

The Pulpit.

No. 40.

A Sufficient Witness.

FOLLOWING IS A SUMMARY OF THE ADDRESS DELIVERED BY THE
RIGHT REVEREND THE MODERATOR TO THE GENERAL
ASSEMBLY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
OF NEW SOUTH WALES.

FATHERS AND BROTHERS. We are at the beginning of a change, the most profound and far-reaching, the most momentous and the most fraught with promise, that has ever taken place in the history of the Christian Church. This change has already been made by Christian scholars. It must soon be made by the Christian people. If wisely guided from within, it will be easy and safe. But, if the leaders of the Church obstinately ignore it, if the officers of Christ's army shrink from obeying Christ's word of command, "Go forward," the people cannot long be kept in ignorance. Outside the Church they will get distorted views of the impending change, with results disastrous to their faith. Be it your care, Fathers and Brethren, to make yourselves acquainted with the necessity for, and the meaning and end of this great movement, that you may be able lovingly to safeguard and cautiously to guide the Lord's people committed to your charge, and to save Christ's beloved from

and the meaning and end of this great movement, that you may be able lovingly to safeguard and cautiously to guide the Lord's people committed to your charge, and to save Christ's beloved from needless disturbance of their peace, and some of them, perhaps, from making shipwreck of their faith. There is great peril to the peace and faith of the Church, not indeed in the change itself, but in a blind and unwise resistance to it. A sense of this peril has induced me to call your attention to this grave subject. I have done so in no rash humour. For many weeks I hesitated, doubtful of my ability to set the subject plainly before you in the Divine light of truth, and fearful lest I should do harm instead of good. But the longer I thought and the more I prayed for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the stronger became my conviction that loyalty to the Lord Christ and faithfulness to His Church compelled me to speak and to speak boldly as I ought to speak (Eph. 6: 20). This change, because it is inevitable, is in the line of the fulfilment of the Lord's great purpose of the world's salvation. Therefore let us, the Lord's servants, be men of courage and of faith in a living Christ and join in leading His Church to a new vantage ground such as she never before had from which to inflict a crushing defeat on infidelity, to assail the sins and miseries of humanity, and to win the world for Christ. This impending and all important change is a transition from the theory that the Bible is a "Verbally inspired and inerrant Code of Rules" to a more reasonable and a truer view of the real nature and actual function of the Book. This theory, now rapidly passing away, is, that the Scriptures, just as we now have them, are in all their parts and in all their contents and in their very words as well as their ideas, equally inspired, equally free from error, not only in teaching morals and doctrines, but also in stating facts, even the most unimportant facts, whether scientific, historical or geographical; and equally authoritative throughout as a rule of faith and practice (Hodge I. 163-4). The holders of this theory make it of the very essence of Christianity, the very first and fundamental principle of our religion. And to their Theory they bind our Faith for life or for death. They make the credibility and authority of the Bible depend on the absolute accuracy and certainty of the minutest statement of fact, "scientific, historical or geographical" (Hodge I. 163). They, for instance, with a bond of adamant link the credibility of the Gospels with the absolute accuracy of the itinerary of Israel throughout the Wilderness. They make Christianity answer with its life if the smallest mistake be found in the ages of the patriarchs or in the genealogies of the priests. Hence, since all is at stake, the contortions and evasions of misguided apologists trying to reconcile such trivial diversities of statement as that Joseph was stolen (Gen. 37: 28 and 40: 15) by Midianites and sold by them to Potiphar (Gen. 37: 36), or that he was sold by his brethren to Ishmaelites (Gen. 37: 27-28) who sold him to Potiphar (Gen. 39: 1). The holders of this theory honestly think that by their Theory they honor the Bible and safeguard its Divine authority. But they are unbelieving Uzzahs stretching out their hands to save the Ark of God. They are like foolish men who should erect props to keep the sky from falling. This theory makes itself an essential to Revelation. If it be disproved, it says all is lost, for that on its validity the Divine mission of Jesus Christ, and the salvation of mankind depend. A Theory which claims to be of vital importance to the faith of men and their hopes for eternity must have its claim tested to the utmost.



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HISTORY OF THE VERBAL THEORY.

I. The first test is its own history. The Verbal Theory has been held almost universally from the last quarter of the 17th century down to nearly our own time. It has, however, not found a place in the Reformed Confessions, except in one, the *Formula Consensus Helvetica* (1675) which goes the length of imposing on Christian consciences as an article of faith the inspiration and infallibility of the Hebrew accents and vowel points, invented by the Jewish Massorets, or "possessors of tradition," about the 6th to the 8th century, A.D. In spite of strong pressure, the Westminster Assembly declined to countenance the Theory of Verbal Inspiration. Therefore it does not appear in our Confession of Faith, and has never received the official sanction of our Church. The Reformers, Luther and Calvin, did not hold this theory, as the former plainly showed when he called the Epistle of James an "epistle of straw." We, however, find the theory stated in extravagant terms by some of the Fathers as early as 200 A.D., and it was held by the Jewish Scribes certainly as early as the beginning of the Christian era. This, then, is the respectable origin of the Verbal Inspiration Theory. It is one of those traditions of the Scribes at which Christ launched withering invectives!

THE NEW TESTAMENT TEXT.

II. The second test is this: "Is there any text of the Scriptures absolutely inerrant, and which thus exactly fits the Verbal Theory?" That the English Authorized Version contains many errors has been shown by the Revised Version. And the R.V. itself disclaims inerrancy by acknowledging "defects, blemishes and imperfections" (pref. to the N.T.) In the N.T. the Greek Received Text, or "Syrian" text, which underlies the Authorized Version, was the result of a recension completed at Antioch about the middle of the 4th century, A.D. (Westcott and Hort, 185, 190). Modern critical editions show the Syrian text to be far from inerrant (Westcott and Hort, 166). The text of the N.T. lies in numerous MSS., versions in Latin, Syriac, Coptic and other languages, and in quotations by the Fathers. Comparison of these sources shows about 150,000 variations, nearly all of which, however, are trivial. This surprising number arises from the fact that a great many written copies of the N.T. were made, each new copyist adding errors of his own to those of his predecessors. In face of these numerous variations, the Verbal Theory breaks down. But the purest text of the N.T. that can now be attained exists somewhere among this multitude of variations, and it can be ascertained only by a process of selection and rejection of various readings. This has been done by Westcott and Hort by means of their scientific genealogical method. The result is that the Church now has a text of the N.T. nearer the original than any other that has existed since the autographs left the hands of the writers. But even this, the purest existing text, "makes no pretension to be more than an approximation to the purest text that might be formed from existing materials" (W. and H. 371). It repudiates inerrancy by giving many alternative readings, thus confessing its inability to decisively restore the true text in those cases (W. and H. 376, 377), and again, by pointing out the existence of a few "primitive errors" which it is unable to remove (W. and H. 365, 368). Even the autographs or originals might not fit the Theory by being inerrant. Paul used to dictate his epistles to a shorthand writer, and unless the amanuensis were inspired as well as the Apostle, the very first copies may have contained slips of his ear and hand. But, granted the copies were inerrant, of what service is that? The autographs are irretrievably lost. Thus, as regards the N.T., the Verbal Theory breaks down, owing to the physical fact that no text exists that will fit it.

THE OLD TESTAMENT TEXT.

The Hebrew (and Aramaic, text of the O.T. shows very few variations. It is the descendant of one MS., which about 135 A.D. was selected as an exemplar by the Scribes, who suppressed all its rivals. This uniformity is a disadvantage, for it prevents the same good work being done for the O.T. text that Westcott and Hort did for that of the N.T. We cannot get within centuries of the O.T. originals. We cannot get behind the one MS. chosen by the Scribes. That various readings existed before this choice of one MS. is shown by a comparison of such parallel passages as 2 Sam. 22 and Ps. 18; by quotations in the N.T. and in apocryphal books; such as the Book of Jubilees, written about the beginning of the first century, A.D., by the variations in the Samaritan Pentateuch, which dates from the middle of the 5th century A.C.; and by the great and notable variations in the Septuagint, or Greek Bible, translated in Alexandria about the middle of the 3rd century B.C. for Ptolemy, King of Egypt. In view, then, of those ancient variations, the conclusion is that the Hebrew text of the one MS. selected by the Scribes was not inerrant. But the Hebrew text so fixed consisted of consonants only. The vowels were not added till the 6th to the 8th century A.D., so that the text as we have it, the Massoretic text, dates only from that period. During all the previous centuries, those who read the Hebrew had to supply the vowels to the best of their ability. The Scribes had a tradition