

THE CHURCH OR THE BIBLE

by Fr. Arnold Damen, S.J. (1815-1890)

Introduction...

The following sermon is as relevant today as it was over 100 years ago when it was first preached by Father Arnold Damen, S.J. That Father Damen's message was and still is a challenge to the many who pride themselves "Bible-and-Bible-alone Christians" is evident from the title, "The Church or the Bible." "One cannot have God for his Father, who will not have the Church for his Mother," and likewise one cannot have the Word of God for his faith who will not have the Church for his teacher. It is the infallible teaching authority of the Church, as promised by Christ, which alone preserves God's Word from erroneous interpretation. This is the essence of the zealous priest's doctrine. It is also the essence of true Christianity, as Father Damen amply proves from Scripture itself and from just plain common sense. Every sincere Bible reader deserves to know the true relation God has established between His Church and Holy Scripture. We, therefore, invite all who love the Bible to read Father Damen's exposition with an open mind, lest while reading the Scriptures "they wrest them to their own destruction." (2 Peter 3:16)

I. Dearly Beloved Christians:—

When our Divine Saviour sent His Apostles and His Disciples throughout the whole universe to preach the Gospel to every creature, He laid down the conditions of salvation thus: "He that believeth and is baptized," said the Son of the Living God, "shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be condemned" (Mark 16:16). Here, then, Our Blessed Lord laid down the two conditions of salvation: Faith and Baptism. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be condemned—or is damned. Hence, then, two conditions of salvation: Faith and Baptism. I will speak this evening on the condition of Faith. We must have Faith in order to be saved, and we must have Divine Faith, not human faith. Human faith will not save a man, but only Divine Faith. What is Divine Faith? It is to believe, upon the authority of God, the truths that God has revealed; that is Divine Faith. To believe all that God has taught upon the authority of God, and to believe without doubting, without hesitation; for the moment you commence to doubt or hesitate, that moment you commence to mistrust the authority of God, and, therefore, insult God by doubting His word. Divine Faith, therefore, is to believe without doubting, without hesitating. Human faith is when we believe a thing upon the authority of men—on human authority. That is human faith. But Divine Faith is to believe without doubting, without hesitating, whatsoever God has revealed upon the authority of God, upon the word of God.

Therefore, my dear people, it is not a matter of indifference what religion a man professes, providing he be a good man. You hear it said nowadays in this Nineteenth Century of little faith that it matter not what religion a man professes, providing he be a good man. That is heresy, my dear people, and I will prove it to you to be such. If it be a matter of indifference what a man believes, providing he be a good man, why then it is useless for God to make any revelation whatever. If a man is at liberty to reject what God revealeth, what use for Christ to send out His Apostles and disciples to teach all nations, if those nations are at liberty to believe or reject the teachings of the Apostles or disciples? You see at once that this would be insulting God. If God reveals a thing or teaches a thing, He means to be believed. He wants to be believed whenever He teaches or reveals a thing. Man is bound to believe whatsoever God has revealed, for, my dear people, we are bound to worship God, both with our reason and intellect, as well as with our heart and will. God is master of the whole man. He claims his will, his heart, his reason, and his intellect. Where is the man in his reason, no matter what denomination, church, or religion he belongs to, that will deny that we are bound to believe what God has taught? I am sure there is not a Christian who will deny that we are bound to believe whatsoever God has revealed.

Therefore, it is not a matter of indifference what religion a man professes. He must profess that true religion if he would be saved. But what is the true religion? To believe all that God has taught. I am sure that even my Protestant friends will admit this is right; for, if they do not, I would say they are no Christians at all. "But what is the true Faith?" "The true

Faith,” say Protestant friends, “is to believe in the Lord Jesus.” Agreed, Catholics believe in that. “Tell me what you mean by believing in the Lord Jesus?” “Why,” says my Protestant friend, “you must believe that He is the Son of the Living God.” Agreed again. Thanks be to God, we can agree on something. We believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of the Living God, that He is God. To this we all agree, excepting the Unitarians and Socinians, but we will leave them alone tonight. If Christ be God, then we must believe all He teaches. Is this not so, my dearly beloved Protestant brethren and sisters? “And that’s the right Faith, isn’t it?” “Well, yes,” says my Protestant friend, “I guess that is the right Faith. To believe that Jesus is the Son of the Living God we must believe all that Christ has taught.” We Catholics say the same, and here we agree again. Christ, then, we must believe, and that is the true Faith. We must believe all that Christ has taught—that God has revealed—and, without that Faith there is no salvation; without that Faith there is no hope of Heaven; without that Faith there is eternal damnation! We have the words of Christ for it: “He that believeth not shall be condemned,” says Christ.

II. But if Christ, my dearly beloved people commands me under pain of eternal damnation to believe all that He has taught, He must give me the means to know what He has taught. If, therefore, Christ commands me upon pain of eternal damnation, He is bound to give me the means of knowing what He has taught. And the means Christ gives us of knowing this must have been at all times within the reach of all people. Secondly, the means that God gives us to know what He has taught must be a means adapted to the capacities of all intellects—even the dullest. For even those of the dullest of understandings have a right to salvation, and consequently they have a right to the means whereby they shall learn the truths that God has taught, that they may believe them and be saved.

The means that God gives us to know what he has taught must be an infallible means. For if it be a means that can lead us astray, it can be no means at all. It must be an infallible means, so that if a man makes use of that means, he will infallibly, without fear of mistake or error, be brought to a knowledge of all the truths that God has taught. I don’t think there can be anyone present here—I care not what he is, a Christian or an unbeliever—who can object to my premises. And these premises are the groundwork of my discourse and of all my reasoning, and, therefore, I want you to bear them in mind. I will repeat them, for on these premises rests all the strength of my discourse and reasoning. If God commands me under pain of eternal damnation to believe all that He has taught, He is bound to give me the means to know what He has taught. And the means that God gives me must have been at all times within the reach of all people—must be adapted to the capacities of all intellects, must be an infallible means to us, so that if a man makes use of it he will be brought to a knowledge of all the truths that God has taught.

III. Has God given us such means? “Yes,” say my Protestant friends, “He has.” And so says the Catholic: “God has given us such means. What is the means God has given us whereby we shall learn the truth that God has revealed?” “The Bible,” say my Protestant friends, “the Bible, the whole of the Bible, and nothing but the Bible.” But we Catholics say, “No; not the Bible and its private interpretation, but the Church of the Living God.” I will prove the facts, and I defy all my separated brethren—and all the preachers in the bargain—to disprove what I will say tonight.

I say, then, it is not the private interpretation of the Bible that has been appointed by God to be the teacher of man, but the Church of the Living God. For, my dear people, if God has intended that man should learn His religion from a book—the Bible—surely God would have given that book to man; Christ would have given that book to man. Did He do it? He did not. Christ sent His Apostles throughout the whole universe and said: “Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” Christ did not say, “Sit down and write Bibles and scatter them over the earth, and let every man read his Bible and judge for himself.” If Christ had said that, there would never have been a Christianity on the earth at all, but a Babylon and confusion instead, and never one Church, the union of one body. Hence, Christ never said to His Apostles, “Go and write Bibles and distribute them, and let everyone judge for himself.” That injunction was reserved for the Sixteenth Century, and we have seen the result of it. Ever since the Sixteenth Century there have been springing up religion upon religion, and churches upon churches, all fighting and quarreling with one another. And all because of the private interpretation of the Bible.

Christ sent His Apostles with authority to teach all nations, and never gave them any command of writing the Bible. And the Apostles went forth and preached everywhere, and planted the Church of God throughout the earth, but never thought of writing. The first word written was by Saint Matthew, and he wrote for the benefit of a few individuals. He wrote the Gospel about seven years after Christ left this earth, so that the Church of God, established by Christ, existed seven years before a line was written of the New Testament. Saint Mark wrote about ten years after Christ left this earth; Saint Luke about twenty-five years, and Saint John about sixty-three years after Christ had established the Church of God. Saint John wrote the last portion of the Bible—the Book of Revelation—about sixty-five years after Christ had left this earth and the Church of God had been established. The Catholic religion had existed sixty-five years before the Bible was completed, before it was written. Now, I ask you, my dearly beloved separated brethren, were these Christian people, who lived during the period between the establishment of the Church of Jesus and the finishing of the Bible, were they really Christians, good Christians, enlightened Christians? Did they know the religion of Jesus? Where is the man that will dare to say that those who lived from the time that Christ went up to Heaven to the time that the Bible was completed were not Christians? It is admitted on all sides, by all denominations, that they were the very best of Christians, the first fruit of the Blood of Jesus Christ. But how did they know what they had to do to save their souls? Was it from the Bible that they learned it? No, because the Bible was not written. And would our Divine Saviour have left His Church for sixty-five years without a teacher, if the Bible is the teacher of man? Most assuredly not.

Were the Apostles Christians, I ask you, my dear Protestant friends? You say, “Yes, sir; they were the very founders of Christianity.” Now, my dear friends, none of the Apostles ever read the Bible; not one of them except perhaps, Saint John. For all of them had died martyrs for the Faith of Jesus Christ and never saw the cover of a Bible. Every one of them died martyrs and heroes for the Church of Jesus before the Bible was completed. How, then, did those Christians that lived in the first sixty-five years after Christ ascended—how did they know what they had to do to save their souls? They knew it precisely in the same way that you know it, my dear Catholic friends. You know it from the teachings of the Church of God, and so did the primitive Christians know it.

IV. Not only sixty-five years did Christ leave the Church He had established without a Bible, but over three hundred years. The Church of God was established and went on spreading itself over the whole globe without the Bible for more than three hundred years. In all that time the people did not know what constituted the Bible. In the days of the Apostles there were many false gospels. There was the Gospel of Simon, the Gospel of Nicodemus, of Mary, of Barnabas, and the Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus. All of these gospels were spread among the people, and the people did not know which of these were inspired and which were false and spurious. Even the learned themselves were disputing whether preference should be given to the Gospel of Simon or that of Matthew—to the Gospel of Nicodemus or the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of Mary or that of Luke, the Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus or the Gospel of Saint John the Evangelist. And so it was in regard to the epistles: Many spurious epistles were written, and the people were at a loss for over three hundred years to know which was false or spurious, or which inspired. And, therefore, they did not know what constituted the books of the Bible.

It was not until the Fourth Century that the Pope of Rome, the Head of the Church, the successor of Saint Peter, assembled together the Bishops of the world in a council (Council of Rome, 382 A.D.). And there in that council it was decided that the Bible, as we Catholics have it now, is the Word of God, and that the Gospels of Simon, Nicodemus, Mary, the Infancy of Jesus, and Barnabas, and all those other epistles were spurious or, at least, unauthentic; at least, that there was no evidence of their inspiration, and that the Gospels of Saints Luke, Matthew, Mark and John, and the Book of Revelation, were inspired by the Holy Ghost. Up to that time the whole world for three hundred years did not know what the Bible was; hence, they could not take the Bible for their guide, for they did not know what constituted the Bible. Would our Divine Saviour, if He intended man to learn his religion from a book, have left the Christian world for three hundred years without that book? Most assuredly not.

V. Not only for three hundred years was the world left without the Bible, but for one thousand four hundred years the Christian world was left without the Sacred Book. Before the art of printing was invented, Bibles were rare things; Bibles

were costly things. Now, you must all be aware, if you have read history at all, that the art of printing was invented only a little more than four hundred years ago—about the middle of the Fifteenth Century—and about one hundred years before there was a Protestant in the world. As I have said, before printing was invented books were rare and costly things.

Historians tell us that in the Eleventh Century—eight hundred years ago—Bibles were so rare and costly that it took a fortune, a considerable fortune, to buy oneself a copy of the Bible! Before the art of printing, everything had to be done with the pen upon parchment or sheepskin. It was, therefore, a tedious and slow operation—a costly operation. Now, in order to arrive at the probable cost of a Bible at that time, let us suppose that a man should work ten years to make a copy of the Bible and earn a dollar a day. Well, then, the cost of that Bible would be \$3,650. Now, let us suppose that a man should work at the copying of the Bible for twenty years, as historians say it would have taken him at that time, not having the conveniences and improvements to aid him that we have now. Then, at a dollar a day, for twenty years, the cost of a Bible would be nearly \$8,000!

Suppose I came and said to you, “My dear people, save your soul, for if you lose your soul all is lost.” You would ask, “What are we to do to save our souls?” The Protestant preacher would say to you, “You must get a Bible; you can get one at such-and-such a shop.” You would ask the cost and be told it was \$8,000. You would exclaim: “The Lord save us! And can we not go to Heaven without that book?” The answer would be: “No; you must have the Bible and read it.” You murmur at the price, but are asked, “Is not your soul worth \$8,000?” Yes, of course it is, but you say you do not have the money, and if you cannot get a Bible, and your salvation depends upon it, evidently you would have to remain outside the Kingdom of Heaven. This would be a hopeless condition, indeed. For fourteen hundred years the world was left without a Bible—not one in ten thousand, not one in twenty thousand, before the art of printing was invented, had the Bible. And would our Divine Lord have left the world without that book if it was necessary to man’s salvation? Most assuredly not.

VI. But let us suppose for a moment that all had Bibles, that Bibles were written from the beginning, and that every man, woman, and child had a copy. What good would that book be to people who did not know how to read it? It is a blind thing to such persons. Even now one-half the inhabitants of the earth cannot read. Moreover, as the Bible was written in Greek and Hebrew, it would be necessary to know these languages in order to be able to read it. But it is said that we have it translated now in French, English, and other languages of the day. Yes, but are you sure you have a faithful translation? If not, you have not the Word of God. If you have a false translation, it is the work of man. How shall you ascertain that? How shall you find out if you have a faithful translation from the Greek and Hebrew? “I do not know Greek or Hebrew,” says my separated friend; “for my translation I must depend upon the opinion of the learned.”

Well, then, my dear friends, suppose the learned should be divided in their opinions, and some of them should say it is good, and some false? Then your faith is gone; you must commence doubting and hesitating, because you do not know if the translation is good. Now with regard to the Protestant translation of the Bible, allow me to tell you that the most learned among Protestants tell you that your translation—the King James edition—is a very faulty translation and is full of errors. Your own learned divines, preachers, and bishops have written whole volumes to point out all the errors that are there in the King James translation, and Protestants of various denominations acknowledge it.

Some years ago, when I lived in St. Louis, there was held in that city a convention of ministers. All denominations were invited, the object being to arrange for a new translation of the Bible, and give it to the world. The proceedings of the convention were published daily in the Missouri Republican. A very learned Presbyterian, I think it was, stood up, and, urging the necessity of giving a new translation of the Bible, said that in the present Protestant translation of the Bible there were no less than thirty thousand errors. And you say, my dear Protestant friends, that the Bible is your guide and teacher. What a teacher, with thirty thousand errors! The Lord save us from such a teacher! One error is bad enough, but thirty thousand is a little too much. Another preacher stood up in the convention—I think he was a Baptist—and, urging the necessity of giving a new translation of the Bible, said for thirty years past the world was without the Word of God, for the Bible we have is not the Word of God at all. Here are your own preachers for you. You all read the newspapers, no doubt, my friends, and must know what happened in England a few years ago. A petition was sent to Parliament for an allowance of a few thousand pounds sterling for the purpose of getting up a new translation of the Bible. And that

movement was headed and carried on by Protestant bishops and clergymen.

VII. But, my dear people, how can you be sure of your faith? You say the Bible is your guide, but you do not know if you have it. Let us suppose for a moment that all should have a Bible. Should all read it and have a faithful translation, even then it cannot be the guide of man, because the private interpretation of the Bible is not infallible, but, on the contrary, most fallible. It is the source and fountain of all kinds of errors and heresies, and all kinds of blasphemous doctrines. Do not be shocked, my dear friends; just be calm and listen to my arguments. There are now throughout the world three hundred and fifty different denominations or churches, and all of them say the Bible is their guide and teacher. And I suppose they are all sincere. Are all of them true churches? This is an impossibility.

Truth is one as God is one, and there can be no contradiction. Every man in his senses sees that every one of them cannot be true, for they differ and contradict one another, and cannot, therefore, be all true. The Protestants say the man that reads the Bible rightly and prayerfully has truth, and they all say that they read it right.

Let us suppose that here is an Episcopal minister. He is a sincere, an honest, a well-meaning and prayerful man. He reads his Bible in a prayerful spirit, and from the word of the Bible, he says it is clear that there must be bishops. For without bishops there can be no priests, without priests no Sacraments, and without Sacraments no Church. The Presbyterian is a sincere and well-meaning man. He reads the Bible also, and deduces that there should be no bishops, but only presbyters. "Here is the Bible," says the Episcopalian; and "here is the Bible to give you the lie," says the Presbyterian. Yet both of them are prayerful and well-meaning men. Then the Baptist comes in. He is a well-meaning, honest man, and prayerful also. "Well," says the Baptist, "have you ever been baptized?" "I was," says the Episcopalian, "when I was a baby." "And so was I," says the Presbyterian, "when I was a baby." "But," says the Baptist, "you are going to Hell as sure as you live."

Next comes the Unitarian, well-meaning, honest, and sincere. "Well," says the Unitarian, "allow me to tell you that you are a pack of idolaters. You worship a man for a God who is no God at all." And he gives several texts from the Bible to prove it, while the others are stopping their ears that they may not hear the blasphemies of the Unitarian. And they all contend that they have the true meaning of the Bible. Next comes the Methodist, and he says, "My friends, have you got any religion at all?" "Of course we have," they say. "Did you ever feel religion," says the Methodist, "the spirit of God moving within you?" "Nonsense," says the Presbyterian, "we are guided by our reason and judgment." "Well," says the Methodist, "if you never felt religion, you never had it, and will go to Hell for eternity." The Universalist next comes in, and hears them threatening one another with eternal hellfire. "Why," says he, "you are a strange set of people. Do you not understand the Word of God? There is no Hell at all. That idea is good enough to scare old women and children," and he proves it from the Bible. Now comes in the Quaker. He urges them not to quarrel, and advises that they do not baptize at all. He is the sincerest of men, and gives the Bible for his faith.

Another comes in and says: "Baptize the men and let the women alone. For the Bible says, unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven. "So," says he, "the women are all right, but baptize the men." Next comes in the Shaker, and says he: "You are a presumptuous people. Do you not know that the Bible tells you that you must work out your salvation in fear and trembling, and you do not tremble at all. My brethren, if you want to go to Heaven shake, my brethren, shake!"

VIII. I have here brought together seven or eight denominations, differing one from another, or understanding the Bible in different ways, illustrative of the fruits of private interpretation. What, then, if I brought together the three hundred and fifty different denominations, all taking the Bible for their guide and teaching, and all differing from one another? Are they all right? One says there is a Hell, and another says there is not Hell. Are both right? One says Christ is God; another says He is not. One says they are unessential. One says Baptism is a requisite, and another says it is not. Are both true? This is an impossibility, my friends; all cannot be true. Who, then, is true? He that has the true meaning of the Bible, you say. But the Bible does not tell us who that is—the Bible never settles the quarrel. It is not the teacher.

The Bible, my dear people, is a good book. We Catholics allow that the Bible is the Word of God, the language of inspiration, and every Catholic is exhorted to read the Bible. But good as it is, the Bible, my dear friends, does not explain

itself. It is a good book, the Word of God, the language of inspiration, but your explanation of the Bible is not the language of inspiration. Your understanding of the Bible is not inspired—for surely you do not pretend to be inspired!

It is with the Bible as it is with the Constitution of the United States. When Washington and his associates established the Constitution and the Supreme Law of the United States, they did not say to the people of the States: “Let every man read the Constitution and make a government unto himself; let every man make his own explanation of the Constitution.” If Washington had done that, there never would have been a United States. The people would all have been divided among themselves, and the country would have been cut up into a thousand different divisions or governments. What did Washington do? He gave the people the Constitution and the Supreme Law, and appointed his Supreme Court and Supreme Judge of the Constitution. And these are to give the true explanation of the Constitution to all the American citizens—all without exception, from the President to the beggar. All are bound to go by the decisions of the Supreme Court, and it is this and this alone that can keep the people together and preserve the Union of the United States. The moment the people take the interpretation of the Constitution into their own hands, that moment there is an end of union. Ad so it is in every government—so it is here and everywhere. There is a Constitution, a Supreme Court or Law, a Supreme Judge of that Constitution, and that Supreme Court is to give us the meaning of the Constitution and the Law. In every well-ruled country there must be such a thing as this—a Supreme Law, Supreme Court, Supreme Judge, that all the people abide by.

There is in every country a Supreme Law, Supreme Court, Supreme Judge; and all are bound by decisions, and without that no government could stand. Even among the Indian tribes such a condition of affairs exists. How are they kept together? By their chief, who is their dictator. So our Divine Saviour also has established His Supreme Court—His Supreme Judge—to give us the true meaning of the Scriptures, and to give us the true revelation and doctrines of the Word of Jesus. The Son of the Living God has pledged His Word that this Supreme Court is infallible, and therefore, the true Catholic never doubts. “I believe,” says the Catholic, “because the Church teaches me so. I believe the Church because God has commanded me to believe her. He said: ‘Hear the Church, and he that does not hear the Church let him be to thee as a heathen and a publican.’ ‘He that believeth you believeth Me.’ said Christ, ‘and he that despiseth you despiseth Me.’” Therefore, the Catholic believes because God has spoken, and upon the authority of God. But our Protestant friends say, “We believe in the Bible.” Very well; how do you understand the Bible? “Well,” says the Protestant, “to the best of my opinion and judgment this is the meaning of the text.” He is not sure of it, but to the best of his opinion and judgment. This, my friends, is only the testimony of a man—it is only human faith, not Divine Faith.

It is Divine Faith alone by which we give honour and glory to God, by which we adore His infinite wisdom and veracity, and that adoration and worship is necessary for salvation. I have now proved to you that private interpretation of the Scripture cannot be the guide or teacher of man. In another lecture I shall prove that the Catholic Church is the only true Church of God, and that there is no other.
