

OPEN INSPIRATION VERSUS A CLOSED CANON AND INFALLIBLE BIBLE.

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JESUS told the Scribes and Pharisees that they had made "the word of God of none effect through their tradition." Very many of our religious teachers are to-day doing the same thing. Modern preaching lacks truth and power because so many churches cling to an utterly untenable tradition that the Bible is an infallible book. This dogma is their besetting sin. It is the golden calf of their idolatrous worship. It is the palpable lie that gives the ring of insincerity to all their moral exhortations. If theologians wish to regain their lost intellectual leadership or even to possess an influence on the thoughtful part of the community, co-ordinate with that of poets, philosophers, and men of science, they must throw aside the dogma of an infallible Bible as completely and frankly as Protestants have thrown aside the dogma of an infallible pope.

The Bible is the most precious of all books. Its teaching that man is a child of God and heir of heaven ennobles human life, and is the great basis of virtue, happiness, and high achievement. All other charters and constitutions are small in value beside the documents and titles that the prophets and apostles and Jesus Christ have left us. The Bible is a noble collection of law, history, biography, precept, and poetry. Of all writers, the psalmists and prophets, evangelists and apostles best deserve Wordsworth's eulogy :

" Blessings be with them and eternal praise,
Who gave us nobler loves and nobler cares,
The poets who on earth have made us heirs
Of truth and pure delight by heavenly lays."

But the great spiritual treasure of the Bible is in an earthen vessel, and the water of life has been colored by the medium which has preserved it. The credulous and the ignorant disciple, the allegorist and the poet, the priest and the scribe, in their efforts to expound and popularise religious truth, have all more or less clogged and corrupted the spiritual message of the prophets, and our teachers must frankly recognise this fact. Let us look at a few examples of tares among the Bible wheat.

There is a story in the book of Daniel that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego for refusing to bow down to the image of a Babylonian king were cast into a burning fiery furnace, the flames of which slew those that threw them into it, and yet the fire had no power upon the three opponents of idolatry. "Not a hair of their heads was singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed on them." (Dan. iii. 27.) He must be a very bold or a very ignorant man who

will assert that he believes that this account is literally true. It is certainly a thousand times more probable that it is a legend or allegory.

We read in the book of Kings that when Elijah fled from Ahab and dwelt in the wilderness "the ravens brought him bread and flesh in the morning and bread and flesh in the evening." (1 Kings xvii. 6.) We read in that quaint mediæval book, *The Voyages and Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, that the monks of the church of St. Catharine at Mount Sinai have plenty of olive oil for their lamps "by God's miracle; for the ravens, crows, and choughs and other fowls of that country, assemble there once every year, and fly thither as in pilgrimage; and each brings a branch of bays or olive in its beak, instead of offering and leaves it there; of which the monks make great plenty of oil." The story of Elijah's ravens and Mandeville's story of the ravens of St. Catharine's monastery are akin. They are mere poetic fancies, one as untrue and incredible as the other.

We read that Elijah smote the waters with his mantle and "they divided hither and thither," so that he and his companions "went over on dry ground." (2 Kings ii. 8.) Elijah is said to have miraculously multiplied meal and oil, and even to have raised the dead. (1 Kings xvii. 8-23)

With his successor Elisha the myth-making fancy has been even more active. He, too, was said to have had power over the elements. He divided the waters with his mantle and went through Jordan dry-shod (2 Kings ii. 14), he made iron to swim (2 Kings vi. 6), he multiplied a widow's single pot of oil until it filled many vessels (2 Kings iv. 1-7). He, too, raised the dead. (2 Kings iv. 18-37.) Some of these stories are crude and childish, some are pathetic and sublime, but they are all alike legendary and not historic.

It is impossible to draw any dividing line between these alleged miracles in the Old Testament and similar accounts in the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles. When a gate opens "of its own accord" to let Peter through (Acts xii. 10), we think of the story of Elisha and the axe that he made to swim. When Jesus is represented as multiplying loaves and fishes to feed a great multitude, we think of the widow's barrel of meal multiplied by Elijah and the cruse of oil increased by Elisha. When Jesus is represented as walking on the lake of Gennesaret, we think of Moses dividing the Red Sea and of Elijah and Elisha cleaving the waters of the Jordan. The story of the raising of the son of the widow of Nain by Jesus recalls the story of the raising of the son of the Shunammuite woman by Elisha. The legendary element is as obvious and as indisputable in the New Testament as in the Old.

It is admitted by all commentators that the differences in substance and style in the books of the Bible correspond to the differences in the temperaments and opinions of the writers of the respective books. John's Gospel differs from Mark's because the intellectual and spiritual endowments of those who wrote them were different. The writings of Isaiah differ from those of Jeremiah and Ezekiel because the men themselves differed, and so on through the whole list of books and authors. Carrying the reasoning a step further, it means that every sentence in every book in the whole Bible is the thought of some man or woman, inspired by God, the ultimate source of all power and wisdom.

The only question is, How did God communicate the contents of the Book to man? Nobody maintains that he handed a parchment scroll down from heaven. The ten commandments were indeed said to have been written by the finger of God on tables of stone. If this language is not figurative, it is legendary and incredible, and no similar claim is made for any other part of the Bible. How, then,

were the Psalms, the Gospels, and the Epistles written? Did God write any one of them on any material substance so that the physical eye of the human author saw the writing and transcribed it? Did he speak the words aloud so that they came to the outward ear like a telephone message? Surely, no reverent and intelligent man will accept either of these views. No book, no chapter, no verse, no word in the Bible was ever so communicated. God is a spirit and speaks to man as a spirit and through the spirit. All spiritual truth comes to man through his brain and conscience, and one man receives more and another less, because of the differences in the hearts and minds and wills of men. Some men seek to know and love and obey the will of God, and naturally that will is more clearly and abundantly made known to them than it is to those who do not seek to know it, do not love it, and do not obey it "Ask and ye shall receive; seek and ye shall find," says Jesus. "If any man will do God's will, he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God." (John vii. 17.)

This is a view of inspiration which agrees with all the facts. It gives a very high degree of authority to many parts of the Bible and a much lower one to other parts, and permits a changed interpretation or the rejection of such parts of the book as from time to time are superseded by God's later revelations to his chosen prophets and to all his people.

The Bible nowhere intimates (not even in Rev. xxii. 18, 19) that the canon of scripture is closed, but in hundreds of passages we are taught that God's revelation of himself to man is universal and continuous. The true light is said to enlighten every man that cometh into the world. (John i. 18.) Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would lead his followers into all truth. The burden of every apostle's exhortation is, "Quench not the spirit, resist not the Holy Ghost."

Every message from heaven comes to us colored and shaped and limited by some man's personality, and must be discarded or altered or supplemented, according to the new knowledge and the new needs of men. *Vox populi, vox dei*. Humanity is the great ecumenical council. The race is greater than its greatest representatives. The religious consciousness of men, perennially quickened by the divine spirit, is forever testing every spiritual dogma and ideal, and is continually elevating the intellectual and moral standard of the race.

Those who perceive that this is true have no difficulty with any passage in the Bible. They may cordially recognise that what is now a scientific error was once a scientific advance, that what is now relatively low morality, even that what would now be an atrocious crime was once done with a sincere belief that it was in accord with God's will.

Such a view relieves the churches of the present day of any responsibility for scientific error and for the odium attaching to the passages enjoining a war of extermination, the slaughter of whole nations, men, women, and children (Deut. xx. 16, 17), the killing of prophets and reformers (Deut. xiii); slavery (Lev. xxv. 44-46); the polygamy of Jacob, David, Solomon and other patriarchs and prophets; the refusal of divorce for drunkenness, cruelty, or desertion (Mat. v. 32); and the passages on the nature and status of women which are so fiercely resented by some of the sex and are a pain and perplexity to thousands of the church's most loving and helpful members. (1 Cor. xi. 3, 9.)

The great spiritual teachings of the Bible rest upon absolute and eternal truth, but its history and science are always imperfect and often erroneous. Only the most ignorant still believe in witchcraft and demoniacal possession. Not "the stars in their courses" only, not merely astronomy, but geology and biology have

shown that the story of creation in Genesis is poetic and not scientific. The Church cannot afford to uphold primitive conceptions which are opposed by every school book on the subjects in question, or barbarous ethics which are condemned by every moralist and legislator.

It will be asked in dismay by conservative people what is left to the Church if it accepts these views. I answer: An infinitely truer, richer, and more spiritual religion. Faith, hope, and charity are left. The moral law is left. The Bible itself is left and all its spiritual teachings are freed from the dead body of tradition and quickened into new life.

The great task of the Church is to continue and expand the work of Jesus, to get rid of the traditions which "make the word of God of none effect," and to develop faith in direct and immediate communion with the Father. In other words, we must discard all error as soon as we discover it to be error, and accept all truth as soon as we become convinced that it is truth.

Spiritual revelation in the past legendary age was bound up with legend; spiritual revelation in the present scientific age must be based upon science. "The truth shall make you free," says Jesus. The love of truth is the great liberating and unifying force in all lines of inquiry and conduct.

Truth is real and objective and is eventually discovered by all honest and competent seekers after it. But those who wilfully refuse or neglect the truth have no basis of agreement whatever, but are at the mercy of their individual prejudices and caprices, and are lost in the endless mazes of error.

Religious teachers cannot safely oppose or ignore the exact sciences. Ignorant men, no matter how pure and honest they may be, cannot to-day direct the world's affairs. Nor can wise men, leaders in science, in commerce and in finance, economists and philanthropists work effectively through merely secular agencies. They must lay hold upon the mighty spiritual aspirations through which man joins his feebleness to the omnipotence of his divine Creator.

The existing Churches by laying aside their legends and superstitions and accepting reverently all truth as it is revealed, must become fit agencies for the best minds to utilise or must yield to new and more progressive organisations. The evasion and suppression of truth, if persisted in, becomes mere priestcraft and imposture, and leads to the decay and death of any Church that permits it.

Miracles of the class before spoken of, once a help, are now a hindrance. Those Churches which continue to teach that such legends, errors, or allegories are literal truth, taint all the rest of their message. People are saying, and they will say more and more, I cannot believe these stories, and I will have nothing to do with any Church that teaches their literal truths or calls the book that contains them infallible. It is the cowardly refusal of the Churches to admit patent facts and to advance with the advance of knowledge, that has brought about their present deplorable condition and the low moral state of the nation that depends so largely upon them for spiritual guidance and strength.

But it will be said that multitudes of simple and ignorant people implicitly believe the Bible legends. Perhaps, many of the ignorant do, but certainly many of the ignorant do not, and surely the opinions of the ignorant are not to prevent the declaration of truth by the better informed. Truth must not be surrendered to bigotry. Paul gave us a rule and an example for such cases when he declared that to obstructive traditionalists he did not "give place by subjection, no, not for an hour." (Gal. ii. 5.)

But it will be further objected that this is the infidel's view of miracles. What

then? Shall the prophets not denounce idolatry because the wits scoff at those who bow down to graven images? Wise men will accept the truth from any source. If Christians were more ready to learn from infidels when the infidels are right, there would soon be much less of infidelity in the world. Infidels would accept our truth if we would accept theirs, but when they see us mistaken and unreasonable in some very plain and simple matters they are less likely to trust our wisdom and sincerity in more important concerns.

It is said by some that the errors in the Bible are so interwoven with the spiritual truths of the Gospel that the existence of errors cannot be admitted without destroying faith in Christ's teaching and character. It is a shameful allegation. It is the saddest and deepest infidelity, for it is equivalent to saying that Christianity itself rests upon ignorance and error. There is a pseudo-Christianity that does so rest, but the Christianity of Christ is a struggle for spiritual and intellectual perfection and every advance in knowledge, in truth, and in righteousness tends to strengthen, establish, and extend the influence of Jesus Christ and of the "Kingdom of God" upon earth. "Be ye perfect" is the law of Christ. His greatest apostle so understood it, and exhorts in the words, "Add to your faith, virtue; and to virtue, knowledge."

We require our heathen converts to renounce their errors and false traditions and to accept new customs. Shall we be less heroic than they? That we Protestants may live up to our professions and our past we must accept new truth and duty at all costs and at all hazards. Great, undoubtedly, will be the labor involved in making so stupendous a change as the advance in scholarship and the new social conditions demand, yet it will not be greater than the work of the reformers of the sixteenth century. So strong and so splendid was the mediæval Church that it seemed impossible to change it, yet the change was made and the great Protestant bodies and the great nations which Protestantism has created are the glorious justification of the faith and courage of those whose keen spiritual vision saw things yet hidden from the worldly wise and selfishly prudent.

It is by perfect obedience to the conceived will of God, by seeking truth and righteousness with the whole heart and mind and soul and strength, that the Church has won all her great victories. Obedience to the voice of God in the soul gave power to the prophets of Israel. Obedience to the Holy Spirit gave their "tongues of fire" to the apostolic Church. Faith in the soul of man, and in the lawfulness and trustworthiness of private judgment as against the claims of authority and tradition enabled the Lutheran reformers to overthrow the papacy. Personal faith in God's guidance led the Pilgrim Fathers across the sea and established a free Church in a free State. Faith in the "inner light" and obedience to the direction of the Holy Spirit enabled the Friends to give their powerful testimony against religious persecution, against slavery, and against war. Faith in the doctrine of the witness of the Spirit, personal consciousness of pardon and salvation, gave joy and power to the early Methodists.

Quench not the Spirit, resist not the Holy Ghost, is the burden of all Scripture and all history. Obedience to truth and duty as revealed by God to every man's conscience is the eternal principle of spiritual life, surrender of personal conviction through fear of man or love of the world is the eternal principle of death.

It is the spirit of truth, the purpose to discover and apply the whole truth on every subject that has given science in these later years its amazing progress, a spirit that makes every scientific man a co-worker with the omnipotent God and

every great scientific association a true ecumenical council, declaring unto men the will of the Most High.

It was the spirit of truth in them that made Milton, Carlyle, Ruskin, and Emerson (all of whom were intended for the ministry of the Church, but all of whom on closer view rebelled against her errors, her narrowness, timidity, and sloth), to become, instead of priests of little parishes, prophets of great nations.

From Abraham, who left his country and his kindred; from Moses, who refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; from Paul, who counted not himself to have apprehended but who pressed onward; from every saint and hero ancient and modern, we learn that the greatness of all the great comes from using all the light and exerting all the power at their command.

My plea is that the official leaders of the Churches, those who have the necessary scholarship and the administrative responsibilities should unite to change the prevailing policy of silence, inactivity, and obstruction in regard to the results of modern scientific and biblical scholarship into one of sympathy and encouragement for absolute freedom of inquiry and exposition. Present preaching is evasive, present Sunday-school teaching is inadequate and almost farcical. Thorough research and full frank exposition of results would amazingly quicken the intellectual and spiritual life of the Church. Cannot the policy of inertia and suppression be changed? Cannot all the sciences be made tributary to religions? Cannot Christianity be based upon progressive truth instead of upon mouldering tradition?

In what respect, I ask, is it more moral in our day for the Churches to teach miracles instead of law than it would be for colleges to teach astrology instead of astronomy or alchemy instead of chemistry? There is the same obligation on every teacher to teach truth and not error, to increase knowledge and not to obstruct it; and in the case of the clergyman there is the voluntary additional obligation of a vow to follow the example of the most daring and self-sacrificing of all spiritual leaders who has expressly commanded all who want to be his disciples to be led by the Holy Spirit into new truth and to let their light shine, who has expressly condemned the man who buried his talent, and has told his followers not to fear the opposition or persecution of men but to fear God only.

It ought to be evident to the authorities in the Churches that while Christ is ever growing in power and is, indeed, drawing all men unto him, the Churches are more and more looked upon as incomplete and unsatisfactory agencies for carrying on his work. If the leading Protestant Churches are not to sink into a position like that of the Catholic Church, one in which reason is wholly subject to authority and is grossly outraged and scorned; if the Protestant Churches are not going henceforth to make their appeal only to the ignorant, the weak, and the credulous; if instead of being a body of investigators and expositors, a brotherhood of seers and prophets, preachers are not to degenerate into a mere priesthood and Church services into sacramentarianism and ritual, it is certainly high time for the leaders in the Churches to denounce known errors and to formulate a programme for intellectual and spiritual advance.

It does not now require the exceptional courage and foresight of a Hume or a Strauss to recognise the mythical character of the biblical miracles. We live in the age of Darwin and Huxley, of the *Encyclopædia Biblica* and of the science of criticism, and for the Churches to ignore the conclusions of the whole scientific world and of their own best scholars is at once fatuous and culpable.

To conclude, we hear much about efforts to purify politics, to control trusts, and prevent the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few. But corruption

and greed cannot be cured by legislation. They are diseases of the soul and must be cured by agencies that appeal directly to the soul. The true word of God, if faithfully preached, will reach the hearts of men now as it did when spoken by the mouth of John the Baptist, of Jesus, of Paul, of Knox, and of Wesley. But merely perfunctory professional appeals, appeals which are clogged by irrational dogmas and by superstitious rites are easily and contemptuously thrust aside by clear-headed, energetic men of affairs. If the Church of to-day is to control the business men of to-day it must meet them fairly upon the plane of their intelligence. It must be as accurate, as energetic, as straightforward as they. It must preach living truth to men who deal with living values and forces. It must avail itself of the life-saving energy of the divine spirit as that spirit is now working among men.

The Protestant fathers must be judged by their light, we shall be judged by ours. Emerging from mediæval ignorance and needing a weapon with which to defend themselves against the usurped authority of popes, who claimed infallibility, the theologians of the Reformation might once in good faith preach an "infallible Bible," and "the times of this ignorance God winked at," but surely now he commands his prophets and apostles to rise to the spiritual plane of Christ's teaching and to follow him in denouncing the myths and legends, the traditions and superstitions, the worldliness and sin that make the living word of God of none effect. When this is done there will be a basis for a revival of spiritual religion, but as long as our creeds and preaching rest upon what is known to be a false assumption, all exhortations by the Churches to religion are inconsistent and hypocritical, and all accessions of members to them add little to their strength.

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