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THE ANALOGY OF THE FAITH

I

THE authority which was attributed to the Bible by the first Reformers, especially the Calvinistic Reformers, is too well known to need emphasis. It is frequently suggested that they would not have taken this position had they really appreciated its difficulties. Even so judicious and well-informed a historian as Professor G. D. Henderson has said that among the framers of the Scots Confession of Faith of 1560, "the proof-text method of using the Bible was assumed without discussion, and every doctrinal statement was held to be established by references in connection with which no attention was necessarily paid to context or relevancy, or which involved irresponsible allegorizing".¹

Certainly these evils existed at the time of the Reformation. But the Reformers were not so blind to them, or so incapable of finding and using means to counteract them, as this quotation would suggest. They were certainly fully aware of the dangers of the "proof-text method", being frequently reminded by their Roman Catholic opponents that they, too, accepted the Bible, but interpreted its statements differently. They were forced to provide a definite principle of Scripture interpretation, and to do this without at the same time denying the supreme authority of the Bible by placing it at the mercy of its "interpreters". They had to find a principle of interpretation which, while being a real guide, was in no way imposed upon the Bible from outside.

Their way of doing this was to say that the only authoritative interpreter of the Scriptures was the same Spirit by whose inspiration they were written. "The interpretation (of Scripture) we confesse, neither appartaines to private nor publick persone, neither zit to ony Kirk . . ., bot appartaines to the Spirite of God, be the quhilk also the Scripture was written."² This principle had both a subjective and an objective application.

¹ *The Scots Confession and the Negative Confession*. Edited, with an introduction, by G. D. Henderson, p. 11.

² *Ibid.*, p. 77.

Subjectively, it meant that the Scriptures could only be understood by *faith*, which only the Holy Spirit could awaken in men. Last century F. D. Maurice attacked those representatives of Protestant orthodoxy who taught that the men who wrote the Bible were "inspired" by God in a sense in which no other men were, his own position being that faithful readers of Scripture are "inspired" in exactly the same way as its writers.¹ The Reformers certainly believed in a unique kind of inspiration in the "penmen of the Lord", and were sometimes rash enough to try to define it; but they also supported Maurice's view in so far as they held consistently to this doctrine that the Scriptures are interpreted by the same Spirit by which they were written.

This interior witness of the Spirit was not conceived, however, at all events at first, as merely a species of strange individual psychological illumination. The work of the Spirit in Christian men was, fundamentally, to bring them into a certain "situation"—to place them, as it were, within the Bible, so that God's speech in the Bible to His people was really addressed to them. This was sometimes expressed by saying that God's Word in the Bible was addressed to the Church, and it was consequently in the Church, and as members of it, and not as individuals, that men really heard and understood His Word as His Word. John Wemyss, for example, writing in 1633, describes the Scriptures as "the ordinary way whereby God reveals himselfe to *his people*".² Robert Fleming, in his *Fulfilling of the Scripture*, says that in times of distress we should seek to "know what the Scripture speaketh to the church".³

Very similar statements have been made in the present day by Karl Barth, particularly in his *Credo*. He says, for example, that the subject of the act of faith expressed in the Apostles' Creed "is the *Church*, and therefore not the individual as such nor in virtue of any human or even divine mark of individuality, but the individual solely in virtue of his bearing the mark of membership of the Church".⁴ He also says of the Lordship of Christ that it "is no private intercourse between Christ and individual believers, but the rule of Christ in his Church".⁵ This "situational" view of the state of being "in the Spirit" and of reading the Bible "in faith" was no doubt

¹ F. D. Maurice, *Theological Essays*; Essay XIII.

² John Weemse, *The Christian Synagogue*, p. 29.

³ R. Fleming, *The Fulfilling of the Scripture* (1801 reprint), p. x.

⁴ Karl Barth, *Credo*, p. 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

largely responsible for the emphatic assertion by the Reformers of the right and duty of infant baptism. Such baptism is God's appointed sign that even from our infancy we have been in a "situation" in which His Word is spoken to us. Says the Covenanter Samuel Rutherford, "It is a mercy to be born in Zion."¹ Barth also emphasizes the importance of infant baptism in this context.²

This does not mean a concession to the view that the Church is the interpreter of Holy Writ. It is certainly to the Church that the Bible speaks, but note that it speaks *to* the Church. The Word of God in Scripture is not an element *within* the Church's life over which the Church has control, but speaks judgment and mercy *to* the Church from its own independent position. The Church, if she is faithful, will rather see herself "within" the Bible, as the "people of God" about which the Bible speaks and to which God's Word comes in the Biblical "situation". As Karl Barth expresses it, to read aright the "two-fold history" in the Bible—the history of the people of God, and the history of the Coming of this people's Messiah—one must "participate in it oneself", and see it as one's own history, as a story about oneself.³ This is what the internal witness of the Spirit "by which the Scripture itself was written" enables us to do.

II

This interpretation of the Bible by its own Author has also, however, an objective sense. It means, quite simply, that what God says to us in one part of the Bible is to be interpreted by what He says in another. In reply to Queen Mary's challenge, "Ye interpret the Scripturis in one maner, and thei interprete in ane other; Whome shall I beleve? And who shalbe judge?", John Knox said, "The Word of God is plane in the self; and yf thair appear any obscuritie in one place, the Holy Ghost, whiche is never contrariouse to him self, explanes the same more clearlie in other places."⁴ The Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England similarly state, not only that "it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written", but also that it may not "so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another". This "conferring",

¹ Samuel Rutherford, *The Covenant of Life Opened*, p. 79.

² Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, p. 175.

³ Karl Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God*, p. 67.

⁴ *The Works of John Knox*, Laing's Edition, vol. II, p. 284.

“collation” or comparison of Scripture with Scripture was what the Reformers understood by the “analogy of the faith” by which St. Paul says all “prophecy” in the Church is to be tested.

This did not merely mean a strained attempt to reconcile conflicting passages in Holy Writ. More often than not it meant precisely that attention to immediate context which the Reformers are accused of having failed to exercise. Knox’s “Treatise on Predestination”, written in answer to an Anabaptist pamphlet, time after time refers “proof-texts” quoted by his adversary to their immediate context. Robert Bruce, in a sermon preached in 1589, says that it is essential to the sound interpretation of Scripture passages to ascertain “what relation they have to the things that go before, and how they are fastened with the things that follow”.¹ Very much later, in an “Essay on the Nature of Faith” written at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Thomas Halyburton thus answers an attempt of M. le Clark to prove from a text in Corinthians that Paul’s preaching claimed assent purely on the grounds of the miracles accompanying it: “If the author had followed the old approved interpreter of scripture, I mean the scripture itself, and had looked into the foregoing verse and context, he had given us a more genuine account.”² The attention of the Reformers to immediate context cannot be better attested than by the advice given in the First Buke of Discipline regarding the reading of the Bible in Church: “We thinke it most expedient that the Scripture be read in Order; that is, that some one Book of the Old or New Testament be begun and orderly read to the end; and the same we judge of Preaching, where the Minister for the most part remaines in one Place; for this Skipping and Divagation from Place to Place of Scripture, be it in reading, or be it in preaching, we judge not so profitable to edifie the Kirk, as the continuall following of one Text.”³

Knox’s own “proof-texts” for his doctrines are seldom isolated verses—he expounds chapters, stories, whole books in support of his argument, sometimes even summarizing the entire Bible as his “proof-text”. Thus in the early pages of the “Treatise on Predestination” he runs rapidly through the history of God’s people from Adam to Abraham, from Abraham to

¹ Bruce’s *Sermons and Life* (Wodrow Society), p. 376.

² *Halyburton on Deism* (1798 reprint), p. 307.

³ Knox, *Works*, vol. ii, p. 240-1.

Christ, and from the time of Christ to the "last days" described in the Apocalypse. A very similar course is followed in the "Treatise on Justification" of his friend Henry Balnaves. One is reminded here of the remark of a modern Anglican when asked for "proofs" of the Resurrection—"As a common person, when I am asked Bible authority, for anything worth talking about, I learnt from Maurice to quote, 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth', down to 'even so, Come, Lord Jesus', and every single verse betwixt and between."¹ The early Scots plainly recognized that beside the immediate context of a Biblical passage there was also a larger context by which it had to be interpreted. in the form of a general "drift" of the Bible as a whole. The Scots Confession thus speaks of "that quhilk the halie Ghaist uniformelie speakes within the body of the Scriptures."² Knox's descendant, John Witherspoon, who left Scotland in 1768 to become the *sixth* President of Princeton College, makes use of this conception when, after giving a number of texts in support of the doctrine of original sin, he adds, "Let me observe to you that in this, as in most subjects, the general strain of the Scripture is fully as convincing as particular passages."³

"Collations" of particular passages widely separated may also be far from arbitrary. The Old Testament prophets, for example, delivered what they had to deliver in particular historical situations, which a reference to the historical books of the Bible will help us to understand. Their teaching was also often based more or less directly on the Pentateuch. Some interesting comments on this fact are to be found in the curious *Christian Synagogue*, of John Wemyss. "The Jewes," he writes, "usually conferred Scripture with Scripture. When they read *Moyses Law*, they read so much of the Prophets answering to the Law. . . . The occasion why they joyned these parts of the Prophets, with these of the Law, was this; when they were under the persecution of *Antiochus Epiphanes*, he polluted the Temple, tooke away Circumcision, and forbad the reading of *Moyses Law* under paine of death; therefore they called him *Antiochus haraschi*, *Antiochus the wicked*. Now least they should altogether want the reading of *Moyses Law*, they made choice of certaine parts of the Prophets, most answerable to the parts

¹ H. H. Kelly, *The Gospel of God*, p. 126.

² *Scots Confession*, Henderson's Edition, p. 77.

³ *The Works of John Witherspoon*, vol. viii, p. 125.

of the Law which they read before. As for this place, *Gen. 1. 1. In the beginning God created heaven and earth*, they made choice of the Prophet *Esay 42. 5. So saith the Lord, Creator of the heaven and earth.* and they read to the eleventh verse of the fortie three Chapter, which hath this marginall note upon it, *Gnad kan, huc usque, thus farre.*¹

III

Particularly recommended by the Reformers was the "Collation" of the New Testament with the Old. In a "Letter of Wholesome Counsel" on the subject of Bible reading, Knox says, "I wolde, in readyng the Scripture, ye shold joyne some bokes of the Olde and some of the New Testament togeder, as Genesis and one of the Evangelists, Exodus wyth another, and so forth; . . . for it shal greatly comforte yow to heire that harmony and weill-tuned song of the Holie Sprite spiking in oure fatheris frome the begynnyng. It shall confirme yow in theis dangerous and perilous dayes to behold the face of Chryst Jesus his loving spous and church, frome Abell to him selfe, and frome him self, to thys day, in all ages to be one."² Unquestionably the New Testament itself invites this procedure from its first page to its last—from its lists of the Jewish ancestors of the Messiah Whom they awaited, to its picture of the "New Jerusalem". Christianity—faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah—surely stands or falls with the legitimacy of this "collation". And how much better do we understand the New Testament when we cultivate the habit of looking up the original contexts of its countless Old Testament quotations and allusions!

An admirable example of this last may be found in Knox's "Exposition upon Christ's Temptation in the Wilderness." He deals particularly with Satan's suggestion, after Christ's forty days' fast, "Command that these stones be made bread" (which he interprets as a temptation to doubt God's providence by making an experiment to see if it is real), and Christ's reply, "It is written, Thou shalt not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." "The Scripture that Christ bringeth, is writtin in the eight chapter of Deuteronomy. It was spokin be Moses a litill befor his deth, to establishe the pepill in Godis mercifull providence. For in the same

¹ *The Christian Synagogue*, p. 58.

² Knox, *Works*, vol. iv, pp. 138.9.

chapter, he reckoneth the great travell and dyvers dangeris, with the extreme necessiteis that thai had sustenit in the desert; the space of fourtie yeiris, and yit, notwithstanding how constant God had bene in keiping and performyng his promeis; for then throucht all perrellis had he conductit thame to the syght and borderis of the promissit land. And so this Scripture maist directlie answereth to the tentatioun of Sathan; for thus doith Sathan reasone (as befoir is said), 'Thow art in povertie, and hath no provisioun to susteane thy lyfe: thairfoir God taketh no regarde nor cair over thee as he doith over his chosin children.' Chryst Jesus answereth, 'Thy argument is false and vane; for povertie or necessitie secludeth not the providence or cair of God: whilk is easie to be proved be the pepill of God, Israell, whilk in the desert did often tymes lack thingis necessarie to sustentatioun of the lyfe, and for lack of the same thai grudged and murmurit; yit did never the Lord cast away the providence and cair of thame. But according to the voyce that he had anis pronuncit, to wit, that thai wer his peculiar peipl; and according to the promeis maid to Abrahame, and to thame befoir the departure from Egypt, he still remanit thair conductour and gyde, till he placed thame in peaceabill possessioun of the land of Canaan, thair greit infirmitis and manifald transgressionis notwithstanding.'¹ Thus Knox avoids, without any apparent effort, both the interpretation of the "not by bread alone" which suggests that God does not care whether men starve or not and the opposite error that prosperity and adversity are direct indications of God's love or hatred.

Finally, the objective interpretation of the Scripture by "the Spirit by which it was written" may mean, quite simply, the subjection of our minds to the *logic* of the Word of God as well as to its particular pronouncements. This idea of the "analogia fidei" was insisted on particularly emphatically by M. Jean de Saussure in his address on "Theology and Secular Knowledge" at the Fourth International Congress of Calvinists in 1938. The Bible is not merely a collection of tenets and precepts from which we can make whatever deductions the ordinary principles of argument seem to justify. We must learn how the Bible itself makes its deductions and see that our own argumentation moves in the same way. Knox perhaps understood this better than any other Reformer. He sometimes

¹ Knox, *Works*, vol. iv, pp. 112. 3.

attempts, indeed, to drive an argument home by casting it into syllogistic form, thus helping out the Bible, as it were, with a little Aristotle. He accuses one opponent, for example, of producing "a plain Paralogisme, that is a Sophisticall and false argument, for it standeth on foure termes, against the use of all good and solide reasoning".¹ But usually he moves in a much more natural and direct way in a path which the Bible itself has laid down.

An excellent example of this application of "the logic of the Word of God" may be found in Knox's criticism of a deduction drawn by certain people from the Bible's teaching that God can bring good out of evil. "To make matter more plain; the case supposed, that I be tempted with concupiscence, and lust another man's wife, in the which I long strive, and in the end Sathan objecteth to me this cogitation, Follow thy purpose, for by that meanes thow mayest perchance be further humbled, and after thow mayest taste more aboundantly the mercie and the grace of God. Should I therefor louse the bridle to my wicked affections? Should I declyn from the plain precept, and enter into the secrete providence of God? God forbid! for that, besides the violating or breaking of his commandment, were horrible temptation of his godlie Majestie, and so in one fact were committed double impietic. The sinnes, I know, of God's dearest children are grevous and many; and wonderous is the providence of God working in his saintes, but never, or seldom it is, that such perillouse cogitations prevale against them; for the Spirit of God so reuleth in them, that commonly this sentence of Salomon is before their eies: 'Such as unreverently search out God's Majestie, shalbe oppressed by the glorie of the same.' And so must it needes come to passe, as John Calvin affirmeth, That the pryde of such must be punished, and that with an horrible punishment. The pryde of those, I say, shalbe punished, who, not content with the will of God reveled, (to the which they will not be obedient,) delite to mounete and flie above the skyes, there to seke the secrete will of God."²

Just what text or group of texts constitutes Knox's "proof" in this passage? The verse from the Vulgate version of the Book of Proverbs is only brought in in a very incidental way. The phrase "God forbid!" no doubt occurs in Scripture, and at one point in a context very like Knox's ("Shall we sin that

¹ Knox, *Works*, vol. v, p. 109.

² *Ibid*, p. 181.

grace may abound?"), but who would take "God forbid!" for a "proof-text"? There are also other echoes of the Bible—for example, "wonderous is the providence of God working in his saintes"—but the passage would still present insoluble problems for a person who wished to compile an index of the Biblical texts adduced by Knox in support of his doctrines. The Bible has worked its way into the very warp and woof of his language and style, and more than that, into the twists and turnings of his thought. To a limited extent, indeed, the same might be said of almost any civilised person. When, for instance, we find a modern novel entitled *The Grand Babylon Hotel*, who among us does not instinctively think of magnificence united with wickedness, and of wickedness that is such *because* it is magnificent?—a moral idea that is essentially Biblical, as is also its association with the city which began with an impious attempt to build a tower to heaven and finally appears as the "great whore" in the Apocalypse. But in most of us this is just a lingering echo, and such control of our thoughts by the Bible is something that appears only here and there. In Knox it was constant and inescapable.

There is surely no higher test than this submission to "the logic of the Word of God" of whether a man's thought has really grown out of the Bible, and is not merely "dragging it in" to support ideas that come from a different source. Knox says in effect, "It was not from my own speculations, but from the Bible—and above all from the story of the Crucifixion—that I learned of God's power to bring good out of evil, and where should I learn how to draw out the practical bearings of this truth—where should I learn to 'interpret' *this* 'Biblical' truth, and not some quite different speculative one—if not from the Bible too?"

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