

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

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

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

The Inspiration of the Church.

BY THE HON. AND REV. W. E. BOWEN, M.A., CURATE OF ST. BOTOLPH, ALDGATE, LONDON.

‘Howbeit when He, the Spirit of Truth, is come, He shall guide you into all the truth.’—John xvi. 13 (R.V.).

THESE words are prophetic of the greatest and most blessed of all the Divine gifts to mankind. Never before in the long history of the human race had God given Himself as now—through the lips of His only begotten Son—He promises to give Himself. Never had He communicated Himself with the same measure of communication that Jesus Christ here speaks of. Men had never been without God, without the help of His inspiration, without the comfort of His over-arching love, but the coming in Person of the Holy Ghost—the third Member of the sacred Trinity, one with the Father and the Son—marked a new beginning, the commencement of a new era—nay, a new creation. A modern preacher¹ has spoken of each succeeding Pentecost as ‘the commemoration of the birthday of the new birth of humanity itself,’ and it is no more than the bare truth. That gift is really the dividing line between ancient and modern history—if, that is, we regard history as something more than a record of political events, of rising and falling dynasties, of wars and treaties, of varying geographical boundaries, of legal enactments, if we regard it—as what surely it really is—the story of the human race as a whole, of all that makes up mankind, of all the struggles, whether national or social or moral or spiritual, from which our modern complex life has gradually emerged. What variation or shift or crisis can equal, for the Christian man or woman, that stupendous change which was brought about by that measure of self-communication of which Whitsuntide speaks to us, and which Jesus Christ in these words, on the last evening of His earthly life, foretells to His perplexed disciples? His own ministry amongst them was about to terminate. They should see Him again—after all the worst that human error and malice could do had been wreaked upon Him—but not for long. He must ‘go away,’ and it was ‘expedient’ for *them* that He should do so. But the issues of that ministry should be fostered and cherished and

¹ Dean Church, *Cathedral and University Sermons*, p. 170.

brought to perfection by the Comforter or Advocate whom He would send, and in whom His Church should have for ever an abiding guide and an unfailing helper. He who had given Himself, in His Son, should now give Himself in His Holy Spirit.

And what does such a gift in fact carry with it but the gift of a special measure of inspiration? Believe in the one and you must believe in the other. If once you say that the Holy Spirit is with the Church you must go on to say that the Christian Church is an inspired body, and inspired as not even the Jewish Church was. If once you admit that God has not withdrawn, and will not withdraw, this new and wondrous bestowal of Himself, then you must go on to admit, not only the special, but also the continuous inspiration of the Church.

It is, of course, more than what it is sometimes made, the inspiration of one particular order. The original promise was, indeed, to the Twelve, but the fulfilment was for all. The great spiritual prerogatives of the Christian society are the inheritance of the entire body; their exercise may be limited to the few, but the limitation is through the act of the Church herself, not through any separation, by the Head of the Church, of one part of the body from another. The great acts of the Christian ministry derive their validity from the entire society, upon which, in its unbroken solidarity, the power was originally bestowed by Him who alone could give it. It is the body corporate which absolves,—‘Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them.’ It is the body corporate which consecrates,—‘The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion of the blood of Christ?’ So, too, it is within the body corporate that there dwells, and for ever, the privilege of inspiration. ‘Howbeit when He, the Spirit of Truth, is come, He shall guide you into all the truth.’

The privilege of inspiration! The gift of the Holy Spirit! Guidance into all the truth! It is a tremendous promise, and the claim that as the centuries pass, as generation follows generation, it is being slowly fulfilled is a tremendous claim. But it is a claim which we *must* make. We are

surely false to our calling, if we allow any doubt of our own, or any current of contemporary prejudice, or any measure of opposition, whether from without or within, to come between us and the full assertion of those gifts and prerogatives of which He Himself spoke to us, of which He Himself is the source and fountain. How can we say, how *dare* we say, that there is no inspiration, when He Himself promised us that there should be? How dare we pretend that it was limited to a few years, when He Himself promised us His own perpetual presence? How dare we say, either to ourselves or to one another, that the Church is alone, solitary in the midst of 'a naughty world' till He return, when we have His own assurance of 'a Comforter, who shall be with us for ever, even the Spirit of Truth'?

And yet any claim to inspiration seems to well-nigh 'stick in our throats.' It looks, in the face of so much of the past, a claim not only presumptuous but outrageous. There is so much of Church history which seems to rise up and give the lie direct to any such hope. It is an old thought that the Church herself has been the condemnation of her own doctrines. It is an old taunt that upon almost every page of her annals there lies written the contradiction of her pretensions. It is an old question whether past and present do not combine to make manifest the impossibility and absurdity of any interpretation of the Church of Christ as 'the Church of the Living God,' as anything beyond a strictly human association, with a multitude of crimes upon its head in bygone days, with, if not crimes, at any rate follies, to degrade it as it exists among us now. Blundering, quarrelling, schism, cruelty, oppression, have not they—we are asked again and again, asked with all the eloquence of indignation, with all the force of bitter reproach—been the ingredients of much of the medicine with which the Christian Church has sought at times—when she might have known better, when she *ought* to have known better—to heal the sorrows and miseries and ignorances of mankind? Are these the resources of the inspired physician or of the degraded quack? Have the scientific mistakes of the Church been inspired? Have the doctrinal exaggerations and excesses of the Church been inspired? Have her political failures been inspired? Is the history of the dark ages, on its spiritual side, the history of an inspired community? But let us not go on

with the well-known indictment. Let us admit that if the brighter spots have sometimes been forgotten and lost sight of, there have, none the less, been large tracts of deep blackness, been mistakes made and wrongs done, such as the world will never let us forget, been failures of duty, lapses from the true standard, nay, epochs of prolonged degradation, such as our own consciences will never let us forgive. It has been very justly said that 'we expect to be disappointed in the world: but to be disappointed in what has come to save and heal the world, this is bitterness indeed.' And there *is* this depth of disappointment: there *is* this extremity of bitterness. There *is* this much-checked past.

Yes; there is this past with all its errors and shortcomings, with all its follies and guilt; but behind the past there is the promise of the Lord Himself; and in spite of the past, the virtue and blessing of that promise continue even for ever. 'The gifts and calling of God are without repentance.' And does it not help us to realize what the true meaning of the inspiration of the Church is, what that inspiration is on its intellectual side, when we look at it, not in the sphere of doctrine, but in the simpler sphere of plain morals? For that most priceless gift of Himself to the world was not made by God only to guide men into all truth, but also to lead them into all righteousness. 'Ye therefore shall be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.' There was the ideal: and the gift came that men might be able to slowly struggle towards it. It had been out of the reach of the world as it was 'in Adam.' It was not to be out of the reach of the world as it should be 'in Christ.' It was not to be out of the reach of mankind, if only they would open heart and soul and conscience to that new guest who came to be both their Consoler and Inspirer, to be their Guide and their Mainstay, 'to convince them of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment.' There had been the ever-increasing dominion of evil, a dominion ending in a collapse such as the world has never seen since, such as those who beheld it thought beyond hope and remedy; there was to be the infusion of a new spiritual and moral energy, through which the lost ground was slowly to be regained, and the consequences of what had been an ever-spreading disaster gradually undone. There was to be this *moral* inspiration. And yet it too was to be checked and thwarted and made of none effect.

It, too, like the inspiration towards truth, was to seem, at times, to work in vain, to be a force overmastered and overwhelmed by the forces which opposed it, a power too weak to contend against the hellish agencies which manifested themselves in human cruelty and selfishness and lust. More than once it has seemed as though the ship of the Church must perish, not from any storm which broke upon her from outside, not from external hostility and persecution, but because of the fatal weight of her own sins and vices, because of the iniquity of her rulers, because of the depravity and corruption of her own members. Yes, it seemed so. But it was not to be so. Always there was a latent power of recovery; always there was a renovating principle, of which men could avail themselves, if only they would; always there was the presence of this gift; always there was the grace of the Risen and Ascended Christ; always there was this eternal indwelling of the Holy Ghost. And of the value of that gift, of the meaning of that indwelling—so far as our moral life goes—we see the real measure as we look back to the empire of the Cæsars, and put our own times against those. We see what the moral work of the Spirit has been, as we think how new, and once well-nigh unknown, virtues have made their way into the code of society and taken a high place there; how different is the estimate which is now placed upon love and mercy and pity and forgiveness, upon the value of each individual life, upon patience and longsuffering, upon chastity and sobriety, to that which prevailed in Imperial Rome; how complete is the change which has come over the world's thoughts about disease and poverty and self-sacrifice, about all those duties which we sum up in the old phrase, '*noblesse oblige.*' It requires a serious effort of the mind to set the days of Tiberius against the close of this nineteenth century, and to compare the two. Quite apart from the growth of science, or the development of literature, quite apart from forms of government or any of the externals of society, there is this tremendous, this overpowering contrast between the moral stature of the one age and the moral stature of the other, between the level of goodness then and the level of goodness now, between the spiritual attainments of the later Roman world and the spiritual attainments of the Christendom of to-day. In that contrast we see, I say, the measure of the work of the Spirit. It is

not less true of our social than of our individual life that

Every virtue we possess,
And every conquest won,
And every thought of holiness,
Are His alone.

Yes; in all that greater care for the poor, in all that wider sympathy for suffering, in all that deeper horror of bloodshed, in all that greater purity of life, in all that profounder sense of sin, in all that truer love of simple unaffected goodness, in all that is implied by the extinction of the gladiatorial games, by the abolition of slavery, by the suppression of infanticide, by the raising of hospitals and refuges, by the sanctity and beauty of home life—in all that, and more than all that, in far more than many words could express, have we the evidence of what the gift of the Spirit has meant for the world, the earnest of the moral inspiration with which Jesus Christ, before His ascension, endowed His Church.

And if, with these thoughts on our minds, we turn back to the question with which we set out—the question, not of the moral, but of the doctrinal inspiration of the Church, we see (do we not?) what the answer is to those old objections of which we said something, what the mistaken conception is that lies at their basis. We misunderstood the nature of inspiration. We thought that God would force truth upon us, that He would compel us to see and recognize it, that He would make error impossible, that He would make truth manifest. We thought that the treasure would be ours, not in earthen vessels, but apart from all human insufficiency. So we thought, and because things have not been as we expected, because God's ways have proved different to our own, we are tempted into denial and faithlessness. But directly we look at the moral history of the Church, we see what inspiration means, and what its divinely appointed limits are. It means that God helps human weakness, but that He does not override human wilfulness. It means a power with us 'making for righteousness' and truth, but a power against which we can successfully rebel, which we can thwart and annul, which we can refuse to avail ourselves of. To get the fulness of inspiration, there must not only be the perfect co-operation of God with man, but the perfect co-operation of man with God. There is, indeed, the Spirit, but there is, alas! also resistance to the

Spirit. There are the effects of human prejudice and haste, of our unteachableness, of our bigotry; there is the fruit of our own mental and spiritual insolence ever rising up to contest the ground with the fruit of God's greatest gift to man. Inspiration, as it touches doctrine, is no nearer omnipotence than when it touches morals.

And when once we realize this, we realize how fallacious is not a little of the popular reasoning of the day. Take, for example, that familiar remark, 'If I believed in an inspired Church, I should go over to Rome.' In other words, my friend, you will go over to a Church whose claim to plenary inspiration is at best a claim of a most one-sided character. The *moral* inspiration of that communion, as the Roman Catholic must needs admit, runs in no fuller stream than it does elsewhere. Why, then, should Rome possess *doctrinal* inspiration in its perfection? Why should the Spirit of God have worked on one side with completeness but on the other have been checked and limited and restrained? You must show me absolute moral inspiration before you can ask me to believe in absolute doctrinal inspiration. You must show me the kingdom of heaven in all its sanctity before you bid me do homage to its infinite wisdom. If I may use the expression, inspiration is inspiration all round. As I find it in one sphere, so I shall expect to find it in the other. I find it imperfect as a moral force; I shall not look for it to be perfect as an intellectual influence. I find it conditional in matters of conduct; I shall not therefore demand of it that it be unconditional in matters of belief. In each case, in the second not less than the first, I shall expect the infusion of the human element—of the element which will, to a greater or less degree, injure and mar the beauty of the whole—but which is there because God in His infinity and His wisdom wills it so, because men are exalted to be more than the unconscious instruments upon which the hand of God plays, because it is their calling and their duty, and their high privilege, to be His 'fellow-workers' both now and hereafter, in this world as in the next.

Or take again some of the popular discussions over the Church's Creeds. I go to one man and ask him his opinion of them, and he answers me, 'They are the infallible voice of the Church. To deny them is to deny the Spirit who inspired them.' I go to another and he tells me that they

are merely human compositions, lacking any intrinsic authority, man-made from first to last. How shall we decide between the two? Are we to regard the Nicene Creed as merely the outcome of theological subtlety and skill? or are we to ascribe to the Holy Ghost the damnatory clauses of the Athanasian Creed? Do we not see that the truth lies between the two alternatives? The creeds are not purely human; nor are they purely Divine. They are in part both. They are the issues of the Divine working upon the human. There is inspiration there; but there is the absence of inspiration as well. The door is not fully opened to the Spirit. But it is none the less true that there is more than human agency there. We do, indeed, see those Creeds made by the men of those times. We hear the work beaten out in fierce, perhaps wild and turbulent, discussion. We hear the clink of the hammer, we listen to the shouts of the workmen; but we do not know, we do not see, or hear and see only in some portion of the result, the spiritual visitant who came into the world when Jesus Christ was withdrawn in the flesh from it, that mankind might never again be without the presence of that God who had vouchsafed to enter into it.

And is it not in this way that we explain what is so striking a feature in the Christian Faith, its power of assimilating itself to the advancing knowledge of the human race? Each discovery, instead of drawing the veil farther over the face of the gospel, only illumines it with new brilliancy. Even Darwinism has added to our realization of its fulness. And to-day, though more than eighteen centuries have passed since the foundation of the Christian Church was laid, that Church is still with us, the greatest of all influences, the most potent of all forces. It is broken into fragments; it is at war with itself; we look in vain for unanimity; sometimes we look in vain even for brotherly love; but there this Church is with its great Catholic, or Anglican, or Presbyterian, or Nonconformist branches, speaking to the world of what are, in the main, the old doctrines, but to which men still listen with reverence; preaching the old gospel to which men of intellect still submit themselves; offering a revelation which the scholar and the philosopher, no less than the woman and the child, are thankful to behold. If there is one thing more certain than another it is that Christianity has *not* had its day. And to

what is this permanence due? What lies at the root of this strange stability? What has given this adaptability, this unending sufficiency of development? How is it that the great Christian dogmas are still able to crown every advance of science, still able to complete every guess of the best speculation, still able to meet and satisfy the needs both of brain and conscience? To what shall we attribute it all? To what but to that gift which at times we are so apt to deny, to that most wondrous self-bestowal which is so often forgotten or ignored?

'When He, the Spirit of Truth is come, He shall guide you into all the truth.' The promise is for us, even for us. We have our perplexities—God knows their weight. We have our burdens—they are indeed heavy. But we have also this most glorious heritage. Let us not be false to it. Let us not be unworthy of it. But how can we think that we are true to it, if, under the pressure of difficulty, or in the turmoil of dispute, we are rancorous and self-willed, easily excited, quickly roused to passion; if we are uncharitable and intolerant; if we think highly of ourselves and meanly of others; if we are petty or pharasaical; if we exaggerate details; if we are so ready to shut the

kingdom of heaven against men? Do let us remember what is required of us, if the grace of the Spirit of God is to work efficiently in and through us. Have we not to be tractable and kindly and modest, to be spiritually minded, to know our own unworthiness, to be tolerant and slow to wrath, to be patient and forbearing, to be content to sow that others may reap, to work for results which we shall never see, to be the imitators and disciples of Him who was meek and lowly in heart? Depend upon it, we can throw away the gift of inspiration by our own inability to use it, just as others have done in the past. Is there not only too real a danger of our doing so? On the other hand we may—like more than one age of the Church—turn it to good account. We *need* not fail in the face of our trials. God help us to succeed. God keep us from all that will prohibit success. May He so support us, so chasten and correct and discipline us, that we may be able to feel His hand and hear His voice, as in His goodness He guides us a little nearer the final goal, a little closer to that unspeakable, unthinkable vision of 'all the truth.'

Keep Thou my feet, I do not ask to see
The distant scene; one step enough for me.

At the Literary Table.

RECENT NOTES AND NOTICES.

THERE is no literature so easy to get into circulation in Germany as the pamphlet: in this country the pamphlet will not circulate at all. So it sometimes happens that the most useful matter gets published locally and is never heard of, simply because the great publishers will not take a pamphlet up. Mr. A. C. Lomax of 'The Johnson's Head,' in Lichfield, has published an *Outline Sketch of the History of the Jews*. It is a pamphlet. But it contains, in the form of chronological tables, so clear an account of the History and Prophecy of Israel from 930 B.C. to 37 B.C., and their relation to foreign powers, that we hope this reference will induce some students to inquire about it.

It is just as difficult in reviewing as in anything else to disburden oneself of the natural bias.

So we congratulate the *Guardian*. Its reviews recently have been excellent reading. There is one in the issue for 10th August of Dr. Forrest's 'Kerr Lecture.' 'Dr. Forrest is a Presbyterian, and therefore it was only likely that we should differ from him when he came to speak of certain questions.' But of these matters of dispute, 'being altogether subordinate to the main purpose of the book,' only one is even mentioned—the doctrine of the intermediate state,—and it is mentioned to blame 'the rash assertion of the Shorter Catechism,' not Dr. Forrest. Dr. Forrest is approved of, both in what he has attempted and what he has done. He has attempted to speak, not to the downright materialist or scornful rejector of Christianity, but to those thinkers who hover on the border line, respectful, nay, reverent; but only half believing. And he has