

Scripture and Obedience

Sermons on the Subjects of the Day (4)

*The fourth in a monthly Fulcrum series of seven sermons for the web
by Oliver O'Donovan*

O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes! (Psalm 119:5)

The authors of the Windsor Report thought it was unnecessary and inexact to speak of the authority of Holy Scripture; to speak of the authority of God said everything that needed to be said. And there is an element of truth in this, in that the only authority these books can possibly command is the authority of their role in God's self-announcement; apart from that they are records of a past culture that may interest us or not, as we choose. Yet we cannot leave it at that. For God's authority authorises; and it is through authorised persons and activities that we see the effective exercise of God's authority in the world. There is nothing wrong in speaking of the authority of bishops, of councils, of preachers or of the community of the faithful; and at the other end of the spectrum there is nothing wrong in speaking of the authority of Jesus of Nazareth. Neither is it inexact, then, to speak of the authority of apostles and prophets, called out by God to write with clarity and sufficiency of the events surrounding Jesus of Nazareth, their context in the history of Israel and their universal meaning for mankind. These writings are God's chosen means, together with the sacramental acts of the church, of making his self-announcement known to all ages. Scripture is not the first moment of God's self-announcement; that is the historical deeds themselves by which he raised up Israel and Jesus. But neither is it a moment *after* God's self-announcement, a retrospective commentary that could be peeled away, leaving the core intact. Scripture is, we may say, God's administration of his self-

announcement, the record he has authorised to it and the seal he has set on it to confirm that it is true.

If we need to say more about the Scriptures than that they are authorised, perhaps we may follow John Webster in speaking of their “sanctification” for their work.¹ That means simply that God has set them apart. As he has set apart a particular race and a particular member of that race for the salvation of the world, so he has set apart particular writers to bear a definite and decisive testimony to what he has done. It was, of course, a *human* testimony they had to bear, a work performed in human ways by human servants. In a thousand ways the texts that lie between the covers of our Bibles show that they are the product of painstaking and creative human labour and reception. But we must be careful what we make of that word “human”. If we glide from speaking of their humanity into implying some kind of inadequacy in them, as though their being human were a shameful secret we have laid bare, a deficiency we are now in a position to patch up, then it is we, not they, that must stand charged with ignorance and superstition. The humanity of the Scriptures does not entitle us to patronise them. Just as we speak of the sinlessness of the human being Jesus of Nazareth, and some Christians speak of the immaculate human conception of the Virgin Mary, so we may speak quite appropriately of a perfection in Holy Scripture. Its perfection is *sui generis*, a fitness for its own assigned task. The perfection of the Psalms does not consist in their being the most perfectly metrical verses or containing the most perfect poetic imagery. The perfection of the letters of Paul does not consist in their being the highest examples of epistolary elegance. Neither does the perfection of the historical books consist in their being the most unambiguous records or the most discerning evaluation of sources. The only perfection that counts is this: that God *truly attests himself and his deeds* through this poetry, these letters, this history. The faith required of the reader of Holy Scripture is obedience to the testimony that God bears within them, and that is one and the same as the faith that leads to salvation.

In more ways than one the Christian world now finds itself living “after” the fundamentalist controversy, downstream of those whitewater rapids that imperilled theological navigation for a century. There is a widespread sense, for one thing, that the historical exploration of the biblical texts has played itself out, that most of what can be done intelligently on those lines has been done, and that further work is subject to the law of diminishing returns. For another thing, the question of the authority of the biblical texts has been re-focussed from their historical veridicality to their moral servicibility. This makes a deal of a difference. Those who first raised problems about the Bible’s historical veridicality thought they could be confident of its authority in everything that really mattered – *i.e.* faith and morals, two things which might, to a thoroughgoing liberal, melt into one. To the liberalism that grew out of the sceptical project of historical criticism the moral authority of the Bible, or at least of the New Testament, was simply self-evident. Moral and religious goodness, it seemed to them, was either unaffected by the vagaries of history or was in a progressive compact with it. So far have liberal convictions undergone a sea-change. Doubts about Scripture’s authority today are focussed on its competence to guide us through those highly contested moral discernments that have become so common a feature of the late-modern world.

But in order to get a view of what authority means in this context, we need a clearer view of what it means to make moral discernments. Certain phantasmic conceptions, which liberals and conservatives often used to hold in common and which hang around today’s discussions like ghosts at the feast, had better be exorcised. Moral truths were conceived of as something like self-evident speculative truths, which, once properly grasped, could hardly be doubted. Christ was to be obeyed because, and to the extent that, his moral teaching self-evidently presented us with those truths to which the moral consciousness bore independent witness. Kant said as much in a famous assertion in the *Groundwork*. That meant that practical moral crises could be viewed only as temptations to the weak in faith, not as real dilemmas to which the answer could be in any doubt. They were challenges to our resolution, to be countered by a more unflinching reassertion of the

principles we were taught from the beginning. (Think of the appalling assumptions that generate the melodrama of Scott's *Heart of Midlothian*!) Casuistry, which attempted to resolve dilemmas by making fine distinctions, was dismissed scornfully as a mean abuse of the intellect designed to produce subtle denials of the obvious. Needless to say, the Bible's wholesale rejection of homosexual conduct was seen, by liberals as well as by conservatives, as entirely of a piece with its moral superiority over pagan cultural values.

But ethics has now fallen out of the realm of the self-evident into the realm of the contested, to which, in truth, it always belonged. And this has made moral consistency look less like a confident conviction of truths that are as evident as the day, more like a faith in truths not seen. "In the beginning is the half-light," says one philosopher about the foundations of ethics.² This restores to practical reason the atmosphere of insecurity and risk that is native to it. The prayer of the Psalmist, "Give me life according to your word!" is the prayer of the faithful reader of Scripture who is ready to take the risk of living by it. This reader does not know everything there is to know about Scripture or about the challenges of life; he does not have the answer to every question; but he is willing to rely on this teaching, to receive it on its own terms, questioning and being questioned by it, in the expectation that God will open up his way before him as he reads, recites and constantly re-visits those testimonies to God's purposes.

If we are inclined to say, as I am, that this is the *authentic* way of understanding obedient practical reason, more suited to the real meaning of discipleship, we should not do so glibly, underestimating the danger. That danger arises in relation to two conjoined intellectual tasks, for neither of which there can be secure rules, two "discernments" that simply have to be made, and may possibly be made wrongly, with serious consequences. There is the interpretative task of discerning *what the text means*, on the one hand, and there is the conscientious task of discerning *ourselves and our position as agents in relation to the text*, on the other. The first discernment is *of* the text; the second discernment is *out of*

the text. In the first discernment the text is before us; we read about David, about Peter, about Jesus, and have to decide what it is that is said about them there. In the second discernment the text is behind us; we do not read about ourselves in the same way that we read about David, Peter and Jesus. Yet it sheds light forward upon us. It provides us with the categories and analogies we need for questioning ourselves and understanding ourselves. The Scripture tells us not to bear false witness against our neighbour. Whether *this* particular ambiguous statement we have it in mind to make will be false, or merely discreet, is something that the Scripture will not tell us; we must judge that for ourselves with the aid of the Holy Spirit. Yet everything the Scripture does tell us about truth and falsehood will contribute to making that judgment possible. The authority of Scripture is proved, then, precisely as it does, in fact, shed light on the decisions we are faced with, forcing us to re-evaluate our situation and correct our assumptions about what we are going to do.

Neither of these two discernments are without risk; yet the second is the more highly dangerous. The most mysterious question anyone has to face is not, *what does Scripture mean?*, but, *what does the situation I am facing mean?* If we have even begun to appreciate the nature of this question, and how a false judgment of ourselves can lead us to destruction, we shall be on our guard against any hermeneutic proposal to *reverse* the sequence of discernments, starting with our own situation and turning back to Scripture to look for something there to fit it. That presupposes that we already know the answer to the one question we dare not presuppose an answer to. Nevertheless, such proposals are common enough in theological discussion, sometimes with a liberal, sometimes with a conservative slant. It hardly matters which, since the two come closest to each other precisely at the point where they are both furthest from the truth. If the conservative thinks that *all* the Scriptural witness to moral behaviour can and must be honoured somehow, and the liberal that only *some* of it, or only *most* of it, must be honoured, what difference does that make if each thinks that conclusion has been reached from some self-evident intuition about what the times require, so that the appeal to the Scripture merely confirms what has

already been decided? This is not to take Scripture seriously as an authority. And it is not to take living in the present seriously as a risky business.

For our present purposes, and since much of our discussion so far has been concerned with the current dilemmas of liberal Christianity, let us take up a liberal version of this hermeneutic proposal. We shall have opportunity enough to identify the specifically conservative form of the temptation when we discuss the need for hermeneutic “distance” in our next Sermon. And help is at hand from a cautiously worded statement of Roman Catholic provenance, representing the proposal at its most modest, and therefore, perhaps, its most seductive. “Here and there,” wrote Heinz Schürmann, “among the particular New Testament values and precepts... there are time-bound judgments of value and fact, and they show that the Holy Spirit has deepened moral sensitivity through the course of the Church’s history and the history of mankind.”³ Bracketing out the mention of time-bound judgments of *fact*, which is irrelevant to our purpose, the important claim here is that some New Testament “judgments of value”, being “time-bound”, show us how moral sensitivity has “deepened” since they were made. These are, of course, only supposed to be occasional. Sufficient distinctions have been made before this point in Schürmann’s exposition to render most of the New Testament amenable to our ethical reasoning without recourse to the “here and there”. These occasional “time-bound judgments”, then, are an intractable residue, a clinker in the furnace that refuses to burn up. When the author then proceeds to urge that a “moral-theological hermeneutics” is in place to handle this recalcitrant material, we know that the word “hermeneutics” cannot bear its customary sense. It does not promise, as might be expected, an *interpretation* of these judgments; it promises only a refusal of them. What is demanded is a clear, though modest, right of repudiation in respect of some “judgments of value”, not on the ground that the situation has changed, which could cause no-one any difficulty, but simply on the ground that we have made some moral progress since the days when the Holy Spirit spoke through the apostles, and can understand their judgments as immature. It asserts the superior right of our pre-understanding.

It is decisive, of course, that this claim is made in respect of *New Testament* moral judgments. That something will have to be said of the “time-bound character” of some judgments in the *Old Testament* will surprise no-one who has learned from the Epistle to the Hebrews to see the pre-Christian vision of the human goal as “fragmentary” and “diverse”, looking for an “earthly” rest where the ultimate purpose of God was nothing less than a heavenly sabbath (Hebrews 1:1, 4:7). To take just one example from that book: the way we think of Joshua’s wars of conquest will be affected by our looking for a “heavenly” rest. The conquest narratives will not be taken to afford, directly or indirectly, a moral norm for war-making, and that not because of changed situations or perceptions, but simply because their salvation-historical position has been, as it were, overwhelmed by the Advent of Christ. But this judgment is based on a Christian reading of history, in which Christ himself fulfils and transforms what has gone before. That is the framework in which the “then” of Joshua is differentiated from the “now” of the Christian epoch. To take the same way with the teachings of the New Testament, on the other hand, would be self-subverting. And to avoid this fall into incoherence, the liberal hermeneutic proposal faces, it would seem to me, a simple alternative. Either it posits some *further* climax of salvation-history over and beyond Christ, some “age of the Spirit” such as Montanus or Joachim conceived of, or a Hegelian dialectical history with an Absolute Future, something, at any rate, that will allow a “deepened moral sensitivity” to which the revelation of the Incarnation looks immature and outgrown. Or else it makes a distinction between the normative position of Jesus himself and the sub-normative position of the apostolic authors, refusing to claim on their behalf the kind of finality it claims for him. The difficulties into which each of these courses leads are too well known to be pursued in detail at this point.

Since we summoned a Roman Catholic theologian for a modest statement of a hermeneutic proposal that Anglican liberals would be likely to make with less reserve, let us look in the same direction to find a suitable corrective, equally modestly expressed. Jean-Yves Lacoste has written: “The image of the hermeneutic ‘circle’ is less illuminating

than it seems. We can learn only to the extent that we can let the unanticipated put our expectations and our prejudices in question. Authentic discovery punches a hole in the circle, since only pseudo-questions carry their own answers ready and waiting in their bosoms. Pre-understanding without honest admission of non-understanding will hardly invite more than the most meagre discoveries.”⁴ Lacoste does not challenge the necessity of hermeneutic pre-understandings. He insists simply that there can be no discovery that has a circular form; pre-understanding cannot have both first and last word. “Yet it is necessary,” he continues, “for questions to be asked, and that means there must be a field of dialogue where the speech that answers my questions can become my very own speech.” The essential difference between two hermeneutic approaches emerges precisely at this point: where the one sees Scripture’s readers as armed with “deepened moral sensitivity”, new moral confidence that has accrued to the elevated age in which they live and from which the text cannot deflect them, the other sees them as approaching armed with moral *questions* to which they seek answers that may become their “very own”. What is at stake in resistance to the liberal hermeneutic paradigm here becomes clear: the cause is the cause of *open questions* - questions that need opening and holding open because they are of such importance existentially to those who have to ask them. But to hold a question open with real existential commitment, and not merely to bedazzle the conversation with interrogatives darting round like bats in daylight, one must purposefully look to the source from which an answer is sought, an answer not already contained in the question which is therefore capable of reforming and refining the question. And that is precisely what is meant by the authority of Scripture in Christian ethics.

Indeed, it is what is meant by the authority of Scripture as such. For authority is what evokes belief and obedience, and questions of belief and obedience are all, at root, moral questions - not in the superficial sense of being related to the details of our behaviour, but as concerned with the way we dispose of ourselves in our living. What hermeneutic theory says about pre-understandings applies, of course, to speculative and empirical questions, too: the experimental scientist cannot ask questions of the readings he obtains without

some pre-understanding of what those readings may indicate; yet he cannot discover anything unless those readings can re-determine his pre-understanding. But we leap into a whole new world of seriousness when the questions are the ultimate practical questions, questions about how we are to live the one life given us; and we leap into a whole new world of seriousness when we dare to ask these questions of God's chosen witnesses, the writers of the documents of the Old and New Testaments.

The liberal hermeneutic paradigm, fashioned by the controversy over historical biblical criticism, failed precisely because it thought it could count on there being a concrete moral truth immediately and categorically known to all, a peremptory and unchallengeable moral certainty. In this it failed to allow for danger. Action is always exposed to danger: we may turn out to have acted on false assumptions about the facts, to have misunderstood the situation in which we acted, to have formed an inadequate conception of our task, to have failed to envisage the good to be pursued, etc. etc. Nothing can guarantee us against such failures; nothing except perpetual vigilance can protect us from them. In failing to allow for danger, the liberal hermeneutic failed to pose the questions that engage us supremely in our self-disposal: questions of intelligibility and purpose in the life we live, questions of our responsibility for ourselves. Always pressing forward in pursuit of some speculative truth, it dared to take the answers to all these questions as read; in doing so, it by-passed deliberative reason and short-circuited the role of the intellect in the living of life.

The questions we pose to Scripture look for answers to help us live as those re-born from death and destruction, exercising our powers of thought and decision anew. We may not look for answers that will excuse us that task. Consider, for example, the question and answer of the Psalmist: "How shall a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it in keeping with your word" (Psalm 119:9) It is hardly surprising that a long-established line of historical criticism found this profound poem, the most existentially urgent document

in the whole Old Testament, to be legalistic, formalistic and altogether uninteresting. That was because the critics never grappled with practical reason as the poet grappled with it. To the poet, presented here as a young man poised on the threshold of life with everything about his fate to be determined, the question mattered, and mattered urgently. He had need of a word; he had a way to find, and was unsure of it; he wanted it to be not merely *safe* but *pure* – “uncompromised”, as we might say, and worthy of a human being’s one and only opportunity to live. But why a *word*? Because the only way we have of engaging with our living is by *thinking* about it, and thought requires that we discern a shape, a form, in how we live. An approach to practical reason must be existential, for it is our selves that are at stake in the answers we reach; it must be “poetic”, for the task is not mere repetition, but creation in action; but it cannot be improvisatory, since it is a response to a context, and that context may at any point deceive us or trip us up.

To a word of God we turn, then: a word that gives the world its original meaning and intelligibility, and gives our engagement with the world its meaning, too. If we fail to envisage the practical question practically, and think of it as merely theoretical, then we shall feel ourselves imposed on by its claim to authority and shall resist it by outright protest or by calculated dissimulation. Theoretical discussions always look askance at authority, for we can dally over them for ever without putting ourselves or other people to the slightest inconvenience. If nobody needs to know whether Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea, a text that claims the authority to settle the matter strikes us as intrusive, hemming us in by forbidding speculation that he was born in Waco, Texas. But what if we do need to know? What if it is part of a message about how we may be saved? Then its claim to authority is the very opposite of intrusive; it is a welcome handhold that we may grasp in our struggle for deliverance. And when we come to St. Paul’s observation that God has given an idolatrous culture over to homosexuality, or to Jesus’ saying that a man who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, it is a radical judgment upon human culture and history, a judgment that presupposes the confrontation of God and world. It operates not simply to demand our assent or dissent; it operates to elicit

moral decision from us about the kind of life we are to live in faithfulness to its judgment. Its role is to authorise us to live well, not to take authority away from us. So any judgment we make on the authority of that text is, at the same time, a judgment on ourselves, a moment of self-transcendence that it has brought us to achieve.

It sometimes happens, when gays and non-gays meet to explore questions of sexuality, that proceedings will be brought to an embarrassed halt by an impassioned avowal on someone's part of being personally affected: "It is *me* they are all talking about!" The correct response to such a declaration must be for everyone, of every approach and every point of view, to leap to his or her feet and chime in: "And me!" "And me!" Certainly, we had better not approach the famous biblical texts on homosexuality as though we were *not* personally affected! What business could we possibly have with them if our only interest were to frame a theory of sexuality, or perhaps a history of sexuality, for scientists or philosophers to discuss? We had better come to them knowing that we need the help of God's word if we are to find our way through this idol-ridden sphere, and that our own sexuality and idolatry – nothing less! - is under scrutiny in those texts. The dangerous possibility of moral scepticism had better be always present to our minds, and we had better know the terror of waking up one day to find that the living of our lives has become worthless, in our own sight and in God's. We had better *stumble across* homosexuality, our own or other people's, as a genuinely unknown quantity; we had better ask about it as those who need to be told, rather than reckon we already know all there is to know. If its opportunities and threats press in on us with bewildering complexity, leaving us at a loss as we search around for a way of sorting out the multiple layers of our experience, then the authority of Scripture may begin to mean something serious to us.

Better an honest bewilderment than a perfect theory. Then, with our pre-understanding up in the air, we shall understand well enough that St Paul's observations about the relation of homosexual practice to an idolatrous culture are only *one* moment in the story.

Yet we shall be very unwilling to leave that moment out, since we shall be all too conscious of our own predicament with the idolatry of our culture. The danger lies, we shall know, precisely in over-simplification. But over-simplification consists precisely of ruling inconvenient angles out, and we can hardly avoid over-simplification by failing to think about the subtle undercurrents and connexions that bind a given sexual dilemma to a given cultural complex. If we cannot approach this text as a clue to a problem weighing sorely on us (whether as homosexuals ourselves, or as those who share a social space with homosexuals, two categories that include most people in the West), we shall certainly experience it as a pointless imposition. Then we shall rebound in panic, assert the right of our pre-understanding, and briskly close down every question. Protective of a freedom which will, in the end, be no more than purely notional, we shall put ourselves on guard against any insight in any text that might actually teach us something helpful. If only we understood what freedom really meant, and how difficult freedom is to accomplish, we would surely ask that text to give us rivers of living water!

Professor Oliver O'Donovan FBA is Professor of Christian Ethics and Practical Theology at the University of Edinburgh. He took up this post on 1 August 2006 and formerly was Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology, University of Oxford and a Canon of Christ Church.

¹ John Webster, *Holy Scripture*, Cambridge University Press 2003, pp17-39

² J.-Y. Lacoste, "Du phénomène de la valeur au discours de la norme", in *Le monde et l'absence d'œuvre et autres études*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2000, pp107-27

³ "How normative are the values and precepts of the New Testament? a sketch", in Schürmann, Ratzinger, von Balthasar, *Principles of Christian Morality*, tr Graham Harrison. San Francisco, Ignatius 1975, p43. We are told that Schürmann's conception of the relation of Scripture to moral doctrine was "adopted in general terms" by the International Theological Commission in 1974

⁴ "Urgences kerygmaticques et delais hermeneutique", in *Le monde et l'absence d'oeuvre*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2000, p145. The translation is mine