

**THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE  
IN THE ENGLISH REFORMERS  
ILLUMINATED BY JOHN CALVIN**

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The question of the divine inspiration of holy Scripture was scarcely a live issue four hundred years ago, for it was not in dispute. However fierce the debate concerning the precise meaning of certain passages of Scripture, or concerning the scriptural validity of the claims made for the authority of the Church or of ecclesiastical tradition, that the Bible was the inspired Word of God was universally acknowledged. Accordingly, those who turn to the writings of the English Reformers expecting to find works in which the doctrine of the inspiration of holy Scripture is systematically developed or defended will be disappointed. This does not mean, however, that, on the one hand, the principle of the inspiration of holy Scripture was consistently and scrupulously applied by all who acknowledged it (had that been the case, there would have been no need for the Reformation), or, on the other hand, that the Reformers did not have much to say about the Bible and its origin, for of course they did, particularly with a view to the exposure and confutation of error and within the framework of the controversy with the papists over the locus of authority. The purpose of this paper will be to examine the teaching of the English Reformers, allowing them to speak for themselves on this important subject, and then to turn to John Calvin in order to illustrate the Reformed approach to certain problems, if they are such, which present themselves in the course of a detailed study of the biblical text.

Let us hear, then, what the English Reformers have to say.

In the first place, they unhesitatingly believed that God was the primary author of the Bible. Thus in his “Exposition upon Nehemiah” James Pilkington affirms:

“Scripture cometh not first from man, but from God; and therefore God is to be taken for the author of it, and not man . . . God then is the chiefest author of this book [Nehemiah], as he is of the rest of the

scripture, and Nehemiah the pen or writer of all these mysteries.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Bishop Hugh Latimer, in his sermon preached before King Edward VI on 8 March 1549, proclaims:

“The excellency of this word is so great, and of so high dignity, that there is no earthly thing to be compared unto it. The author thereof is so great, that is, God himself, eternal, almighty, everlasting. The Scripture, because of him, is also great, eternal, most mighty and holy.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer exhorts:

“Let us stay, quiet, and certify our consciences with the most infallible certainty, truth, and perpetual assurance of them [the Scriptures]. Let us pray to God, the only author of these heavenly studies, that we may speak, think, believe, live, and depart hence according to the wholesome doctrines and verities of them” — as indeed this great Archbishop faithfully did in his ministry and martyrdom.<sup>[3]</sup>

And William Whitaker, who was Queen’s Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge, and whose *Disputation on Holy Scripture* is the one extensive work on the subject of the Bible written by an English Reformer, speaks as follows:

“Scripture hath for its author God himself; from whom it first proceeded and came forth. Therefore the authority of Scripture may be proved from the author himself, since the authority of God himself shines forth in it.”<sup>[4]</sup>

Together with his fellow-Reformers both at home and abroad, Bishop John Jewel delighted in the definition of the Bible as “the Word of God” — a definition which is consonant with the conviction that God is its author.

“The scriptures,” he says, “are ‘the word of God’. What title can there be of greater value? What may be said of them to make them of greater authority, than to say, ‘The Lord hath spoken them?’ that ‘they came not by the will of men, but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost?’ . . . The word of the gospel is not as the word of an earthly prince. It is of more majesty than the word of an angel . . . For it is the word of the living and almighty God, of the God of hosts, which hath done whatsoever pleased him, both in heaven and in earth. By this word he maketh his will known . . . This word the angels and blessed

spirits used, when they came down from heaven, to speak unto the people; when they came to the blessed virgin, and to Joseph, and to others: they spake as it was written in the prophets and in the scriptures of God: they thought not their own authority sufficient, but they took credit to their saying, and authority to their message, out of the word of God . . . . Whatsoever truth is brought unto us contrary to the word of God, it is not truth, but falsehood and error: whatsoever honor done unto God disagreeeth from the honor required by his word, it is not honor unto God, but blasphemy . . . . Tyrants, and Pharisees, and heretics, and the enemies of the cross of Christ have an end; but the word of God hath no end. No force shall be able to decay it. The gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Cities shall fall: kingdoms shall come to nothing: empires shall fade away as the smoke; but the truth of the Lord shall continue for ever. Burn it, it will rise again: kill it, it will live again: cut it down by the root, it will spring again.”<sup>[5]</sup>

“The Word of the Lord is the bush, out of which issueth a flame of fire,” Jewel says again. “The scriptures of God are the mount, from which the Lord of hosts doth show himself. In them God speaketh to us: in them we hear the words of everlasting life.”<sup>[6]</sup>

As the Word of God, the Scriptures are, of course, the Word of God *to man*. But the Reformers repeatedly emphasize the truth that it is only through the grace of the internal operation of the Holy Spirit in heart and mind that the message of Scripture can be understood and appropriated. The Divine Spirit is both the author of Scripture and the interpreter of his own Word.

“The scripture speaketh many things as the world speaketh,”

William Tyndale, the honored father of our English Bible instructs us;

“but they may not be worldly understood, but ghostly and spiritually: yea, the Spirit of God only understandeth them; and where he is not, there is not the understanding of the scripture, but unfruitful disputing and brawling about words. The scripture saith, God seeth, God heareth, God smelleth, God walketh, God is with them, God is not with them, God is angry, God is pleased, God sendeth his Spirit, God taketh his Spirit away, and a thousand such like: and yet is none of them true after the worldly manner, and as the words sound.”

After citing 1 Cor 2:11f and Rom 8:14 and 9, Tyndale proceeds:

“Now ‘he that is of God heareth the word of God’ John 8. And who is of God but he that hath the Spirit of God? Furthermore, saith he, ‘Ye hear it not because ye are not of God;’ that is, ye have no lust in the word of God, for ye understand it not; and that because his spirit is not in you. Forasmuch then as the scripture is nothing else but that which the Spirit of God hath spoken by the prophets and apostles, and cannot be understood but of the same Spirit, let every man pray to God to send him his Spirit.”<sup>[7]</sup>

Whitaker enumerates the evidences which, as given by Calvin (*Institutes*, I, viii), are a testimony to the divine origin of the biblical writings; but then he adds the following admonition.

“These topics may prove that these books are divine, yet will never be sufficient to bring conviction to our souls so as to make us assent, unless the testimony of the Holy Spirit be added . . . In order, therefore, that we should be internally in our consciences persuaded of the authority of Scripture, it is needful that the testimony of the Holy Ghost should be added. And he, as he seals all the doctrines of faith and the whole teaching of salvation in our hearts, and confirms them in our consciences, so also does he give us a certain persuasion that these books, from which are drawn all the doctrines of faith and salvation, are sacred and canonical.”<sup>[8]</sup>

In this assurance too, of course, Whitaker and Calvin are entirely at one with each other.

“The blind cannot perceive even the light of the sun,” says Whitaker again; “nor can they distinguish the splendor of the scriptures, whose minds are not divinely illuminated. But those who have the eyes of faith can behold this light. Besides, if we recognize men when they speak, why should we not also hear and recognize God speaking in his word? . . . But they [the papists] object that we cannot recognize the voice of God, because we do not hear God speaking. This I deny. For those who have the Holy Spirit, are *taught of God*: these can recognize the voice of God as much as anyone can recognize a friend, with whom he hath long and familiarly lived, by his voice.”<sup>[9]</sup>

In answer to the objection that “the Scripture is not the voice of God, but the Word of God; that is, it does not proceed immediately from God, but is

delivered mediately to others,” Whitaker offers this comment:

“We confess that God hath not spoken by himself, but by others. Yet this does not diminish the authority of scripture. For God inspired the prophets with what they said, and made use of their mouths, tongues, and hands: the scripture, therefore, is even immediately the voice of God. The prophets and apostles were only the organs of God.”<sup>[10]</sup>

This assertion he supports by citing Heb 1:1 and 2 Pet 1:21.

An important point at issue during the Reformation was the sense in which Scripture should be interpreted (and this, indeed, continues to be a matter of importance). It was the contention of the English Reformers that the only proper sense was that which the Holy Spirit intended, and this they defined as the *literal* sense (not to be confused with literalism: it is the equivalent of what we today would call the *natural* sense). This is a principle on which Tyndale insists with particular emphasis.

“The scripture hath but one sense,” he affirms, “which is the literal sense. And that literal sense is the root and ground of all, and the anchor that never faileth, whereunto if thou cleave, thou canst never err or go out of the way. And if thou leave the literal sense, thou canst not but go out of the way. Never-the-later, the Scripture useth proverbs, similitudes, riddles, or allegories, as all other speeches do; but that which the proverb, similitude, riddle, or allegory signifieth, is ever the literal sense, which thou must seek out diligently.”<sup>[11]</sup>

The literal sense, he further insists, is at the same time the spiritual sense, as follows from the premise of the divine authorship of Scripture:

“God is a Spirit, and all his words are spiritual. His literal sense is spiritual, and all his words are spiritual.”<sup>[12]</sup>

Whitaker also expresses himself clearly to the same effect.

“It is surely foolish,” he writes, “to say that there are as many senses of scripture as the words themselves may be transferred and accommodated to bear. For although the words may be applied and accommodated tropologically, allegorically, anagogically, or any other way; yet there are not therefore various senses, various interpretations and explications of scripture, but there is but one sense, and that the literal, which may be variously accommodated, and from which various

things may be collected . . . The sense of scripture, therefore, is but one, — the literal; for it is folly to feign many senses, merely because many things follow from the words of scripture rightly understood. These things may indeed, be called corollaries or consequences, flowing from the right understanding of the words, but new and different senses they are by no means . . . It is only from the literal sense that strong, valid, and efficacious arguments can be derived . . . It follows, therefore, that this and no other is the genuine sense of scripture . . . Therefore, tropology, allegory, and anagoge, if they are real meanings, are literal ones. Now the reason why sound arguments are always derived from the literal sense is this, because it is certain that that which is derived from the words themselves is ever the sense of the Holy Spirit . . . Since he is the author of the scriptures, it is fit that we should follow him in interpreting scripture.”<sup>[13]</sup>

The question naturally arose (and this, too, is a question of importance for our day no less than it was in the sixteenth century) as to how far credence was to be given to the Church Fathers and their writings. Let Bishop Jewel answer:

“What say we of the fathers, Augustine, Ambrose, Hierome, Cyprian, &c.? What shall we think of them, or what account may we make of them? They be interpreters of the Word of God. They were learned men, and learned fathers; the instruments of the mercy of God, and vessels full of grace. We despise them not, we read them, we reverence them, and give thanks unto God for them. They were witnesses unto the truth, they were worthy pillars and ornaments in the church of God. Yet they may not be compared with the word of God. We may not build upon them: we may not make them the foundation and warrant of our conscience: we may not put our trust in them. Our trust is in the name of the Lord.”

Jewel cites the declaration of Augustine, the greatest of the Fathers, as follows:

“Neither weigh we the writings of all men, be they never so worthy and catholic, as we weigh the canonical scriptures; but that, saving the reverence that is due unto them, we may mislike and refuse somewhat in their writings, if we find that they have taught otherwise than the



truth may bear. Such am I in the writings of others, and such would I wish others to be in mine” (see Augustine, *Ep.* CXLVIII, *ad Fortunatianum*). “Some things I believe,” Jewel continues, “and some things which they write I cannot believe. I weigh them not as the holy and canonical scriptures. Cyprian was a doctor of the church, yet he was deceived: Hierome was a doctor of the church, yet he was deceived: Augustine was a doctor of the church, yet he wrote a book of Retractations; he acknowledged that he was deceived.” Jewel adduces further evidence from the writings of the Fathers, and then proceeds: “I could shew many the like speeches of the ancient fathers, wherein they reverence the holy scriptures; as to which only they give consent without gainsaying; which can neither deceive nor be deceived.”<sup>[14]</sup>

“What is the cause,” asks Tyndale, “that we damn some of Origen’s works and allow some? How know we that some is heresy and some not? By the scripture, I trow. How know we that St Augustine (which is the best, or one of the best, that ever wrote upon the scripture) wrote many things amiss at the beginning, as many other doctors do? Verily, by the scriptures; as he himself well perceived afterward, when he looked more diligently upon them, and revoked many things again. He wrote of many things which he understood not when he was newly converted, ere he had thoroughly seen the scriptures, and followed the opinions of Plato, and the common persuasions of man’s wisdom that were then famous.”<sup>[15]</sup>

If the authority of the Fathers must be subject to that of holy Scripture, so also must the authority of the Church. In particular, Scripture is not dependent on the pronouncements of the Church for its authentication, for it is authenticated to every believer by the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit.

“We do not deny,” says Whitaker, “that it appertains to the church to approve, acknowledge, receive, promulge, commend the scriptures to all its members; and we say that this testimony is true, and should be received by all. We do not, therefore, as the papists falsely say of us, refuse the testimony of the church, but embrace it. But we deny that we believe the scriptures solely on account of this commendation of them by the church. For we say that there is a more certain and illustrious testimony, whereby we are persuaded of the sacred character of these

books, that is to say, the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, without which the commendation of the church would have no weight or moment. The papists, therefore, are unjust to us, when they affirm that we reject and make no account of the authority of the church. For we gladly receive the testimony of the church, and admit its authority; but we affirm that there is a far different, more certain, true, and august testimony than that of the church. The sum of our opinion is, that the Scripture is *αυτοπιστος*, that is, hath all its authority and credit from itself; is to be acknowledged, is to be received, not only because the church hath so determined and commanded, but because it comes from God, not by the church, but by the Holy Ghost.”<sup>[16]</sup>

And again:

“Now that it is in itself the word of God, they [the papists] do not deny, but they say that we cannot be certain of it without the help of the church: they confess that the voice of God sounds in our ears; but they say that we cannot believe it, except upon account of the church’s approbation. But now, if it be the word of God which we hear, it must needs have a divine authority of itself, and should be believed by itself and for itself.”<sup>[17]</sup>

The Bible is, in fact, the very touchstone of truth, by which the Church, the Fathers, and all traditions must be tested and judged. “The scripture is the touchstone that trieth all doctrines, and by that we know the false from the true,” asserts Tyndale in his “Prologue to the Book of Genesis.”<sup>[18]</sup> “That word,” he says in another of his writings, “is the chiefest of the apostles, and pope, and Christ’s vicar, and head of the church, and the head of the general council. And unto the authority of that ought the children of God to hearken without respect of person.”<sup>[19]</sup> Even in the case of learned and godly-minded men, we are to believe them, admonishes Cranmer, “no further than they can shew their doctrine and exhortation to be agreeable with the true word of God written. For that is the very touchstone which must, yea, and also will, try all doctrine or learning, whatsoever it be, whether it be good or evil, true or false.”<sup>[20]</sup>

There was no question, of course, of Scripture being regarded by the Reformers as a sort of handy philosopher’s yardstick by reference to which, in all mundane affairs, truth might be distinguished from error — though it is



a cardinal fact that only in its light are we able to attain to the proper perspective of man and the universe in which he finds himself. But the Reformers' view of Scripture is essentially dynamic and practical, as befits those who genuinely take their place before the Bible as *Verbum Dei ad hominem*. The *Word* of God, precisely because it is the *Word of God*, is living, powerful, penetrating (Heb 4:12). It is integrally bound up with the revelation to fallen man of God's redemptive purpose and action in and through our blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It is indeed a testimony of the Holy Spirit to Christ (cf. in. 5:39, 15:26, 16:13f). "The scripture," declares Tyndale in memorable words, "is that wherewith God draweth us unto him. The scriptures spring out of God, and flow unto Christ, and were given to lead us to Christ. Thou must therefore go along by the scripture as by a line, until thou come at Christ, which is the way's end and resting-place."<sup>[21]</sup> Bishop Jewel speaks of the holy Scriptures as "the bright sun of God, which bring light unto our ways, and comfort to all parts of our life, and salvation to our souls; in which is made known unto us our estate, and the mercy of God in Christ our Saviour witnessed."<sup>[22]</sup>

The reformers were not mere academic theologians in retreat! They were in the thick of the battle. They proved for themselves the vitality and faithfulness of God's Word in the midst of fierce testing and persecution. The Bible was for them essentially a *practical* book, relevant to every circumstance of daily life and struggle. Listen to Bishop Jewel speaking with reference to the apostolic affirmation that all Scripture is not only inspired but also profitable (2 Tim 3:16):

"Many think the apostle's speech is hardly true of the whole scripture, that all and every part of the scripture is profitable. Much is spoken of genealogies, and pedigrees, of lepers, of sacrificing goats and oxen, &c.: these seem to have little profit in them, but to be vain and idle. If they shew vain in thine eyes, yet hath not God set them down in vain . . . There is no sentence, no clause, no word, no syllable, no letter, but it is written for thy instruction: there is not one jot but it is sealed and signed with the blood of the Lamb. Our imaginations are idle, our thoughts are vain: there is no idleness, no vanity in the word of God. Those oxen and goats which were sacrificed teach thee to kill and sacrifice the uncleanness and filthiness of thy heart: they teach thee that thou art guilty of death, when thy life must be redeemed by the death of

some beast: they lead thee to believe the forgiveness of sins by a more perfect sacrifice; because it was not possible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins. That leprosy teacheth thee to know the uncleanness and leprosy of thy soul. Those genealogies and pedigrees lead us to the birth of our Saviour Christ. So that the whole word of God is pure and holy: no word, no letter, no syllable, no point or prick thereof, but is written and preserved for thy sake.”<sup>[23]</sup>

Jewel shows how the Scriptures speak to the condition of and should be heeded by kings, subjects, ministers, fathers, children, the wealthy, the poor, merchants, usurers, fornicators and adulterers, servants, the proud, those in adversity, sinners, those who despair of the mercy of God, and the dying — in short, all sorts and conditions of men. “Therefore,” he concludes, “hath Paul said well: ‘The whole scripture is profitable.’ It is full of great comfort. It maketh the man of God absolute, and perfect unto all good works; perfect in faith, perfect in hope, perfect in the love of God and of his neighbor, perfect in his life, and perfect in his death. So great, so large and ample, and heavenly, is the profit which we do reap by the word of God.”<sup>[24]</sup>

Similarly, Pilkington advises us that “the Holy Ghost, who is the author of the holy scripture, hath not put down any one word in writing, whether in the new testament or in the old, that is either superstitious or unprofitable, though it seem so to many; but it hath his mystery and signification for our learning, and either for the plainness of it . . . or else for the deep mysteries that be hid in it is to be revered of all sorts of men, and with diligence and prayer is to be searched out, as far as we may.”<sup>[25]</sup>

“The holy scriptures,” says Jewel again, “are the mercy-seat, the registry of the mysteries of God, our charter for the life to come, and holy place in which God sheweth himself to the people, and mount Sion where God hath appointed to dwell forever . . . Heaven shall shake: the earth shall tremble; but the man of God shall stand upright. His foot shall not fail: his heart shall not faint: he shall not be moved. Such a ground, such a foundation, such a rock is the word of God.”<sup>[26]</sup> “Scripture is a light,” writes Tyndale, “and sheweth us the true way, both what to do and what to hope for; and a defence from all error, and a comfort in adversity that we despair not, and feareth us in prosperity that we sin not . . . As thou readest, therefore, think that every syllable pertaineth to thine own self, and suck out the pith of the scripture,

and arm thyself against all assaults”<sup>[27]</sup> —and who is there who has lived more closely with the Word of God or who has known more constantly the need for being armed against all assaults than the godly exile and martyr William Tyndale?

So firmly did the Reformers believe that the Scriptures originated from God that they felt no embarrassment not merely in affirming their infallibility but even in speaking of them as having been *dictated* by God. Thus Whitaker, for example, alluding to the supposition of Erasmus that the reading “Jeremiah” instead of “Zechariah” in Matt 27:9 was due to a slip of the memory on the Evangelist’s part, says;

“It does not become us to be so easy and indulgent as to concede that such a lapse could be incident to the sacred writers. They wrote as they were moved by the Holy Ghost, as Peter tells us, 2 Pet 1:21. And all scripture is inspired of God, as Paul expressly writes, 2 Tim 3:16. Whereas, therefore, no one may say that any infirmity could befall the Holy Spirit, it follows that the sacred writers could not be deceived, or err, in any respect. Here, then, it becomes us to be so scrupulous as not to allow that any such slip can be found in scripture. For, whatever Erasmus may think, it is a solid answer which Augustine gives to Jerome: ‘If any, even the smallest, lie be admitted in the scriptures, the whole authority of scripture is presently invalidated and destroyed’ [Ep. XXVIII, to Jerome]. That form which the prophets use so often, ‘Thus saith the Lord,’ is to be attributed also to the apostles and evangelists. For the Holy Spirit dictated to them whatever things they wrote.”<sup>[28]</sup>

The picture so far presented of the Reformed view of inspiration is not yet complete, however, and in order to round off this study it is necessary for us to turn to the writings of the great French Reformer John Calvin. I say it is necessary, because the English Reformers were placed in circumstances of theological conflict which scarcely permitted them to turn their attention to the prolonged and laborious task of producing commentaries, verse by verse, on the text of holy Scripture. The detailed exegesis in which they engaged was in the main confined to the explication of those passages which were at the centre of their dispute with Rome — such, for example, as the interpretation of the words, “This is My Body,” spoken by Christ at the institution of the sacrament of Holy Communion. I should not wish to

contend that Calvin was less harassed by circumstances or less closely involved in ecclesiastical conflict than were the English Reformers: but he was a man who not only had from the time of his conversion set before himself the task of composing commentaries on the books of the Bible, but who also because of his phenomenal intellectual capacities (and the English Reformers were no pygmies) may justly be described as *stupor mundi*. The question which I wish now to investigate is that of the manner in which the principles, so plainly and emphatically enunciated by the English Reformers in respect of holy Scripture, worked out when applied to the text itself, and especially when applied to certain places or passages which might appear to offer problems and perplexities to men who held so full-blooded a view of inspiration as did the Reformers.

Before doing so, however, let us be fully assured that Calvin's view of inspiration differed not at all from that of the English Reformers. He, no less than they, held that Scripture is the very Word of God, so much so that he too did not scruple to speak of it as having been dictated by the Holy Spirit.

“This is a principle which distinguishes our religion from all others,” he comments on 2 Tim 3:16, “that we know that God has spoken to us, and are fully convinced that the prophets did not speak at their own suggestion, but that, being organs of the Holy Spirit, they only uttered what they had been commissioned from heaven to declare. Whoever then wishes to profit in the Scriptures, let him, first of all, lay down this as a settled point, that the Law and the Prophets are not a doctrine delivered according to the will and pleasure of men, but dictated by the Holy Spirit.”

Again, writing on 2 Pet 1:20, he expresses his judgment as follows:

“I think that the simpler meaning of Peter's statement is that Scripture is not of men, or by the initiative of men. You will never come to it well prepared to read it unless you bring reverence, obedience, and teachableness with you. But reverence comes from the knowledge that it is God who speaks to us and not mortal men. Therefore Peter in the first place urges us to believe without doubting that the prophecies are God's oracles; which means that they were not set in motion by men's own action. What comes next means the same thing. The holy men spoke as they were moved by the Spirit of God; that is, they did not

babble out fables, moved by their own impulse and as they willed. In short, the first step in right understanding is that we believe the holy prophets of God as we do him. The Apostle calls them ‘holy men of God’ because they performed faithfully the task which was laid upon them; and in this service they were surrogates for the person of God. Peter says they were ‘moved’, not because they were bereft of their own minds (as the Gentiles imagined their prophets to have been during their ‘enthusiasm’), but because they did not dare to say anything of their own. They followed the Holy Spirit as their guide and obeyed him to such an extent that their mouths became his temple and he ruled in them.”

So also in his exegesis of Psalm 8 Calvin declares that it was the Holy Spirit “who directed David’s tongue.”

What could be more definite than Calvin’s assertion, with respect to the Apostle’s statement that all Scripture is God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16), that “we owe to the Scripture the same reverence which we owe to God; because it has proceeded from him alone, and has nothing belonging to man mixed with it”? No less than the English Reformers, Calvin taught that it is only by the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit that a man may understand and obey holy Scripture.

“The same Spirit . . . who made Moses and the prophets certain of their calling,” he says, “now also testifies to our hearts, that he has employed them as his servants to instruct us. Accordingly, we need not wonder if there are many who doubt as to the Author of the Scripture; for, although the majesty of God is displayed in it, yet none but those who have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit have eyes to perceive what ought, indeed, to have been visible to all, and yet is visible to the elect alone” (*idem*).

No less, again, than the English Reformers, Calvin held that Scripture is essentially practical in its purpose and that its primary function is to direct sinful men to Christ. “We ought to believe,” he comments on John 5:39, “that Christ cannot be properly known in any other way than from the Scriptures; and if it be so, it follows that we ought to read the Scriptures with the express design of finding Christ in them. Whoever shall turn aside from this object, though he may weary himself throughout his whole life in learning, will

never attain the knowledge of the truth; for what wisdom can we have without the wisdom of God?” And, regarding Paul’s declaration of the profitableness of all Scripture (2 Tim 3:16), he says that it “contains a perfect rule of a good and happy life . . . Hence it follows, that it is unlawful to treat it in an unprofitable manner; for the Lord, when he gave us the Scriptures, did not intend either to gratify our curiosity, or to encourage ostentation, or to give occasion for chatting and talking, but to do us good; and, therefore, the right use of Scripture must always tend to what is profitable.”

There are many today who, on hearing such words as I have cited from Calvin and his fellow-Reformers in England, would immediately and scornfully dismiss the Reformers as bibliolaters and obscurantists, or (to use another fashionable word) “fundamentalists.” But the great leaders and moulders of the Reformation, in Britain and on the Continent, must not be summarily written off in this manner. Let us not forget the sort of men they were and the great things they achieved on the basis of these principles that they held to be so vital. They were men of exceptional intelligence, candor, and scholarship, whose study of the Scriptures was marked by both depth and integrity. Above all, they were men of profound spirituality whose lives — mind as well as heart — had been radically transformed by the Good News of Jesus Christ which they had found set before them in no other place than in the Bible. When they spoke of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit within the believer to the divine inspiration of Scripture, they were speaking of what they had themselves experienced, as well as of what the Bible taught about itself. Those critical souls who do not know this internal witness of the Spirit as a truth of their own experience should earnestly question within themselves whether they are in fact qualified to pronounce against this teaching.

But, if there is what may be called a certain real “divinity” of holy Scripture, there is also what may be called a certain real “humanity” of holy Scripture. There is evidence at times of “human” weakness. The biblical authors, on the human side, were not mere “typewriters.” They were not (as we have already heard Calvin say) “bereft of their own minds.” It was *as men*, frail and imperfect, with all their diverse characteristics of temperament, personality, and style, that they functioned under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Calvin does not attempt to sidestep or gloss over such weaknesses as may be apparent in what they wrote. Indeed, they leave him singularly unworried; for



there can be no question of their being a reflection of weakness on the part of the Holy Spirit or a frustration of the purpose of inspiration.

Let us take a few examples from the commentaries.

**1.** God's Word is addressed to all men everywhere, and accordingly he speaks in a manner that all can understand. "Many hold the Gospel in less estimation," says Calvin, commenting on John 3:12, "because they do not find in it high-sounding words to fill their ears, and on this account do not deign to bestow their attention on a doctrine so low and mean. But it shows an extraordinary degree of wickedness that we yield less reverence to God speaking to us, because he condescends to our ignorance; and, therefore, when God prattles to us in Scripture in a rough and popular style, let us know that this is done on account of the love which he bears to us."

**2.** The quotations by the Apostles from the Old Testament are seldom *verbatim*, but free and *ad sensum* (and especially according to the ampler sense of their fulfillment in the sphere of the New Covenant); for it is not the words by themselves, but what they teach, that matters. Referring to Ps 8:5 and its quotation in Heb 2:7, Calvin writes: "We know what freedoms the apostles took in quoting texts of Scripture; not, indeed, to wrest them to a different meaning from the true one, but because they reckoned it sufficient to show, by a reference to Scripture, that what they taught was sanctioned by the word of God, although they did not quote the precise words. Accordingly, they never had any hesitation in changing the words, provided the substance of the text remained unchanged." And again, with reference to the quotation of Mic 5:2 in Matt 2:6, he says: "One must always notice that when the apostles quote a scriptural testimony they do not give it word for word, and sometimes depart quite far from its language; they nevertheless accommodate it in a fitting and proper way to their own purpose. Let the readers always keep in mind the purpose of the Evangelists in bringing forward passages of Scripture, so that they will not insist upon dwelling upon mere words, but will be content with the fact that the Evangelists never twist Scripture into a false meaning, but apply it properly to a genuine use."

**3.** The biblical writers are not concerned always to speak in terms of the strictest scientific accuracy, but phenomenally, that is, in accordance, quite legitimately, with the appearance of things to the ordinary observer. "It would have been lost time for David to have attempted to teach the secrets of

astronomy to the rude and unlearned” comments Calvin on Ps 19:4; “and therefore he reckoned it sufficient to speak in a homely style, that he might reprove the whole world of ingratitude, if, in beholding the sun, they are not taught the fear and the knowledge of God . . . He does not here discourse scientifically (as he might have done, had he spoken among philosophers) concerning the entire revolution which the sun performs, but, accommodating himself to the rudest and dullest, he confines himself to the ordinary appearances presented to the eye.” And with reference to Ps 136:7 he writes: “Moses calls the sun and moon the two great lights, and there is little doubt that the Psalmist here borrows the same phraseology. What is immediately added about the stars is, as it were, accessory to the others. It is true that the other planets are larger than the moon, but it is stated as second in order on account of its visible effects. The Holy Spirit had no intention to teach astronomy; and, in proposing instruction meant to be common to the simplest and most uneducated persons, he made use by Moses and the other prophets of popular language, that none might shelter himself under the pretext of obscurity . . . Accordingly, as Saturn though bigger than the moon is not so to the eye owing to his greater distance, the Holy Spirit would rather speak childishly than unintelligibly to the humble and unlearned.” (See also comments on Gen 1:13ff; Ps 148:3; Jer 31:35.) I should wish to emphasize, however, that a description which is phenomenal, from the point of view of the observer, naive though it may seem to the astronomer, is neither unscientific nor untrue.

**4.** Nor are the biblical authors always concerned to set down things in precise chronological sequence. Thus Calvin observes, in his commentary on Ps 51:9, that “in Scripture, it is well known, things are not always stated according to the strict order of time in which they occurred.” This is illustrated, for example, in the difference between Matthew’s and Luke’s accounts of the sequence of our Lord’s temptations in the wilderness. Both cannot be correct. But the precise sequence is of no religious significance, and is immaterial to the spiritual teaching which the records are designed to convey (cf. Heb 2:18, 4:15). “It is not of great importance,” says Calvin, commenting on Matt 4:5, “that Luke’s narrative makes that temptation to be the second which Matthew places as the third: for it was not the intention of the Evangelists to arrange the history in such a manner, as to preserve, on all occasions, the exact order of time, but to draw up an abridged narrative of the

events, so as to present, as in a mirror or picture, those things which are most necessary to be known concerning Christ. Let it suffice for us to know, that Christ was tempted in three ways. The question which of these contests was the second, and which the third, need not give us much trouble or uneasiness.” (See also comments on Matt 13:12 and 16.)

**5.** A difference, again, such as that between Acts 7:14, which states that Jacob came down to Egypt with seventy-five souls, and Gen 46:27, which gives the number as seventy, may well, in Calvin’s opinion, be due to a copyist’s error over a single letter in the original; but, whatever its cause, it in no way affects the religious significance, which points to the power and providence of God. “I think,” comments Calvin (on Acts 7:14), “that this difference came through the error of the writers which wrote out the books . . . This, so small a number, is purposely expressed, to the end that the power of God may the more plainly appear, in so great an enlarging of that kindred, which was of no long continuance . . . We ought rather to weigh the miracle which the Spirit commendeth unto us in this place, than to stand long about one letter, whereby the number is altered.” Calvin may, of course, be right, but I would suggest that the problem may be resolved even more simply by concluding that either one or both of the numbers should be understood as round figures rather than as precise enumerations.

**6.** The question also arises of what appear to be definite mistakes in the text. Take, for instance, the attribution to Jeremiah of the quotation found in Matt 27:9, in connection with which the differing views of Erasmus and Whitaker have already been heard. Calvin comments as follows: “How the name of Jeremiah crept in, I confess that I do not know, nor do I give myself much trouble to inquire. The passage itself plainly shows that the name of Jeremiah has been put down by mistake instead of Zechariah (11:13), for in Jeremiah we find nothing of this sort, nor any thing that even approaches to it.” The Reformer may, however, have been rather too hasty in his judgment that in Jeremiah there occurs nothing that even approaches to the quotation which Matthew gives, for, while the main reference would seem to be to Zech 11:13, yet, as modern scholars have pointed out, there are passages in Jeremiah which are not wholly unrelated in theme and appropriateness (such as Jer 18:2, 19:1, 11, and 32:7ff), and which the Evangelist may have had in mind at this point.

7. There are, of course, parts of Scripture that are not clear and easy to understand. But as we persevere in the study of the Bible, so our perception of its meaning will increase and its difficulties will diminish. Calvin cites the example of the Ethiopian eunuch, who did not comprehend the passage he was reading (Acts 8:28): “Though he were ignorant of many things, yet was he not wearied, so that he cast away the book. Thus must we also read the Scriptures. We must greedily, and with a prompt mind, receive those things which are plain, and wherein God openeth his mind. As for those things which are hid from us, we must pass them over until we see greater light. And if we be not wearied with reading, it shall at length come to pass that the Scripture shall be made more familiar by continual use.”

It is important to notice that Calvin was in no way embarrassed or disconcerted by the difficulties and problems that from time to time confront the student of holy Scripture. In comparison with the comprehensive power and purpose of God’s Word they are matters of small moment; reasonable explanations may generally be suggested for their occurrence; and, in particular, they cannot possibly undermine the unshakable testimony of the Holy Spirit in every believing heart to the inspiration and authority of that Word. There is no doubt in my mind that the English Reformers and Calvin, who were at one in their doctrine of Scripture, were also at one in their use of it.

Holy Scripture is a sacred mystery, divine in its origin and human in its mediation. Its inspiration is not a process to be analyzed, but a fact to be known and experienced as the saving truth it reveals is imprinted on the heart and mind of the believer by its own divine author. The nature of the mystery that is Scripture may be illustrated by reference to the still more wonderful mystery of the theanthropic person of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son, who at the same time is both God and man. Can this Son of Man who knows hunger and thirst and fatigue, yes, and death, be in truth the almighty and pre-existent Son of God? Is it really possible for human weakness and divine power to be brought together? Yes, for he is also the risen, victorious, and glorified Lord; and by that same inner certification of the Holy Spirit, which seals the testimony of the Scriptures, we know, unassailably, and we confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. The humanity of the incarnate Son does not and cannot annul his deity. Nor can it detract from or diminish his deity. Deity is an absolute category. It does not admit of degrees

of more or less. The deity of Christ is at all times full and unimpaired. And so too (though of course in a quite different category) the Bible is the very Word of God. Its “humanity” does not annul or diminish its “divinity.” Its “weaknesses” do not contradict its strength and, especially, its dynamic ability to make us wise unto salvation through faith in the Saviour it proclaims.

The Bible is an organic whole, a *corpus* (but not a corpse). Like the human body, some of its parts are less comely than others, but all have a specific function to perform within the whole. Some parts may even be removed without destroying its organic function — though not without maiming the body and impairing the harmony of the whole. Other parts are absolutely indispensable, just as the head and the heart and many other organs are essential to the life of the human body. Whatever their relative importance, all the parts belong together and have need of each other.

I would venture to suggest that there are three dangers which we should be careful to avoid. There is, firstly, the danger, particularly in the specialized fields of scholarship, of treating the Bible as a corpse to be dissected and classified, instead of as the living Word of God to be heeded and obeyed. In saying this, however, there is no desire to depreciate the tremendous debt which, in biblical studies, is owed to modern scholarship. There is, secondly, the danger of treating the Bible like an embalmed body to be preserved intact, in a sort of perfection of death, as though it were a sacred and magical relic, the emblem of an orthodoxy without the Spirit. And, thirdly, there is the danger of robbing the Bible of its mystery — a mystery which belongs to God — by presuming to offer a quasi-rational (that is, humanly comprehensible) explanation of the “mechanics” of inspiration; just as there is a constant temptation to imagine that the ineffable mystery of the dual nature of our Lord’s theanthropic person can be rationalized and “made respectable.” We must not be afraid to let the Bible *live*, as it is and in its own right, unimpeded by our apologies and hesitations. What have we to fear if by the ineluctable witness of the Holy Spirit it is sealed to our hearts as the veritable dynamic Word of the Living God?

The manner in which we approach and handle the Bible should be determined by the example of Christ himself, for, as the Christians’ Lord and God, himself the Truth and the Light of the world, his example is absolutely



authoritative for us. The attitude of him who is the incarnate Word to the testimony of the written Word is entirely clear. And in the issue concerning the inspiration of Scripture it is nothing less than the supreme and inerrant Lordship of Christ that is at stake. Of the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture neither he nor his apostles had any doubts. They wielded it lustily and frontally as a sword, and without apology. The apostles cannot, however, be saddled with a “typewriter” view of inspiration, for had that been their belief the liberties they took in quoting from the Old Testament Scriptures would have been reprehensible. And when we find the Reformers of the sixteenth century speaking of “dictation,” we must understand that they are referring to the Godward as distinct from the manward aspect of inspiration, or, in other words, that they are emphasizing the sovereign action of almighty God in the giving of holy Scripture, not suggesting that the apostles and prophets were mere impersonal puppets when they uttered or wrote the words of Scripture.

“Let it . . . be held as fixed,” says Calvin in a notable passage, “that those who are inwardly taught by the Holy Spirit acquiesce implicitly, in Scripture; that Scripture carrying its own evidence along with it, deigns not to submit to proofs and arguments, but owes the full conviction with which we ought to receive it to the testimony of the Spirit. Enlightened by him, it is no longer on our own judgment or that of others that we believe the Scriptures to be from God; but in a way superior to human judgment, feel perfectly assured — as much as if we beheld the divine image visibly impressed on it — that it came to us, by the instrumentality of men, from the very mouth of God. We ask not for proofs or probabilities on which to rest our judgment, but we subject our intellect and judgment to it as too transcendent for us to estimate. This, however, we do, not in the manner in which some are accustomed to fasten on an unknown object, which, as soon as known, displeases, but because we have a thorough conviction that, in holding it, we hold unassailable truth.”<sup>[29]</sup>

Finally, let me quote once again that unforgettable saying of William Tyndale concerning the purpose of the Bible: “The scripture is that wherewith God draweth us unto him. The scriptures spring out of God, and flow unto Christ, and were given to lead us to Christ. Thou must therefore go along by the scripture as by a line, until thou come at Christ, which is the way’s end and resting-place.”



## FOOTNOTES:

- [1] *Works* (Parker Society [hereafter P.S.] edition), pp. 286f.
- [2] *Sermons* (P.S.), p. 85.
- [3] “A Faithful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture,” *ad fin.*, in *Homilies*.
- [4] *Op. cit.* (P.S.) p. 289.
- [5] “A Treatise of the Holy Scriptures” in *Works* (P.S.), IV, pp. 1163ff.
- [6] *Ibid.*, p. 1188.
- [7] “The Parable of the Wicked Mammon” in *Doctrinal Treatises* (P.S.) p. 88.
- [8] *Op. cit.*, pp. 294f.
- [9] *Ibid.*, p. 290.
- [10] *Ibid.*, p. 296.
- [11] “The Obedience of a Christian Man” in *Doctrinal Treatises* (P.S.), p. 304.
- [12] *Ibid.*, p. 309.
- [13] *Op. cit.*, pp. 405, 408ff.
- [14] *Op. cit.*, pp. 1173f.
- [15] “The Obedience of a Christian Man” in *Doctrinal Treatises* (P.S.), p. 154.
- [16] *Op. cit.*, pp. 279f.
- [17] *Ibid.*, p. 290.
- [18] *Doctrinal Treatises* (P.S.), p. 398.
- [19] “The Practice of Prelates” in *Works* (P.S.), II, p. 333.
- [20] “A Confutation of Unwritten Verities” in *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters* (P.S.), p. 14.
- [21] “The Obedience of a Christian Man” in *Doctrinal Treatises* (P.S.), p. 317.
- [22] *Op. cit.*, p. 1163.
- [23] *Op. cit.*, p. 1175.
- [24] *Ibid.*, p. 1177.
- [25] *Op. cit.*, p. 370.

[26] *Op. cit.*, pp. 1166, 1172f.

[27] *Doctrinal Treatises* (P.S.), pp. 399f.

[28] *Op. cit.*, pp. 37f.

[29] *Institutes*, I, vii, 5.

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