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His Church for all time, until the return of Christ shall usher in a new age. Evangelicalism stands or falls with the authority of that Bible upon which its creed is based and from which its spirit is derived.

In conduct as well as in faith this is true. The Bible is our missionary handbook and our code of philanthropy. If the Bible loses its authority the warnings of God lose their terrors and the promises of God lose their comfort. If the Bible loses its authority, assurance of salvation will have to be placed in human works or human feelings. Without the Bible as the authoritative Word of God to this age, as to every age, it would be impossible to build up that saintliness of life and that practical holiness for which such gatherings as the Keswick Convention stand, and which is a true mark of Evangelicalism.

Finally, the authority of the Bible, being derived from the Divine Spirit of God, Who speaks in all its pages, let us in all consideration of its authority, as well as in its daily study, seek His illumination that we may see it as He made it, and use it as He intended.

THE EVANGELICAL MESSAGE: THE BIBLE—ITS INTERPRETATION.

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FROM what has been already said this morning it is clear that, as we attempt to interpret and to understand the unique library of which the Bible consists, we must use every effort to make our study worthy of its object. This means that our work must be begun, continued and ended in sincere devotion to Truth, and under the direction and ruling of the Spirit of God. We shall consciously depend upon the comfort of the Holy Ghost. Not that this is necessary only in the study of Holy Scripture. It is indispensable in all study. Every educational establishment should begin the day's work with prayer, as every human being should, whatever his day's work may be. We shall also constantly endeavour to preserve a single eye for Truth. It has been said [1] that the Roman Church manifests every Christian grace with the single exception of veracity. There are many, especially in the Universities, who are to-day watching the Anglican Communion not without anxiety with regard to the same virtue. We must be entirely loyal to the truth as we see it. Not that we shall see it all. We shall not be able to explain everything in the Bible. But it is not open to us to acquiesce in explanations which appear to us to be unreasonable.

[1] As Mr. A. E. J. Rawlinson has recently reminded us, *Studies in Historical Christianity*, p. 100.

Let us ask first of all, what it is that our fathers have told us with regard to the interpretation of Holy Scripture?

It seems to me that two distinct strands can be distinguished in the tradition of Biblical interpretation which we have received; and each of these strands can be traced backwards to the very earliest times.

The first may perhaps be called the interpretation of personal application. Men and women who are thoroughly familiar with the Bible find as a matter of fact that its language frequently comes to their lips in the various situations of life. Again and again in their experience inspiration and guidance are conveyed to their minds by the very words and sentences of Holy Scripture, sometimes with little or no reference to their context. Let me give a rather extreme example of what I mean. It is the interpretation given by an old monk to John Cassian of the last verse of Psalm cxxxvii. "Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones" (Ps. cxxxvii. 9). "Happy is he," said the old monk, "who takes his evil habits while they are yet little and dashes them against the stones." It would be hard to find a better application of this particular text of Scripture. In cases like this the words of Holy Scripture are a vehicle for a personal message, a message which strikes deep into the heart of the individual who receives it. Such a message, if we may change the metaphor, is *food* for the soul. And we should all be agreed that it is our privilege both personally to use such food, and to encourage our congregations to do the same. We should frequently impress upon them the importance of expecting, both when they come to church and in their private devotions at home, messages conveyed to them through psalm or lesson or prayer or sermon in this kind of way. That expectation should sustain them through the more arid portions of their religious exercises.

In this interpretation of Holy Scripture, the interpretation of personal application, it is clear that the utmost freedom is allowable. The English Bible, to say the least, stands at the highest point of our literature; and it would be strange indeed if the Holy Spirit of God did not speak to us through its beautiful and familiar words. We can accept no theory of inspiration which would deny some measure of it to our own translators. In some cases they have undoubtedly improved upon the Hebrew text. To quote a single example: in Psalm xxix. 2, "Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness" is even better than "Worship the Lord in holy array," i.e. arrayed in holy ornaments, which is the more correct rendering of the Hebrew text. And there are many passages which have given rise to noble and inspiring ideas which are not, as a matter of fact, suggested by their original writers. Haggai ii. 7 is a familiar instance: "The desire of all nations shall come," has furnished a text for many a stirring sermon upon the Messiah; whereas the original should be translated, "The desirable things of all nations [i.e. their treasures] shall come." Still more familiar is the magnificent passage from the book of Job in our own Service for the Burial of the Dead: "I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall

stand at the latter day upon the earth. And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another" (Job xix. 25–27). We do well to repeat these splendid words over our dead, even if it cannot be assumed that this rendering of the original really represents the belief of the author of the book of Job.

The interpretation of personal application, however, has its obvious limitations, especially when one individual tries to pass on his own private interpretation to others. About 1605 when all the Colleges at Cambridge except Emmanuel and Sidney had finally adopted the use of the surplice in chapel, a certain Fellow of Christ's, William Ames by name, still refused to wear one. The Master tried hard to persuade him. "The surplice," he said, "is that very armour of light which the Apostle enjoins us to put on." But although the Master saw the force of the argument, William Ames failed to see it, and we can hardly blame him. The author of *The Divine Armory of Holy Scripture* quotes as authority for "the noble lineage, immaculate conception and virginity of the Virgin Mary," "Thou art all fair, O my love, and there is no spot in thee" (Canticles iv. 7). By applications of this kind we are forced sooner or later to two important questions with regard to any given passage of Holy Scripture: What did the writer of it himself mean, and how do his words apply in other circumstances, above all, in our own? The consideration of the latter question I must be content to omit to-day. The former brings us at once to the other strand of the tradition we have received, and it is plain that it is the primary and the other the secondary.

For the other use of Holy Scripture rests upon the assumption that the sacredness of the Bible is already recognized. That sacredness, if we are to avoid arguing in a circle, rests on something else, namely, upon the actual meaning of, at any rate, some parts of it. That this meaning, the meaning of the writers themselves, must be discovered by sound scholarship and careful study is the other thread of the tradition we have received.

It must be confessed that there have been times when the thread has worn very thin. Especially was this the case in the Middle Ages. The Council of Trent summed up the principles of mediæval exegesis in four propositions. Any interpretation of a passage in Holy Scripture must conform to the rule of faith, the mind of the Church, the consent of the Fathers, the decisions of the Councils. It was a new and surprising thing at Oxford when at the beginning of the Michaelmas term in 1496, John Colet, with no degree in Divinity, and not yet in deacon's orders, announced a course of lectures on St. Paul's Epistles. He began with the Epistle to the Romans and went through it to the end treating it as a whole and not as an armoury of detached texts. His lectures contained hardly any quotations from the fathers or from the schoolmen, and he closed them with a few words to the effect that he had tried to the best of his power, with the aid of Divine grace, to bring out St. Paul's true

meaning. "Whether indeed I have done this," he added, "I hardly can tell, but the greatest desire to do so I have had." [1]

As a Reformed Church we are committed to the exegesis of Holy Scripture by means of careful study and sound scholarship. This of course exposes us to the danger of unsound scholarship; but ignorance is no match even for unsound scholarship. Only sound learning can drive out unsound. The work of the Christian student is thus summed up by Bishop Westcott[2]: he "examines the history of the Scriptures with the frankest study of all available evidence, external and internal; he determines their interpretation with a watchful regard to the circumstances under which they were composed; he sees in them, in a word, a true monument of human experience through which the Spirit of God spoke and speaks to men." What drove the revolutionary conclusions of scholars like Baur from the field was the superior scholarship of men like Bishop Lightfoot. And it is a reassuring indication of the increasing soundness of Biblical scholarship in general that new theories like those propounded in Bousset's *Kyrios Christos* and Norden's *Agnostos Theos* have been met with adequate criticism at an early stage and have by no means been allowed to sweep the field.

Sound study is impossible without accuracy. It is impossible also without the belief that all Truth is one. It is very easy to fall into inaccuracy in the simple quoting of Scripture. Lyman Abbott, in his book on *The Life and Literature of the Ancient Hebrews*, tells the story of a Judge of the Supreme Court of New York who declared in a legal decision, "We have the highest possible authority for saying, 'Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life." The next morning the *New York Herald* commented on his opinion substantially as follows: "We find that it was the devil who said, 'Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life': now we know who it is that our Supreme Court Judges regard as the highest possible authority." Even the Westminster Confession of Faith enforces the doctrine that the hopes of the unregenerate are illusory and vain by the argument of Bildad that Job must have been a great sinner or his prosperity would not have come to naught (Job viii. 13, 14).

If we are to avoid such mistakes in the future we must be accurate in our study of Holy Scripture. And that is perhaps the chief reason why there should be examinations in Scripture knowledge as in other subjects in our schools. Examination is a great incentive to accuracy. On the other hand the student of Holy Scripture must beware of the fictitious value which minute accuracy, depending upon microscopic points of learning, possesses for the academic mind: he must have a wide outlook; he must believe that all Truth is one. God is one; and the God of the Bible cannot contradict the God of History and the God of Nature. Happily in this respect we are in a better position than past generations. The study of Nature and of History is now well established on scientific

[1] See Seebohm's *Oxford Reformers*, p. 42.
[2] *Lessons from Work*, p. 177.

lines. For the one we go to the laboratories; for the other to the monuments and to original documents. If, for instance, we want to know about the prehistoric state of the earth we make a systematic study of geology and astronomy. If we want to obtain an account of the early history of the nearer East we take a book like Hogarth's *Ancient History* as our starting point and pass down the centuries keeping in touch with archæological remains all the way. No one will now think of questioning the validity of the scientific method in the realms of Nature and of History. And when, after having had—under the influence, as we believe, of the Spirit of God—exercise in these realms of thought, we come to the Bible and read it carefully we soon see that the Bible is neither a text-book of Science, nor, though it contains historical material, a text-book of History. It is only if we read carelessly that we escape from the fact that the Bible assumes that the earth is flat and that it, and not the sun, is the centre of the solar system. Some of the language of theology, resting as it does upon the language of Scripture, is built upon this assumption. Copernicus undermined the whole conception and as the Dean of St. Paul's has recently put it,[1] has left in our theology, "a still unhealed wound." And if the Bible is not a text-book of Science neither is it a text-book of History. No text-book of history could say so little about the great founder of a dynasty like Omri; no text-book of history could leave unreconciled two such different accounts of the end of Jehoiakim as we find in 2 Kings xxiv. 6 and 2 Chronicles xxxvi. 6. We cannot assume that as writers of history the writers of Holy Scripture were miraculously preserved from error. Obvious slips are left staring us in the face, in Mark ii. 26 for example, as if to insist that the writers, honest bona fide historians as they are, make no claim to infallibility. Discussions as to the accuracy of St. Luke with regard to the impostor Theudas, or as to the numbers recorded in the book of Chronicles are interesting, but not important. St. Luke was a careful and well-informed, but not an infallible, historian. The exaggeration of numbers in the book of Chronicles is no more significant than the similar exaggeration in Josephus or in the journals of John Wesley.

But time does not allow of further illustration of such details. I think, if I may be allowed to do so, I had better try to sum up simply and frankly what I believe to be the result of the devoted labour which has been expended upon the study of Holy Scripture during the past two generations.

It seems to me that the contents of the Bible flow as it were from two great watersheds.

The first was reached under the Providence of God when Israel emerged out of childhood into the period of adolescence. After a long and chequered history, at last, at last, Israel knew that there was one God alone and that the Lord its God was holy and righteous and merciful. From that point Israel looked back and wrote its history in poetry and in prose. The first chapters of Genesis are an ancient

[1] "Teaching by Parable," *Modern Churchman*, March, 1922, p. 656.

Paradise Lost; the historical books of the Old Testament embody ancient material and use it as a good Protestant like one of ourselves might use the original documents of the Middle Ages in writing a history of the English Church; the Psalms are the "hymns ancient and modern" of the Second Temple; of the prophets I shall try to say a word in a moment. From all these documents we can, partially at least, reconstruct the course of history. We can go back to a time, for instance, when pious Israelites kept their teraphim or household gods and went to the nearest high place to worship the deity who gave the increase to their crops. The reconstruction needs care and is by no means complete at present. It is full of the deepest interest for it gives us a history of religion, and of our own religion. For our own religion goes back not to Thor and Odin, but to the religion of Israel. But the development we trace is no uniform development. High water mark is reached here soon and there late; surprisingly soon sometimes, and especially in the prophets: "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God" (Micah vi. 8). Here we have one of the permanent high water marks of religion. Or again and again in the Psalms the poet rises above the hill of Zion to the very heights of God. It is unnecessary for me to give examples. The Psalms appointed for the twenty-seventh day of the month (for instance) are full of them. We must remember, moreover, that the historical books of the Old Testament were written under prophetic influence, and many a peak stands out among them. It was especially through history and not especially through nature that the prophets had come to a knowledge of the character of God. And when they look forward into the future it is upon this knowledge that they take their stand. Their forecasts are intuitions, involving not a detailed foreknowledge of the future but an insight into the Divine mind.[1] But all this cannot be allowed to disguise the fact that the general level of religious thought in the Old Testament is lower than the Christian level. I have heard of cases in which professedly Christian men have seriously defended low levels of sexual morality by referring to the practice of concubinage by the patriarchs. Not long ago I was reading Professor Sir George Adam Smith's great book on *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, and on page 28 I came across a statement which I thought would be a good starting-point for a sermon. "To the prophets," says the Professor, "Phœnicia and her influence are a great and a sacred thing. Isaiah and Ezekiel bewail the destruction of Tyre and her navies as desecration. Isaiah cannot believe it to be final. He sees Phœnicia rising purified by her captivity to be the carrier of true religion to the ends of the earth."

I turned up the passage in Isaiah, and chose a text, Isaiah xxiii. 18: "And her merchandise and her hire shall be holiness to the Lord." And then I looked into the passage more closely, and with the assistance of the commentaries of Dr. Skinner and Dr. Gray, found

[1] See Rawlinson, *op. cit.* p. 168.

that there is in the context no suggestion of the purification of Tyre. After her captivity Tyre is to ply her trade exactly as before and the only difference appears to be that now the profits of Tyre's trading are to be paid into the Temple at Jerusalem. I was somewhat taken back at the lowness of the prophet's prospect, although I found it possible by a slight modification still to preach the sermon.

The whole watershed of the Old Testament is a lower one than the second watershed to which I have referred, the watershed of the New Testament. This is indeed the highest watershed the world has known, the heights of which, like those of Mt. Everest, have never yet been trodden by foot of man. It consists of nothing less than that life which was the light of men. All the books of the New Testament have their origin in the disciples' experience of that life and of its meaning in their own lives unto the second, and perhaps unto the third, generation. It is not merely St. John who looks back upon the events of the life of our Lord remembering all the time that He was no other than the Word made flesh: it is not merely in the fourth gospel that when Jesus speaks it is the voice of the Risen Christ that we hear. The same is true, to some extent at least, of the Synoptists. Even in a simple tale like that of Martha and Mary it is no mere rabbi, it is the Divine Lord Who uses words that fit that part only, and in a lower character would be out of place. Here again in the New Testament the heights are not all upon one level. We are told that John Colet [1] was wont to declare "that when he turned from the Apostles to the wonderful majesty of Christ, their writings, much as he loved them, seemed to him to become poor as it were in comparison." And it is impossible not to be struck by the differences in level among the utterances of St. Paul. On the one hand we have the thirteenth chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, which even so unsparing a critic as Samuel Butler ranks among the three or four finest achievements of human art. On the other hand we also find in St. Paul prejudices not altogether defensible about women, unguarded language about the irresponsibility of spiritual people, and so on. We may follow up this last case a little further. In 1 Corinthians ii. 15 the Apostle writes "he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man." But as the Apostle grew in grace his sense of humour evidently grew also, and in his later epistles he does not take his readers so seriously. There must have been a twinkle in his eye as he wrote to the Philippians, his dear friends, whose capacity for forgetting he knew well: "Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you, to repeat once more and for the last time what I have said to you, to me indeed is not grievous—no, I don't mind doing it at all—but for you it is *safe*."

The conclusion to the whole matter in a word is surely this: God is the Living God. His Spirit is still guiding men. If He is not guiding them now then He never has been guiding them. But we believe that He still speaks to them and leads their hearts and minds

[1] Seebohm, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

into the way of Truth. They are fallible: there are no infallibilities. But inspiration is a reality, a reality in the present as well as in the past: "The Holy Spirit," says Wiclif, "teaches us the sense of Scripture as Christ opened the Scriptures to His disciples." It is true that we are not in a position to define it either then or now: and it will be well for us if we do not make the attempt. It is scarcely too much to say that the fundamental error in all the "heresies," as we called them, is over-eagerness to define, over-confidence in definitions. As Bishop Westcott puts it in the book I have already quoted,[1] "We have no right to approach Scripture with any *a priori* theory of inspiration but rather by a careful and inductive study of the books themselves we must be led to see in what their inspiration really consists." In that careful and inductive study, proceeding reverently and depending upon the comfort of the Holy Ghost, we shall go forward with confidence.

By Thine unerring Spirit led
We shall not in the desert stray:
We shall not full direction need
Nor miss our providential way.
As far from danger as from fear
While love, Almighty love, is near.

The special subject of this paper has led me to refer at such length to various problems of Biblical interpretation that I am afraid I may have left an exaggerated impression of the difficulty of understanding the meaning of the Scriptures. I would if possible correct that impression in a closing word.

In the providence of God the Bible as we have it contains large stores of religious food already prepared for the consumption of the wayfaring man. "I utterly oppose the opinion," Erasmus once said,[2] "of those who deny the common people the right to read the divine letters in the vernacular, as if Christ taught unintelligible mysteries which only a few theologians understand." Modern Psychology in treatises on the Psychology of Religion endeavours to present us with the results of its analysis of religious experience in a form that[3] arouses in us only a faint repulsion. It is as if a chemist should take us into his laboratory and invite us to partake of the elements of which our food is composed, nicely labelled in bottles. However hungry we were we could not eat. But here in the Bible the chemical process by which the elements become food convenient for us has been already performed under the good providence of God. The bread of life is placed upon the table. It is not a mixture of Carbon and Hydrogen and Oxygen: it is bread: all alike, young and old, rich and poor, learned and unlearned—for the Lord is the Maker of us all—may feed upon it by faith with thanksgiving.

[1] *Lessons from Work*, p. 417.
[2] Quoted by J. Moffat, *The Approach to the New Testament*, p. 113.
[3] With notable exceptions like William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*.