

Pastor and People.

Inspiration.

[Paper read by Rev. Principal Mac-Vicar, L.L.D., before the Dominion Evangelical Alliance, at Montreal, in October last.]

We hear so much in our day of danger and defection, of scepticism, of the revision or destruction of old creeds and confessions, and even of the Bible itself, passing away as superannuated and effete, that it does not seem out of place in a gathering of this sort to ask the questions:

Are we to continue to believe that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God? Can we fully assure ourselves that God at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, and hath in those last days spoken unto us by His Son?

Have we satisfactory evidence to warrant us in affirming that God made choice of certain persons to whom he communicated a revelation of His will, and that He by the special operation of His Spirit rendered them infallible in recording this revelation, and selecting from various sources the materials which we find incorporated in the books of the Bible?

Are we to accept this entire volume as of divine authority?

These are questions which are pressed with peculiar force upon the Christian mind at the present day; and what can be said upon them in a paper of this sort must be incomplete and in briefest outline. It appears to me that there is a very extensive introductory work to be done before we can approach the question of inspiration—a work imposed upon us by the sceptical spirit and form of modern thought and investigation.

It cannot be concealed that there are speculations and theories claiming to be founded in sound philosophy and science, some of them very ancient but now reproduced as discoveries, and others projected for the first time, which we must encounter and set aside before we can gain a fair hearing, or reach a proper starting-point for our doctrine. Glance for a moment at some of these.

Atheism, in its many modern forms, admits of no such doctrine. Unless we can drive men from their secret lurking places they cannot take in the idea of a God-given book for the very obvious reason that in their apprehensions there is no God to deliver such a volume to man.

Pantheism, which in its various forms holds probably a wider sway than any other anti-theistic system, is equally hostile to inspiration. If we concede Spinoza's central proposition that Being is one and indivisible, "substantia una et unica," that God and His works are so commingled as to be indistinguishable from each other, then we plead in vain, such personal attributes and acts on His part as are requisite in communicating a revelation to mankind.

Materialism sets aside inspiration. The God of the Materialist like that of the Pantheist, is devoid of personality, strangely diffused throughout all nature as an unintelligent force, a mere causality, or a blind and absolute law.

Indeed, some recent disciples of this school seem willing to dispense with even this vague and shadowy God; they require only matter—of the origin of which they either neglect or refuse to give us any account—in order to evolve from it "every form and quality of life." This is Professor Tyndall's last public confession. For the Creation and government of the universe he requires no God but matter. But there is nothing new in this except the peculiar vagueness of the terms in which the Professor's God is defined. Others long ago uttered the same sentiments. Schelling and Carlyle speak of God as force, and as the eternal movement of the universe, in very much the same sense as Tyndall talks of "the promise and potency of matter." In fact, the whole Oriental world anticipated all of them by many long centuries in advancing this creed, and regarded God as somehow slumbering and concealed in matter as "the unconscious ground of being."

But what are we to do with all these and kindred theories? Are we to allow them to pass unchallenged? It is frequently said that our work is to preach the Gospel; and this is true, but not the whole truth. We are "set for the defence" as well as for the propagation of the Gospel. We are to hold fast as well as to hold forth the Word of Life. We must by all means be in earnest in saving souls, but equally in earnest in striking down the enemies that deceive and destroy them. Or in other words, we must understand clearly what work we can and should do in seeking to save men. I have no idea that it is the duty of the man who is loyal to God and the Bible to stand by meekly offering no resistance to those who would rob us of the truth; on the contrary I believe it to be a very essential part of Gospel work in the present day to expose the folly and wickedness of Atheism, Pantheism, Materialism, and the rest; and Theologians must go aside from the old beaten path to meet and overthrow the enemy in the by-ways which he makes for himself. I do not say that they are to preach science and philosophy; no, these would be wretched substitutes—husks to offer the souls of men, instead of the living Word—but they require to write and to publish philosophy and science. They require by a patient and comprehensive study, not of medieval scholasticism, but of the facts and laws of natural science, and of the relations between matter and spirit; to expose the hasty dogmatism of Materialists. They must meet their opponents, too, upon their own grounds, and fight over again the old battles of Theism and raise the advocates and abettors of all such follies out of the barbaric darkness into which they have descended, to the apprehension of the grand fundamental and yet elementary truth which we teach our little children in the Sunday-school, "that God is a Spirit"—not a force, not a law, but a spirit, a person, and as such possessed of freedom and other personal attributes; and that He is "infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth."

It appears to me that by sound philosophy and science we can bring men to the length of being Theist. There is an Evangelical Rationalism, a legitimate and most valuable use of reason, in this connection which we cannot despise or condemn. From a proper understanding of the facts of consciousness, which are just as real as anything which natural science can advance, and the result of which must be conceded before science is possible, men may arrive at the conviction that God is, and from this go on to learn all the grand truths revealed by God's works, or the lessons of natural religion. But until they arrive at this stage, until the Divine existence, in a clear and proper sense, is acknowledged, it is useless to propose to them any doctrine of inspiration.

Here again let me guard myself against being misunderstood. I do not say that by the means proposed we can make them Christians, or save their souls—no; but we may attain that which the Apostle deemed desirable his day when he spoke of certain persons whose "mouths must be stopped." We may deter and prevent them from destroying others; and may even bring them to a knowledge of the truth. When dismissed of their deadly weapons they may be open to the power of the living word. Paul found it necessary to remove the fatal dagger from the Pagan jailer's hand, to cry to him with a loud voice, "Do thyself no harm," before he said to him, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved and thy house."

As if you find a man drunk, helpless and besotted in the gutter, what is your first word with him? You must lift him up and nurse and sober him before you can preach the Gospel to him. And so if you find a man's mind poisoned, delirious, utterly paralyzed through materialism, or any similar system, you must restore him to proper rationality before you can speak the Gospel to his heart, with the hope that the Holy Ghost may give him life and lead him to accept the Word as divine and the warrant of saving faith.

But suppose we bring men this length, the length of being Theist, we are far from having them on solid ground with respect to Inspiration.

It is a lamentable fact, with which every scholar is acquainted, that many opinions have been advanced by those who have agreed in affirming the Divine existence, which are as dangerous and subversive of the truth as those to which we have just referred.

Such is the case with all rationalistic attempts to deal with the question of Inspiration. I now use the term rationalistic in its offensive sense; and cannot wait to state, much less to refute, the many strange notions which come under this term.

Take one example out of many—the theory associated with the name of the distinguished Schleiermacher; and this is selected, not as the worst, but as one of the most devout looking theories which Germany has produced. It is not atheistic. It grants the Divine existence, and affirms that God is the Creator of the universe and the Redeemer of sinful men, and that He twice interposed in a supernatural manner in the affairs of the world; first, in the creation of man; and, secondly, in the incarnation of Jesus Christ; but, aside from these two instances, all that is embraced in human history is natural. The origin and the contents of the Bible are to be accounted for on natural principles. It is the natural outgrowth of the life of the Church; and hence as this spiritual life rises or sinks the teachings of this volume improve or deteriorate. In the earlier portions of it, accordingly, we have crude and imperfect utterances, utterances which cannot be placed on a level with the verified results of modern scientific research, and this is owing to the primitive and relatively uneducated state of the Church; but as the world grows older, and man advances in knowledge and culture, we observe a marked improvement in the sacred writings, until at last humanity and religious life are perfected in the person of Jesus Christ, and then we have the highest forms of what we call revelation, which, however, are nothing more than the developments of the human intellect without any special divine interposition.

Such is the theory. And it is not surprising that it should be regarded with favor by a certain class of literally and scientific men. It ministers abundantly to human ambition and vanity. The historian, the poet, the novelist, can all accept this doctrine, whatever their conduct and general opinions may be, and take no small credit to themselves in educating the world up to the point at which the highest forms of revelation become possible. Scientists can hold this notion and dream away about the development of all creatures from a few primordial germs, or the evolution of them from matter or from nothing. Indeed, it is the natural ally of the doctrine of development, which, for the moment, seems to be almost universally dominant. Theologians of the Max Muller school can accept this theory while they work out a science of religion and see in all religions germs and elements of truth, and finally regard them all as equally divine, or rather equally human.

And why should we reject a doctrine so generally popular?

Not because it advocates a gradual unfolding of divine truth. This we believe to have been God's method of making known His mind to men. He gave them here a little and there a little, and carried them forward step by step from the truths suitable to the early ages of the world to the fullest manifestations of His will which the Church on earth is to enjoy. We can hold this view and at the same time believe that God's first utterances were as infallibly true as His last. Hence we do not reject the phase of rationalism referred to, because it teaches a gradual development of Divine truth; but we reject it because it ignores God as the author of His own Word and makes man the author of what we shall show he has received from God. So much for one form of rationalism as it deals with the question of Inspiration.

Take another, that which gives special prominence to God's providence, and which has been sometimes called the Providential theory.

In this case God is represented as guiding and controlling the occurrence of all events; but in doing so He adheres to certain eternal laws, from which the slightest departure is impossible, and hence, if we are to have any doctrine of Inspiration, it must be consistently with this adherence to eternal laws. We may, indeed, regard man as inspired when, by a happy combination of circumstances, they are elevated to a higher plane of knowledge and religious experience than others, or when God works in a special degree on their intellectual consciousness. In this sense Plato and Socrates as well as Paul and John were inspired or rendered superior to other men intellectually and spiritually; but their utterances contained nothing but the offspring of their own minds. They had no external revelation from God.

Thus Newman declares: "An authoritative external revelation of moral and spiritual truth is essentially impossible to man."

Davidson, in his introduction to the Old Testament, says: "When the prophets spoke of the work of the Lord coming to them, or when they began their message by 'thus saith the Lord,' it is not meant that the Deity really spoke to their external organs of hearing, or that they received a distinct commission to write. They were moved by their own spiritual impulses to utter or write the extraordinary intuitions of truth which the Spirit enabled them to reach. God spoke to them, not by a miraculous communication, foreign to human experience, but by the inward voice of spiritual consciousness, which daily and hourly tells every one, if he will listen, what his work in this world is, and how he should do it."

In these opinions Coleridge, Arnold, Maurice and many others substantially agree. They hold, to use the words of one of their number, that the writers of the Bible "experienced an inspiration the same as what every believer enjoys." The Holy Ghost wrought in prophets and apostles as He does in all the children of God, but not in such a sense as to make them a class by themselves, divinely chosen and supernaturally endowed; and their writings should be regarded only as a record of the devotional sentiments and opinions of men highly favored of the Lord.

To accept this theory, again, is manifestly to give up all that is distinctive in our doctrine; to abandon miracles, prophecy, inspiration, is in fact to set aside the whole Bible. It is not worth while contending, for inspiration in the sense of this theory, for if the sacred writers were in no wise endowed beyond "what every believer enjoys," there is nothing to hinder us in this enlightened age, with our superior educational advantages, and our access to the experience of past ages, to far surpass them, and to produce a much better book than the one which has been so long regarded as the Word of God. We drop this scheme, therefore, as unworthy of a place, or of any countenance in Christian theology.

Equally hopeless is it to defend the Divine authority of this volume by falling back upon any one of the theories of partial inspiration. It has been asserted, from the 12th century down to our own day, that there are different degrees of inspiration. That the law is in this respect superior to the Prophets, and they again are superior to the Hagiographa. Some have held that the thoughts, but not the words, of the sacred writers were inspired; others have urged that the Holy Ghost rendered the writers infallible in all doctrinal matters, but allowed them to err in history, geography and science generally; while not a few are disposed to mutilate the Word of God by accepting certain portions of it as of Divine authority, such as the New Testament or the discourses of our Lord, and rejecting the rest as unworthy of confidence.

But is it not plain that if such liberties as these are to be taken with the volume it is scarcely worth while retaining any portion of it? We may as well cast the whole of it overboard at once. If certain portions are inferior to others in point of Divine authority and accuracy, if there has been no infallible guidance enjoyed in the selection of words, and no safeguard against error in history and science, and if certain parts, whole books in fact, are to be branded as not trustworthy, then the volume sinks far below a respectable human production that issues from the press.

And is this the melancholy conclusion that we are forced to adopt? By no means. We are far from surrendering the old doctrine of the Catholic Church as untenable or indefensible. We may not be able to accept all the arguments by which it has been maintained, but the doctrine itself remains undisturbed amid all the noise and boasting of modern scepticism; and while we hear so much about destructive criticism it may be well for us to fix distinctly in our minds the things which remain.

It seems to me that we can safely rest our doctrine on the following propositions.

1st.—That there is nothing improbable or impossible in the miraculous inspiration of men to whom God revealed His will.

And here, at the very outset, I join issue with all theories referred to, which labor to remove the miraculous from the discussion of this question. On the contrary, I maintain that inspiration involves a miracle as truly as the incarnation of the Son of God, or the restoration of the dead to life again, and the inspiration which is not miraculous, as has been already hinted, is not worth defending.

But what is a miracle? Many answers have been given to this question. The one which appears to my mind satisfactory is this, and is expressed with a slight modification in the words of Hobbes. A miracle is a work of God, aside from His usual mode of acting, and may be employed by Him to accredit His messenger. If so, on the face of it, improbable or impossible that such works should occur? A miracle is a work of God, and hence I do not need to wait to prove that it is possible. I know that devout scientific men have volunteered their testimony in favor of the possibility of miracles. They have said, for example, that in the record of the rocks they see conclusive evidence of successive creative acts by which one order of creatures and then another appeared upon the stage of being. But such proof seems

to me quite unnecessary, for this reason, that to ask me to prove that a miracle is possible, is the same thing as to ask me to prove that God can work, and this is what no sane man will demand from me.

But does not the form of divine activity, which we denominated miraculous, involve the contradiction or infraction of natural laws? By no means. These laws simply indicate God's usual or ordinary mode of acting; and these miracles are just another mode of acting, and, surely, no one can imagine that God is so fettered by law as to be incapable of going aside from the normal course of action. And why should He contradict himself when He does so? You can exercise your personal freedom and turn aside to many special courses of action without incessantly contradicting yourself; and will you grant less than this to Jehovah? Miracles are not unforeseen, or out of time and place to Him. They surprise and startle us because of our ignorance of God's government, but to Him they are not new or surprising, since they always had a place in His mighty plan.

But I said that a miracle is a work of God, and hence I have no difficulty in accepting the very greatest that can be involved in this question of inspiration, or recorded in the Bible.

Some persons do experience grave difficulty in this connection, and this, perhaps, is the root of all the curious theories of inspiration which have disgraced theology. The persons who advance them are at a loss to understand how God could look after the dictation of all the words of the Bible, and how, while doing this, he could allow each writer to have his own peculiar style, and how He could conciliate this infallible guidance with human freedom, or how He, a spirit, could speak to the ears of men and give them an external revelation of Divine things.

Now all this is of precisely the same nature as the perplexities which people experience about the theory of the deluge, or of Jonah, or of Balaam's ass speaking, or of the sun standing still while Joshua was fighting against the Amorites. Such a miracle as this, the sudden arresting of the world in its revolution upon its axis, they say, would involve the derangement and ruin of the whole universe.

We answer, so it would if left to you to manage. But when God sets to His hand to work is there anything too hard for Him to do? The fact is that the moment you grant that a miracle is the work of God, you need not feel bound to find out little miracles for Him to perform; you may, on the contrary, hold that the greater the work the more it is in harmony with what a becoming its Omnipotent author. Instead, therefore, of straining every point and trying, as has so frequently been done under rational influence, to find out with how little of Divine interposition I can make up the Bible, my mind is quite open to the conclusion that it is not in the slightest degree improbable or impossible that the whole Bible is full of God, that "all Scripture is given by the inspiration of God."

2nd.—Take now a second proposition upon which we rest our doctrine, viz: that an appeal to the Bible itself will make it incontrovertibly evident that it contains superhuman elements, or that it is not the product of the human mind. Surely this is a fair enough way of dealing with the question. I do not say, at this stage, as is said in so many standard books on the subject, that the writers claim to be inspired, and, therefore, they were inspired. This is a *petitio principii*, a begging of the question. An impostor might seek to sustain his pretensions by testifying in his own favour, by saying that he was inspired. Avoiding this method, then, what I ask the sceptic to do is to read this book and disregard, in the meantime, what the writers say of themselves or of each other, and look exclusively at the contents of the record which they make.

The very silence of these men is superhuman. Take for example the much debated account given of creation. It is expressed in a few brief sentences which contain enough, but not too much. Had it contained a full scientific description of the structure of the earth and of the relations and movements of the heavenly bodies, it would have inevitably contradicted the experience and limited observation of the early ages of the world, and must have led to the rejection of the entire volume. Besides, such an account would have crippled the human intellect by cutting off the field of investigation and discovery. But as it is, when the subjects in question are scientifically and thoroughly examined the brief opening sentences of the Book of Genesis are found to accord perfectly with the verified results of science.

Take another example of this superhuman silence. We have it in the manner in which the incarnation of Jesus Christ is touched by the sacred writers. They raise none of the curious questions of the mediæval theology in this connection. They simply give us one sublime utterance made to the Virgin. "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee, wherefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee, shall be called the Son of God." This is all—no attempt at proof or explanation.

Then we have no specific description of our Lord's personal appearance, of His complexion, His stature and such like; and His biographers bestow no praise upon Him when he manifests the very highest forms of virtue and wisdom, or performs the most beneficent and amazing deeds. Why this restraint or silence? It is human or superhuman?

But let us not argue from what is not said; let us take some specimens of the communications made by these writers. And here we venture to say that the Decalogue as a generalization of human duty could not have originated in the human intellect. We have nothing like it in all human legislation. And if anything can be regarded as superhuman, it is the minute and accurate knowledge of distant future events; such knowledge these writers abundantly evince. Take a few familiar examples.

They foretold the birth of Jesus and the circumstances of it, as well as the details of His life and death. I know that it has been slanderously said that these were no prophecies; that the biographers of Jesus

agreed to apply these ancient utterances to their hero; but that we have no reason to believe that the writers of the Hebrew scriptures had any special insight into future events. No assertion can be more groundless than this. And happily for our argument, but unfortunately for their reckless mode of dealing with prophecy, we have in the same Old Testament writings declarations respecting kingdoms and cities for the proof of the fulfilment of which we not dependent upon the testimony of four Evangelists who might be accused of collusion in order to exalt and defy their Master. We have in these instances the incontrovertible testimony of the ruins of these cities which have broken silence in the very hands of the infidel and have declared that the sacred writers, ages before, minutely described their doom.

Then, in the New Testament we have predictions as to the destruction of Jerusalem, the dispersion of the Jews, the diffusion of the Gospel, the conversion of the Gentiles, and the rise and progress of the Papacy.

What proof have we that the persons making these announcements possessed a full and accurate knowledge of future events? We point to seven millions of Jews scattered over the whole world, and to millions upon millions of Gentile converts, ourselves among them, and to millions of blind and abject slaves of "the man of sin," as witnesses in this case.

But not to multiply instances of this sort, we now press the sceptic with the question: Does not reason, does not common honesty, compel you to confess that these elements in the Book are superhuman? Account, then, for their origin. If they are not from the human mind whence are they? Our account of them is short and simple. They are God-given. And this being so, we do not care to perplex ourselves as to how God gave them, whether by dreams, or visions, or words addressed to the ears of men, or by revelations conveyed in some inexplicable manner to human consciousness. The mode of Divine operation in giving us truth is not what we wish to determine, but the great fact that this volume is the record of the revelation which He has given.

But suppose it conceded that there are certain Divine elements in this volume, how are we to reach the plenary inspiration of the whole? We answer by a very simple and conclusive method which will be made apparent by our third proposition, viz:—

3rd.—That Jesus Christ was neither deceived nor a deceiver. He was what he professed to be. To enter upon the discussion of this question would lead us far beyond the proper limits of this paper. Suffice it, therefore, to say that we have risen from the patient examination of very much of what has been written by friends and by foes touching the life and character of Jesus, with the proposition just announced thoroughly established in our mind. What follows from this? If Jesus was what He professed to be, then He was infallible. If He was not mistaken or deceived, then His testimony in this matter of inspiration is final. And He did most assuredly accept, not certain portions of the Old Testament, but the whole of it, as given by God, as the Word of Jehovah. In this sense He set His seal distinctly to the Law, the Prophets and the Hagiographa; and He promised that His Apostles who were to complete the canon of Scripture, should be guided infallibly by the Spirit in their speeches and writings.

Thus we reach the plenary inspiration of the whole volume. We have the doctrine from the lips of Jesus. And here we might end our argument. But, instead of doing so, we submit a fourth proposition, which is usually, but unfortunately, as I think, placed on the foreground, viz:—

4th.—That the writers of this Book claim to have been inspired. To begin with this declaration seems to me a begging of the question.

The very thing which we desire to ascertain is, were they inspired; and surely, as a matter of argument, this should not be taken for granted at the outset. But, having discovered that there is nothing improbable or impossible in the miracle required in order to inspiration, and having been forced by an examination of the Book to conclude that it is not the product of the human intellect, or that it must be from God; having found that Jesus Christ was what He professed to be, Divine and infallible, and that He testified to the Divine origin of this Book; and being well assured that these men were no enthusiasts, but calm and honest, men of high moral character and thoroughly trustworthy, we think it now quite fair to ask, did they claim any such supernatural endowments as we establish in their behalf? And you know the answer. They did. You have the answer given *in extenso* in any ordinary treatise on inspiration.

And now I have only time to enunciate, without illustration, the remaining propositions of my argument.

5th.—The scientific and historic discoveries of the present day, instead of unsettling our doctrine, are daily affording strong confirmations of it.

6th.—The living power of this Word is not diminished. It is felt and acknowledged more at this day throughout the world than in any former period of history. Felt by all, by peasants and princes, by barbarians and scholars. There is confessedly a universal influence diffused by the book throughout the nations, and if you ask its opponents what is the character of this influence, they are bound in honesty, in the light of history and reason, to say that it is more than human, that it is divine. The most bitter and determined among their ranks feel now unable to argue that conformity to the life and character of Jesus disqualifies a man in any way to be a most happy and useful citizen. They feel unable to furnish proof that the fullest subjection of the human soul to all the laws and principles of the Gospel is found to operate injuriously to the individual, to the community, or to the nation—they feel that none of the evils which afflict society are to be traced logically and legitimately to the direct influence of this book. They can, indeed, point to the blood-stained page of Ecclesiastical History, strifes, discords and persecutions flowing from the perversion of Christian principles, but they have discernment