having handed him a Bible, "Think upon the things contained in this Book. Be diligent in them." So, all the way of the ministry, our Church has safeguarded the sanctity and authority of the Word of God.

But it is known that in some Communion vows identical with or similar to those which we have just been quoting have been taken at ordination only in a considerable percentage of cases to be broken. Men pledged to uphold the Scriptures have questioned their inspiration and infallibility. How is it with us? Your presiding bishop here testifies that he does not know of a single minister of the Reformed Episcopal Church who has departed from the ancient faith; with us, the primacy of the Holy Bible still stands.



III. Having shown the fundamental position of the Bible in our doctrinal system and in the vows of our Gospel ministry, we come now to study its place in our book of worship. Let us take a little journey through the Prayer Book.

Starting at page 1 we find bidding sentences from the Bible, and going on through the Order for Morning Prayer, we have the Lord's Prayer, the *Venite*, the Psalter, the first Lesson, the second Lesson, the *Jubilate Deo* or the *Benedictus*, and the Grace—in all, eight portions of Morning Prayer taken from the Bible. Nay, in Lent, even a ninth may be used—the *Magnificate Dominum* instead of the *Te Deum*, after the first Lesson. On a typical Sunday morning forty per cent. of all words said or sung in the Divine Service are from the Scriptures. (In a church where the Epistle and Gospel for the day are also used, fully one-half of the entire service is in the very words of the Book of books.)

Evening Prayer has always *eight* portions of Scripture provided, or, if one Lesson and its canticle be omitted, *six*.

Even the Litany—a series of penitential suffrages and responses—has the Lord's Prayer and the Grace.

Passing over the section of Prayers and Thanksgivings Upon Occasions, we come to pages of Invocations, Ascriptions, and Benedictions, nearly all from the Bible.

Then the Order for the Holy Communion, with the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Summary of the Law, the Epistle, the Gospel, the Offertory Sentences, the Comfortable Words, and the first Benediction—again *eight* portions in the very words of Scripture.

Next we have the whole center of the book—two-thirds of all its pages—containing the Collects, the Epistles, the Gospels, and the Psalter, all except the Collects taken from the Bible (and the short prayers called Collects, be it noted, are every one based either upon the Epistle or the Gospel for the day). Now these Collects by measurement occupy only nineteen pages of the 388 in the center of the book, so that this portion has 369 pages from the Scriptures.

See now page 473, Baptism of Infants, and read: "Hear the words of the Gospel, written by St. Mark, in the tenth chapter." Next (page 478), Baptism of Adults: "Hear the words of the Gospel, written by St. Matthew, in the twenty-eighth chapter." Then (page 488), the Preface to the Order for Confirmation: "Beloved, it is written.....also, in the same Scripture, we read." Again (page 492), the Preface to the Form for Matrimony, with three references to Bible history. When we come to the Order for Burial of the Dead, we find its first pages, ten and one-half of them, all taken from the Word of God—as would be expected, for who but God and His Holy Spirit can speak comfort to the soul in the hour of sorrow and heart-break? In the remaining eight pages, moreover, there are six passages from the Bible.

Passing by the Ordinal, hereinbefore treated at length, we come (page 542) to the Reception of Presbyters from other Churches, with the question, "Do you solemnly declare your belief in the Old and New Testaments?" Then the Form for Installing Pastors, with its exhortation to dispense the Divine Word. Next, we find a Form for Laying a Corner-Stone, which is new to the Book of Common Prayer, in any country;

one-half of its printed pages, also the Proper Lessons which are cited, are from the Scripture; and about the same proportion characterizes the Form for the Consecration of a Church. After Family Prayers, opening with the Lord's Prayer, closing with the Grace, comes last of all the Catechism, with its question, "What was promised for you in Baptism?" and answer, "That I should be brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, diligently instructed in the Holy Scriptures" with its question on the Creed, "Upon what authority do you receive these Articles of your belief," and answer, "Upon the authority of the Bible, which is the Word of God;" with its printing and exposition of the Decalogue, the Summary of the Law, and the Lord's Prayer; finally, with its Bible passages explaining Confirmation.

Summing up our discoveries on this little journey through the Prayer Book, we find that 412 of its 578 pages, 71 out of every hundred, over seven pages out of every ten, are in the exact words of the Holy Bible! And what was said of the Collects is substantially true of all the other prayers—that they are based upon clear teachings of various portions of the Word.



IV. But how shall the Bible Lessons and the Bible passages in the Prayer Book be read in public worship? Pre-ordination instruction is given, it is true; but is it enough? Would it not be well to have another question and vow: "Will you in conducting Divine Service read every passage from the Bible reverently, pronouncing every word correctly and distinctly, laying emphasis intelligently, yourself feeling, and endeavoring to convey the feeling to all others present, that God Himself is speaking to all souls through His Book?" "I will, by God's help."

And the service should contain nothing to distract the attention of reader and hearers—no genuflections, bowings, crossings, occult postures and gestures; no pomp and—ceremony; no priestly vestments, no needless embellishment, no meretricious ornament. All of these things are associated with Romanism and Anglo-Catholicism. Their introduction in any thitherto "Low Church"

parish has always presaged a transition to "High Church"—a change from evangelical faith to sacramentalism and priestcraft. They may pass today unchallenged in most Anglican and Protestant Episcopal churches, because these denominations are not Protestant and Reformed. They are comprehensive: they combine High Church, Broad Church and Low Church parties, and any one parish may contain members of each of these parties. Not so with the Reformed Episcopal; ours is a Low Church—evangelical—nothing else. And I beg you to bear in mind and take to heart the fact that ours is the only Church possessing the historic English Liturgy that is truly and solely evangelical. Ritualism in one of our parishes is a pageantry of false testimony. It carries on its banners the legend, "We are very like the Church from which we separated"; and this declares in effect that our founders were schismatics and that our Declaration of Principles is a confession of fanaticism. Let us rather honor our self-sacrificing founders and sustain their principles. Our Prayer Book contains Sentences, Canticles, Psalter, Lessons, Epistles and Gospels from God's Holy Word. Refined gold needs no gilding. It contains chaste, Biblical prayers, which should be prayed, not merely read or chanted, and which are robbed of reality by a ritualistic setting.

And, on the other hand, the demand for an "open" service in the evening has implications which mar our testimony to the primacy of the Bible. Take, for example, any non-liturgical church, and see whether you will find more of the Bible in any service than, possibly, the Lord's Prayer at the close of an invocation, perhaps a responsive reading from the Psalms, and, surely, a single Scripture lesson—at most, three portions from the Word. I most earnestly recommend as a minimum Order for Evening Prayer this:

1. Two Bidding Sentences
2. "Let us pray—saying:" (the Lord's Prayer)
3. The Versicles, pages 19, 20
4. The Psalter and Gloria Patri
5. A Scripture Lesson, followed by one of the Canticles, sung
6. The Creed

7. The Versicles (including or omitting the eight in the center)
8. Two or three Collects (including or omitting the Collect for the Day)
9. Two or three selected Prayers from the remainder of Evening Prayer, or from the Prayers Upon Occasions, or both; or else, Extemporaneous Prayer
10. The Grace

This is far from a long or complicated outline; it may well be used when, a sermon of ordinary length following, the whole service will be ended in one hour. And it includes *six* portions from God's Word. You who called for the "open" order of service, is it because you do not want so much of the Bible read and sung? Then why, when you know what will result, do you not give up the demand? Holy Scriptures hold first place in the Reformed Episcopal Church. Let our position be maintained until Christ come and the Church be translated with Him.

V. But, lastly, what of the primacy of the Holy Bible in the lives of Reformed Episcopalians? Do we exalt the Bible in the church and neglect it in the home? Do we read it daily, in family devotions or, at least, in private? Nay more, do we not only read but study, closely and reverently, comparing Scripture with Scripture, and using devout and scholarly helps; praying beforehand for the illumination of God's Holy Spirit, continuing in that prayer while we read and meditate, and following each study period with the petition that we may transmute what we have been thus divinely taught into godly conduct and Christlike service? Loudly to profess devotion to the Bible while privately spending far more time with the scandal sheets of the daily press than with the Holy Book is of the essence of insincerity. May our ministers and our people of the pews be true to our Declaration of Principles, our Articles of Religion, and our Book of Common Prayer in giving prime and pre-eminent place in their studies and devotions to the inspired Word of God.