

to take responsibility. Why, I am sometimes asked to send students at unreasonably early hours on Sunday because in a church of hundreds no one can give week-end hospitalities. It is only symptomatic of a slack sense of responsibility. The whole conception of life is changed. Our fathers lived in smaller houses, kept fewer servants, took briefer holidays, indulged in no week-ends, spent far less on pleasure and entertainment. They were restrained in these matters on principle. They lived simpler lives that they might give more to Christ and His cause.

What is the Christian ideal of life and service amongst us? It is not high enough.

These are a few reflections which have come to me as I have travelled north, south, east, and west. I wish to apply all that I have said last to myself as much as to anyone.

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The Place and Use of Scripture in Christian Experience.*

THE limits within which I propose to deal with this subject will best be indicated by stating briefly the circumstances of origin of my paper.

In the course of a discussion which we had a few months ago, on the work of the minister as defender of the faith, one of our members remarked that he really felt the need of a previous discussion as to the essential contents of the faith which we had to defend. He went on to explain that in particular we seemed to be at cross purposes respecting the Scriptures, some making a particular view of their inspiration and authority practically an article of the Christian faith, while others could not assent to this.

It is the purpose of this paper to take up his suggestion. It will be, in intention at least, an eirenicon. As far as possible it will seek to avoid controversial matter, and to map out a common standing-ground which both parties can occupy. Please observe that my title avoids divisive terms like "inspiration" or "revelation." It does so deliberately. It is no part of my object to combat the traditional theory of inspiration. I have not the impertinence to wish, or in a twenty minutes' address to attempt, to dislodge revered brethren from an attitude to the

* The substance of a Paper read at a recent meeting of a Baptist Ministers' Fraternal Union.

Scriptures in which they have lived and worked fruitfully for the best part of a lifetime. Neither is it any part of my plan to expound and defend the methods and conclusions of the critical school of Bible students. To do that at all adequately would demand a long series of papers and discussions. I confine myself here to the place and use of Scripture, and I limit the subject still further in a practical direction by adding "in Christian *experience*." This phrase is intended to exclude abstract or philosophical consideration of the significance of Scripture in a theological construction of the Christian religion, and to concentrate attention on the practical function of the Bible in our Christian life. And I venture to hope that on this point we shall not find a material difference between our respective positions.

Let me begin by asking the question, What is a Christian? It will perhaps be answer sufficient for our purpose, and one, too, which we can all accept, if I reply that a Christian is one who is "in Christ": that he is one who walks in the line of God's will by the light and strength derived from a fellowship of faith with the living Christ. He does not simply follow the traditional precepts and example of a dead leader, with whom there is no present communication. By prayer he has direct access to a living Head, and he follows leadings which he believes he receives from Him. More than that, he has a direct acquaintance in his own experience with that Head: he believes that he, too, has "the mind of Christ." When he reads the Scriptures he seeks this guidance, and he understands what he reads by its light. The Scripture itself then, is not his final authority; it is referred to, and tested by, the Spirit of Christ. He does not necessarily understand a given passage as does another Christian; but this fact does not disconcert him, because he is conscious—as indeed is the other also—that his own reading has a higher sanction. This means, of course, that he is *interpreting*, and he interprets in virtue of of the light within him; it is this which both guides and authorizes his interpretation.

But if the Christian is one who lives in and by fellowship with the living Christ, then theoretically at least—and please note, I say no more than this—theoretically the Scriptures are not indispensable to the Christian life. And actually, we should remember—we are far too apt to forget it—that there were once Christian people, and Christian churches, without Christian Scriptures. The Christians of the first generations had no New Testament, i.e., no collection of Christian books recognized as having canonical authority. The apostle Paul—perhaps the most gigantic saint begotten of the Lord Jesus Christ—had no New Testament: he himself produced a great

part of our New Testament, and became thereby, after the Master, incomparably the most influential exponent of the faith in Christian history. It is true that the primitive Christians had the Old Testament. But it was no final authority for them. It could not be. It was that only for Jews. The Christians, indeed, read the Old Testament: but they read it with a sovereign freedom. They used without reserve their right of interpretation. With an even sublime audacity they read their Christianity, or rather, their Christ, into the Old Testament. In proof of this I need only remind you of the first two chapters of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and how their author unhesitatingly applies directly to Christ passages from the Psalms which not only the Jews, but sober-minded Christians of the present day also, recognize as referring to God the Father. As for the earthly life of Jesus Himself, they owed their knowledge of it to an oral and fluid tradition. They heard tell of his words and deeds, his death and resurrection, from those who were in the Lord before them, and who had known Him in the flesh. But in the writings of Paul the life and teaching of the earthly Jesus occupy quite a minor place. It is the risen and ever-living Christ that is in the forefront. And it is the apostle's communion with Him that is the decisive thing. In virtue of this he insists that he is no whit behind the chiefest apostles; he has seen the Lord, and he knows that he has the mind of Christ.

Now it is at least conceivable that this state of things might have continued for an indefinite period—I mean, that there should have been merely an oral and fluid tradition about the life and words of Jesus, and that present experience of the living Christ should have kept the foremost place and emphasis. (Perhaps there is an organic relation between the two factors; it is possible that the Church of later days has paid for its fuller and exacter knowledge of the earthly Jesus by a proportionate loss of spontaneity and immediacy in the spiritual life.) I recognize, of course, that sooner or later the preservation in writing of the tradition about Jesus, and of the first disciples' experience of him was practically inevitable. Inevitable, perhaps, also, was it that in course of time these writings should attain to canonical authority. But this we need not now discuss. The point at the moment is this—that at first, in the very nature of the case, there were no Christian Scriptures, although there were Christians in the fullest sense of the term. And the next point is, that even when the books had come into existence, it was only after the lapse of a considerable time, and by a gradual process, that they came ultimately to be recognized as authoritative Scriptures. Some of the books finally included in the canon continued indeed to

be questioned or even rejected by sections of the Church after others had obtained general recognition.

Before leaving this part of the subject it may be well to remind ourselves also that the erection of an authoritative New Testament canon was part of that stiffening and externalizing process which resulted in the emergence of the Old Catholic church, with its insistence on authoritative forms, alike in doctrine (the creed), in organization (the bishop), and in practice (sacraments and liturgy). That was a process involving consequences which free churchmen most sincerely and wholeheartedly deplore.

But how, then, did the Bible come to hold for evangelical Christians the position of final authority which it eventually obtained? We all know that it did so. Those of us who to-day adopt a freer attitude towards it are well aware that our fathers did not share this attitude. And most likely we ourselves were brought up in their ideas, and only through a period of great difficulty, uncertainty and distress have fought our way to a different view. Well, we know that the old view was really the consequence, by reaction, of the extreme development and corruption of the Catholic church. That church finally arrogated to itself a position of supreme authority over the faith and life of Christian people. It took possession of the Bible, and decided how far it should be communicated to lay-folk, and in what sense they were to understand it. Virtually it even took possession of Christ, for it taught that fundamentally the mind of Christ was imparted, not to Christian people at large, not even to the clergy in general, but to the individual head of the Roman Catholic Church, on whom the clergy were dependent for the spiritual gift which empowered them to teach and direct God's people. Hence the revolt of Luther was necessarily a revolt against this arrogated authority of the church. But it was impossible then to overthrow this authority except by setting up an alternative. There must be another authority, similarly visible, ancient and venerable, to set over against the Church's authority. Protestantism found such an authority in the Scriptures. The time had not yet come for the acceptance of the mind of Christ as manifested in the collective Christian consciousness. Progress advances slowly, a step at a time. That is God's wise way. Individualism indeed brought itself into evil odour by its excesses. All sorts of divergent and extreme views were advocated. The very men who claimed to read Scripture for themselves by the inner light discredited their contention by the extravagance, in some cases even by the immorality, of their views. Some of them were, no doubt, possessed but very imperfectly by the Spirit of Christ. Hence arose the cry "Back to the Scriptures,"

and for Protestants this was necessarily accompanied by the fond belief and sanguine assertion that the meaning of the Scriptures was all plain to the plain man. And yet even their learned theologians could not agree in its interpretation. They disputed, they abused and excommunicated one another, and where they could they persecuted those who differed from them. It was long before the truth dawned on Protestants that a "final" authority which seemed to different readers to mean different things could not occupy, and could not be intended to occupy, that magisterial position which they would fain have assigned to it.

But it is time to leave this historical sketch, and come to its bearing upon our own problem of to-day.

It ought to have become apparent to us all that the particular presentation of Scripture truth for which any of us contends, is perforce an *interpretation* of Scripture. There is not, nor can there be, one central interpretation which is of divine authority, so that all the views which diverge from it more or less, are more or less illegitimate. There is no uniform interpretation of the Scriptures which has been held by the genuine Christian saints of all countries and centuries. In point of fact the theory of plenary inspiration in its current form is not nearly so ancient, nor of such widespread acceptance, as many people perhaps imagine. In this form it goes back only to the theologians of the old Protestantism of the seventeenth century—those men who reduced the utterances of the living faith of the Reformers to an ossifying and barren scholasticism comparable to that of the mediaeval schoolmen themselves.

It would make this paper far too long if I took space to show in detail that inevitably, whatever sense we assign to the words of Scripture, we are interpreting. I remember once getting into an animated discussion with one of the clergy of the Catholic Apostolic Church. He pelted me with quotations of the *ipsissima verba* of Scripture, and whenever I ventured to hint that more than one view of their meaning was entertainable—that it was a question of interpretation, he adopted an air of superior sanctity, and said, "Oh well, my dear sir, if you are not prepared to accept the verdicts of Scripture, I have no more to say to you. If you are going behind the plain words of Scripture, I confess I cannot follow you." Some of his "plain words" were apocalyptic utterances from Zechariah or the Revelation of John, for which he seemed to have a greater relish than for pellucid utterances of the Master. I remember in particular that he argued confidently for a material heaven, adducing, among other passages, Paul's affirmation of a spiritual *body*, which drew from me the rejoinder, "I have as much right to emphasize the 'spiritual' as you have

to emphasize the 'body.'" This passage alone is enough to convince us of the absolute inevitability of interpretation. The phrase "spiritual body" has no definite and unmistakable meaning that it carries in its face. We all inevitably put a meaning on it as we read, and we by no means all put the same meaning. In this connection I will only remind you further that Luther called the Epistle of James an "epistle of straw," and plainly regretted its inclusion in the canon of the New Testament. Why? Because he interpreted the whole Bible in the light of his doctrine of justification by faith, which he found to be emphatically absent from that epistle.

It would be a gain of incalculable magnitude if we could agree to recognize that the views of Scripture which we personally represent are just so many interpretations of it, and to allow the right of others to hold diverse views without denying, by word or behaviour, the genuineness of their discipleship. It ought to be a case of live and let live. I believe I can speak for those who bring critical methods to the study of Scripture when I say that they are quite prepared to respect the right of their brethren who adhere to older methods. I know at least that I am. Is it too much to ask that these on their side would acknowledge similarly that we can read the Scriptures in our way, without thereby forfeiting our discipleship, or imperilling the evangelical character of our witness; and that they would refrain from denouncing us as "traitors," or "wolves in sheep's clothing"? I can only say this for myself—every hope I have of holiness here, or of heaven hereafter, hangs upon the Lord Jesus Christ, and His mediatorial work for me on earth and in heaven.

If we could agree to recognize that we are all interpreting Scripture in our several ways, then we should also be able without difficulty to advance to this further admission—that no particular theory about Scripture is vital to Christian faith.

And in making this further admission, we need not fear to be unfaithful to any teaching of the New Testament. It is true that its writers claim inspiration, now for themselves, and now for other Bible writers. But none of them sets forth or implies any specific and exclusive theory of their inspiration. Again I must content myself with an apparently dogmatic assertion. I cannot here examine all the passages which bear, directly or indirectly, on this subject. Apart from our Lord Himself, the authors of the New Testament do claim or imply a measure of divine inspiration for themselves, but nowhere formulate any specific theory of their inspiration. It is noteworthy that Paul will speak at one time as the mouth-piece of the Lord, and then again with a clear consciousness that he cannot claim the Lord's authority for his dictum; also

that Luke expressly states in the preface to his gospel that he depends for his facts not on divine inspiration, but on the ordinary methods of historical investigation. Apart from these data, there are two New Testament passages which bear more directly on the question of inspiration, and are commonly adduced in discussions of the subject.

One is 2 Peter i. 21. This verse follows on a passage in which the writer claims that in his case the word of ancient prophecy is confirmed by his personal experience, for he himself heard the witness of the Divine voice to the beloved Son. He proceeds to bid his readers take heed to the word of prophecy, remembering at the same time that no prophecy is a matter of a man's own interpretation (meaning that the individual cannot rightly interpret it without the aid of that Spirit who originally inspired the prophecy): "for not by man's will was prophecy ever brought, but under impulse of a holy spirit men spake from God." Clearly the statement is entirely general, and does not favour any particular theory of inspiration.

The other passage is 2 Timothy iii. 15, 16. This speaks of "sacred Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus." (Note the statement here as to the function of Scripture, and its limitations. Its business is not to teach history, or science, or even religion in the abstract, but to guide the individual into saving fellowship with God.) "Every Scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for rectification, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be fit, thoroughly fitted for every good work." It makes no material difference if we adhere to the rendering in the Authorized Version, "Every Scripture is inspired of God, and is profitable" . . . There is still no specific theory of inspiration. Let us remember also that the reference is of course to the Old Testament Scriptures. In this passage it is perfectly clear, and it comes out indeed most strikingly, that the quality and proof of Scripture inspiration lies in its practical utility for the nurture of the Christian life. From the New Testament we can further gather, as I have already pointed out, that this was the principle on which the Old Testament Scriptures were actually used by the Christians of the first generations. They selected those passages which served to confirm and encourage them in their Christian faith and practice, and they interpreted them freely in the light of Christ's revelation to them.

May I now venture a step further, and assert that practically this is our own attitude to the Scriptures, whether we belong to the older or the newer school of Bible study? Do we not all in practice select those parts of the Old Testament

most akin to the evangelical teaching of the new dispensation, and are there not considerable tracts of the Old Testament from which we seldom if ever take our public readings or the texts of our sermons, e.g., much of Leviticus, and the books of Ecclesiastes and Esther? Again, do we not interpret the portions that we do select by the light of the Christian evangel, i.e. do we not freely read into them a deeper and fuller meaning than their immediate historical sense? Isaiah xxxv. 10, for example, we refer not merely to the return of the Jews from captivity, but to the ultimate coming of God's people to the celestial city. The fact is that we all show a practical preference for those passages which, in Coleridge's suggestive phrase, "find us" most intimately—those which have a spiritual deep in them to which answers a deep in our own spiritual experience. Even in the New Testament all is not on the same level for us. There are passages here also which we seldom or never handle—the warnings of eternal fire, the bulk of Jude's epistle, and the central portions of the Apocalypse.

Before concluding I must try to meet an objection which has been haunting my mind, and probably yours also, through a great part of this paper. It may be stated thus: We all alike recognize that our only authentic source of information about Jesus, His character, example and teaching, is found in the New Testament Scriptures. It is easy to talk about the mind of Christ; but the mind of Christ derives positive and definite content only from the New Testament, and primarily from its gospels. They are our indispensable means of checking the excesses of subjectivism. But if the records are unreliable in some details, and if, moreover, we are not agreed as to the details that are unreliable, what becomes of our confident appeal to these writings?

Now it can be shown that in some points the record is uncertain. Leaving aside the fact that readings in the best manuscripts of the New Testament differ, and sometimes materially, it is clear that (for example) the Synoptic Gospels do not always give the same account of the same event, or of the same utterance of Christ. The call of the first disciples has a quite different setting in Luke from what it has in Mark: and the utterance about divorce in Mark lacks the exception of fornication which it has in Matthew. Even if we manage to explain away these discrepancies, the fact of *uncertainty* remains; and uncertainty is enough to create the difficulty to which I now refer. Let us frankly face this difficulty. Surely it is not fatal. Take, to help dispassionate consideration, a parallel from secular history. We have decidedly diverse presentations of Socrates in the writings of Xenophon and Plato.

Further, it is doubtful whether Plato was really the author of all the dialogues attributed to him. And the dialogues generally ascribed to him differ materially in their representations on some important points: often we cannot be sure when Plato is giving us the undiluted Socrates, and when it is Socrates more or less transmuted in the active and original intellect of his greatest disciple. Yet in spite of all this, we by no means despair of obtaining a picture of Socrates and what he stood for, sufficiently clear and specific for practical purposes. Similar considerations could be applied, and with like result, to the picture of Jesus as transmitted to us by the records which embody the reminiscences of His disciples.

Besides, we may easily attach too great importance to the possession of accurate details. Does not the objection we are considering really imply a false and unevangelical notion of Christian faith, namely, that it is a matter of correct belief about the life and death and teaching of Christ? But it is no such thing! We Baptists are in the forefront in maintaining that this is a false, and a perniciously false, conception of Christian faith. Christian faith, we affirm, is a personal trust in a living Christ. It is true that this is mediated by knowledge of the written word. We are prepared to go further, and to assert that Christian faith is sound and energetic and fruitful just in proportion as it is constantly nourished upon the written word. But it is not essential that that word should be a complete and irrefragable record. You can get through to the mind of Christ by reading the existing records: it is only necessary that they should be honest transcripts of the memories and impressions of the witnesses. You can allow for the "personal equation" of a Peter, a John, a Paul. You can gather such a convincing conception of the mind and spirit of Jesus that instinctively you will come to use it in checking, not merely other Christians' interpretations of the records, but details of the record itself. It is long now since devout Christian souls began to feel that the cursing of the fig-tree was something foreign to the justice and gentleness of Jesus, and found relief in the supposition that this narrative arose through transformation of a parabolic utterance into a literal incident.

Let me add that this view of the adequacy of the records is no mere armchair speculation. Our missionaries can tell us of heathen people who, with no instruction from Christians, and no knowledge of any theory of inspiration, but simply with the New Testament in their hands, and reading it precisely as they would read any ordinary book, have seen Christ for themselves, and surrendered heart and life to Him.

This paper is already too long. I will content myself

with making, very briefly, one further practical suggestion. Could we not agree to keep our theories of biblical inspiration in the background of our teaching? It would be another immense gain if we could. Ought we not indeed to do this? Is not the proper business of the pulpit the positive exposition of the content of Scripture, and not the investigation of such secondary matters as its origin, nature and authority? These can be discussed in a special class, or with individual enquirers. I am not of course asking that any of us should suppress or disguise his honest conviction. I am only pleading now that we should "put first things first." In our teaching generally let us avoid giving such large and prominent place to the Bible-question as to create the impression that faith in the Bible, or in anything of human origin, is the condition of men's salvation. Let us be very jealous for the honour of our Lord. Salvation is not through the Bible, but through Christ. Recently I heard—and heard with pain—a Baptist minister declare, "I regard the Bible as the one perfect thing we have on earth." That, though he did not intend it, was to detract something from the unique honour and glory of the Lord. "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." Surely there has never been on earth aught perfect save the person and life and death of Him who did no sin! Let us beware of making of even the Bible a fetish. Let us not exalt a means into an end. The Bible is but the finger-post that points us to the Saviour. Let us not even seem to put it in His place, so as to convert it, for some at least, into a stumbling-block which prevents their ever coming to Him.

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The Scottish History Society has just issued its first Journal. It contains an account of the Cameronian organization, with its division in 1753, and the fortunes of each party. More generally interesting is an essay on the Scottish Reformation Psalmody. Most humorous is the story of a memorial volume of sermons; the dead minister left many, which his friends could not print; but he also left sixteen children and a widow, for whom 1,700 people offered to buy copies: so the friends scraped together ten sermons by themselves, and published them in the name of the dead man! Members of our Society will be supplied through our Secretary with this Journal at 2s. 6d. a copy. The Presbyterian Historical Society of England hopes soon to issue a monograph on the Westminster Confession, which may be obtained similarly on special terms.