

Three Talks on Scripture

Inspiration, Authority and Interpretation

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[The Inspiration of Scripture](#)

Our first task will be to examine the Bible's claim to be *inspired* and what it means by that claim. And not only what it means, but what it quite clearly does not mean.

We shall then turn to the question, *How do we know whether the claim it makes is true?* Unless we first get a clear idea in our minds as to what the claim is, we shall not be very well equipped to ask the question, how do we know the claim is true?

Then we shall deal with the *Authority* of Scripture—where that authority comes from, the nature of that authority and how that authority can be recognized.

If the Bible is inspired and it comes to us with the authority of God, how then are we to interpret it? After all, a thousand and one interpretations have been put on this or that part of the Bible and very often the authors of those interpretations maintain that their interpretation is the right one, to the exclusion of all else. How should ordinary men and women come about the question of interpreting the Bible, so that they might be sure they have the meaning that the Bible intended?

The Bible's claim to be inspired

Two phrases that are metaphors, if you look at them closely, will help us understand what the Bible means by this claim.

1. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable (2 Tim 3:16 KJV)

You may prefer to translate that sentence, 'All Scripture that is inspired of God is also profitable,' but for our point it makes no difference at the moment. I call your attention to the adjective *inspired*—Scripture is said to be inspired of God. That is to say, *something that God has breathed out*. It comes to us, so to speak, as the very breath of God—something that issues from his mouth, something that he personally gives. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God; it is God-breathed. Now, no one supposes that God has breath in our sense of the term, but it is a forceful phrase, telling us that Scripture comes to us from the very mouth of God by his initiative, from him as source. He conveys it to us by his own personal, direct act.

2. And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God. (Exod 31:18).

The second metaphor to which we shall refer is used in the Old Testament. We are told that Moses came down Mount Sinai carrying the tablets of stone on which was the testimony that God had given him, *written with the finger of God*.

Let me take another instance where the same phrase is used in a different connection. Earlier in the book of Exodus we are treated to the story of the plagues of Egypt, which Moses

performed in the name of God; or God sent at the word of Moses as a punishment upon Pharaoh for his stubbornness. Pharaoh had some magicians and they understood one or two primitive things about how the world worked. It was all mixed up with a good deal of superstition and the real physical forces that they dimly perceived, which very often they deified into idols of one sort and another. They deified their own psychological powers into gods and goddesses and if they encountered what we know as static electricity they thought that was a god too. They didn't think it was the absolute God up in heaven, but it was a kind of a god; it was a force that they didn't quite understand. So, when Moses began his announcements and God began to do the plagues, the magicians gave Pharaoh to understand that this was nothing out of the ordinary. They understood these things and they could do the same with their manipulations too.

But there came a point when these same magicians informed Pharaoh that now, with this particular happening, 'This is the finger of God' (Exod 8:19). They meant that, as distinct from the normal processes of daily life, the almighty God had intervened. They believed that, once God had created the world and set all its intricate systems going, normally those systems went on working under their own steam. But in their thinking they clearly distinguished the normal working of those systems from an occasion when God intervened to do something from the outside of the system. They said it was *the finger of God*.

Let's transfer that to the moral and spiritual realm. God has made us, men and women; he has given us brains, intellect, moral judgment and conscience. Normally these things work well, more or less. Therefore, you will find even atheists offering the view that one thing is right and another thing is wrong, and something else is unfair. They are using their normal intellect and conscience such as God Almighty gave them when he made mankind, but no ancient would have called the working of his conscience, the working of his brain or his own moral judgment, 'the finger of God'.

So, when we are told that the Law was written by the finger of God, Moses is saying that God has intervened once more. Not now at the physical level, but at the moral and spiritual level. This law comes, not as a result of Moses' long pondering, nor as a result of the working of his brain, his moral judgment and his conscience; it comes from the outside, a direct communication from God—what we would call *revelation*.

It is important for us to get hold of this concept. Nowadays there is a view abroad that is quite mistaken. People will tell us that we really mustn't think that there was a God on the top of Mount Sinai, who actually spoke to Moses. Perhaps Moses didn't even go up Mount Sinai! He just sat in the Sinai Peninsula and thought about life and he came up with these commands, which he thought made a very good set of laws. In fact, he thought they were so good that he would say they came from God. After all, God made his brain, his moral judgment and his powers of thinking; therefore in some sense these things do come from God.

But that isn't what holy Scripture says. When the Old Testament declares that the law was written by the finger of God, it is not just giving some kind of sanction to what Moses thought up by the use of natural processes that God had put within his brain and heart. It is saying that God Almighty himself intervened to give the message; he wrote it, so to speak, with his finger!

Two metaphors; figurative language about two striking things, one from the Old Testament and one from the New. The Old Testament says that the revelation we have here in our Bibles, *God wrote it with his finger*. The New Testament says, *God breathed it out from his mouth*. It comes direct from God, these are the words of God.

With what kind of process did God convey these words and messages to men? Let us listen to some of the men to whom God spoke. Peter, himself an inspired apostle, is talking of what happened in olden times (in the Old Testament): ‘For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit’ (2 Pet 1:21). Two things: God breathing out his word (2 Tim 3:16); and men speaking from God as they were carried along by that same breath, by that same Spirit (2 Pet 1:21).

Peter, again talking of the Old Testament prophets, says, ‘Enquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories’ (1 Pet 1:11). That is to say, God’s Spirit took up his abode in their hearts and in their minds—the Spirit of Christ was ‘in them’.

If you read the context you will find that Peter is explaining a remarkable phenomenon of the Old Testament. Many passages clearly point forward to the things that happen to Jesus Christ our Lord, notably the suffering of the cross and his resurrection. How could these ancient writers (living so many centuries before the time that Jesus lived and died) prophesy so exactly what should happen to him? Peter’s answer is this, when the Old Testament prophets prophesied of ‘the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories,’ it wasn’t because they were hazarding a shrewd guess; it was because the Spirit of Christ was in them and testified of what should subsequently happen.

Indeed, Peter indicates that when the Holy Spirit within them had testified of these coming things, the prophets themselves sat down and searched diligently, endeavouring to understand the full implication of the message they had just uttered, ‘Enquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating.’ These men didn’t conjure it up out of their own minds, or they would have understood what time was being spoken of. The Holy Spirit used them to convey a message and they subsequently tried to understand the implications of that message, which were not immediately clear to them.

So much then for the claim and the process. Let’s ask ourselves, does this claim extend to the entire Bible? Is it all inspired, or are some parts of it inspired and others not? I would refer you to the words of our Lord, spoken after his resurrection,

These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. (Luke 24:44)

Here he is on record as having told his disciples that the Old Testament spoke concerning him. But he was not content to use one omnibus title, ‘The Old Testament’; he used the three terms that together in the Jewish custom make up the Old Testament—the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. These are the three divisions of the Jewish Old Testament.

1. The Law—the Law of Moses, the *Torah*.

2. The Prophets—not merely the prophets that we know, Isaiah, Jeremiah and others. In the Jewish Bible it includes the history books, such as 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. The Old Testament regards those history books not just as history but as prophecies. That is, they give not merely the facts but God’s interpretation of those facts and their significance. The writers are not just historians; they are also prophets.

3. The Psalms, or called elsewhere the Writings. The most important and the largest part of this section is the Psalms, hence they give their name to the whole.

Because the Spirit of Christ was in the writers when they wrote, even though they lived centuries before Christ, they were able to write about him. We have already noticed Peter saying this and our Lord is confirming that all three divisions of the Old Testament contained things concerning him.

What of the New Testament? Our Lord explicitly makes this self-same provision for those who should write the New Testament,

These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. (John 14:25–26)

The teachings of our Lord that we now have in our Gospels, and some elsewhere in the Epistles, are covered by our Lord’s promise that he would not leave his apostles to try as best they could to remember exactly what he had said, and the meaning of what he had said. He promised that the same Holy Spirit that had inspired the ancient writers of the Old Testament should thus inspire these New Testament men and would bring back to them such teaching of our Lord’s earthly ministry as he wished to be recorded.

And of the Holy Spirit and his ministry our Lord also said,

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. (John 16:13)

When he was exalted to heaven our Lord would send his Holy Spirit to lead his church into all the truth and to indicate to them prophetic things—the things that are to come.

In addition of course, to the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles and prophets of the New Testament, we have central in all this process our Lord himself. In his prayer to his Father here is how he describes his own work,

Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. (John 17:7–8)

Notice how carefully that is phrased. He is saying that he has given to men the message that God gave to him, but more than that. He has not only given the general message, he has

given to them particular words—‘I have given them the words that you gave me’—‘words’, not just ‘the word’. You will observe that this is an extreme statement. On the matter of inspiration, one can scarce get a fuller statement.

In John’s Gospel we read, ‘Whoever receives his [Christ’s] testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure’ (John 3:33–34).

Do you catch what the writer is saying? He says that if you come to Christ and listen to his testimony and you believe what Christ says, then you are agreeing that not just what Christ says is true, but that God is true. May I repeat that—if you believe that what Christ says is true, then you are saying that God is true. How can that be? Well, Christ speaks not just a general message but he speaks the words of God. The words of Christ are the words of God and these are interchangeable terms. If you accept what Christ says as true you are accepting that God is true. In the highest and fullest sense, everything that Christ said was God-breathed.

This is also how the apostles understood the writings of their fellow apostles. Referring to Paul, Peter says, ‘It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look’ (1 Pet 1:12). In his second epistle he says (or at least he implies), that the writings of Paul are on a par with the inspired writings of the Old Testament,

just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do *the other Scriptures*. (2 Pet 3:15–16)

So much then for the claim, what it means and the extent of the claim.

What the claim does not mean

First, when we say that ‘all Scripture is given by inspiration of God,’ we mean that Scripture is *God-breathed*—not that it is necessarily ‘inspiring’. In other words, we are not saying that here and there in the Bible you will come across beautiful passages of literature that move you to your depths when you read them. There are certainly passages like that; but that is not the aim of holy Scripture.

This is a very important point because in modern lingo the word ‘inspired’ is attached to the writing of certain parts of Shakespeare or Euripides, or to the musical compositions of Bach or Tchaikovsky. We all know what people mean, but we should try to get it clear in our minds that this is not what the Bible means. There are very moving passages in holy Scripture, but they are not more ‘inspired’, in the biblical sense, for being moving. There are what, at first sight, seem to be very dull and dreary parts of Scripture; lists of the insides of animals used for sacrifices make very dull reading unless you happen to know what it’s all about! They are no less inspired for being dull.

The Queen may command my income tax inspector to send me sheets of stuff written in very tiny print. It is extraordinarily dull reading and some of it I find offensive; but it is no less authoritative because it's dull! It comes with her sanction. When we talk about 'inspiration' then, it is not the emotional level of the subject matter that is involved, it is a question of: Did it come from God? Is it his word—whatever it says?

Secondly, when we say, 'Scripture is given by inspiration of God' (and therefore it is God's word, his message to us), we do not mean that every bit in the Bible is part of revealed truth. Now let me go slowly there, lest you mistake what I am saying. I am not saying that part of the Bible is the word of God and part is not. I have just said many times that *all* Scripture is given by inspiration of God—*all of it is God's word to us*. But in the course of his message to us, God has had to tell us many things—things true and eternal, emanating from his own mind. And then (so that we should see the significance of them) he has been obliged to tell us things that are not true—things that originated in other people's minds. In order that we should see the significance of his truth he has been pleased sometimes to tell us of actions that people did that were horrible and sinful, so that you mustn't suppose that God approves of all that is in the Bible!

Let me illustrate what I mean. The book of Genesis tells us that God told Adam and Eve that if they ate of a certain tree they would die.

You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die. (2:16–17)

Genesis then tells us (by inspiration of God, because God wants us to know this) that Satan said, 'You will not surely die' (3:4). That bit was a lie. God has had that lie recorded in holy Scripture; it is part of God's message to us. He wants us to know that it was Satan that put the lie across, what the lie was and how it was eventually exposed as being a lie.

Certain of Job's friends came to comfort him and in the book of Job in the Old Testament there are long chapters containing their observations. When they had finished trying to comfort Job, they hadn't comforted him. In fact, they hadn't even talked a lot of sense in places! God is on record at the end of that book as telling Eliphaz, 'My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has' (Job 42:7). So God asks us to listen to the utterances of Job's friends, but not to believe them. He inspired the writer to record what they said so that, against the background of their misuse of principle and truth, God might get his own message across more clearly.

I suspect nobody who has read the book of Genesis' inspired account of Jacob's actions will fall into the trap of supposing that his questionable deals were approved of by God. But God inspired the writer to record those actions so that from their crookedness we might be warned to avoid such practices.

So we have to make a distinction in our minds between 'inspiration'—the process by which God gave us this message—and 'revealed truth'—the revealing of the very mind of God. He reveals what is absolutely true; but he reveals other things that are not true but positive lies in order that we should not be deceived by them, and that we should see his truth all the more clearly.

What then is the process of inspiration? I can only deal with this briefly, as the men who were used of God in the process have said very little about it. On the one hand, the Bible does not imply that God took these men over and used them as mindless computers. Luke, for instance, tells us that he did a lot of historical research; he didn't just sit down one afternoon and wait for some voice to flow through his brain. On the other hand, Peter points out that when they had finished their writing or their speaking (as the case may be), they frequently found that the message had gone beyond them. They had to sit down and scrutinize their own writings. They had uttered things that they themselves did not fully understand and they were being taken far beyond mere human ingenuity.

You will say, 'Surely you are not claiming that the Bible is verbally inspired, word for word?'

How else do you suppose it would be inspired?

You say, 'It's the general message that's inspired.'

How, then, was the message put across? Admittedly you can put across a certain range of messages without words—you can wiggle your finger, raise your eyebrow, put out your tongue, for instance. All sorts of antics can be used to get certain messages across, but the range is severely limited and for a complicated and sophisticated message you have to use words. I do not understand folks who talk against verbal inspiration and are content to say, 'I think it was the message that was inspired.' How can you convey a message of any complication or sophistication without words?

I am talking now, of course, of the words as originally given—the original text of holy Scripture (not the sundry mutilations of the manuscripts that have subsequently been copied), the original words of holy Scripture (not the sundry translations that can be good or not very good). I adhere to what the Bible itself says and I have been quoting it many times. It was not just the general message; but inspired words were given to the men whom God used to write the Scriptures.

A Practical Point

You say, 'What use are words? In my heart I sense a need for something more than just words.' I think I know what you mean, but be careful before you dismiss the Bible as 'just words'; or even *words* themselves as 'just words'. Words are some of the most effective and valued things in all human experience. I don't suppose a dying American soldier, who got shot down in the swamps of Vietnam, would have in the pocket nearest his heart a tin of cocoa sent by the Red Cross. More likely it would be a letter from his fiancée. Why should he want to have that in a pocket near his heart?—it's only words! But words are valued because they convey a message; they get a relationship across much better than cocoa!

The Bible is unashamedly words. And God will have it so, for at its heart is 'The Word'—God communicating directly to man from his very heart. I say it reverently, they come warmed with his very breath. Words that shall last when cocoa and the tins and all material things have perished forever. Words of personal relationship, still living, vibrant and creative. Our Lord put it this way,

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life. Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. (John 5:24–25)

In the later verses he spoke about the resurrection at the last day, when at his word of command the graves shall open and the dead shall arise. But at this juncture he is talking about our spiritual experience and state. We are fallen; our relationship with God has been cut and there is a void in our hearts. Where shall we find a message that will satisfy our hearts? Everyone who does not know God personally dwells in a 'grave' — a cold, grey, silent kind of existence.

Christ says, 'The hour is coming, *and is now here*, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.' When his voice breaks through into my silence it not only conveys a message, it can create life. And so that we might hear that voice plainly (and not be the victims of all sorts of imaginations, stemming merely from our subconscious minds), God has done the miracle of enshrining his voice in Holy Writ for us to read.

How shall we know that it really is the word of God? Don't wait until you know it's the word of God before you read it, or you'll be like the Irishman who said he would never go into the water until he learned to swim! If you want to know that it is the word of God read it carefully and patiently, allowing God to do his life-giving work in your heart.

The Authority of Scripture

I want first to deal with two objections that have been levelled against holy Scripture:

1. The Bible is so full of the most ghastly historical errors in matters that we can check, we couldn't possibly believe it is the word of the almighty and omniscient God.

I want to deal with that very briefly. Because of its claim to be the word of God, the Bible has been subjected to the most exaggerated criticism and all sorts of things have been firmly asserted about its accuracy, many of which have subsequently been proved wrong by further historical light and by the discoveries of archaeology.

Of course there are problems; there will be problems I suppose unless and until our knowledge of history comes to be one hundred per cent. I do not propose, however, to discuss any of these matters in detail. For one thing, others have done it far better than I could cover in this lecture—I refer you to *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* by Prof. F. F. Bruce¹, which, together with its bibliographies, will point you to more detailed information.

In the nature of the case, all such criticisms have to be met individually, one by one. To prove that ninety-nine criticisms levelled against the Bible have been unfair and untrue does not of itself prove that the hundredth criticism is also unfair. It may create a tremendously strong prejudice that the hundredth criticism isn't any more true than the other ninety-nine, but it cannot prove it. If we want to know that the Bible is the word of God and be sure of its authority, it will not be because by our knowledge of archaeology and history we have been able to satisfy all the criticism. It would indeed be a curious state of affairs if knowledge of our Creator depended on archaeology and history.

2. I want to deal even more briefly with that other criticism that is levelled against holy Writ, that the original documents have been copied out so many times that they no longer represent the originals sufficiently well for us to trust them.

That charge is nothing short of being absurd; and one can only decide that those who make it are either themselves ignorant of the facts, or are indulging in deliberate obscurantism. I have given a large part of my life to this actual trade of working upon and considering the evidence of the biblical manuscripts, sorting out, as best we can, what was originally written.

¹ IVP, 2003 (Sixth Edition).

Now we come to the main question: How can I know for certain that the Bible is the word of God and recognize its authority? Sundry unsatisfactory answers have been given to this. One of them is that the church tells us that the Bible is the word of God; we believe the Bible because the church tells us we ought to! That is unsatisfactory, for two reasons:

(a) *The Church did not give us the Bible.* That is a wrong way of putting things. Quite unhistorical, in fact.

(b) *It is open to the charge of being a very vicious circular argument.* If I am to believe the Bible because the church tells us to, I shall next have to enquire where the church got its authority. It is only in the Bible that I shall find where the church actually started. Therefore, if the Bible isn't first true, the church isn't true either. So I cannot say that I believe the Bible because the church says it is the word of God and the church must be right.

Another way people come at the problem is to say that we must just use our own reason and moral judgment. But that, likewise, proves to be an unsatisfactory state of affairs. By definition we are sinners and our reason is in itself sometimes defective. Not only is our reason sometimes defective, it is often clouded with all sorts of emotions and misdirected by our will. Experience in life shows us that we are not always led by our reason, not even in coming to conclusions. Our emotions can colour our reason, sometimes to the extent of blinding it completely.

So, from those two imperfect ways of diagnosing its authority, we come to recognize that *the authority of holy Scripture is in itself*, by reason of the fact that *it is the word of God*. Someone will immediately say, 'But you have now fallen into a worse vicious circle than ever! You ask me first to believe that the Bible is the word of God, and then on the authority of the Bible I shall discover that it is the authoritative word of God. That's just the trouble! All my Christian friends exhort me to read the Bible, but I can't believe it. Then they tell me that I ought to believe it because it is the word of God. Now you say that if I acknowledge that it is the word of God before I even open it, I shall obviously believe anything it says—even the claim that it is inspired, but I can't agree that it is the word of God!'

I understand that quite well, and certainly it is a logical difficulty. But let's come at the problem the other way around. When I say the Bible is its own authority I am arguing in a circle—but not a vicious circle—some circles are good. Let's start at the other end and suppose that there is a God, a God who made and is the source of everything and everyone. If that God were to speak to us, how should we know it was his word? Who could tell us, so that we would be absolutely sure? Let's ask the philosopher; if he says it's the word of God then that will prove it. But wait a minute! Where did the learned philosopher come from? By definition he is a creature of God, so therefore you are only going a long way round to come back to God!

By *God* we mean the *Author of all*. Therefore God himself has to be his own authority, for there is nobody independent of God. No one can speak from an independent position and bring you a third-party witness to God, for all comes from God. *God must be his own evidence*. He is his own authority and when he speaks it is God's word and it carries its own authority.

If that sounds very strange I must remind you that our Lord Jesus said the very same thing.

And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' Jesus answered them, 'I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?' And they discussed it among themselves, saying, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?" But if we say, "From man", we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.' So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.' (Matt 21:23–27)

He said that if they wanted evidence, John the Baptist was an exceedingly powerful witness to the fact that he was the Son of God. 'And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God' (John 1:34). But ultimately, the witness he received could not come from men. In the last analysis all the authority comes from God anyway. He claimed to be God incarnate:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. (John 1:1–3)

I am so glad our Lord made this point, for some of our philosopher friends would say, 'He doesn't see the logical implications of his claim.' He saw them all right! In the last analysis he does not receive witness from men. It was his word that gave authority to the apostles; his word therefore gave authority to the church. His word is its own authority.

But some will still find this very unsatisfactory and ask, 'Why do we have to have a written Bible? Why couldn't God (if there is a God) speak to me direct?' If they heard a voice coming 'out of the blue', they would feel that it was the very voice of God speaking to them and then perhaps they might be impressed and might believe. 'Why have a written Bible? How can we really believe that it is the voice of God, his authoritative word? It is but paper and ink!'

Are you sure you would be convinced if a voice came to you out of the blue? And suppose such a voice came, what criterion would you apply to prove that it is God's voice? Would you believe any voice that came out of the blue? I remember Sir Fred Hoyle telling us that he was quite sure there must be life on other planets attached to other solar units, and he longed for the day when, instead of sending men to the moon, there would be gigantic radio telescopes so that he could receive messages from them and send his messages to them.

Suppose one of these days we do hear voices. Would you believe them, just because they came out of the blue? I shouldn't! If you were on the other end of the blue and received voices from earth, would you believe all of them? Just to hear a voice that you think is miraculous wouldn't solve the problem; you would still have to decide, *Is this the voice of God?*

It is a tremendous mercy that we are not merely exposed to voices from the blue. We have God's written word that we may calmly study, think about and weigh it up, and let the weight of its own evidence sink into our ears. In the first place we should have to decide on its morality. When our Lord was here on earth he performed miracles, obviously by

superhuman power. To escape the implications of what he was doing the Pharisees said that his power came from the devil: 'But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons." Knowing their thoughts, he said to them . . .' (Matt 12:24–25).

Our Lord challenged them to decide not merely if it was a work of superhuman power, but what was the moral quality of the work. To write off a beneficent work of this kind as though it came from the devil showed a morality that was perverted or deliberately obscurantist. And I would make the same point about holy Scripture; God's word is not just a voice out of the blue that could be anybody's voice, but a voice whose moral quality challenges us to the very depths of our being and asks not just for a scientific but for a moral response.

Therefore, in presenting holy Scripture to you, I don't ask you first to believe that it is the inspired word of God. I don't ask you to believe anything about it, save to read it! *Let it put before you its own evidence.*

In particular, I ask you to read about its central figure, Jesus Christ our Lord. I suggest that you take for instance his Sermon on the Mount and live with it. I'm not urging you to any crash decisions; live with it; let his word sink into your moral consciousness. As you live with those words in all their sublime morality, your conscience will keep hammering away inside you. 'Yes, he's right; I've never seen it like that before, but it's right!' When you would rather shut your eyes to the compelling claim your fellow-man has upon you; when you would rather give in to the look or the deed that's going to give you immediate gratification, unless your conscience has packed up on you altogether, it will witness, 'Yes, he's right!' That's what I mean by the Word of God being its own authority.

Christ not only taught morality, he taught that other wonderful thing, *God is love*. God so loved men and women that he did something about our human predicament of sin and sent his Son to die for us upon a cross. A lot of people talk about God being love, as though they themselves thought up the idea, or that it was so self-evident that everybody has always known it. But everybody has not always seen that God is love! Search the classical records, I don't know of any eminent philosopher who said, 'God is love.' You may read Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Freud or anybody else you please; but they don't say it like he said it. It is Christ who taught this world that God is love. Though he hated our sin he loved us so much that he was prepared to die for us, that we might be saved. He offers his love and all its security free. He doesn't ask us to buy salvation, to earn his love with meritorious behaviour; he is God, we couldn't buy anything from him. He made us, he loves us and he died to redeem us.

That would be my practical and pragmatic approach. I am not asking you to believe anything to start with. Come first with an open mind, read the Bible, listen to it and in particular to its central figure. What he is and what he says will bring their own authority to convince you.

What about all the rest of the Bible?

It has in itself that same quality and it also comes with the authority of Christ. He is on record as saying that the Old Testament spoke of him; it was a preparation for him. There again we

meet a unique thing about this Christian book. Various religions have holy books, but in all history there is only one that dared to begin way back in those dim and distant centuries, saying that it was the voice of God, promising that one day a Saviour of the world would come; and in the end that Saviour appeared, answering to what it said. Not only did he say that the Old Testament was God's word, whose purpose is the spiritual education of men and women, leading them to salvation; but he has put his own imprimatur on the writings of his apostles.

How do we recognize God's word?

I have tried to make the point that Scripture's authority is in itself; but how can we recognize it? And here we meet a difficulty! The difficulty is that we are not perfect saints, the very faculties we need to recognize it have been impaired. Let me illustrate what I mean. A man may attend a concert to hear the best pianist in the world, but if he has been working in a foundry all his lifetime it is quite probable that his ears have become dulled, so that the beautiful music is to him a hit-and-miss kind of a thing. He only manages to hear the very loud or shrill notes, so it's a bit of a jumble to him. That doesn't prove the pianist is no good; it proves that the man's receptor mechanism is defective.

Our Lord himself said of men and women that we are blind, spiritually blind. Faced with the things of God, very often we do not see them properly, or see them as distorted. Perhaps someone will say that I seem to like having it both ways! First, I tell you that the Bible is the word of God—if you read it you will see that its authority is self-evident. But then, if you come back and say that you've read it but couldn't see anything, I will say, 'that's because you're blind!'

I am reporting what you will find if you read the New Testament, where our Lord says that his saving mission is to open men's eyes, to turn them from darkness to light, to unstop their ears and cause them to hear. Let me use an analogy from our own world. Some of my artist friends have taken me along to see modern art. I can't see a thing in it, but they assure me that there is! They can see something in it that I don't, but they are artists and I am not. Moreover, some of them have helped me to see more in a Rembrandt that I ever realized was there.

So, in the same way, when Christ says that God is love you begin to see that it is right and a very desirable thing. You begin to wish that it were true, but you can't see it all that clearly. And you cannot come to the Bible and understand all it says without receiving God's Holy Spirit: '. . . no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God' (1 Cor 2:11). Therefore, if we are going to understand the things of God fully, we must let God give us his Holy Spirit. Christ's claim is that he is able to do that; he can open blind eyes.

Because it comes from God, the Bible claims to be a unique book. Because it is the word of God, it claims that its authority is in itself. Its central figure claims to be God and the kind of knowledge he is offering you is not merely the knowledge of facts but the knowledge of the person who speaks. But think of this staggering claim for a moment. He is saying that you will never fully know him, nor fully understand all he says, unless you allow him to give you his Spirit.

To my mind that makes sense. If the one who speaks is God, what he says is the word of God. To satisfy ourselves that the Bible is the inspired word of God we would do well to read books on archaeology (as to the trustworthiness of the historical evidence in the Bible); or books on textual criticism (so that we may be sure that what we have is substantially the same as what was originally written). And we could go further; we would do well to listen to men like John the Baptist, or anybody else who has had a personal experience of God and has come to know Christ; to those people who have found the word of God intensely interesting and it has spoken to them. Let them encourage you to come to the word of God and read it. But in the last analysis you will find yourself alone with this word, having to make up your own mind—‘Is God speaking to me?’ If you read it patiently you will find that it isn’t any longer just words on a page. The central figure will come out at you, so to speak, as a living figure. Not merely like a Socrates who spoke a long time ago, but as a person alive now and speaking again to you the words that are printed in his name.

In the early days of Christianity, the Chancellor of the Exchequer of Ethiopia came up to Jerusalem to worship. The story is found in Acts 8:26–39. It is understandable why he should have done so. The pagan idolatry among which he was brought up was so crude, so intellectually impossible that no man of any intellect could believe it. Moreover, that old idolatry showed itself as false because it was never, or only rarely, coupled with morality. It didn’t really matter how you behaved so long as you paid the gods their rent and rates in the form of sacrifices and a hymn or two! It was like empty religion; a round of rituals with nothing to say morally. Indeed, some of the gods themselves were immoral scoundrels.

Therefore, this man began his search for something that would be true, that he could recognize as being from God. He came to Jerusalem and he saw the service and worship of God in the Jewish temple, marked by lack of any images or idolatry. He heard its moral code; higher than anything he had ever met. His conscience answered within him that it was true. If there was a God at all, he knew that he would demand this kind of thing.

As he returned to Ethiopia, trundling across the desert in his chariot, he was reading a book. This Jewish religion had a book that they said was inspired, but he couldn’t see where the inspiration lay. In fact, he couldn’t understand what it was saying! Philip joined him and asked if he understood what he was reading, but he had to say, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ (v. 31). He couldn’t make sense of it. When he invited Philip to come into the chariot, ‘beginning with this Scripture he [Philip] told him the good news about Jesus’ (v. 35). It began to fall into place and it was not long before that book ‘came alive’. He found that the person of whom it speaks is alive and that person is saying, ‘I am your God, and I love you. I died for you and I want to form a relationship with you. Will you trust me?’

Today I speak to people who were never brought up in pagan idolatry. You have an idea that the Bible is the word of God because you respect its morality. You think you ought to love your neighbour as yourself and that’s what the Old Testament says. Your conscience tells you that you ought to serve your fellow man, you shouldn’t hate your enemies and that’s what

the Bible says. You think that the golden rule in the Sermon on the Mount is marvellous, if only you could persuade people to keep it. You're that far, aren't you?

But for the rest of it; it doesn't make much sense to you. That's because you haven't quite got it in focus. If you let it, that morality of which your conscience approves will lead you to the next step. You are a sinner who needs to be saved. God, who is in this book and the author of that authoritative morality, says, 'I am love and I love you; in Christ I came to seek you, died to save you and live again to give myself to you.'

How shall we know whether that is right? There's only one way of knowing and that is to make that great experiment of committing yourself to him and to find out by actual experience if he is as good as his word. After all, that is what the Bible means when it says, 'Taste and see that the LORD is good' (Ps 34:8).

The Interpretation of Scripture

In this final study we shall attempt to deal with the question of how we should interpret the Bible and whether we can do that by ourselves. Also, a number of questions have been handed in and as time permits I shall try to deal with them.

We have dealt so far with the question of the inspiration of holy Scripture; the claims that holy Scripture itself makes, the meaning of the term 'inspiration' and the extent of it. Then I tried to deal with the question of the authority of the Bible and to consider where that authority is located, namely in the Bible itself.

Now we come to the very practical question of understanding the Bible. I want to start by emphasizing the point I made in the previous session. It cannot be over-emphasized that, if we would understand the Bible in all its fullness, we must form a personal relationship with Christ and allow Christ to give us his Holy Spirit.

For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. (1 Cor 2:11)

No one knows the things of God save the Spirit of God. Therefore, if we would understand the Bible we shall need to receive the Holy Spirit of God. To some people that seems a very arbitrary statement. In fact, another vicious circle! If I must first have the Holy Spirit before I can understand the Bible, I have got to believe in Christ and allow him to give me that Holy Spirit. But how shall I know about Christ if I haven't first read the Bible and what's the good of reading it, if I can't understand it?

At first sight it seems a very genuine difficulty, but in actual practice it is not a real difficulty. Let me use a crude illustration. As I have remarked before, there are things in common between a man and his dog. A dog understands beefsteaks and so does a man. And a dog has a pretty good idea of what's happening when a man eats a beefsteak! It will stand by, wagging its tail and ask for a share. There are other things about man (reading literature and attending lectures on laser beams, for example), that go completely beyond the dog and will presumably continue to go beyond it, unless the dog can somehow be given man's human spirit and outlook. And there are things that lie between. If it would understand what human love is, it would very necessarily have to have a human spirit, for it could grievously misunderstand the whole thing if it merely interpreted it according to canine relationships.

Thus it is with spiritual things. As God's creatures there are things that we have in common with God. We can enjoy a sunset, as presumably he does. We can enjoy flowers, perfume and music—all the delightful works of the Creator. But there are other things about God that go beyond us, unless God gives us his Holy Spirit.

When I first come to the Bible I shall find all sorts of evidence that is immediately apparent and understandable. Our Lord did sundry miracles, for instance, that his contemporaries could see before their very noses and which therefore they could not dispute. One was opening the eyes of a blind man. That miracle was a piece of evidence his contemporaries could see and understand. On the basis of that evidence then, Christ asked them to take the next step; to trust him enough and allow him to do something to them that would open their eyes. Not now in a physical sense, but in a spiritual sense. He invited them to get to know God in a more deep and intimate way than they had known him before, to discover a dimension that they couldn't see before. So there was some evidence that everybody could see and on the basis of that evidence Christ asked them to trust him and allow him to do this further thing that would open up the realm of God's heart and Spirit to them, which hitherto was veiled.

Similarly, there are two levels of evidence for anyone who reads holy Scripture. You may come to holy Scripture as though it were no more than the daily newspaper and read it as critically as you care. You will find evidence, such as the moral evidence, that your conscience will respond to immediately. Any man has a conscience that will tell him that certain things are wrong and evil and certain things are good. On the basis of that sort of evidence, Christ will ask you to trust him. He maintains that there is a deeper meaning and a more intimate experience of God; a spiritual realm that no man can see unless he is born again and receives God's Spirit (John 3). But he will ask you to trust him on the basis of the preliminary evidence and allow him then to open your mind and eyes to that spiritual realm. To decline thus to trust Christ will inevitably render certain parts of the Bible almost meaningless.

At school my Classics teacher was an agnostic, if not an atheist. It was required of us at a certain stage to read from the New Testament. The comment of my Classics master was, 'I think I understand at least something of what Plato, Socrates and Aristotle say, but when it comes to Paul I don't understand a word the man is saying.' For four years I worked as a farm labourer alongside some uneducated men, who could scarcely speak without murdering the King's English. When I got to know them I found that the New Testament and the epistles of Paul meant a tremendous lot to them. The simple reason was that they had had the experience of which those epistles speak; they were born of God and as children of God they understood their Father, just as a child understands his physical father. It is not simply a question of IQ; it meant something to them. As Christ will tell us, it is a question of whether or not we have the Holy Spirit of God and therefore, by instinct, are able to understand the things of God.

How do we interpret the Bible?

This is a very basic question. Can any individual Christian come direct to the Bible, understand and interpret it? Or must he, as some would claim, rely on the offices of the church? For centuries there has been a serious claim held in some quarters of Christendom, that the ordinary Christian layman or woman cannot properly understand the Bible. If the

people at large were to try and understand it, they would come up with all sorts of bizarre theories and contradictory notions. The result would be utter confusion. The church, so the argument goes, gave us the Bible and it must be the church that interprets the Bible.

What shall we say to that basic problem? Well, in the first place, the New Testament tells us that Christ has put many spiritual gifts in the church and among them teachers. Those teachers are meant to teach! They are meant to help us in the understanding of the word of God. Therefore, we should not despise them. If Christ has placed teachers in the church, it is evident that the church needs those teachers. All of us who have had any experience of Christ are thankful to God for those teachers and evangelists who pointed out to us the meaning of Scripture.

On the other hand, the New Testament is insistent that the individual has the right—indeed the necessity—to come directly himself to the word of God. Before we proceed to the actual biblical statements, let me use another analogy of understanding paintings.

I know very little about painting and the kind of things artists are trying to do. So I am very grateful for art critics who, out of the wealth of their experience, tell me just what an artist is attempting here in comparison with what another artist is attempting there. I should be foolish to disregard what they say; they have spent many years in studying the matter and have more experience than I have. But it is not the art critic that is speaking to me through that picture, it is the artist and my response must be to the picture and to the artist.

It would be a miserable thing if our response to art and to literature were never anything else but second-hand. Fancy having to put up all your life with the judgments of your lecturers about Shakespeare, instead of coming to Shakespeare yourself, making up your own mind and letting Shakespeare speak direct to you. The trouble with a good deal of literary study is that people content themselves with the opinions of critics and reviewers, and read potted critiques of the authors rather than the authors themselves. It's a swift way of getting through exams, but it isn't the authentic experience!

When it comes to the word of God it is right that mature Christians, who know God and have had experience of his word, should help us. They can point us to a lot of things and save us an immense amount of time. But it wouldn't do to rely on that kind of second-hand experience. In the Bible it is not the teacher who speaks, it is God. The Bible is not just a book of information, it is the word of the living God seeking to create a living response in our hearts. Only as we come direct to the word of God will it have the maximum effect for which it was written. I recur to the basic proposition with which I started; God speaks through the human authors of holy Scripture, breathing out his word. Our response should not be mere intellectual understanding but appreciation of a person.

Where do we get the faith to respond?

'Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God' (Rom 10:17 KJV). The authority of the Bible is in the Bible itself. The authority of the word of God is in that word and I must listen to it if it is going to have an effect on me. In the end I shall be convinced by the power of that word itself and by its inherent authority; by the creative voice of the living God that speaks through it.

Imagine a young gentleman doing his courting by proxy, getting the girl's brother to tell him all her excellences and relying on his interpretations. The courtship is not likely to get very far! It is no sentiment to say that in holy writ we have God's proposals of life in Christ. They are meant to be spoken directly to us and we to make our direct response.

Now to the biblical statements. In the first two chapters of his letter to the Galatians, Paul is talking about people who have come with false interpretations of Christianity. He acknowledges his own authority as an apostle and his relationship to the other apostles at Jerusalem. He tells us of a visit he made to Jerusalem to talk to those who were apostles before him. He tells us that those apostles of repute, like Peter, James and John, 'added nothing to me' (2:6). He is talking of course in the context of the gospel and claiming that he got it direct from Christ. The apostles at Jerusalem did not give him anything more. They got the gospel direct from Christ too; but it wasn't that they got it from Christ and then passed it on to Paul. Paul is saying that he got it direct—'They added nothing to me.'

Why is that relevant? It is historically untrue to say that the church gave Paul the Bible. The church was already in existence when Paul was converted. It had its leading apostle, Peter, and others like James and John, but they did not give Paul the Bible. When Paul was in Arabia, had you been concerned to know how to be saved, to be right with God, you could have come direct to Paul and put your question to him. As he gave his reply you could believe his word and be saved without going down to Jerusalem, without consulting Peter, James or John. You wouldn't have had to say, 'I know what Paul says, but I don't know whether I have interpreted it the right way, so I must go to the apostles and get an authoritative interpretation.' Of course not! You may come direct.

How can we know that we have got the right interpretation?

Someone will say, 'Surely the church, or somebody, will have to interpret it, because just coming direct and listening to Paul we might pick it up wrong?' But who are these interpreters that can explain things better to me than Paul can? I have the record of what Christ says here in his word. Is Christ so bad at explaining things that I have to take it to some mortal man and get him to explain what Christ means? That has implications that are not at all pious. We may come direct—we need to come direct.

Nor should we exaggerate the difficulty of understanding holy Scripture. The God who gave it has not wrapped it up so that it is altogether a conundrum that only the expert can explain. Too often the difficulty is not with the understanding, it is with the believing. When our Lord said to Nicodemus, 'Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God' (John 3:3), Nicodemus didn't understand—'How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?' (v. 4). But Christ's eventual answer was, 'If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?' (v. 12). Very often our trouble is not lack of understanding but lack of believing.

I remember on one occasion being in Paris, waiting for the boat-train to leave and taking some tea in a cafe. I was accosted by an Irishman, who had been on his travels around France

and Portugal visiting sites where many miracles are said to have taken place. Delighted to find other English speakers in the café, he came across and regaled us with the stories of his travels and the marvellous miracles of which he had heard.

When he had done, I said to him, 'I suppose with all these miracles, your faith is now so strong that you are absolutely sure you are saved.'

'No, no,' he said, 'no man can know he is saved!'

'I thought the Bible said you could,' I replied. I pulled a little Testament out of my pocket and read to him from 1 John 5:13, 'I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God *that you may know* that you have eternal life.'

'Ah yes,' he said, 'but you see it's been translated from the Greek. There are all sorts of manuscripts and you can't be sure that that's exactly what it meant.'

'Is that so?' I asked.

Well, you'll know what I told him: 'It's a lot of obscurantism to exaggerate difficulties like that, when there is no difficulty! If you want to know about the manuscripts, the Greek is as simple as the English. There's no difficulty in understanding it. It says, these things are written "*that you may know* that you have eternal life." The simple words stand as a challenge to our faith. They may be taken utterly at their face value.'

Must we not, however, understand things in their original context? God may have spoken to the early Christians in a way that was true and relevant for them, but not for us because our situation has changed. To some extent that is true. Within the whole range of Scripture you will find things (commands, for instance) that were laid down for a certain time and then no longer applicable. At the Last Supper our Lord rescinded the instructions he had given his disciples for their missionary journeys around Palestine during his lifetime.

And he said to them, 'When I sent you out with no money bag or knapsack or sandals, did you lack anything?' They said, 'Nothing.' He said to them, 'But now let the one who has a money bag take it, and likewise a knapsack. And let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: "And he was numbered with the transgressors." For what is written about me has its fulfilment.' (Luke 22:35-37)

The reason was that, when he came the first time, he came as Israel's Messiah. He had the right, therefore, to commandeer resources to maintain his apostles. But, because the nation outlawed him, he warned his disciples that they could no longer count on the nation and they would have to support themselves.

Or to take a far bigger thing, God's relationship with the Jews was by a covenant containing certain terms, but that is now changed. His relationship with believers nowadays is not on the terms of that old covenant, but the new covenant. Not only is the relationship changed, but also the liturgy and the approach to God. Under the old covenant they used earthly shrines; they had a system of priests and laity, vestments and incense and lights (see Heb 9). All of these were symbols, but those symbols were imposed only until the reality should come. Christ having come, we no longer need the oil lamps, the incense, the

vestments, the priesthood and laity, the literal temple and so on. As the candle goes when the sun rises, the symbol goes when you have the reality.

We must always be careful, however, how and where we apply this principle. The Bible tells us that, though certain bits of God's word have now been rescinded and are no longer applicable to us, they have been left there 'for our learning.' We must take care, lest our own predilections lead us to want to remove the bits we do not like on the grounds that they only applied to first century Christians.

Questions and Answers

Question 1

Looking at Paul's instructions to the women in the church at Corinth, how were they to dress themselves and how were they to behave in general?

DR GOODING: For long centuries the Christian church took Paul to mean what he said and women wore veils or their counterparts in church. Now, for some curious reason, vast sections of Christendom have decided that it was only relevant to Corinth. At Corinth people were very bad and therefore Christian women had to conform to very strict standards of etiquette and behaviour so as not to look like these bad people in Corinth and thereby offend the good people in Corinth. Therefore, in great parts of Christendom nowadays, ladies no longer wear veils, hats, or any other such objects in church.

However, if you look at what Paul actually says, it becomes immediately apparent, right on the surface, that he is not talking about some concession or some temporary thing applicable only to the Christian women in Corinth. He says that the reason why Christian men don't wear hats in church and Christian women do, is for a specific reason:

The head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God. (1 Cor 11:3 RV)

Evidently this is not referring only to local conditions in Corinth. 'The head of Christ is God'—that is absolutely as true today as it was when Paul wrote it. 'And the head of every man is Christ'—that isn't a little adaptation to suit the conditions in Corinth, it is still true now. I'd better pluck up my courage and read the rest!—'And the head of the woman is the man.'

The apostle urged the early Christians to symbolize those timeless verities in this double symbol; wearing a veil if you are a woman and not wearing one if you are a man. It is a significant symbol of spiritual relationships, just as the bread and wine at the Lord's Supper are symbols.

Question 2

Is it possible to describe the infinite in finite terms?

DR GOODING: As far as I can read the mind of the questioner, this is in reference to the doctrine of inspiration. The words in our Bibles are human words in human languages. Is it possible that an infinite God should be able to get his infinite ideas into human words? Surely we cannot claim that the Bible is the word of God, because the Bible is a finite book and God is infinite. Is the doctrine of inspiration therefore a little bit doubtful? The answer is, No!

Of course you can't get infinite things into finite, but let me use an analogy. Take a father and a child. The father is a Nobel prize-winning physicist; his knowledge of physics goes utterly beyond his four year-old, who probably doesn't even know where he came from. Does that mean the father can't communicate anything to the child, or talk to him? Suppose the child has begun to read and can spell some words if they are not more than six letters. He gets a note from his father, 'Went to a party and had jam for tea.' Will the child say to himself, 'I couldn't believe that's the word of my father, because he is a Nobel prize-winning physicist!' It would be nonsense to say that by definition he won't be able to understand anything his father says.

God is infinite and among all his other infinite abilities is his infinite ability to talk to his creatures and make them understand.

Question 3

How do you deal with the moral difficulties in the Bible?

DR GOODING: This is a very serious question, deserving a whole session at least in itself. In the Old Testament in particular, there are deeds of vengeance and apparent cruelty that seem to be so utterly out of accord with the character of God that we cannot begin to think that those parts are inspired. I cannot possibly answer this very big problem fairly in the few minutes that are left. It is much more complicated than sometimes even those who ask it realize, so I am aware that what I say will sound arbitrary by reason of the time.

We must at the first level distinguish between acts of cruelty that God himself and the Bible would disown (recorded because they were performed by people who claimed to be believers in God); and those acts of judgment that God himself authorized. For instance, there is an appalling story in Genesis 34. It tells how Simeon and Levi tricked the inhabitants of Shechem because their sister had been maltreated. Their father, Jacob, wasn't above doing crafty tricks, but even he had to say, 'You have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land' (v. 30). It is recorded for our warning, to remind us that there isn't any cruelty to which people who profess to believe in God will not go under the name of moral indignation and religious fervour. The Bible of course strongly condemns it.

On the other hand there are judgments that the Bible stands over as being instigated by God; notably those exceedingly severe judgments carried out by the Israelites when they invaded Canaan. However, before we could come to the conclusion that they couldn't

possibly be from God, we must refute the notion that *judgment* contradicts the Spirit of Christ. It is a popular notion that the Old Testament is a severe book and the New Testament is by and large a book full of love.

Let me quote from the Old Testament, 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might' (Deut 6:5). 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev 19:18).

Now let me quote, from the New Testament, the words of Christ himself.

And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched'. (Mark 9:43–48)

The popular figure of Jesus has got a little bit distorted. He preached the *love* of God and the *forgiveness* of God; but divine forgiveness is not below *justice*, it is above justice.

What do I mean by that? There is a thing that goes by the name of forgiveness that isn't forgiveness at all, because it is below justice and therefore falls into the category of merely condoning sin. Suppose the police come along to a good woman to inform her that her daughter is in a mental hospital; her mind has been absolutely smashed by drugs. They have caught the drug-pusher and they would like the woman to come along to the police station and identify him. He happens to be a fellow that used to come to tea at one time. Suppose the woman turned round and said, 'It's all right, I forgive him!' But that isn't forgiveness. It's simply being an accomplice to the crime. It is below justice. Justice would say, 'This drug-pusher must be dealt with.'

But there is a forgiveness that is above justice. Christ has found a way by which even that drug-pusher, if he repents, may be forgiven. The very central message of Christianity is that if he ever gets forgiven it won't be by God's weakness, it will be because Christ has borne the sanction of God's law on his behalf. The love of God is *just* in forgiving the repentant, believing sinner. So it is above justice. It upholds the law—it demands that the sanction be fulfilled. Christ, in his love and mercy, bears the sanction for the sinner.

That being so, there is no conflict between the Old and New Testaments in the matter of God's judgments. Indeed, the Old Testament will tell us that, before the Israelites entered Canaan, God already had his eye on the fearful sins of the Canaanites, but he gave them four hundred years to repent. God judged that nation through the Jews, not by a sudden outburst of rage but after long centuries of mercy and tolerance. When the Jews exceeded their role and, for sheer spite and land grabbing, executed Gentiles around them (as Saul and his sons did to the people of Gideon), the divine disfavour and wrath came upon them just as impartially as it had originally come on the Amalekites. 'And the LORD . . . said, Go and utterly destroy the sinners the Amalekites, and fight against them until they be consumed' (1 Sam 15:18 KJV).

So what you have in the Old Testament is not an ancient tribe going berserk in its bloodthirstiness and justifying it by calling on its own tribal God. The message of holy

Scripture is that God is a just God; if men will not repent, his judgments will, and must, fall. Christ also said this and to that extent there is no conflict.

About the Author

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