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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

THE OBSCURANTIST.

By THE REV. W. S. HOOTON, B.D.

THE common usage of this term, and of its kindred word "obscurantism," is very familiar. Here is an example taken almost at random—a Church paper quotes a modernist journal as expressing its anticipation of "a hard struggle against the forces of obscurantism and reaction."

Such rash utterances always assume that it is "the other fellow" who is darkening counsel and fighting against intellectual light. It is worth while examining the grounds for the supposition, from more than one point of view. But first let us define our terms.

The monumental *New English Dictionary*, associated with the name of the late Sir James Murray as chief editor, warrants the possibility of other applications. The idea usually conveyed by the group of words is undoubtedly to define opposition to enlightenment and inquiry. This raises, of course, the very fundamental question, What is light and truth? We shall have occasion to return to it. But, altogether apart, the very form of these words is suggestive. The first part of this great Dictionary's definition of "obscurantism" is "the practice or principles of an obscurant." And "obscurant" is defined as "one who obscures," with the added words "one who strives to prevent inquiry, enlightenment or reform." Plainly, the radical idea is obscuration, at any rate. Similarly, the adjectival meaning of this less common variation "obscurant" is applied to anything "that obscures or darkens"; and a significant example for our purpose is quoted from Grosart—"Recondite and obscurant speculation."

It appears, therefore, that we are within our rights in insisting that some attention ought to be paid to the origin of terms like these. It is true that what practically matters, and what must above all things be borne in mind by writers and speakers who do not set out to mislead, is the current and understood meaning of what they say. But when the accusation "obscurantist" is flung, it is obviously intended to convey this very idea that the opponent *does* obscure. We are therefore justified in inquiring whether the accuser himself "obscures" either fact or reason. If so, he is

himself a true obscurantist ; and possibly his beam is much greater than his brother's mote.

i. To this we turn our first attention. And the most practical method will be to give certain common examples from current language and thought. These illustrations may be numbered for clearness.

(i) It is sometimes said that we make claims for the Bible which it never makes on its own behalf. The underlying idea, presumably, is that the Bible itself gives no ground for ascribing to it that inerrancy which so many believers have in fact ascribed to it.

But what do these objectors want ? When a book plentifully besprinkles its pages with phrases like " Thus saith the Lord," it would surely be blasphemous to expect that in contexts of that kind it will pause to assure us that what the Lord says can be exactly relied upon. Or when it repeatedly states, " The Lord spake unto Moses, saying . . ." are we to suppose that the commands represented as the Lord's are not intended to be relied upon as His actual commands to Moses ? In this particular matter, of course, modern criticism raises other fundamental questions : but we are not dealing directly with those on the present occasion. We are just now speaking of what the Bible claims for itself ; and it is the sheerest obscurantism to pretend that phrases of that kind do not involve a clear demand that its statements in those contexts shall be taken as absolutely reliable.

There are other contexts which are not definitely covered by such positive pronouncements. But the prevailing tone of the sacred writings is in the same direction. And our Lord and the Apostles make no distinctions. To them there was but one way of referring to Bible statements. It was all " the Scripture " ; and what the Scripture said was to them the end of controversy. And so it was to their opponents. From the Bible records (which are all that we are just now considering) we should judge that nobody dreamed of suggesting that any part of Scripture was anything but a final and utterly reliable court of appeal, even in matters of detail whose minuteness quite takes away the breath of the modernist thinker. On one occasion, moreover, our Lord Himself definitely said—quite as an aside (and even in human affairs casual references are among the most striking as evidence)—" and the Scripture cannot be broken." Have we grasped the full bearing of that

utterly incidental reference on His lips? Judging from the manner of it, we should certainly conclude that such a reminder might as well have been given with reference to any other passage whatsoever. On another occasion He insisted on fulfilment to the veriest jot and tittle—as it were to “the dot of an *i* or the stroke of a *t*.” When we come to the quotation of Scripture by Apostles and Evangelists, it is mere childishness to pretend that they do not assume inerrancy in passages they quote; and once again I would emphasize that sometimes it is inerrancy down to the veriest details that startle and astound (or, more probably, are coolly repudiated by) the sceptical tendencies of modern thought. And can it seriously be supposed that other passages, not actually quoted by them, would have been treated, if occasion had arisen for their quotation, as on a lower level of authority? Once again “the Holy Ghost saith” is as natural an expression on the pages of the New Testament as is “the Scripture saith.” Both mean exactly the same thing—which is also the thing directly conveyed by that striking expression *διὰ τοῦ προφήτου* (“through the prophet”). The prophet is the mouthpiece of God—there can be no other interpretation of it. And the phrase “the Holy Ghost saith” is itself a claim to inerrancy.

The Bible of our Lord and His Apostles was to all intents and purposes our Old Testament, the whole of which is endorsed by testimony of this uniform character. From such testimony it seems to follow that even when it is not expressly stated, the fact is still the same, “Thus saith the Lord”; and that therefore, as in the cases where some such phrase is definitely employed, it is unreasonable to say we must have explicit assurances of accuracy, or to pretend that inerrancy is not to be assumed, merely because it is not expressed in a definite formula. And what shall be said of the New Testament? It is impossible to use one line of proof which was so convincing in the case of the Old, because New Testament writers were not followed by others who could testify to their writings with the authority possessed by inspired Apostles and by their Lord Himself. But, in any case, the authoritative tone of New Testament writers is in harmony with what we have seen of the tone of the Old. This is illuminating, especially in connexion with the promises of John xiv. 26; xvi. 13. Men who could, almost incidentally and quite as a matter of unchallengeable fact, use such

a phrase as "it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us"—or could employ the tremendous language of Revelation xxii. 18, 19 (or rather, as it seems, could authoritatively pass on such language as the very utterance of the ascended Lord Himself)—men like these leave no really open mind in doubt of their claims. I desire to avoid the least suspicion of exaggeration. I believe that the evidence, reviewed as a whole by a candid mind, justifies a stronger conclusion than I am going to state, when we fairly face the intrinsic characteristics of the whole Bible, and the tremendous implications of the testimony and the whole attitude and bearing of our infallible Lord and His inspired Apostles towards the Old Testament Scriptures. We are dealing now with the suggestion (as we take it) that the Bible contains nothing to warrant any belief that it claims inerrancy. This, at the very least, has surely been shown to be mere obscurantism—and obscurantism, indeed, of the very worst type. To contend that the Bible in no way suggests that its statements are altogether to be relied upon as the Word of God, would certainly be to be guilty of obscuring its most notable feature. And if this is not what is contended by those to whom we refer, it is certain they "obscure" their own meaning. The surest way of avoiding obscurantism is candid examination of the evidence, by methods of the most enlightened inquiry (the definitions quoted at the outset will substantiate this). At any rate it would be unreasonable to demand, as a necessary condition, statements of inerrancy in set terms from a Book whose whole tone and manner may justly be taken to suggest inerrancy; and if no such demands for explicit statements are intended, the proof is of course by so much the more overwhelming, and the conviction of sheer obscurantism all the more crushing in its force.

(ii) Rather akin to what has already been discussed is the suggestion that the inerrancy of Scripture has not been held in other ages of the Church's history, and that it was only definitely formulated at a comparatively late period. But here a different line must be taken in reply.

And first let us clear the ground. We are not discussing the views of Scripture which were held at different times or by different people, but obscurantism in any arguments drawn from those views. During recent discussions, evidence has been produced that well-known leaders in the history of the Church by no means

bound themselves to the inerrancy of Scripture. The subject is difficult, because it is admitted that the statements of such earlier writers and leaders in the Church are often inconsistent, the same writer using at one time words which seem entirely to contradict what he said at another : also because it is not possible to assert that they always used words precisely in the sense which has become attached to them in modern controversy. We need not stay to illustrate these points now. Let it be admitted that statements can be produced suggesting that their authors were far from holding that Scripture is inerrant in detail, however infallible any such may have held it to be in principle.

Where, then, does the obscurantism come in? Not in the production of such statements ; for such production is perfectly fair, and is not to be objected to on the ground that their authors contradicted themselves in other places—which would appear to cast a reflection upon them for confusion of ideas rather than upon those who quote them now ! Yet there is a certain amount of obscurantism even here. It lies in the *obscured sense of proportion*, with reference either to the questions at issue respectively now and in earlier days, or to the main attitude adopted towards Scripture.

Take a concrete example of the former sort of mistake. No illustration is more frequently quoted than that of Luther and St. James. Now it must be remembered—without the least desire to defend Luther's audacious remarks—that he did at any rate resist the canonicity of that Epistle : and a genuine doubt about canonicity is a very different thing from destructive criticism of an indubitably canonical book—such as, for example, the deplorable and open rejection of St. Paul's argument from the Fall. Luther, it appears, had strange ideas on some other parts of Scripture as well ; and it is altogether disastrous that he gave so dangerous a handle to modern critics, which they are not slow to use against him—and against us ! Here let us say boldly that if anything else can be quoted from Luther or from any other writer of any age, which reflects upon the absolute trustworthiness of Scripture, it will make not an atom of difference to the view of those who place all their credence upon what we regard as the indubitable testimony of our Lord and His Apostles. Happily we are not tied to the opinion of Luther or of Origen or of anybody else ; but we are

·tied to the plainly-expressed utterances of Incarnate Truth, and to the Spirit-prompted teaching of His chosen and endowed Apostles and Evangelists. What does it matter what anyone else thought or said about such a subject ?

But, with our main point of *obscurantism* in view, it may be sufficient merely to ask this question : what would the early Fathers have said, and what would the Reformation Fathers have said, to the kind of thing so painfully familiar in our own generation—to denial of the historicity of the Creation of Adam and Eve, and of the reality of the Fall ; to rejection of the narratives which tell the true facts about the Incarnation ; to a theory of the Old Testament involving falsification and direct reversal of facts by its writers ; to disparagement of the authority of the glorious Gospel of St. John, the citadel of our Lord's full Deity ; to refusal to credit plain testimony of our Lord Himself with reference, e.g. to His Return ? It is at any rate legitimate to challenge the production of anything from the early or Reformation Fathers which is comparable to what can be read on such points as these from the pens of the great majority of Biblical writers to-day. And if such sayings cannot be produced, then it is at any rate obscuring *the sense of proportion* in these matters to quote ancient authorities as if they supported such modern ideas of Scripture as these. And while we deplore whatever handle they have given for such quotation, we decline altogether to set their authority over against that of our Lord and His Apostles.

In this connexion one inquiry seems pertinent : Why has there been so much desire to alter that awkward question in the service for the Ordination of Deacons ? We are told that statements of Reformers clearly prove that this question and answer only require acceptance of all Scripture as basis of faith ; and they are evidently supposed by many to allow the modern rejection of Pauline doctrine and even of our Lord's authority, or certain people could never remain in their official positions. Well, if the Reformers really intended them to cover such lapses, it seems to many of us very surprising that they should have used language which appears designedly framed to exclude these. But, apart from this, if it be genuinely believed that their language does cover them, what was good enough for those days is good enough for the modernist ! Is he really only anxious for tender consciences, or is there a bit

of obscurantism about his plea that he is quite justified already in holding the ideas he does?

But not all of those who thus quote the Reformers and others use their words as a basis for such advanced pleas. Indeed, some are no doubt actuated only by a spirit of historical inquiry. But possibly some even of these, and probably many of their readers, make use, though more moderate use of the facts than that already considered. And in such cases I venture to suggest that sufficient recognition is not given by them to a notoriously fundamental feature, at least in the ecclesiastical history of the Reformation period—the deep reverence for the Bible as the final court of appeal. This is certainly the most characteristic feature in the attitude of Reformation divines, as it is also in our own formularies. Some of those divines gave utterance to obviously inconsistent remarks in matters of detail, but the *attitude* even of these was quite different from that prevailing even among moderate critics to-day; e.g. Luther could state clearly his belief in the absolute inerrancy of Scripture. And our formularies at any rate do not betray the slightest inconsistency such as Luther showed! Surely it is somewhat “obscurant” to quote such detailed utterances by individual Reformers (and, by the way, how many of the Reformers were really guilty of them?) as if they covered the idea now prevailing that in matters of doubt the testimony of Scripture must give way before the conclusions of what is alleged to be the best available scholarship and science of our particular day! And this is (is it not?) the prevailing assumption even of those who would style themselves “moderate” critics. How different an *attitude* from that of the Reformation divines! Is not the *sense of proportion* again lacking? And, in particular, is it not sheer obscurantism to suggest that our *formularies* sanction current modes of thought?

We barely note here another possibility, viz. that if such questions as confront us had been raised at that time we might very probably have had much more detailed definitions, in those formularies, of the authority of Scripture. May it not also be “obscurant” to ignore this?

(iii) Another group of illustrations, though supremely important, and involving issues of the most vital character, can be more briefly dealt with. First, the allegation, often made in reply to appeals to our Lord's authority, that He laid aside His omniscience, or that

He limited it in some degree during His earthly Ministry. It is of the utmost importance to point out that this in no way touches the real issue. That issue is not—Was He omniscient when on earth? It is something even more far-reaching, viz.—Can we implicitly trust all He said? The extent of His omniscience in His earthly state (although it is great presumption to assign limitations to it, and as a matter of fact much of the evidence tells quite the other way) is a subject man could never fathom, in any case. Such speculations utterly carry us out of our depth. But His *infallibility*, as Teacher and Guide, is essential to our assurance! And to confuse omniscience with infallibility is unpardonable obscurantism. It obscures the issue by introducing an unfathomable subject which in reality touches a distinct matter. Yet nothing is more common!

It is possible even to derive strong confirmation of His infallibility from the one thing which we are sure, on His own authority, that He did not know. We have not the least idea whether His knowledge was in any other matter limited during His earthly sojourn; and, as we have seen, it is perilous presumption to assume it. But He tells us Himself that He did not know the day and hour of His Return. That fact, so often quoted as if it tended to uncertainty, in reality suggests strong assurance of His supreme trustworthiness. For it irresistibly suggests that if there were anything else He did not know, He certainly would (as in this case) have abstained from making any statement about it. As it has been said, He knew that He did not know. If there were any other such case, He would be equally conscious of it. And surely we repel with horror the thought that He would either have asserted anything, well knowing He had not the knowledge on which to base it, or have imagined He knew what He did not know, and made the least mistaken assertion on such a basis. Bishop Handley Moule pointed out, too, that He knew the angels did not know that fact, and showed how this itself indicates “the vastness of His supernatural knowledge,” and is “an implicit assertion of an immeasurable insight.” No: such a Speaker was not the one to submit to make mistakes of fact in *any* of His statements, or, as the Bishop put it elsewhere, “consented, as a Teacher, *not to know that He did not know.*”¹

¹ To My Younger Brethren, p. 58; Prayers and Promises, p. 150.

But this is, strictly speaking, a digression. The real point is that to introduce the question of omniscience as if it were identical with that of infallibility is to *obscure the issue*.

(iv) Now as to omniscience by itself. Dr. Gifford and others have conclusively proved that Philippians ii. gives no warrant for a theory of Kenôsis which involves the laying aside of Divine knowledge. The truth is, we have no warrant whatever, except that one clear statement of our Lord Himself, for saying that His knowledge during His Ministry was in any particular limited. And for that, there may well have been special reason. Possibly even, where there are so many tokens in our Lord's life of His altogether superhuman knowledge and insight, the express mention of such a case may suggest that it is of an altogether exceptional character.

The Rev. A. H. Finn brought out the questionable nature of these contentions about our Lord's laying aside of omniscience, when he replied to the Dean of Westminster's addresses in the Abbey at the end of 1920. Speaking of the Dean's contention that "our Divine Lord's true humanity was manifested in the renunciation of His Divine attributes upon earth," he said, "That is very questionable," and gave illustrations of several such attributes as manifested on earth. On the matter immediately before us he commented as follows: "As regards knowledge, He claimed to know, and according to the evangelists did know, the unspoken thoughts of the heart: He claimed to know and foretell the future even to the end of the world: His knowledge of a hidden present and past convinced Nathanael and the Samaritan woman, and was shown in His being aware of Lazarus' death."

Mr. Finn draws lessons from these facts quite in harmony with some of our earlier thoughts. "Yet we are asked to believe," he continues, "that He was ignorant of the truth about the Old Testament Scriptures, sharing in the erroneous belief of His generation." And, a little later, he says, "Even if it were true that the Divine Word on becoming flesh laid aside His Divine omniscience, it would still be difficult to believe that He could acquiesce in, still more that He could share in, actual error"; and pertinently asks: "If he possessed the gift of the Divine Spirit 'without measure,' had that Spirit also renounced His Divine attributes?" But the whole section is worth studying. See *The True Value of the Old Testament*, pp. 31, 32, published by the Bible League, price 6d.

Our chief point at present, however, is that in assuming our Lord thus to have laid aside His Divine omniscience, modern thinkers, so far from seeking full enlightenment by complete and minute inquiry, do not even face the chief part of the evidence. Nothing in Philippians ii. supports them; the narrative of His Ministry is largely against them, and the only real piece of evidence in their favour is a notable utterance by our Lord Himself which possibly bears marks of an exceptional significance, and itself indicates superhuman knowledge! To play tricks with evidence is one of the most glaring forms of obscurantism.

“We must take our Lord as He is represented in the Gospels,” once said a friend to the writer—apparently in apology for these vagaries of modern thought. By all means! But that is *precisely what they do not do*. They take Him to be a very different Christ from that. There, He is majestic, authoritative, wonder-working; supreme over all the forces of nature, the works of hell, the thoughts of men; building His whole Mission, and indeed His own personal spiritual life, upon Scriptures which are to Him as the voice of God. What likeness is there to that picture in the modernist's Christ? In this above all they are “*obscurants*,” for they *obscure the Christ*.

(v) A few words now on infallibility by itself, as we have dealt with omniscience by itself, and with the two in contradistinction. They deny His infallibility in three ways. Not only do they evade by one or more of the modern devices His plain and varied testimony to just those personages and incidents of Old Testament history which are special butts of modern criticism. Not only do they even reject His line of reasoning when it actually depends, as in the case of Psalm cx., upon a fact of that history, or of the literature connected with it, which they see fit to deny. They do something which is more far-reaching than either of these things, though it can scarcely be worse in itself, for He says Himself that He received a commandment, “what I *should say*, and what I *should speak*” (τί εἶπω καὶ τί λαλήσω—how all-inclusive!). Their “correction” of our Lord's alleged “nescience” relates not merely to details—or even to a series of details. It fundamentally affects His whole attitude and teaching. They tell us these are points which do not affect His Mission, or His Office as Teacher—they are merely literary and scientific questions. This argument can be disproved in detail;

as, for instance, by the case just quoted (directly bearing on His Deity), and by His very definite predictions as to His Second Coming, which are now utterly disbelieved by many. All such instances are an essential part of His teaching as to His Mission. But there is something even more destructive of their argument in this matter. If things are as they say, it is no mere question of a few details as to authorship and allegory and so forth; it is a question of our Lord's whole basis for His teaching. It affects His Mission even fundamentally. For if the critics are right, then He was mistaken not merely in details, but in His whole conception of the history of Israel and the composition and authority of their sacred Books. The argument would, in fact, undermine the basis on which He founded His teaching. By representing the matter as one of mere unimportant detail, they *obscure the real issue*. Once more they are convicted of obscurantism.

2. In conclusion, a different line of thought may be suggestive. We are accused of obscurantism because we are taken as opposed to free inquiry, which is presupposed to be the true road to enlightenment. Is this without exception the case? We have already shown cause why a little more completeness in inquiry, a more candid recognition of all the evidence, might lead those who criticize us to different conclusions; and such a line of study could be made yet more complete with fuller space (for there is no great eagerness to embrace the light which conservative scholars have shed on the dark places of modern criticism—here, too, they are “obscurants”!). But we now ask whether it is altogether an unchallengeable position to hold, that mere inquiry, free and unrestrained, is always the path to light.

In one of the Saturday religious articles in *The Times*, some time ago, these words were written, and they seem suggestive in such a connexion: “God in Christ, His love, His righteousness, His grace, His law, are revealed not as hypotheses to be questioned, or as a philosophy to be recommended to our thought, but as facts to be known.” It is true that the article dealt with an altogether different subject from ours, and that the writer was urging that by practical experience, knowledge and certainty could be attained—or something, I think, to that effect. But it is at any rate suggested that some subjects are more fitted for reverent experience as facts, however unfathomable to human understanding, than

for attainment by inquiry. And one scarcely associates these articles in *The Times* with blind obscurantism!

And is it not further true (we add this on our own behalf) that, in the great matters named, so far beyond the depth of human reason, inquiry must needs be speculative? Without revelation, in such a case thought flounders to darkness rather than wins its way to light. At best, it sees dimly through the mist.

And if it be so with matters like God's love and righteousness as revealed in Christ—if here we must "taste and see" rather than speculate and discuss—may not other subjects be more fit for knowledge than for inquiry? When God saw fit to give the world a full revelation in His Son, can it be supposed it would be a revelation which that Son founded upon an entirely mistaken foundation (as we saw in section 1 (v), that it would have been under the critical hypothesis)? A foundation for the testimony of God's only-begotten Son discovered to be mistaken by fallible men in a later generation? *The Times*, as quoted above, was not discouraging free inquiry, perhaps; but it did show the more excellent way of knowledge by experience. And do we not know Christ? Can we not trust Him better than that? And (to follow once more our added reflection) is not this too a case where free inquiry loses itself in a hidden subject (as we saw earlier) unfathomable under any circumstances, and is foredoomed to failure?

An atheist or agnostic might even deny that God's love and grace and righteousness can be known, as *The Times* urged that they can, or might declare them to be subjects for philosophical speculation. Not so the Christian! Humbly and gratefully, taught by the Spirit, he recognizes, and knows, and adores. May we not suggest a parallel in the other case? An infidel might question the inerrancy of the Incarnate Son of God. May the redeemed sinner reverently do so? Surely, to him, this too is an axiom, not a "hypothesis to be questioned"; it is "a fact to be known" (on the authority of the Christ Whom he knows), not "a philosophy to be recommended to our thought." And it *can* be known, by simply recognizing the dazzling brilliance of His Light. A fallible Christ is wellnigh as unthinkable as a sinful Christ. Here *must* we make our stand, and vow that this, indeed, is no fit subject for cool inquiry by sinful mortals—still less by redeemed sinners and "bondslaves" of His!

At the outset we remarked upon one great fundamental question to which we should return. It is a fit question to ask in a discussion on obscurantism. *What is light and truth?* With that majestic authority of His, He sweeps aside all the paltriness of the "free inquiry" of little minds so infinitely beneath Him, as He declares, "I am THE LIGHT of the world": "I am THE TRUTH."

They set up an abstract idol which they dignify by the name of "truth," but which bears no more resemblance to it than other idols bear to the reality; and in worshipping this image of their own creation they reject the direct and unquestionable testimony of Him Who thus majestically declares that He is THE TRUTH.

They extol free inquiry in the pursuit of "light"—all the while, as we have seen, carefully abstaining from following all the paths by which even human inquiry may seek light—and yet they close their eyes to the real implications of the dazzling brilliance of THE LIGHT that once shone upon the world as no other light could ever shine, to convince men not by argument and inquiry so much as by revealed fact, and by humbly trustful experience. And thus spiritual obscurantism is added to intellectual.

Who, then, are the real obscurantists?

This Land I Love. By Robert Bowman Peek. *Selwyn & Blount, Ltd.* Some seventy short poems on all kinds of subjects—some better than others—fill this little book. The author of "*Perceptions*" has on the whole maintained his reputation.

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