

THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE.

BY THE REV. W. H. GRIFFITH THOMAS, D.D.

[*These questions were asked by a student in an American Theological College, in a letter addressed to the "Sunday School Times" of Philadelphia. The article which follows represents the answers given in that paper, and it is here reproduced by the kind permission of the Editor.*]

What is wrong with such a theory as might be summed up thus—

"The Bible is a human record of divine revelation. The revelation is made not so much miraculously as through historical events and individual experiences. Whatever inspiration there is, is in the degree to which is rightly apprehended the mind or purpose of God, in the event or experience. No particular kind of inspiration is required to make the record.

"The truth is progressive; because there is freedom, the progress may be marked by retrogression. This progressive revelation culminates in Jesus Christ; He is its 'telos.' Our principle of Biblical criticism is to look at everything in the light of the mind of Christ.

"We should not hold God responsible for every statement in the Bible, nor expect that wherever it is opened we shall hear God's voice.

"Why should we believe the mind of Christ to be vested with supreme moral authority? Formerly answered: (1) Because asserted by an infallible church; or (2) by an infallible Book. Infallible—why? Because they claim to be (dogmatic assertion)—an argument in a vicious circle. Ground rather in the power of Christ to deliver from evil; in spiritual experience and values.

"God at all times respects the integrity of the human personality; this determines the apprehension (revelation) and expression (record).

"God's self-manifestation comes in a fourfold way through (1) institutions, (2) literature, (3) personalities, (4) a way of life and thought.

"We must give the human element large consideration in thinking of inspiration and revelation. Revelation imparts only truth not otherwise attainable. Inspiration has nothing to do with truth ascertainable by ordinary mental processes. (As writing the books of Chronicles.)

"What shall be our standard? Because revelation, therefore true; inspiration, therefore true; infallibility, therefore true? Such is pure dogmatism, begging the question (*a priori*). This was the curse of the church of the past."—A Theological Student.

THIS letter raises vital questions which call for careful and thorough answers. It is proposed to attempt this in detail, and for the purpose of doing so it will be necessary to quote most of the statements of the letter.

1. "The Bible is a human record of divine revelation." It is essential to define our terms. What is meant by "divine revelation"? The knowledge of God's will for man's spiritual life. What is meant by "a human record"? Of course the Bible is "human" in the sense that it came through man, for there was apparently no other way of becoming acquainted with God's revelation. But does the use of the term "human" here mean what is imperfect, faulty, and liable to error? If so, how can man be sure he is really getting "divine revelation"?

2. "The revelation is made not so much miraculously as through historical events and individual experiences." This is not a correct way of stating the case, because there are proofs of all three methods being employed. Christ was a miracle and revelation came through Him. Historical events are found both in the Old and New Testaments, and revelation came through them. Isaiah, Paul, and many more had "individual experiences," and in these revelation is seen. The truth is that the supreme requirement is to know how a man can be *certain* of divine revelation, whatever the channel may have been. There must be some guarantee of revelation even in "historical events" and "individual experiences." What is this?

3. "Whatever inspiration there is, is in the degree to which is rightly apprehended the mind and purpose of God in the event or experience." By whom is this to be apprehended? Is it the original writer or the present-day reader? If, as seems most probable in the questioner's mind, the latter, what is to be done if one man says he "apprehends" and another says he finds nothing in it of God's mind and purpose? Is the recipient to settle it? If so, inspiration is made to depend on our apprehension, and if any one does not apprehend it, the particular part is not inspired for him. Is this a logical or even sensible position? A thing is inspired, or it is not, quite independent of our apprehension. Truth is fact, not what "I trow," because the latter is variable and uncertain.

4. "No particular kind of inspiration is required to make the record." But what about any guarantee of accuracy? Thus, in John xx. 31 it is said that the Fourth Gospel is a selection out of a larger quantity of material. How, apart from inspiration of some kind, can we be sure that the selection was properly made and drawn from reliable sources? In the preface to Luke a claim to thorough knowledge and accuracy is made. How can this be

proved apart from the possession of some kind of inspiration? Either the Gospels are the result of their author's unaided efforts, or the selection of material was guided by a Divine agency. Is there not, therefore, what has been called an "inspiration of selection"? Is there any other alternative than that the Gospels are wholly human or else composed under Divine guidance? And if the latter, would God guide inaccurately? Then, too, there is need of the assurance that men's (and even Satan's) words have been accurately recorded. When Satan, as in Job's case, tells lies, the statement that he actually did this ought to be assured as true, and in this case the *record* of what he said is true. How can this be guaranteed, apart from inspiration of some kind? And in the case of books like Ecclesiastes, Esther, and Philemon, what does inspiration mean? In what sense are they inspired? If they are not inspired, why are they in a book called the Word of God? It will be seen, therefore, that some "kind of inspiration is required to make the record."

5. "The truth is progressive; because there is freedom, the progress may be marked by retrogression." Of course the truth is progressive (Heb. i. 1), and we find this so all through the Old Testament, and indeed in the New as well. But the reference to "retrogression" betrays a confusion of thought. There never was any retrogression in the progressiveness of revelation; *the retrogression was in the perception of it by the recipients*. The truth of one stage was repealed by a later, *but never repudiated*, just like an Act of Congress or Parliament is repealed, but is not thereby repudiated. On the contrary every new stage is marked by the ratification of earlier stages. Scripture confirms, but does not repudiate, what had been before given. And when we speak of the progress of Divine revelation we mean the progress of what God gave to man. There are no retrogressions in this, but there are many retrogressions, checks, set-backs in the religious history of Israel, and in their acceptance and appreciation of what God had revealed. The people degenerated and apostatized and herein, because of freedom to sin, there was indeed retrogression, but Scripture will be searched in vain for any trace of retrogression in the Divine revelation itself.

6. "This progressive revelation culminates in Jesus Christ; He is its 'telos' (end or object). Our principle of Biblical criticism is to look at everything in the light of the mind of Christ." All this

is very true, and it is on this account that the witness of Christ to the Old Testament is so important. He bore testimony to many of its facts, He quoted from nearly all its books, He claimed to interpret it with finality, and He maintained that every word He spoke was given him by His Father. And so behind the word of Christ is the authority of God, and thus when Christ said "Moses wrote of me," it was the Father who gave Him these words to speak. No one can doubt that Christ set His seal (and thereby God's seal) to the Old Testament as we now have it.

7. "We should not hold God responsible for every statement in the Bible, nor expect that whenever it is opened we shall hear God's voice." No one does. The Bible contains Satan's words, which are lies; the words of Job's friends, which were often untrue; the utterances of wicked men like Pharaoh, Saul, and many more. We do not hold God responsible for these, or hear God's voice in them, except by contrast for warning. But we maintain that, being in the Bible, they were actually spoken, that Satan and others did really say these things. Inspiration does not guarantee the sentiment, but it does guarantee the record.

8. "Why should we believe the mind of Christ to be vested with supreme moral authority? . . . Ground rather in the power of Christ to deliver from evil; in spiritual experience and values." But who is to be the judge of this spiritual value? Suppose a man says that Christ does not appeal to him, which is what H. G. Wells has said more than once. How are we to deal with such an attitude? Must there not be something objectively authoritative in Christ independent of our opinion of Him? If so, what is it? And where is it to be found? And how? What is our best and most accurate channel of information about Christ? And if we are not sure of this, how can we be sure that Christ is "vested with supreme moral authority"? The infallibility of the Church is capable of easy disproof, but the infallibility of the Bible as the most accurate, fullest, and clearest evidence of Christ is altogether different, and is an absolute necessity in the very nature of the case.

9. "God at all times respects the integrity of the human personality; this determines the apprehension (revelation) and expression (record)." Of course He does, but while He "respects the integrity" He uses it and may go beyond it. When it is said that "holy men spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter

i. 21), it implies that God used these men. Yet the differences between writers like Paul, John, Peter, and the rest show that He respected the integrity of their personality. And that the revelation is not to be measured by, or limited to, the apprehension of the human personality is clear from the fact that the prophets were often unable to understand fully the purport of their own utterances (1 Peter i. 11). And that God used while He respected the integrity of human personality is clear from Paul's claim that what he wrote (there is human personality) were the commandments of God (there is God's use). "If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord" (1 Cor. xiv. 37).

10. "God's self-manifestation comes in a fourfold way: through (1) institutions, (2) literature, (3) personalities, (4) a way of life and thought." Here, again, an explanation of terms is necessary. What is the meaning of "comes through"? How and in what way does it come? How, too, can we distinguish between the Divine manifestation and the medium through which it comes? Thus, in the Jewish institutions, or the Jewish literature, or the Jewish prophet, or the Jewish apostle, how much is Divine, and how much human? Where does the former end, and the latter begin? All this shows the impossibility of the position here maintained, or any proper view of inspiration. What is needed is something objective and unchangeable, independent of all merely subjective opinions and feelings.

11. "We must give the human element large consideration in thinking of inspiration and revelation." Most certainly we must, and no one would wish to do otherwise, because the fact is so patent in Scripture. But the "human element" cannot mean the inaccurate or uncertain element, because this would take away all assurance that God had spoken. The "human" is not the fallible and erroneous, but only the medium through which God conveyed His will. Inspiration means a *concursum*, a union or combination of the Divine and the human in which the Divine truth comes to us in human form, and in such a way that we can both understand and feel sure of it. God's inspiration of man's mind is very different from leaving man's mind to itself, and it is this that prevents the "human element" from leading us astray. Even Christ had a "human element," but no one can separate this from the Divine

or say that the former was fallible and the latter was perfect. Christ the living Word and the Bible as the written Word are alike as being both divine and human.

12. "Revelation imparts only truth not otherwise attainable." But allowing this to be true, there still remains the fact that many things in the Bible need to have the assurance of truth, however they came. Suppose the story of Christ's birth (Luke i. and ii.) was given by Mary to Luke; it was thus "attainable" apart from special divine revelation. But it must nevertheless be true if it is to be accepted. And there are many more cases of this kind, so that the statement now quoted really begs the question.

13. "Inspiration has nothing to do with truth ascertainable by ordinary mental processes." But, as already seen, inspiration is needed for several things, including direct revelation, accurate record and proper selection. And as just stated (see 12), there are many parts of Scripture about which we need the assurance of truth, whatever be the medium. And if where we *can* verify accuracy we find a Biblical author inaccurate, how can we trust him in regard to his spiritual teaching and his claim to speak by Divine revelation where we cannot verify him?

14. "What shall be our standard?" A very pertinent and important question. We must have a standard, and one independent of our changing opinions, anterior to our acceptance, and objective to our personality. This standard must be God's truth, God's will, and however it comes, by book or institution, we must be sure of it. It is not fair to say that a belief in the truth of revelation begs the question, for we maintain that revelation possesses its own evidence of truth, and is capable of verification. But it is also true to say that if God has revealed Himself, He is not likely to have given us an erroneous revelation of His will. Revelation will necessarily be true, for God will not, cannot, mislead us.

The fatal weakness of the position set forth in this student's letter is that there is no proper and clear view of what inspiration really means. It is not difficult to criticize the orthodox view, but weak to know what is to be substituted for it, to learn what inspiration is. Then we, too, may be able to criticize. The great necessity is "certainty" (Luke i. 4), and we get this in the Bible as the clearest, fullest, purest medium of God's revelation in Christ.