

Lecture II

THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE --

THE CLARITY OF SCRIPTURE

The lecture today consists of two parts, which to some extent are arbitrarily joined together. Arranging of the total material of the six lectures in approximately equal parts has forced this combination at this point. Inspiration obviously follows on directly from the first lecture devoted to the Scripture and the Word of God. Some consideration of the clarity of Scripture seems desirable before taking up the third lecture, which is devoted to the question of authority and where it resides. So we turn, first, to

THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE

The human writings of the Bible are Word of God because of their inspiration. Only one verse of the Bible actually makes this statement, which is 2 Tim. 3:16... "all scripture is inspired by God". There is no grammatical justification for the translation sometimes seen: "all inspired scripture is ...", and that interpretation is probably rooted in the desire to limit the inspiration of the Scripture in part. Inspiration is, of course, not only asserted of the written form of the Word of God. Inspiration is asserted also in one way or another of Spirit-filled men. Prophetic utterances are utterances of the Lord. The passage often quoted together with 2 Tim. 3:16 puts very fairly the OT picture of the inspiration of the prophetic words: "... no prophecy ever came by the impulse of men, but men moved the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2Pet. 1:21). Lampe, the writer of the article on "Inspiration and Revelation" in the Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (2:713), holds that even in 2 Tim. 3:16 really means the inspiration of human beings; he writes: "'Inspiration' is a quality of persons rather than of writings as such, and there can be little doubt that what is meant is that the scriptures of the OT are the product of men who were specially inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit". We may even speak of the inspiration of the personal Word himself during the course of his life on earth. He was anointed with the Holy Spirit at the time of his baptism, and there were also other occasions on which the influence of the Spirit in Jesus' life is mentioned (Luke 4: 1,18; Matt. 12:28).

But the inspiration of the Scripture is our present question. We first have to inquire into the fact of inspiration and ascertain just what the Scripture has to say of itself in this regard. Even if 2 Tim. 3:16 is to be referred to the inspiration of the written words, which I hold to be the case, it is not the only passage that is germane to our problem, and inspiration is spoken of or implied in a far more pervasive way than the one specific passage might suggest.

We can speak more directly of inspiration in relation to the OT than to the New. The two big passages: 2 Tim. 3:16 and 2 Pet. 1:21, speak directly of the OT situation, and there was no NT in existence when these passages were written (some may have their doubts at this point in respect of 2 Pet. 1:21). "The setting of the Law and the Prophets as sacred books in Judaism, followed by the gradual definition of the rest of the Canon of the OT scriptures, already rested upon the belief that God has uniquely revealed himself to certain minds which he had empowered to receive his self-disclosure". (Lampe, op. cit., 714)

THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE --

In addition to these general statements regarding the inspiration of the OT and the implication of Canon in support, we must also take into account those many phrases referring to individual OT prophecies and sentences which reflect the attitude of the NT writers, and of Jesus himself, to the OT scripture as proceeding from the inspiration of the Spirit. Psalm 110:1 is quoted in Mark 12, and is introduced by Jesus with the words: "David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared" (12:36), the sense of which is properly given in the RSV translation: "David himself, inspired by the Holy Spirit, declared". We recall the words of the Benedictus: "God has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old" (Luke 1:69,70). "The Gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures" so runs the sentence in Rom. 1:2, and to preach this gospel Paul was set apart. The writer to the Hebrews in applying Psalm 95 to the church points to its origin: 'Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" ' (3:7,8).

The two passages, 2 Tim and 2 Pet and the existence of the Canon of the OT (in great part completed by the time of the NT writers) by themselves would prove the point of view that the early church (the NT) saw in the OT scriptures an inspired body of writings just as the Jews at that time also did. But there is a special

aspect of this situation that the NT brings to sharp focus. I am making very full use of the article of Lampe at this point. He is my mentor on this matter.

The Christian church at a very early date (under the guidance of the Lord) carried through a revolution in the understanding of the OT, a revolution indicated in Luke 24. To the two disciples on the way to Emmaus the risen Jesus expounded 'in all the scriptures the things concerning himself', 'beginning with Moses and all the prophets'. 'The Bible was now read as a Christian book. It was a collection of writings whose focus and central point was Christ. The Scriptures, in fact, were a book about Christ. The Law, properly understood, pointed forward to him and spoke of him in types and figures, as the writer to the Hebrews points out at length, the prophets foretold Christ in fuller detail and with greater clarity.... This reinterpretation of the Scriptures is known to us chiefly through the way in which the authors of the NT use the Greek Bible... The justification of the Christian gospel from the pages of Scriptures must have been an essential task of the missionary preacher who sought to commend his message to Jews.'

Now, this drastic change in the understanding of the OT led to a new conception of the inspiration of the ancient writers. They had been seen as men given a singular understanding of the ways of God, men who had spoken forth the word of God to his people. Now it was seen that the God who had 'in many and various ways spoken of old to the fathers by the prophets had spoken in these last days by no one less than one who was a Son, his Son' (Hab. 1:1,2). God's final and complete word to men was spoken in Christ. But it was not a new word, but was continuous with the words spoken through the prophets, through David, through Moses. 'The prophets of Israel were now seen as men who were moved by the Spirit of God to witness to Christ and his coming before the event took place.' The prophets were no longer men of insight into the ways of God in history in general but as those who foresaw and proclaimed beforehand the Incarnation, the act of God in Christ Jesus. This view of the prophets comes out most clearly in the words of 1 Peter: 'The prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired about this salvation; they inquired what person or time was indicated by the Spirit of Christ within them when predicting the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things which have now been announced to you by those who preached the good news to you through the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look' (1 Pet. 1:10-12). The same view of the OT as a whole is reflected also in other passages, notably in St. John's gospel, in the famous sentence from chapter 5: "You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me" (v.39). With which we can associate the words a little later: 'If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?' (vv 46,47).

We must note, finally, in respect of the NT witness to the inspiration of the Old, that there is something like an indirect proof of inspiration produced. This is to be seen from the way in which the OT prophecy and the NT fulfilment are related to each other. I shall quote Lampe directly here, and add to his words some comments of my own.

"There is thus a double movement of thought, as it were, in the primitive church's understanding of the inspiration of the prophetic writers: (a) It accepts their works as a body of sacred scriptures, uniquely authoritative as embodying the word of God to his people. It has taken them over from Judaism with this value already set upon them. It therefore looks to them for evidence for the gospel, and seeks to prove the truth of the Christian understanding of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus on the basis of OT texts. An essential part of the earliest Christian preaching is that "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4). The evidence of the inspired prophets, enshrined in the written Bible, is an actual part of the gospel as Paul had received it and as he handed it on in turn to his own converts. The missionary speeches of the apostles, so far as we may judge from the narrative of Acts, when they were not directed to purely Gentile audiences, like this speeches of Paul at Lystra and Athens, were mainly concerned to show the necessary connection and harmony between the Christian message and the prophecies of the OT, the latter embracing, not only the prophetic books in the narrower sense, but also all those parts of the scripture which could be understood in a new sense as alluding in some way to Christ or to the situation of Christ's church. The inspiration of the ancient prophets, a matter on which both the missionaries and their hearers were fully agreed, could be appealed to as a guarantee of the truth of the gospel. (b) At the same time, the movement of thought runs in the other direction. The inspiration of the prophets is attested in a new way, by

reason of the fact that their utterances have found a fulfilment in the events of the gospel and the age of the church”.

THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE --

A few words may be added to Lampe. There was a certain necessity about the agreement of the fulfilment with the prophecy. Jesus declares to the disciples on the way to Emmaus, ‘O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?’ (Luke 24:25,26). The NT apostolic message is tested by the written word of the OT, and so the Bereans are praised, ‘for they received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so’ (Acts 17:11). If the message of Paul, his gospel, had not been able to stand the test of being in accordance with the written word of the OT, it would by that fact have been disqualified. To go back a step, Jesus’ life and work was not independent and apart from the prophetic word of the OT. There was a Must (Greek: dei) about his mission, which was simply the ancient divine word of promise and the need for that to be fulfilled.

When we now turn to the question of the inspiration of the NT, we have a rather more difficult path to travel, but not by any means an impossible one. Apart from what we find in St. Paul’s writings, which are our real authority among the apostolic writings because of their far greater mass, the important passages for our quest are found in the writings of St. John. Here we mention, first, John 17:20: “I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word”. The word of the apostles is here set up as the power in the church by which human beings are won for Christ. Together with this passage we must take, for the relation of Spirit and apostolic word, John 15:26,27: “But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning.” The witness of the Spirit and that of the apostles of Jesus are in these words identified. Their words of witness to Jesus are inspired words, for they are words of the Spirit. It is probably their spoken words which are in view, although it would be hard to show conclusively that written words are really excluded.

A number of passages from St. Paul are in line with the final conclusions, that the spoken words of the apostles are inspired, that they are God’s words. The foundation of the church is ‘the apostles and the prophets’ (Eph. 2:20). Both prophets and apostles are inspired; through them both the Spirit testifies to Christ. At Thessalonica, Paul presented the gospel ‘in power and in the Holy Spirit’ (1 Thess. 1:5) – a phrase which probably indicates both the inspiration of the preacher and the witness of the Spirit in the hearts of his audience. Passages like the following are in line with this present assertion. So Rom. 15:18,19: “Christ has wrought through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Holy Spirit.” [quotation marks missing here?] So also 1 Cor. 2:4; “And my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power”. It was the Spirit which led him to grasp the meaning of God’s promises (1 Cor. 2:10) “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard...God has revealed to us through the Spirit”. It is a one inspired by the Spirit that Paul approaches and grapples with the problem of Israel’s disobedience Rom. 9:1 “my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit that I have great sorrow and increasing anguish in my heart...”).

In the Thessalonian letters we have, I think, even more pertinent utterances of the apostle concerning his preaching and work in relation to the inspiration of the Spirit. He is conscious of the fact that his word is the word of God. “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what is really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers”(1 Thess. 2:13). It is the Lord’s will that the letter be read to all the brethren (1 Thess. 5:27): “I adjure you by the Lord that this letter be read to all the brethren”. [quotation mark left off here but since added] This latter passage points to the inspiration of the written word of the letter as well, a fact which comes out more clearly in a further combination of sentences from the Thessalonian letters. The word of the letter is put on the same level as the spoken word in 2 Thess. 2:15: “So, then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter”. They convey the same authority: “If any man refuses to obey what we say in this letter, note that man, and have nothing to do with

him, that he may be ashamed" (2 Thess. 3:14). This is inspired utterance if anything is, implies it, and is to be recognized as such. The way in which Paul writes in the Thessalonian letters trembles on the verge of asserting the inspiration of the written New Testament word. Paul almost says: "My words are Scripture like the OT". The early verses of 1 John are probably to be understood very similarly (1 John 1:3-5).

To sum up at this point: It is asserted by direct statement of NT writers and by specific comments in relation to individual passages, and it is implied in the very existence of the canon that Jesus and the apostles held not only that God's Word was somehow present in OT writings but that this was the case through an influence of the Spirit of God, which has not yet been defined or made precise. An effort to do this is still to be made. At this moment of summing-up it can be added without argumentation that inspiration is not only an enlightenment of the human spirit of the OT writers, the prophets, by divine power but also the inspiration of the words spoken or written. Inspiration must be verbal, for that is how we think and how our brain operates in communicating to others. It operates with words.

Can we say something about the How of inspiration as well as about the That? A great number of theories of inspiration have been advanced down the years concerning the inspiration of holy writings, not merely of the biblical scriptures. An account of this could be given here, which I don't intend to do. I shall merely enumerate some of the better known theories, for a proper treatment of inspiration seems to call at least for such a mention. It can be added at once that I reject these theories or explanations, for there is simply no support for them in the biblical writings. The church rightly condemned the view that inspiration was essentially connected with a state of ecstasy, although, as we all know, there are many in the world who can see the Spirit as really active only when the extra-ordinary is taking place. The view that somehow the biblical writers were instruments of the Spirit is a common one and one to be found right down the history of the church. Writers are like musical instruments which the Spirit plays with the appropriate action, blowing, striking, scraping. Or they are like secretaries who write what the Spirit dictates. In most cases, writers who use this comparison resist the idea of mechanical action of verbal inspiration. But this is not always the case. Even those Lutheran Orthodox writers who are least guarded in their use of this comparison and who can speak of the inspiration of Hebrew vowel points do not really want the comparison pressed too far. So Quenstedt insists emphatically that the human writers of the Bible did not write inscii or invitati, but volentes scientesque.

If the suggested methods of inspiration are to be rejected, then what are we to say about the How of inspiration? I don't think we can say anything about it. Where Scripture is silent it is good to say ignoro, I don't know. In what I am to suggest now I am not taking back the last sentence, rather I am in a way underlining it, for what I am to say does not outline a special inspirational action but it will merely draw a comparison between the inspiration of the biblical writers and the spiritual experience of all children of God as to their life of faith.

We are thinking now of the Christian person, shall we say?, one who has come to the faith later on in life, has then been baptized and is now living the life of faith and love. We confess in our Small Catechism that all this is in no way the result of his own reason or strength, not in whole nor even in part, the product of his will, moral strength, intelligence or of any of the powers of his personality. "The Holy Ghost has called him by the Gospel, enlightened him with his gifts, sanctifies and keeps him in the true faith. Here is in influence of the Holy Spirit upon the human personality which we admit and confess, but of which we have no comprehension at all. Our imaginary or ideal person has not changed in size or stature through faith. He looks the same, his cerebral activities are the same, his powers of thought, imagination, self-expression are the same. He probably continues to react to all sorts of stimuli like poetry, music, beauty of their opposites in much the same way as before. Apart from the new conviction of faith in Jesus Christ – the really marvellous new thing – and the life that inspires, he is the same person as he was before. Faith is not what the Holy Spirit does, it is what he inspires in the believer. The person himself knows that he believes, or, at the very least, that he wants desperately to believe. This situation is a marvellous thing compared with his life before his conversion, this he is truly and firmly convinced comes from the Spirit but he can't point to any happening, occurrence, experience which could be remotely described as an evident divine action taking place within him. Those who can observe him, his friends and relatives and his enemies as well, can see the change in him, and they may marvel at it, but they, too, cannot point to a specific divine operation perceptible to them.

I believe that the inspiration of the biblical writers is of the same order, a real event but not one that can be described or made intelligible in any way at all. The prophetic and apostolic men knew that they spoke

and wrote by divine authority and inspiration. God spoke through them, no doubt about it. Of course, not always. Paul could have hardly felt that the divine Spirit led him to curse the high priest, “God shall strike you, you whitewashed wall!”, especially when he goes on to apologize for his outburst. Peter was not led by the Spirit when he acted in inconsistent and offensive fashion at Antioch, for Paul had to rebuke him publicly because he and others ‘were not straight forward about the truth of the Gospel’ (Gal. 2:14). But the many OT passages that come into consideration and the passages spoken by St. Paul mentioned earlier plainly point to a subjective conviction of the holy men of God who spoke or wrote the word of God, or both, that they did so by the Spirit of God. And as for those who heard the word the people of God in the OT were convinced that the claim was true. The church of the New Testament is convinced that as the OT witnessed to Christ, so the writings of the NT are those which give most direct, most original, and most clear and certain testimony to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This last assertion is just the decisive consideration concerning the canon of the NT. One of the chapters of a lengthy essay on the Holy Scripture written by Dr. Sasse for Lutheran Pastors in 1950 concludes with a sentence which summarizes the position taken here. (I do not, however, share any further conclusions that are likely to be drawn from Sasse’s words.)

The Scripture is not inspired because its authors were filled with what Philo the Pneuma and what he described so plastically: that intellectual (geistig) divine fluid which gives man supernatural powers, superhuman insights and divine, superhuman words, and that makes him a theios aner, a superman and enables him to write a superbook, a book with a super-human, divine perfection. But the Sacred Scripture is inspired, because in it is said what can only be said ‘in the Spirit’ (1 Cor. 12:3), because in it testimony is given to what only the Spirit can give witness to, that Jesus is Christ and Lord. (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13,14).

THE CLARITY OF SCRIPTURE

Since the material for this lecture is getting quite extensive already, it will be best to give the material relating to the clarity of Scripture in a summary abstract.

Traditionally, the clarity of Scripture has been stated approximately as follows. My source here is Heinrich Schmid, Die Dogmatik der ev. – luth. Kirche. Since the Holy Scriptures contain everything necessary for salvation, then of necessity they must contain this in so clear and plain a manner that it can be perceived by all. To make the claim of perspicuity (or clarity) for the Bible does not imply that everything contained there is clear and perspicuous for everybody, but only whatever men must know to be saved, not that all passages dealing with the same salvatory matter express it in equally clear language. A further implication is that there are certain natural presuppositions in the reader: intelligence, knowledge of language, careful reading and study; openness to what is being presented and not hostility to it nor prejudice. The clarity that is claimed for the Bible is more than a mere perspicuity inhering in the words and sense of the passages and in the message of the whole. It is a dynamic property that illumines our understanding and leads us to Christ. Further, the perspicuity of Sacred Scripture is not to be so understood as though the mysteries of the Christian faith (Trinity, Person of Christ, and so on) were removed. These rather remain what they are, mysteries. Perspicuity means that the Bible bring to us these mysteries clearly and accurately as God wants us to know them.

Objections that are raised again and again contrary to the claim of clarity can easily be met – the objection, for instance, that there are many obscure passages and sections in the Bible, a fact referred to in the Scriptures themselves; 2 Pet. 3:16 and 1 Cor. 13:12, or that the existence of the public ministry has as a necessary implication that the Scriptures need enlightening from outside, or that exegetical disagreement as to the meaning of many passages, big and small, means that the Scriptures are not clear to the ordinary man.

The traditional Lutheran view concerning the clarity of Scripture and the importance attached to it, particularly in the early history of the church, are undoubtedly related to contradictory Roman claims that the Scripture was not clear and the interpretation of the church was necessary for correct understanding of Scripture. Roman doctrine made the tradition and the interpretation of the church essential for a true understanding of the Scriptures. So Scripture was displaced from its

position of source and nor of faith and life, and till quite recent days was withheld systematically from the laity.

The traditional position of the Lutheran Church on the clarity of Scripture, it seems to me, is eminently sensible and hardly open to serious objection, nor am I aware of much in the way of serious disputing of the claim for perspicuity. There are, however, certain views or developments in the modern church which indirectly constitute an attack, and a serious attack on the clarity of the Scripture.

The first of the matters I have in mind is the contention that there is no unity in the theology of the Bible, and, more particularly, in that of the New Testament. Ernst Käsemann, for instance, wrote an essay thirty years ago which was published only some ten years later, entitled "Begründer der neutestamentliche Kanon die Einheit der Kirche?" He answered this question with a NO. His answer did not imply that divisions in the church could be traced back to corresponding differences in the NT theologies, but rather that since the NT itself bears witness to different theologies and these are only examples of conceivably other theologies contemporary with these which did not happen to get into a haphazard collection of early Christian writings, it is not surprising to find disunity in the church as well. A salient passage of his runs (in rough-and-ready translation):

In the Canon only scraps of the conversation carried on in early Christianity have been preserved, and the variations in the kerygma of the original Christians must have been very much greater than the situation observable in the Canon might lead us to believe.

The variations, however, to be seen in the NT alone are so great that we have to assert there not only serious tensions but even incompatible theological positions, and not a few of these at that.

If he is right, then we can kiss clarity good-bye and confessionalism as well, and as far as I am concerned the whole Gospel with it. If we have doctrinal oppositions, then it is simply not possible to declare what man must know in order to be saved.

The second and final matter I have in mind is the situation created by form criticism and redaction criticism with it. The aim in form criticism is to get behind the written words, to the time when the tradition was in the making, to isolate those factors in the society of Israel and then in early Christian communities which gave rise to the material now recorded in certain Biblical writings. Anyone who has read this kind of material at all carefully will realize how indescribably difficult understanding of the Biblical word has become, and how uncertain almost every sentence. We shall meet form criticism again in these lectures. Here it is mentioned only in order to fill out threats to Biblical clarity arising from developments in the modern church.

Discussion questions omitted