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SOME THOUGHTS ON INSPIRATION

In the time of our Lord there was no religious Jew who did not regard the Pentateuch as possessing absolute authority. While there was some discussion as to which books were to be included in the Writings, there were very few who did not recognize that they and the Prophets shared the authority of the Law, because they were based on it and interpreted it. What controversy there was concerned the manner in which the Law should be interpreted. The view still occasionally met, that the Sadducees accepted the authority of the Law only, is based on a misunderstanding.

This conception of the absolute authority of the Old Testament Scriptures was taken over without question in the infant Church. Christ had used them in this way Himself, and the first generation of Christians were, with few exceptions, either Jews or Gentiles familiar with the Synagogue. At a very early date we find the New Testament writings being invested with an identical authority, the earliest known example being 2 Pet. iii. 15 f. This authority has been acknowledged ever since, and even today there is no church that denies it, though in practice the acknowledgment is sometimes emptied of serious meaning.

The early Church was soon faced with an acute problem as it carried the Gospel to Gentiles who had little or no previous contact with the Synagogue. The Old Testament Scriptures were unknown to them; economic circumstances and the cost of manuscripts made it difficult for the majority to obtain a first-hand knowledge of them. Before long the majority of Church members knew about the Scriptures rather than knew the Scriptures. This in turn precluded the possibility of personal interpretation for the vast majority. Increasingly the Scriptures were presented to the convert through the medium of an authoritative interpretation; this tendency soon led to the authoritative pronouncements of councils, which were often enshrined in creeds. Once the power of the state was used to enforce orthodoxy, it meant that the decisions and traditions of the Church, though claiming to be based on the Scriptures, did in fact set up a rival and superior authority. It is clear that for most theologians of the Middle Ages the Scriptures really only existed theologically as a collection of proof texts for the doctrines which the Church had accepted. In fairness it should be added that until the Reformers raised the whole problem of

authority, the medieval church did not realize the shift of emphasis. It was rather naively taken for granted that the official interpretation of Scripture must *ipso facto* be the correct one.

One of the great battle cries of the Reformation was the sole and absolute authority of the Scriptures and the right and duty of private interpretation. Controversy among the Reformers themselves, however, soon led them to recognize in measure that there had to be some authority for their interpretation of Scripture.¹ Since the problem was never very clearly recognized, no definite answer was ever given to it; a *modus vivendi* was found by the appeal to early Christian tradition. It was assumed that this would give a framework within which Scripture could be safely and certainly interpreted. Where they differed radically from Rome was in their demand that this framework had to be based on and provable by Scripture.

This has remained the position of Protestantism ever since. Every denomination has, written or unwritten, rigid or elastic, a framework believed to be most clearly deducible from Scripture. If this is challenged, even on the basis of Scripture, it is regarded as denominational disloyalty. The practical necessity of some such convention is shown by the jungle of small semi-orthodox and unorthodox sects, to say nothing of free-lance individuals, that fringe Protestantism and that one and all claim to be completely loyal to the Scriptures. This tacit recognition of the importance of a consensus of opinion in the essentials of Biblical interpretation in the Church universal, not merely in the local church, has an important bearing on our understanding of inspiration.

Throughout the first 1,600 years of the Church's history the question of the inspiration of Scripture was seldom raised; it was taken for granted. The conflict was over the authority of Scripture, how it was to be interpreted and by whom. It was not until humanism tried to set the authority of human reason as equal or superior to that of Scripture that the question of the nature of inspiration was really raised.

One of the favourite methods of attack on the authority of the Bible by the humanist was to stress the essential humanness of the Scriptures. The first reaction of the orthodox generally did more credit to their heart than to their head, and even a

¹ See R. E. Davies, *The Problem of Authority in the Continental Reformers*, for an interesting discussion.

hundred years ago statements were being freely made that would shock all but a few of the most conservative today. It was not until the scholarship of last century made it abundantly clear that the facts of Scripture itself were far from being what was generally taken for granted, and until modern discovery, especially archaeology, showed that however accurate the Bible might be in matters of science, history and chronology, it would have been impossible to establish these truths purely from the Bible, that conservative thought as a whole really came to realize that there is a problem of inspiration. It is fair to say that there are many fine Christians in the liberal camp today only because they had come to believe that the conservative position was bound up with a view of inspiration they could not honestly subscribe to.

The Bible itself says practically nothing about how it came to be written. Paul tells us that all Scripture—in the context the Old Testament—is God-breathed (2 Tim. iii. 16). A comparison with Gen. ii. 7 may suggest some of the implications of this statement. Indeed, as T. C. Hammond rightly says,¹ the unravelling of the divine and human in the Scriptures is as difficult as in the analogous problem of the Person of Christ.

Peter tells us (2 Pet. i. 20 f.) that no passage of prophetic Scripture may be interpreted either wrenched from its context or at the whim of the reader (both implied in ἰδίως ἐπιλύσεως), and again (1 Pet. i. 10–12) that the prophets spoke better than they understood. In both cases the reason is that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate author of prophecy. We should remember in this connection that for the Jew a far greater portion of the Old Testament ranked as prophecy than for us.

It will help us in our understanding of inspiration, if we constantly keep in mind that the reverential name we so often give the Scriptures, viz. the Word of God, is never actually so used in the Scriptures themselves, and that though our usage is entirely justified, yet it is no mere synonym. The term “the word of God”, or sometimes “the word of the Lord”, is used in the New Testament with three closely linked meanings. In John i. 1 and Rev. xix. 13 it is used of our Lord Himself both before His incarnation and at His coming again; some have found the same use in Heb. iv. 12 and even 1 Cor. i. 18. In the vast majority of cases, especially in Acts, it is used of the Gospel

¹ *In Understanding Be Men*, p. 35.

message which the Church proclaims. Then it is used, especially when passages of the Old Testament are referred to, of God's revelation of Himself and of His will in specific utterances. This usage is really only a continuation of the normal use of "the word of the Lord" in the Old Testament, where in the vast majority of cases it means a specific prophetic message.

There are, however, passages in the Old Testament, where "the word of the Lord" is used in a wider sense, the most obvious being in Ps. cxix. It is clear, though, from verse 89, "For ever, O LORD, Thy word is settled in heaven," that it is not so much the written Scriptures the psalmist is thinking of, but rather of God's revelation in general through His servants the prophets. This use too is sometimes found in New Testament passages, though it is not always easy to disentangle them from the second and third mentioned above. The factor that links all the uses of "the Word of God" is that both He and it are the revelation of God. Since the Scriptures are both the record of God's self-revelation, and the means by which He continues to reveal Himself to men, the use of the name Word of God is fully justified, provided we remember what we imply by it.

Griffith Thomas said very well:

It is sometimes said that the Bible *is* the Word of God, while at other times it is said that the Bible *contains* the Word of God. These are both true, if held together, though either alone is liable to misapprehension. If we only say the Bible *is* the Word of God, we are in danger of forgetting that it contains the words of men also, many of which are not true in themselves, though the record that they were spoken is true and reliable. If on the other hand, we limit our belief to the phrase, the Bible *contains* the Word of God, there is the opposite danger of not knowing which is God's word and which is man's, an equally impossible position. The Bible *is* the Word of God in the sense that it conveys to us an accurate record of everything God intended man to know and learn in conjunction with His will. The Bible *contains* the Word of God in the sense that in it is enshrined the Word of God which is revealed to us for our redemption.¹

We wish Griffith Thomas had carried his argument further. He is entirely correct in insisting that the setting of God's words spoken in time past are a portion of God's revelation of Himself to us today; the when and how of God's speaking were not fortuitous. But the Bible as a record is not in itself life-giving; it is not the agent of revelation; it is never more than an

¹ *The Principles of Theology*, p. 119.

instrument, the instrument used by the Holy Spirit more than any other, but an instrument for all that. When we call it the Word of God, we should imply that we are expecting the Holy Spirit to make it the Word of God to us, i.e., that we shall have God revealed to us, because the Holy Spirit speaks to us through the record.

We are fully aware that similar language today has been used by some to justify their denial of the objective truth of the Scriptural record or their suggestion that it is indifferent whether it is true or not. It is of course incontrovertible that it is more important that a man should hear God speak to him through the Scriptures, and hearing come to faith and life eternal, than that he should believe that the Scriptures are objectively true, for such a belief need not lead to life. But to suggest that therefore the objective truth of the Scriptures is immaterial is a gross logical *non sequitur*. If we are prepared to say that the Scriptures contain, are and become the Word of God, we occupy a position which seems to cover all the facts of revelation and spiritual experience.

We are not, as some might think, making mere empty distinctions. To call the Bible the Word of God without some such qualifications, spoken or understood, suggests that the work of inspiration ended with the finishing of the record, and that the Bible now functions by virtue of some inherent power, so that anything that *man* may infer from it is necessarily legitimate. We would do well to widen our conception of inspiration. The writing of the Scriptures was only the half-way house in the process of inspiration; it only reaches its goal and conclusion as God is revealed through them to the reader or hearer. In other words, the inbreathing of the Holy Spirit into the reader is as essential for the right understanding of the Scriptures as it was in the original writers for their right production of them.¹

Many would claim that the work of the Spirit in the readers is rather complementary to than the same as His work in the writers, and would prefer to use the term illumination. Technically this may well be correct, but its use conceals a frequent error of thought. God has not committed all that can be known of Him by man to the Scriptures so that the Spirit-illuminated man may find out *about* Him there, but that through the Scriptures he may hear God *Himself*. God meets us in the Scriptures

¹ This is the view adopted in *The New Bible Handbook* (I.V.F., 1947), p. 10.

and *speaks* to us through them; His speaking to us through them is as real and as living as His original speaking to their writers. That is why there is "always new light to break forth" from the Scriptures, because they are the channel through which a living God speaks. That is why there will always be variety in the interpretation of Scripture, for God speaks to His children as they are best able to bear it.

We are not suggesting that the Holy Spirit takes a passage of Scripture and through it gives us a message which is entirely alien to its context and true meaning. When this happens, as sometimes it does, the spiritual man almost invariably knows that God has been condescending to his weakness, and that the message has no claim to be the interpretation of the passage, which the Spirit used to *prepare* him for God's speaking. Though we wrote of variety of interpretation, the differences normally lie in variations of emphasis rather than in the exposition of the central truth. Where the variations go deeper they can normally be led back to the errors of man, as we suggest later.

To hold such a view of inspiration is to meet one of the most subtle of modern attacks on its reality. It is often suggested that the Biblical revelation of God must be inadequate, because human words are inadequate to express Divine realities. That there is a very real truth in such an assertion may be seen from the necessity that the fulness of the revelation in Jesus Christ had to be recorded in Greek, not Hebrew. Hebrew, a peculiarly concrete language, was admirably adapted for the laying of the foundation stones of revelation, but the fulness demanded a richer vehicle. But who would maintain that even it was adequate for the fulness? The objection loses its force, when we realize that the Holy Spirit's interpretation is an essential part of inspiration. He can and does give men a spiritual apprehension and understanding of the message far beyond anything conveyed in the bare literal meaning of the words. This explains too why the Bible never really seems to lose by translation. There seems to be no spiritual gain to those that use a rich and subtle language, no spiritual loss to those who use the more primitive languages of man.

That I have to be inspired to understand the Scriptures aright, does not mean that I can ever claim the rôle of infallible interpreter. The fulness of God in Christ is only known in the Church, His body; it is only in the unity of the Church that we are led into all truth. But since the Church does not reveal the

unity that is Christ's will for it and for which He prayed, no local church and no denomination, however approaching perfection, can claim a sure freedom from false doctrine or the fulness of truth.

It is easy to under-estimate the essential agreement in interpretation among those who accept the absolute authority of the Scriptures. Where this agreement does not exist, the cause will generally be found either in an undue acceptance of tradition, or an undue willingness to accept the novel. An entirely new interpretation of Scripture may be true, but since it involves the supposition that earlier generations failed to respond to the leading of the Spirit, it should be advanced and approached with real hesitation and in deep humility. It is also obvious that many eccentric interpretations are due to the interpreter's laziness; he is unwilling to discover by further study whether his interpretation is supported by the rest of Scripture.

Many of our disagreements, among them some of our bitterest, have come from men asking the Bible questions it was never intended to answer. The long history of God's self-revelation from Abraham to Jesus the Messiah had as its purpose that men might know God, His character, His will, His purposes, that they might know themselves and how they might have fellowship with God. The Bible exists for the sole purpose of preserving and handing on this revelation, and for none other.

Since God has revealed Himself in history and through individuals in their individual circumstances, the record of the revelation contains much of the Eastern background against which it was given. The background may help us to understand the revelation, but it is not the revelation itself, nor is it normally of any special importance for our fellowship with God today. Indeed a preoccupation with this background may well obscure the revelation itself.

Possibly the strongest divisive influence has been that of dogmatic theology. It may seem obvious that we should formulate the revelation into a series of interdependent propositions, and in measure we cannot avoid doing so. But we must never forget that while God could have inspired a manual of theology, He did not. He could have made Himself known in a series of theological propositions, but He used instead the experiences of men. This is partly because experience must always be fuller and richer than its verbal expression, even when guided in its being written down by the Holy Spirit. The deepest reason

is, however, that ultimately the only knowledge of God that can save and satisfy is a personal experience of the Living God in Christ Jesus. Any effort to formulate men's living experience of God into a formal and self-consistent system is bound to be inadequate and to omit factors which for others are of vital importance.

The more we know the fellowship of the Church, the more we experience the unity of the Church, the more we shall be drawn into the true understanding of Scripture, but the more, too, we as individuals shall understand that our own individual understanding is piece-work, our contribution to the understanding and welfare of the Church universal.

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