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THE BIBLE : AUTHORIZED AND/OR AUTHORITATIVE?
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When the King James Version of the Bible was published in 1611 the title page conveyed a message both verbal and visual: a proud verbal message that

‘the Old Testament and the New [were] newly translated out of the Originall tongues: & with the former Translations diligently compared and reuised, by his Majesties speciall Commandment’.

It also conveyed a loaded visual message, represented by the prominent and unusual combination of Moses with his tablets of stone and his rod and Aaron in full priestly robes. The engravers had got the message that on key issues the Bishops’ Bible had retained its position of precedence, and consequently that the puritans had lost the battle for the exclusive priesthood of all believers (Campbell 2010: 92-107). In that engraving and that title page it was a real case of ‘painting the word’ (Drury 1999).

This 1611 version of the Bible, like most other versions that preceded and followed it, sent another resounding theological message to all readers by its choice of two disarming terms, ‘the Old Testament and the New’. With the word ‘testament’ meaning ‘covenant’ or treaty-like contract, it is important to recall that no Jewish reader would be happy with the adjective ‘old’ or with any suggestion that the faith centred on Jesus of Nazareth in any way brought about a replacement of the ‘old’ with the ‘new’. Christian readers, whether happy or not with such a contrast, would do well to reflect on just what the technical term ‘the new testament/covenant’ does or does not convey.

Our reflections are facilitated by the fact that the term occurs only once in the Hebrew Bible (which we for convenience call the OT), i.e. Jeremiah 31.31-34, and effectively only four times in Christian scripture, i.e. in one branch of the tradition of the Eucharistic words, Luke 22.20/1 Corinthians 11.25, and in an aggressively anti-Mosaic Pauline passage, 2 Corinthians 3.6, with the thrust of which the anonymous writer to the Hebrews agrees (8.8; 9.15). In a certain sense the Christian texts are situated on opposite sides of the Easter divide.

- By ‘new’ Paul (and indeed Hebrews) really does mean qualitatively different in content and effect. Using the peshet method of interpreting scripture, the presupposition of which is that we start with ourselves as the community standing at the climax of God’s plan for the world (cf. the Qumran commentary on Habakkuk, and Matthew’s use of scripture), Paul mounts a daring thesis to the effect that the people of God, endowed with the God-given Spirit, are aware, as the weekly worshippers in the synagogue are not, that the Mosaic dispensation has faded away.

Ethnically mixed, they experience a 'new creation' and 'the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ'. God now relates to humankind in a different way.

- By 'new' Jesus of Nazareth means no difference at all in the way his God relates to humankind. Biblical criticism (as necessary in treating the Gospels as in handling the Pentateuch) would engage with the variety in the tradition of the Eucharistic words, invest in the historical-critical method, set itself to isolate the earliest version of the Eucharistic words, and thus to reach back to what he may well have said:

'This is my body, which is for you ... This cup is the new covenant'.

Those who shared the bread and the cup at the final meal with Jesus would continue to participate in the law-defined sacrificial worship of the Temple (cf. Acts 3.1) with no sense that such worship was either inadequate or obsolete (contra the arguments of some recent interpreters), or that the one who presided at that last supper was acting in a priestly fashion or offering some kind of sacrifice. For them his words required an act of formal identification with all that he stood for, and a commitment to make real from the heart the Mosaic religion of law as Jeremiah had envisaged. They belonged to the Jewish people and they had identified with the prophetic message of Jesus calling for the renewal of the Jewish people. Nothing was to change except themselves!

³¹The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31.31-34)

That is the background against which to set our conversations about the authority of an authorized collection of books that we call the Bible. Already it is, I hope, clear that whatever conclusions we reach have to relate a posteriori to what we find within its pages, rather than to some a priori position adopted in advance before we look within. That means recognizing the necessity, made inevitable not by our own predispositions but by the very content of the Bible itself, of using the historical-critical method. It also means recognizing the theologically non-harmonizable diversity within it. That in turn means that readers of the Bible, whether persons or communities, have to become accustomed to making choices on the basis of two-way conversations, as it were, with the biblical authors rather than passive receptivity.

The recognition of the need for historical-critical perspectives can be seen as a wholly appropriate breathing of the spirit of the Reformation, and it is clear that most of the contributors to the Lutheran World Federation's study programme on 'The Authority of the Bible in the Life of the Church' (Boettcher 2006) were well seized of that. Their ecumenical commitment is as clear as the day to readers of their symposium. But ecumenical longings do not always exhibit such realism, and I am afraid to say that in the Anglican tradition, often anxiously searching for uniformity in conversations with

representatives of Roman Catholicism, and in the process showing what might be deemed undue subservience to traditions which would have difficulty withstanding the effects of constructively critical assessment – in the Anglican tradition that realism is sometimes shunned.

One might take as an example the discussion of method in the preamble to the ARCIC Report of 2005, *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*. Here we read:

‘Historical-critical approaches attempted to discern the meaning intended by the biblical authors, and to account for texts’ origins. Each of these readings has its limitations, and may give rise to exaggerations or imbalances: typology can become extravagant, Reformation emphases reductionist, and critical methods overly historicist. More recent approaches to Scripture point to the range of possible readings of a text, notably its narrative, rhetorical, and sociological dimensions. In this statement, we seek to integrate what is valuable from each of these approaches, as both correcting and contributing to our use of Scripture. Further, we recognize that no reading of a text is neutral, but each is shaped by the context and interest of its readers. Our reading has taken place within the context of our dialogue in Christ, for the sake of that communion which is his will. It is thus an ecclesial and ecumenical reading, seeking to consider each passage about Mary in the context of the New Testament as a whole, against the background of the Old, and in the light of Tradition.’

This statement, drafted by a highly respected and card-carrying member of the goodly fellowship of New Testament scholars is extraordinary and even worrying for two reasons:

(i) Having done obeisance to the diversity of methods available to students of the Bible, and included in that range the historical-critical approach, the rest of the Report to all intents and purposes ignores it.

(ii) In seminar discussion of the issues raised by the Report, that same scholar declared that there was no point in raising some critical issues since on the Roman Catholic side they were beyond question. At that point one cannot but ask at what point our (admittedly limited and always vulnerable to questioning and reassessment) perception of truth impinges on a concern for unity. Is truth, as the Reformation insisted, prior to and a prerequisite of unity, or is truth only accessible as a result of whatever it is that constitutes unity? This issue seems to me to haunt all our thoughts and words and actions as we in our own day seek to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ – and, let us add, as we in our own day seek simultaneously to be faithful to our God-given humanity, with all that that implies concerning responsible decision-making and – dare I say it? – wisdom. On that, more anon.

Let us return to where we started with the starkly differing interpretations within the New Testament itself of the concept of ‘the new covenant’. Should recognition of the authority of the Bible, once it has incorporated the process of choice, lead us to defer to the historical Jesus, the Jesus of the kaleidoscopically varied Gospels, or that radically innovative figure, Paul, with whom the Church has so often found it difficult to live, but whom it has again and again found it cannot live without?

In drawing the historical Jesus within the scope of that question we are, as it were, getting behind the much favoured invocation of the tripartite Word – the Word who is Jesus, the word of scripture, and the word of the gospel. For talk of ‘the Word who is Jesus’ is John-speak and incarnation-speak, and the Jesus of John is most of the time far removed from the historical Jesus. We look in vain for any incarnation-consciousness in the mind of the latter. But what are we to do theologically with the historical Jesus, not least because the four Gospels, sometimes in fundamental disagreement with one another, are at least agreed in this that through him God has come near?

Reconstructions of the historical Jesus, varied as they are, suggest that there are features of his outlook, conveyed with prophetic authority, that can hardly be incorporated within an ongoing Christian theology.

(i) He announced the kingdom of God but without defining it, thereby assuming the standard Jewish understanding of it as the ultimate golden age in the history of the Jewish people.

Mark 1.15 sets the tone, and the parallelism between the prayer, ‘May your kingdom come’ and the kaddish prayer of the synagogue community shows Jesus’ identification with the prayers and aspirations of the Jewish people: ‘May he establish his kingdom in your lifetime and in your days and in the lifetime of all the house of Israel ever speedily and at a near time.’

(ii) He sounded an uncompromising note of imminence, which was to give the developing Christian communities a lot of trouble.

Again this is clear from Mark 1.15 and 9.1 and, on the rebound the secondary parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Matthew 25.1-12), where wisdom is equated with preparedness for delay, and foolishness with assumptions of imminence. See also the secondary parables of the faithful and wise servant (Q/Luke 12.42-46) and the talents (Q/Luke 19.12-27).

(iii) He probably saw his own future in royal terms, but opened up no distance between his expectation and that of conventional Jewish political hope.

Two independent witnesses are the traditions of the request of the sons of Zebedee (Mark 10.35-40) and the role of the twelve, derived from the status of Jesus himself, as assessors of Israel (Q/Luke 22.30). Similarly the entry to Jerusalem (Mark 11.1-10), shorn of its probably legendary features, is an anticipatory royal procession which is accompanied and also interpreted by hosanna prayers on the part of Jesus’ followers for the intervention of God.

(iv) He assumed the equation between the people of God and the Jewish people, whose renewal was the aim and objective of his mission, and indeed saw the ultimate inclusion of gentiles within the purpose of God as involving their adherence to Judaism.

This is clear from his encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7.24-30), which Mark has edited under the influence of Pauline strategy (‘to the Jew first and also to the Greek’) but which in its pre-Markan form recorded a straight refusal on Jesus’ part to respond to the needs of a gentile: ‘Let the children be fed; for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’

The so-called cleansing of the temple (Mark 11.15-17), if we are allowed to interpret this perplexing event by means of Isaiah 56.7, is an acted statement of the destiny of the temple as the location for the convergence of scattered Jews and gentiles who will at that stage have attached themselves to Judaism.

(v) He taught within the framework of Torah, all suggestions to the contrary in earlier phases of the quest having proved unsustainable.

This does not require reliance on the probably inauthentic statements of conservative Torah observance (Matthew 5.17-19), which probably derive from those Christian circles highly critical of the Pauline mission. Rather, it notes the stance of the earliest community in Jerusalem, the fierce debates involving Paul, and the failure of attempts to find evidence in the Jesus traditions (antitheses in Matthew 5.21-48; the divorce controversy in Mark 10.2-9; the call to leave the dead to bury the dead in Q/Luke 9.59-60) of any deviation on Jesus' part from the standard assumptions of Judaism concerning the Torah.

(vi) In prophetic mode he called followers to abandon the securities of family and employment in just the same way as he had done, to the intense disapproval of his mother and siblings

The call to the two pairs of brothers (Mark 1.16-20) exemplifies the demand set out in, e.g. Mark 10.29-30; and Jesus' own experience is documented in the traditions in Mark 3.19-20, 31-35; 6.1-6a.

Those aspects of the mission – for that is what it was – of the historical Jesus must arguably be set in the discontinuity column as far as the ongoing Christian community was and is concerned. Not that all versions of early Christianity saw it that way. To cut a very long story short, the likelihood is that Matthew, operating within the tradition of the original disciples of Jesus, and fiercely resistant to what he saw as the liberal anomia of others who claimed the Spirit and fervently invoked Jesus as Lord (cf. Matthew 7.15-23), saw the resurrection as vindicating and therefore confirming all that Jesus had stood for (cf. Matthew 28.19-20) – though even he had some trouble with the delay in the coming of God's kingdom. Others saw the resurrection of Jesus as transformative, the event, the point at which partial continuity with the past made space for partial discontinuity and thus a new world.

If a defensible understanding of biblical authority does not even require total submission to the historical Jesus to whom the Gospels bear witness, and if, to take the example cited above, we face the question of whether Matthean Christianity is to be our Christianity and dare to answer 'no', does that mean that we should throw ourselves into the embrace of Paul? After all, the most distinguished of all contemporary commentators on Matthew has summed up the relationship between the two in a way both terse and telling.

'Matthew obviously does not know Paul and his theology; but it is basically the case that he would belong to the side of the opponents of Paul.' (Luz 1990: 87).

‘Matthew and Paul, had they known one another, would certainly not have struck up a strong friendship.’ (Luz 1995: 148).

So is Paul to be our man as we recognize that within the envelope of respect for the Bible and its authority we have to undertake some conversations and make some choices? Well, one could do a lot worse! And one could hardly do better than take as our own ‘canon within the canon’ the pre-Pauline baptismal reunification formula (thus Meeks 1983: 87) of Galatians 3.26-28, cf. 1 Corinthians 12.13; Colossians 3.11:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

There is no longer Jew nor Greek;
There is no longer slave nor free;
There is no longer ‘male and female’;
For all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Concerning this formula, we should note the following:

(i) Paul’s own convoluted attempt in 1 Corinthians 11.2-16 to harmonize this formula with contemporary culture, an attempt which retreats in part from its essential theological undergirding, not only confirms – as if there were ever any doubt! – its acutely counter-cultural content and implications but also enables us to say that voting for Paul in one context perfectly justifies our voting against him in another!

(ii) The term ‘in Christ’, rightly and recurrently used wherever and whenever Christians offer worship, signals a fundamental reality – the baptismal identification with and incorporation in the risen Christ, who embodies the new creation within which the polarities of the ‘old creation’ are overcome. This is not only about membership (as those who would restrict the role of women in the Church claim) but also and quite non-negotiably about absolutely everything – membership, leadership, and whatever – that defines our life. Many of the tensions that mar the lives of contemporary Christian communities stem from failure to work from and with this revolutionary and counter-cultural summary of the gospel. If we need a canon within the canon, and it seems highly likely that we do, this is it!

(iii) In bringing this ‘canon’ to bear on other alternatives, e.g. the message of the cross, it may be worth observing that under the surface of this formula there is no theory of the atonement, even though Paul sometimes, though, one has to say, not typically or instinctively, quotes such theories (e.g. Romans 3.25). All that is needed is the brutum factum of death, which we are thus freed to regard as a tragedy. Atonement theories, hallowed by some biblical texts and the agonized debates of two millennia concerning their viability, and generated retrospectively as was the case with the Maccabean martyrs (2 Maccabees 7.37; 4 Maccabees 6.27; 17.22; 18.3-4 → Mark 10.45) whose deaths had somehow to be incorporated meaningfully within the providence of God – atonement theories always leave one asking, ‘What sort of a god does this way of thinking presuppose?’, and frankly the answer is usually uncongenial and sometimes even repugnant. But here we have an assumed death, the last and most ghastly event in the story of someone who is identified with humanity within the ‘old creation’ and who then by virtue of an act of God is raised to embody the ‘new’ (cf. 2 Corinthians 5.17; Galatians 6.15). Are not Christians ‘resurrection people’? If so, this is what makes them individually and corporately what they are.

But while Paul, who has by conviction no interest in the particularities of the pre-death-and-resurrection Christ or indeed of the pre-participation-in-death-and-resurrection anyone at all (2 Corinthians 5.16), gives us our cue and the clue we need concerning a 'canon within a canon', restraint might still be advisable in other respects. May I explain?

Not everything that Jesus said and did has to be set within the discontinuity column, as it were. There are some features of his mission, some phenomena attested by the Gospels, which we can regard as authoritative precisely because the resurrection did nothing to evacuate them of meaning or relevance. Several agenda items could be singled out, e.g. his strategy of inclusiveness; his critique of conventional top-down leadership models (studiously ignored in most churches where hierarchy is gladly welcomed as essential to authentic community life!); his prophetic insistence on the 'big principles' that define a community's relationship to God rather than a concept of obedience to the will of God that requires ever more precise and minute distinctions in the interpretation and application of texts; his willingness to mount a prophetic critique from outside the religious establishment on the basis of no appeal to authority other than his ringing true in the experience of those who encountered him. But let us put those in our memory banks for another day. I would like to single out another feature which is almost certainly just as definitive as the idea of Jesus as prophet, and that is Jesus as teacher of wisdom.

The role of wisdom has to be taken seriously by anyone for whom the Bible has any kind of authority, whether the notion of authority is given a weak or a strong interpretation.

The wisdom literature, let us recall, comes to us as part of the heritage of Israel and in close association with the law and the prophets – thus the TaNaK. But it was not always so. If Israel sees herself as the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and if the law and the prophets serve to define the religious outlook of Israel and the very essence of the covenant with Yahweh, it is only in the later examples of the wisdom literature that we witness an assimilation of wisdom to Abrahamic faith and Yahwism, i.e. in the books of Sirach (ca. 180 BCE), who even goes so far as to position 'the writings' between the law and the prophets (38.34-39.1), and the Wisdom of Solomon (either CI BCE or CI CE).

'The sages offered an alternative mode of interpreting reality to the Yahwistic one in which God was actively involved in guiding history toward a worthy goal. The claim that God chose a particular people, fought on their behalf, called prophets, issued legal codes, sent angels to maintain contact with humans, enlisted foreign powers to discipline the chosen race, and promised to bestow a new covenant on inveterate sinners for the sake of God's honour represents a way of looking at the human situation that is wholly alien to the sapiential one.' (Crenshaw 2010: 243)

The earlier wisdom texts (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes/Qoheleth) certainly mention God and refer not infrequently to 'the fear of the Lord' (Proverbs 1.7, 29; 2.5; 8.13; 9.10; 10.27; 14.26; 15.16, 33; 19.23; 22.4; 23.17), and by that they mean 'reverence before the numinous' (Murphy 1992: 925). By 'the Lord' they mean the Creator, to whom all humankind owes its existence, in the sight of whom its existence is played out, and to whose critical judgement everyone is ultimately subject. They do not draw upon Israel's distinctive experience in defining him. In this way we can observe that wisdom is

often the currency of international reflection and is originally untouched by nationalism. Its provenance could be anywhere or everywhere. It breathes an atmosphere of humanism, and draws for its insights on human resources, experience-based observation, and intellectual self-help. Revelation and/or direct divine intervention are not the route whereby access to truth is acquired.

Wisdom ... begins with humans as the fundamental point of orientation. It asks what is good for men and women, and it believes that all essential answers can be learned in experience, pregnant with signs about reality itself. The worldview assumes a universe in the deepest and richest sense of the word. The one God embedded truth within all of reality. The human responsibility is to search for that insight and thus to learn to live in harmony with the cosmos. (Crenshaw 2010: 11)

If we set ourselves to take the role of wisdom with maximum seriousness, it may perhaps enable the letter of James to be brought back from the dead in the face of the dismissive strictures of Martin Luther, to whom not only you who are Lutherans owe so much. No one could pretend that the content of the wisdom tradition in general or the letter of James in particular is derivative from the 'canon within the canon' which I have suggested we might locate in the pre-Pauline baptismal reunification formula. But the one is not in disharmony with the other, and indeed one might say that the wisdom perspective has several major advantages that Christians have perhaps been slow to recognize and exploit.

(i) It articulates that insight which derives from mature and experienced humanity rather than from the specifics of the heritage of Judaism. In other words, it takes being human at its best seriously.

(ii) It is particularly appropriate for a community whose outlook is universal and which sees itself as transcending those particularities that the 'neither Jew nor Greek' factor necessarily envisages.

(iii) It reminds us that the Tanak consists of the law, the prophets and the writings, and that 'the writings' are not 'the law'. And that has immense implications, for wisdom deals in absolutes, unqualified ideals, with circumstantial flexibility, the lifting of human aspiration to the highest possible level, at which point we have to draw back as fast as possible from regarding those unreserved demands as if they were laws. They are not. Within the Tanak we can see how wisdom, which is ultimately inherent in God, and which is often most appropriately celebrated in poetry, is brought down to earth with a bump and equated with a known earthly entity, whether the Torah (thus Sirach 24.23) or, ultimately, none other than Jesus Christ himself (John 1:1, 14). But wisdom needs to be liberated from all that, just as it needs to be retrieved from the adverse evaluation it suffered in the contrast between 'human wisdom' and 'the foolishness of God' which is 'the word of the cross' (1 Corinthians 1.22-25).

You will not have missed the point that from among the range of Christian theological options offered by the Bible I would not be voting for Matthew. But that does not mean that I wish to engage in a conversation with Matthew that is no more than a dialogue of the deaf. No, I want to hear, and I want the Christian community as a whole to hear some at least of what Matthew's Jesus has to say, not least because his Sermon on the Mount cannot but epitomize the will of God as this version of Jesus presents it. And the Sermon on the Mount is deliberately and explicitly defined as a

wisdom text. Thus, in a manner that matches the traditional Jewish ending of a key document, the final parable sets out two stark choices, with no neutral intermediate position allowed, cf. Deuteronomy 30.15-20:

‘See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today ... you shall live. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear ... you shall perish’.

Matthean redaction, and therefore Matthean intention, shows itself significantly when the version of the parable of the two house builders in Matthew 7.24-27 is compared and contrasted with that in Luke 6.47-49. The person who responds at the deepest possible level to the preceding discourse is labeled ‘wise’.

²⁴Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!

The Sermon on the Mount is therefore a wisdom text, needing to be heard and read with the wisdom literature as a whole in mind. It sets out the choices that have to be made in order that a good life may be lived, mature human experience respected, the divine order of the world acknowledged, and pitfalls in areas such as work, property and sexuality safely navigated.

What difference does it make when the content of the Sermon is treated as wisdom teaching rather than a set of laws? Well, before answering that question, let us be alert to, and distance ourselves from, the tendency in Matthew’s own mind for the supposed wellbeing of his community to assimilate wisdom to law. In this respect he is following in the footsteps of Sirach. We see that tendency in the six antitheses.

Everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgement; and if you say to him, “You fool”, you will be liable to the hell of fire. (Matthew 5.22ac)

Everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5.28)

Whoever divorces his wife, except on the ground of immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery. (Matthew 5.32)

[Note: The earliest version of this saying is probably that in Luke 16.18.]

Do not swear at all, but let your word be “Yes, Yes” or “No, No”. (Matthew 5.34, 37)

If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to grab your coat, give your cloak as well. (Matthew 5.39, 40)

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. (Matthew 5.44,45)

These antitheses are placed under the control of just about as uncompromising an assertion as we can imagine of the everlasting authority of the law, with accompanying blood-curdling warnings against being liberal (5.17-19), plus the introduction of each of the six antitheses with a quotation from the Tanak.

However, here is the rub. When the superimposed, and arguably a touch unfortunate, evidence of assimilation to law is resisted, all the sayings which Matthew has caused to begin 'But/and I say to you' have precedent in wisdom material, whether in content (usually) or style (always). Thereby there is conveyed by the historical Jesus – why not? – and made available to be part of the continuity that the resurrection respects and affirms – why not? – a demand for unqualified tolerance of other human beings, for uncompromising sexual purity in thought and action, for unreserved respect for the bond of marriage unless involvement with a third party has already destroyed it, for unequivocal truthfulness and reliability, for a willingness to abandon the instinctive protection of one's honour and prestige so that no resort is made to quite justifiable response in kind, and finally for such imitation of the creator God's indiscriminating provision of benefit for good and bad people alike that one may truly claim to be a son of that same God.

All of this is in content and in style wisdom, and no favours are done and have been done in the life of the Christian Church by letting a department of canon law loose on such material. (Just think what the implications are if the saying about divorce, to name but one of the six, is allowed to be a wisdom saying rather than a law, and how much personal damage to human persons at a vulnerable stage in their lives might be averted.)

At the end of the day, where then are we left in respect of the authority of the book that the wily and politically adroit King James I (and VI of Scotland) authorized? The answer is that there is no easy answer, and concerning that we should, I submit, be pleased rather than perplexed, industrious rather than insecure, responsible rather than rattled. For in allowing the Bible its inalienable place within the life and worship of the community we are setting ourselves against a pre-resurrection mode of thinking and joyfully celebrating in teaching and action the post-resurrection corporate life that our 'canon within the canon' encourages. It is hard to do that if the function of the Bible – this diverse, sometimes exhilaratingly rich, sometimes embarrassingly poor, collection of documents – is understood to be a matter of control. No, better to opt for all the risks of conversation in the context of which we can sometimes say to a given writer, a given tradition, a given community, 'No, you've got that wrong', and at other times, 'Yes, you've got that right. It can be treasured by the resurrection people.'

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