

## INSPIRATION.

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I AM going to deal with this subject from the point of view of human experience, and not from that of theological speculation. If there is such a thing as Divine inspiration, of Scripture or otherwise, it must of necessity be a fact of human experience, and can, I believe, be most helpfully discussed from that standpoint. I shall, therefore, begin by stating the following personal experience, the account of which is a verbatim copy of the report of the occurrence referred to, which I wrote within an hour of its happening.

“THE PRIORY VICARAGE,

“SHIREHAMPTON.

“On Sunday morning, September 29, 1901, Miss B., a former member of the Holy Trinity, Bristol, congregation who is engaged to Mr. M. of Johannesburg, walked over to Shirehampton, where I was preaching that day, in order to see me and tell me something.

“She said that some years ago, before I left Holy Trinity, she was in very great trouble that seemed to be absolutely crushing. She had not been to church for three or four Sundays on account of the distress in which the whole family was plunged; but on the particular Sunday to which she referred she resolved to go, and before starting for church she went upstairs and prayed that God would give me a message to help her.

“That evening as I gave out my text I said, ‘I had not intended to speak to-night on this subject, but had prepared something altogether different. *There is some one in the church to-night for whom God has a special message.*’ She had been able to pay no attention to the service; but these words (words which I had spoken under an impulse that I could not explain) at once laid hold of her, and she listened whilst I described in detail the circumstances in which she was placed, and spoke words of guidance and encouragement.

“Her lover was by her side, and as they left the church he asked her when she had told me all the details of the family trouble; but she begged him not to say anything to her, for her heart was

too full for words. When they had reached home, however, and she was more composed, he repeated the question, and she replied that she had never said a word to me and that I knew nothing whatever of the circumstances—a statement which was quite true.

“This morning she asked me if I remembered having some years ago begun a sermon with the words she had repeated, and when I replied that I remembered the fact quite well but could not remember either the text or the subject, she told me the story that I have now related, and went on to say that she was the one for whom the message I gave was intended, and that she could not tell me all that that message had done for her. She had wanted to tell me of this incident long ago, and had had no opportunity, but as she was hoping to go out to S. Africa to be married early next year and might not see me again in this life she felt she must come and tell me to-day, and therefore she had made the appointment with me last Friday night at the Harvest Festival [in Bristol] and had come over this morning. She could never forget that sermon in which God had made me alter my subject, and had put into my mind the details of her trouble, and had given her a direct message through my lips in answer to her prayer. 29. ix. 01.”

The question arises, How are we to account for this experience? Is the supernatural explanation which commended itself to Miss B. the true account of the matter, or is there a natural explanation?

The idea of telepathy at once occurs to the mind, viz., that the thought occupying the woman's mind was conveyed to the mind of the preacher by the familiar, though unexplained, process of thought transference, and that it translated itself into his subsequent action. This at first sight appears probable, but it will not stand investigation. In the first place there was no *rapport*, no mutual contact, between her mind and the preacher's. I did not personally know her, for the regular congregation was a very large one and she had never made herself known to me. Moreover there was no attempt on her part to concentrate attention upon me so as to convey an impression upon my subconscious mind. She was a young woman utterly unacquainted with psychology whether new or old; but she believed in God and in the power of prayer, and so she prayed that He would give me a message for her. Her thought of me in this connection is wholly inadequate to account for the events that followed; for consider what these were:

i. A conviction occurring in the midst of the Evening Service that I must not preach on the subject I had contemplated, growing into the feeling that it was impossible for me to do so.

ii. The coming into my mind of a fresh subject coupled with an appropriate text, and the shaping of the subject into the form of a sermon—all going on more or less subconsciously whilst my upper consciousness was occupied with the conduct of the service.

iii. The arising in my mind, as an integral part of the sermon, of an illustration which proved to be so accurate and detailed a description of the circumstances that were distressing the young woman and her family that her fiancé could only conclude that she had told me the whole story.

Now telepathy might certainly account for producing upon my mind a more or less vague impression of distress, vague because I knew of no one with whom to associate the distress; but it could not explain *the imperative impulse* to alter the whole sermon at such an awkward moment, nor could it account for the new sermon with its arresting illustration and the words of help and guidance, all of which constituted just the memorable message that was exactly adapted to the need, although to the messenger that need was quite unknown. In this case the supernatural explanation is more reasonable than the natural, unless indeed one has proved that there is no Divine Spirit to inspire the mind of man with specific thoughts and with the impulse to definite action.

Inquiry might disclose experiences of this character as striking as this or even more remarkable; but, however this may be, I suppose there are very few of us, ministers of Christ, who have not frequently experienced the uprising of thoughts in our minds for which there has been no natural cause, and still more of the impulse to do particular acts, arising *à propos* of nothing, but singularly and amply justified by the event—all these things illustrating St. Paul's meaning when he speaks of men being "led by the Spirit of God," and shedding light upon the spiritual experiences which led him down to Troas in order that he might bring the Gospel over to Europe.

Now, what I want to suggest is that in all these experiences we have examples of the kind of inspiration which the Lord Jesus Christ experienced, in so high a degree and to so remarkable an extent, whilst He was here on earth. He was not a superhuman Being

set quite apart from the rest of mankind, even though there was in Him the Divine nature, but was made in all things like unto His brethren. We should, therefore, naturally expect that although the degree to which He was inspired was exceptional because of His exceptional capacity for inspiration, yet the inspiration was of the same kind as that granted to apostles and to us.

And, indeed, whilst certainly claiming this, He claims no other. He tells us that His teaching, the words that He spoke, was given Him by the Father ; He also declares that the impulse to perform the miraculous deeds which were His ministerial credentials came likewise from above. The question of vital importance, therefore, for us is to what extent we can rely upon the inspiration of Jesus ; how far it raises His teaching above the level of that of a Jewish rabbi of His day ; how far, if at all, it constitutes Him a criterion for the inspiration of Holy Scripture in general.

There are two conflicting theories of our Lord's position as a teacher. The one represents Him as infallible by reason of His Divine nature ; the other regards Him as being so really and thoroughly human, because of His incarnation, that He knew and taught just what a well-informed and transparently sincere thinker of His day would know and teach ; and that He made the same mistakes on such subjects, for example, as eschatology and the authorship of Old Testament writings as might under such circumstances be expected. On this latter view of the matter the teaching of Jesus Christ, so far from being the test of the truth, must itself be tested before it can be accepted as true ; and it is claimed that in certain particulars He has been definitely convicted of error. The passage in the Epistle to the Philippians which enunciates the doctrine of the *kenosis* is naturally cited in support of this position. This passage is as follows :—“ Who being originally in the form of God did not regard His being on an equality with God a thing to be held fast, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men ” (Phil. ii. 6-7).

The late Archdeacon Gifford, in a book entitled *The Incarnation* which has recently been re-published by Longmans, has, I think, established the point that the thing of which our Lord is here said to have emptied Himself is not “ the form of God,” i.e. the Divine nature, but, rather, that which He did not regard as a thing to be held fast, viz. His being on an equality with God. The Archdeacon's

interpretation of the passage as a whole appears to me, nevertheless, to be defective because of the exceedingly limited meaning which he quite arbitrarily assigns to this latter phrase, "His being on an equality with God." "We have seen," he says in summing up the conclusions at which he has arrived, that *ἰσα Θεῷ* denotes the manifold circumstances of glory and majesty, or the particular modes of manifestation, which were an adequate expression of the Divine nature of the Son, but not inseparable from it." But why glory and majesty only? Dr. Gifford, relying on a statement of Bishop Pearson; distinguishes between essential attributes and relative attributes, the former assumed to be inseparable from the Divine nature, the latter relative to the perception of God by angels and by men, such as glory and majesty, and capable of being laid aside. This argument, or rather assertion, is singularly unconvincing. Who are we that we should decide between what is and what is not inseparable from the Divine nature? The interpretation of St. Paul's words must be sought in the recorded history of the life and work of Jesus Christ; and, in this connection, whilst we have on the one hand the awe-inspired utterance of St. John, "and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only-begotten of the Father," we have on the other hand the record of an infancy of utter helplessness and ignorance, a boyhood of natural growth in wisdom as in stature, a manhood and a ministry characterised by the frank confession, "I can of mine own self do nothing," "of that day and hour knoweth no one, not even the angels of heaven, *neither the Son*, but the Father only." It would therefore appear that whilst the Divine glory was not so wholly laid aside but that apostles could behold it, there were two attributes of which the incarnate Son had completely emptied Himself, viz. the Divine knowledge and the Divine power.

Must we then abandon our confidence in Him as a perfectly reliable teacher, an infallible guide to the truth in the things of which He speaks? No! for side by side with His admission of personal ignorance and lack of power there goes continually the most unqualified claim to a perfect inspiration both as to His teaching and also as to the works that served as signs of the source of that teaching; and Almighty God has endorsed from heaven that claim, as Jesus said He would, by raising Him from the dead. The experiences that we intermittently and imperfectly enjoy, of utterances given to us and of impulses to action, were for Him regular

and perfect, an integral factor of His ministry. Let us consider His assertions on this point.

1. *His Teaching*.—"My teaching is not Mine, but His that sent Me. If any man willeth to do His will he shall know of the teaching, whether it be of God, or whether I speak from Myself" (St. John vii. 17). "Then shall ye know that I am He, and that I do nothing of Myself, but as the Father taught Me I speak these things" (St. John viii. 28). "For I speak not from Myself; but the Father which sent Me, He hath given Me commandment what I should say and what I should speak: the things therefore which I speak, even as the Father hath said unto Me, so I speak" (St. John xii. 49, 50). "The words that I say unto you I speak not from Myself" (St. John xiv. 10). "The word which ye hear is not Mine, but the Father's who sent Me" (St. John xiv. 24).

2. *His Works*.—"The Father abiding in Me doeth His works" (St. John xiv. 10). On two special occasions, when He worked His first and His last miracles, we see this waiting upon the Father, this watching and listening for the signal, for the impulse to act, and His restraining of His own desire to do the required work until the inspiration from above should come. The Virgin invites His help when the wine fails; but all that He can answer is, "Lady mother, I cannot heed thee; My hour is not yet come." But Mary's intuition was not at fault. In a little while He performed the beginning of His miracles and manifested forth His glory. Similarly, when summoned by the anxious sisters to the sick-bed of Lazarus—a summons to which He would gladly have responded, for we are reminded that He loved Lazarus and Martha and Mary—He lingered where He was; and it was only when the knowledge came to Him that Lazarus was dead that there came with it the inspiration to awake him from that sleep of death.

Here then we have the fact of inspiration in its most marked manifestation. Jesus Christ bears witness to it as an habitual experience, and as the essential element of His ministry both of teaching and also of working miracles. Coming from One who was so singularly humble in heart, so utterly sincere and so clear-minded, this testimony would for most people be convincing as to the reality of the personal experience in question. Being such as He was, He would never have made this claim to Divine inspiration if He had had any doubt as to the reality of the experiences;

and the fact that they were habitual entirely eliminated for Him the possibility of chance coincidence. So firm, indeed, was His conviction of the Divine origin of His teaching that He declared that though heaven and earth might pass away, His words would not pass away.

We have, however, a still stronger witness to the truth of His claim. When challenged by the Jewish rulers to show them a sign in attestation of His authority, He foretold His resurrection on the third day; and this sign has been given. St. Paul, in his address to the Athenians, evidently refers to this fact when he says that God has given assurance that He will judge all men by Christ in the fact that He has raised Him from the dead. There is nothing in the bare fact of Christ's resurrection to indicate that He is to be the judge of mankind; but if we remember that Christ declared that God had appointed Him to be judge of all, and if His resurrection is God's attestation of that claim, St. Paul's argument is clear.

Jesus Christ is thus the perfect example of the inspired teacher. As John the Baptist expressed it, the Spirit was not given by measure to Him. In other words, He had by constant habit developed a practically unlimited capacity for receiving and faculty for recognizing the Divine intimations that were granted Him.

From this fact there flow the following inferences:

In His own words concerning God, revelation, the human spirit, sin, forgiveness, the hereafter, duty, we have certainties to deal with, not speculations that have to be verified. He was not an exponent of the mind of His age and environment, but of the mind of God. 'As He could challenge the men of His day with the question, Which of you convinceth Me of sin? so now He can securely challenge all the ages with the question, Which of you convicteth Me of error? Charges of error have indeed been made against Him, but they break down on examination. To take one case for instance, the first Evangelist could not have recorded in all solemnity as a statement of Jesus the assertion that heaven and earth should pass away, but His words should not pass away—a statement made with reference to His second advent—if the interpretation given by some critics to an earlier statement of Jesus recorded by the same Evangelist is what that Evangelist understood Him to mean. The passage to which I refer is, Ye shall not have gone through the cities of Israel till the Son of Man be come. Whatever

this passage may mean, it could not have been understood to mean by him who recorded it that Christ then committed Himself to the assertion that His glorious advent was to take place without fail within a few weeks at the outside!

If the line of argument which I have here pursued is sound, it follows that the teaching of Jesus makes us in a very real sense independent of the rest of the Bible. It contains, as a matter of fact, all that we need for this life and the next, and it is endorsed by the Almighty Father Himself. The rest of the Bible, however valuable it may be to us, is therefore not indispensable. Opinions may vary concerning the authority or inspiration or authorship of this or that book: the matter is of deepest interest, but it is not vital.

If, however, the rest of the Bible is thus relegated to a secondary place in comparison with the teaching of our Lord, it is nevertheless on His teaching that we have ultimately to depend for our belief in its inspiration. Apart from Christ's testimony there is practically no external evidence in support of that inspiration. The early chapters of Genesis, for example, on which so much of the scheme of the Old Testament depends, come to us without the faintest suggestion of origin or authorship. The internal evidence that they themselves afford points to their being a varied collection of exceedingly ancient records, of singular loftiness and freedom from polytheistic superstition, carefully edited by a very sure hand; but how they first came into existence no one may know. Prophet after prophet claims to have received from God the message that he delivers; but who is to attest his claim? How can we be sure that he was not mistaken? So, too, with the New Testament Epistles: what is the ultimate test and measure of their validity; what is the meaning of their inspiration? To take this latter question first, is it not self-evident that the Epistles have their value for us in the fact that they apply, interpret and expand the teaching of Christ, and the facts concerning Christ in their relation to us? No higher or other inspiration than this is needed, nor is any claimed. It is but reasonable to suppose that if men were called by God to a special work of ministry as St. Paul was called, they would be divinely guided and helped in the discharge of that work; and that inference is abundantly confirmed when we find the letters they wrote to the Churches reflecting so faithfully the teaching of Christ.



In the case of the Gospels, the help of the Holy Spirit was specially promised to remind and to guide (St. John xiv. 26, xvi. 13-15).

The testimony which our Lord bears to the Old Testament is more direct and is of two kinds. In the first place there is a general endorsement of the Old Testament as the Divine witness to Him. Consider, for example, the following statement of our Lord after His resurrection, recorded by St. Luke:—"These are My words which I spake unto you while I was yet with you, how that all things must needs be fulfilled which are written in the law of Moses, and the Prophets, and the Psalms concerning Me" (St. Luke xxiv. 44). And St. Luke also tells us, with reference to our Lord's conversation with the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, that, "beginning from Moses and from all the prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself." Nowhere does He discuss the authority or the inspiration of particular books of the Old Testament, but His whole attitude towards the book implies an acceptance and endorsement of its various parts *as being what they profess to be*. Its history remains history, its proverbs are a collection of proverbial sayings, nor does a special inspiration claimed for this or that particular psalm necessarily imply that every psalm is more than sacred poetry. We are still left to form our own opinion as to the character of certain portions of Scripture: whether, for example, the story of the Fall is literal fact or allegory; whether the prologue and epilogue of the Book of Job are actual history or simply a framework for the discussion of the problem of pain; whether the Book of Jonah is a record of facts or a sacred allegory, like a chapter out of the *Pilgrim's Progress*; and the like. But the testimony of our Lord to the genuineness of the Law, the Jewish book of the Torah, which we call the Pentateuch, is clear and definite; it was for Him one book, and that the work of Moses. On this point His teaching appears to me to be in direct conflict with the higher critical views as to the character and origin of the Pentateuch; and that teaching is the same after His resurrection as it was before. (Luke xxiv. 27, 44; John vii. 19-23.)

In the next place His testimony is specific as to the genuineness of certain sections of the Old Testament and the definite inspiration of others. For example, in His teaching concerning the sanctity and permanence of the marriage tie He seems to endorse the doctrine of Genesis that mankind is a special creation of God, and that

the first human pair were united by Him. To any who may be startled by this suggested conflict between the teaching of Jesus and the doctrine of evolution I would put the following problem : Certain eminent men of science, thorough-going supporters of the doctrine of evolution, have arrived at the conviction that by the scientific method of observation and experiment the fact of continued existence after bodily death has been established. *What then is the origin of that which survives death, and how comes it to be associated with a mortal body so as to constitute a man ?* It cannot be a function of body, for a bodily function would cease with the death of the body of which it was a function : nor can it be a product of bodily evolution, for then it would be itself bodily and mortal like that from which it was derived.

But we will not press this. Let us take another incident, the story of the Flood. St. Peter tells us that when Christ was put to death in the body He went and preached to the " spirits in prison who had been disobedient " in Noah's time. From what source could St. Peter have obtained this information except from the Risen Lord Himself ? If therefore Jesus after His resurrection told St. Peter that He had preached to the people who perished in the Flood, does not that fact take the Bible story of the Flood out of the region of legend and make it actual history ? How that story was first recorded, or by whom, it is impossible to say ; and we can but hazard a guess as to how so ancient a record, if indeed it is a genuine record, can have been preserved and handed down till it reached the hands of the editor or compiler of Genesis. But if Jesus Christ, between His death and resurrection, met and taught the men who perished in that catastrophe, and if He describes them in terms which suit exactly the Bible story, it makes all the difference in the world to that story, however little we may know of its origin. And this verification is certainly not without its effect upon our attitude towards the rest of those primitive records of which it forms a part.

To take one other reference to the Pentateuch, our Lord regards as historical fact the manifestation to Moses at the burning bush, and bases on the Divine words spoken there a proof of continued existence after death—a proof so striking and so original that it completely silenced the Sadducee materialists who had attempted to question His resurrection doctrine. But if this record is sober

history, accurate even as to the very words uttered, who will venture to deny the general historical character of the Exodus narrative of which this is the introduction?

In His reference to the 110th psalm the Lord asserts not only the Davidic authorship but also the inspiration of the psalm: "How then doth David, in the Spirit, call him Lord"; and on the fact of the psalm's Davidic authorship and inspiration He based an argument for the divinity of the Messiah, i.e. of Himself. Incidentally it may be mentioned that the effect of His argument upon His learned audience shows that they at all events had never heard of any doubt concerning the authorship of that particular psalm.

It is to be remembered that it was not in casual conversation that our Lord made these references to Old Testament Scripture, but in His authoritative teaching, that teaching of which He asserted that it was not His but the Father's. Here then we may find ground for our belief in the Scriptures of the Old Testament, sharing that belief with Him.

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