

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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## Is the Bible a Textbook?

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"In Adam's fall we sinned all" was the first line of the first textbook printed in North America, the Puritans' *New England Primer*. Russell Kirk, writing in *The Roots of American Order* (Open Court, 1974), remarked on the position of the Bible in early America:

In colonial America, everyone with the rudiments of schooling knew one book thoroughly: the Bible. And the Old Testament mattered as much as the New, for the American colonies were founded in a time of renewed Hebrew scholarship, and the Calvinistic character of Christian faith in early America emphasized the legacy of Israel (45–46).

Daniel Boorstin, in *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (Random House, 1958), pointed out that "For answers to their problems, they [the early Americans] drew as readily on *Exodus*, *Kings*, or *Romans*, [sic] as on the less narrative portions of the Bible" (19).

The Bible was *the* textbook of early America, as it has been for Christians throughout the centuries. Today, however, it is fashionable and sophisticated to assert that the Bible is not a textbook of biology, or of politics, or of economics, or of whatever discipline the sophisticate happens to be considering. Perhaps, implies the sophisticate, in the ignorant days gone by, the Bible was sufficient for learning, but in our advanced technological age we must turn to other books in order to supplement the

Bible. "The Bible is not a textbook of..." is now a cliché that is usually uttered with an air of finality and profundity. The unspoken implication is: Who would be so ignorant or so foolish as to believe that the Bible is a textbook of anything, except, perhaps, of personal piety?

The textbook cliché tells us nothing about the Bible, but it does tell us a good deal about the person who repeats the cliché. It indicates that he is thoughtless enough to parrot a line devised by those who wish to deprecate the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. There is no reason to deny that the Bible is a textbook unless one wishes to affirm that some other book *is* a textbook. If one is speaking of biology, then perhaps it is Darwin or, more recently, Wilson that has written a textbook. If one is speaking of politics, then perhaps it is Rousseau or Aristotle or Herbert Marcuse who has authored a textbook. If economics, it might be Marx or Mises. Whatever the case, the only possible reason one can have for saying that "the Bible is not a textbook of..." is to preserve some area of thought for non-Scriptural, *i.e.*, non-Christian ideas. The cliché is a result of refusing to acknowledge the authority of Scripture in every area of thought (faith) and life (practice). Christians ought to recognize the cliché for what it is: a cliché of humanism.

Perhaps it may make this point clearer if we define "textbook," and for that we turn to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which is universally recognized as the best authority on English usage. The *O. E. D.* lists four definitions of "textbook" and several more

of "text," many of which, however, can be immediately dismissed as not relevant to the matter at hand. The first definition of "textbook" is listed simply as "(See quot.) *Obs.*" There follows a quotation in which "textbook" is used to refer to a book containing a student's handwritten copy of a master's writings—handwritten with wide margins to allow notations referring to specific points in the "text," the master's writings. The fourth definition of "textbook" is, "A book containing the libretto of a musical play or opera." These two can be ignored, for they obviously are not what the people of the cliché mean when they say that the Bible is not a textbook.

The second definition of "textbook" brings us closer to our mark, and it is reproduced here in full:

2. A book used as a standard work for the study of a particular subject, now usually one written specially for this purpose; a manual of instruction in any science or branch of study, esp. a work recognized as an authority.

In denying that the Bible is a textbook, the people of the cliché are affirming that the Bible is *not* a standard work for the study of that subject (whatever subject they are referring to), that it is *not* a manual of instruction in that subject, and that it is *not* an authority in that subject. *That* is what the textbook cliché means.

Now, someone may object that some people who use the cliché do not mean those things at all; they simply mean to say that the Bible is not *exclusively* about a certain subject, that it was not written, in the words of the *O. E. D.*, "specially for the study of a particular subject." Perhaps there are some people of the cliché who mean that, but I have never heard or read of any. That meaning is obvious—too obvious. Everyone knows that the Bible is not exclusively about politics or economics or biology. That is not the point at issue. To use the cliché with that meaning is pointless, for no one has ever thought of stating that the Bible is exclusively about any single discipline. No, the cliché is used by professed Christians against those Christians who would uphold the authority of the Scripture in every

area of thought and life. *It is used precisely for the purpose of denying Scriptural authority, and those who use it know quite well what they are doing.* They are saying that the Bible can be safely ignored whenever one moves beyond personal piety to academic disciplines. The Bible, they mean to say, is like a devotional guide; it contains nice little stories about kind people, but no one with any sense would look in a devotional for hard answers to important questions. Making an unscriptural distinction between the heart and the head, they make the Bible a book for the heart, but not for the head.

The cliché—thus understood as a denial of Biblical authority—is more ironic, for when one reads the third definition offered by the *O. E. D.*, he learns that a "textbook" is "a book containing a selection of Scriptural texts, arranged for daily use or easy reference." Scanning all the *O. E. D.* entries for "text" and "textbook," one is made conscious of the fact that the words originally referred to Scripture: The *textus* was the Bible. The Bible was the text, and one of the earliest—if not the earliest—textbooks. Reading the *O. E. D.* entries vividly shows how far modern professed Christians have departed from the faith when they deny that the Bible is a textbook.

What does this mean for us today? The answer is quite simple: If we are to "demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and [to] take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 *Corinthians* 10:4, 5), the Bible must once again become our textbook for every discipline. No other book will do, for to what other book shall we go? The Bible has the words of life. God has made the wisdom of this world foolishness.

The Bible itself claims to be a textbook: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 *Timothy* 3:16, 17). Notice that the Bible claims to be *sufficient*: By the study of all Scripture, the man of God may be *thoroughly* equipped for *every* good work. He is not partly equipped for every good work and in need of other textbooks, nor is he thoroughly equipped for some

good work. The Scripture is sufficient thoroughly to equip one for every good work, including the good work of politics, economics, biology, and philosophy.

Moreover, the Scripture claims to be *necessary*, for in Christ are hidden "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Notice the *all*. Scripture does not claim to be a book that needs to be supplemented by other books: *All* the treasures of wisdom and knowledge belong to Christ, and Christ has revealed some of them to us in the Scripture for our edification, for our education. Among the four items Paul lists in *2 Timothy 3:16, 17*—teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training—teaching appears first. The Scriptures are primarily a textbook. Through teaching the Scriptures to his students, a teacher can rebuke them for errors in thinking and behaving, correct erroneous and false beliefs, and train them in every good work.

*2 Timothy 3:16, 17* are only two of the hundred-plus verses in the Bible that command us to teach the Bible to each other, to our children, and to ourselves. In *Leviticus 10:11* the Lord instructs Aaron to "teach the Israelites all the decrees the Lord has given them through Moses." And of course, there is *Matthew 28:20*: "... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

The Bible most definitely regards itself as a textbook. Have we any right to do otherwise? Should we not heed this warning that Paul gives Timothy almost immediately after he has declared the authority of all Scripture? "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers [and textbooks] to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (*2 Timothy 4:3, 4*).

The Bible *is* a textbook—or rather, the Bible is *the* textbook. Let all other books conform. And let us, as Christians, reject the sophistry of those who devalue the Scriptures by making them inadequate for all our intellectual needs.