

1901

The inspiration of St. Paul

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THE INSPIRATION OF ST PAUL.

Graduating Thesis

of

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The principal part of this paper will be occupied with the endeavor to set forth Paul's own claim to inspiration. The discussion of the validity of that claim can only be outlined.

The term inspiration, as applied to the Bible, has been so variously interpreted that we shall hardly shed any light on the subject by attempting a new definition. Instead, therefore, of confining ourselves to a hard and fast definition of St Paul's inspiration, we shall simply assume it in a general way and seek to discover what that inspiration means. We shall be guided in our search by two general principles.

First, inspiration attaches to the man, not to his writings. The latter are inspired only as the inspired man is able clearly and accurately to express his own thought and feeling. This view gives room for the human and fallible element, making inspiration more natural and virile and saving us from the unnatural and mechanical notion of it. If we maintain that the writing is inspired, the logic of the situation at once drives us to the dictation theory: and every product of such inspiration must be infallible, else the inspirer has blundered. It remains, however, that we can determine the inspiration of the man only by a study of what he has written or spoken.

Second, in any inquiry into the subject of inspiration we must proceed inductively and not dogmatically. The study of the subject before us therefore demands that we rule out all preconceived notions as to the time and manner and degree and even the fact itself, of Paul's inspiration. For this reason we narrow our field, and instead of taking the inspiration of the Bible as a whole, take simply that of one author. In the former case we should have to discuss the inspiration of each author separately. For the Bible is inspired only as its authors are inspired and the inspiration of one in no way implies that of another.

Some questions at once arise: if we are to reach the fact of Paul's inspiration by this empirical method, how are we to test our results? What standard have we by which to measure inspiration? Will it not require inspiration on our part to be able to pass judgment on that of

another? To this last question we answer, yes: just as we require human reason and human sensibility to respond to those of another. But there is this important fact to be noted: as in the field of scientific and philosophic inquiry far greater intellectual power is required to make a new discovery than to appropriate it or pass judgment upon it after it is made; so in the field of religious truth, to acquire for the first time a new fact of the spiritual world demands spiritual insight far deeper, spiritual activity far more intense, than to pass judgment upon that fact when once it has been brought into view.

For a standard of inspiration, too, we have no need to search far. Any writing that professes to come from an inspired source should meet at least the following test:

1. It is in harmony with our best and highest reason, and with all the facts of which we are perfectly cognizant. Plain contradiction of these is fatal to any claim to inspiration.
 2. Does it reveal a more satisfactory object of faith—give us better views of God, of man, and of the relation of each to the other?
 3. When we adopt it as the rule of life does it give us a more real, or more satisfactory religious life?
 4. Does it meet a real need of our nature—mental, moral, or religious?
- One whose words meet these tests, or any of them, is entitled to at least a respectful hearing when he lays claim to inspiration. Paul does make such a claim—the extent of which will be our first inquiry.

The claim is very pronounced. It appears in his declaration that for his vocation as a missionary to the Gentiles he had received a divine commission. He opens six of his leading epistles with the statement that he is "Called to be an Apostle". If it be objected that possibly the opening sentence in each of these epistles was added by a later hand, we have the same declaration made in other parts of the epistles. Rom. 1:5, I Cor. 1:17, also 9:1, and 15:9-10, Gal. 1:15, 16. Now, what was this "Call to the Apostleship". In Galatians 2:7-9, he tells us that it was a commission of equal authority with that given to the other apostles. They received their commission direct from Christ and this meant, with Paul, a commission from God. His own authority Paul believed to have come from Christ. I COR. 1:17, 9:1.

His vision at the time of his conversion, and other theophanies recorded in the book of Acts give a basis for this belief of his, and the general impression and the general impression which he gives us is that his commission was renewed and confirmed from time to time. Acts 9:23, 11. Gal. 1:16. I Cor. 15:8, 9.

A fact which further emphasises this claim to a divine commission is that Paul frequently professes to speak as the mouth piece of God. He congratulates the Thessalonians that they received from him the "Word of the message, not as the word of man, but as it is in truth, the word of God". He reminds them that this gospel came to them "in the Holy Ghost". And in speaking of the second Advent he speaks "by the word of the Lord". I Thess. 2:13. 1:5. 4:15. To the Corinthians he writes, "The things which I write unto you.... are a commandment of the Lord". I Cor. 14:37. And still stronger, though indirect, are passages in which he explicitly says that he is giving his own judgment; thus implying that usually he is speaking as the voice of God. I Cor. 7:12-25. He tells the Galatians, 1:11, that "The gospel which was preached by me is not after man". And writes to the Ephesians of "The dispensation of that grace of God which was given me to youward." Eph. 3:2. These are very important passages, as they commit Paul unequivocally to the claim of divine authority for his message.

Other utterances assume or imply the same thing. He has experiences in which he attains high spiritual insight. II Cor. 12:1, 4, 7. He assumes to know the will of God, I Thess. 4:3, and hurls a curse against even the angel who would dare to preach any other gospel than his own Gal. 1:8. He speaks, "In the name of the Lord". I Thess. 4:2. II Thess. 3:6, and declares his ability to perfect the faith of his readers I Thess. 3:10. In Galatians 1:16, also 2:10 he disclaims any influence of the other Apostles upon his theological teaching. This disclaimer is of the utmost importance. For if Paul's theology is his own construction - is entirely independent of those who had been the personal followers of Christ and eye-witnesses of his ministry then the similarity of the two systems of teaching is certainly very remarkable on any other hypothesis than that, at least, of unusual spiritual insight on the part of Paul.

But how does Paul acquire this knowledge? Or, in other words, what is the manner and method of his inspiration? Taking his own

words and inferences from the same, we arrive at results somewhat as follows.

1. Much of it comes along the plain and natural road of religious experience. Truth flashes upon him through the medium of his religious feelings just as the poet's fine sensibility gives him a view which from coarser eyes is forever hidden. At II Cor. 12:9, he has reached a better understanding of a life-experience. There is no need of taking his dialogue with the Lord respecting the "thorn in the flesh" as any other than a picturesque mode of setting forth a new truth which has dawned upon him.

2. At Gal. 3:16, he arrives at an important conclusion by means of a simple exegesis of Scripture.

3. I Cor. 15:12-19, is an example of purely logical reasoning which Paul often employs to reach his conclusions. It would be pure dogmatism to assert that either the exegesis or the logic is inspired above all other logic or exegesis.

4. Allied to the foregoing are some passages in which Paul expressed his "judgment" on certain matters because he has no commandment from the Lord. I Cor. 7:6, 12, 25.

5. I Cor. 15:35ff, has the form of religious speculation. It does not profess to be anything more, simply setting forth analogies from nature yet it is an important fact that on the subject of the Resurrection it has been a guide to the faith of Christendom.

6. Reference was made to Paul's freedom from the influence of the other Apostles. He even says Gal. 2:6 "they imparted nothing to me". But this evidently has reference to his theological teaching and it would be unwise to conclude that Paul was not familiar with the current Christian traditions. At Acts 20:35 he is reported as using the saying of Christ. In I Cor. 15:5-7, he recites events that took place immediately after the resurrection of Jesus. Moreover, some of his practical counsels bear such a strong resemblance, not only in substance but also in form, to reported sayings of Christ, that we cannot help linking them together by a natural connection. Such are Rom. 12:17, 20, 13:7, 9, 10. An example of his conduct also I Cor. 4:11, 13, reminds us of much that is related of Christ.

7. Upon the foregoing methods of God's revelation of his truth to mankind Paul had no monopoly. They are open to many not to say all.

One other claim, however, remains to be noted which if valid, forever secures Paul's authority as a religious teacher. While he admits having received knowledge through natural media, he still strongly insists that he is the recipient of a higher revelation than is granted to the generality of men. As one proof he instances his call to the apostleship. Others are as follows: "God hath revealed them unto us by his spirit", I Cor. 2:10. "The Gospel which was received by me... neither did I receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but through revelation of Jesus Christ", Gal. 1:12. The same thought also occurs in Eph. 3:3,5. The precise manner in which this revelation came to him he does not relate. He speaks of coming "to visions and revelations of the Lord", and knowing one who was caught up into paradise and heard words unlawful for man to utter, II Cor. 12:1-4; while to the Council at Jerusalem "he went up by revelation", Gal 2:1. Granting all that may be claimed for a pictorial style of writing, it is still certain that Paul believed, with a faith most sublime, that in some way there had come into his consciousness a direct and peculiar revelation of the truth—a new and better knowledge of the nature, the will, and the purposes of God. z

A final question arises with reference to Paul's claims; does he profess to be infallible? To which we can answer neither yes nor no, without qualification. He does not express a claim to infallibility anywhere, neither does he go out of his way to admit that he may possibly be mistaken. Where he professes to speak the words of God he certainly would not make that admission. Even had he been consciously as fallible as other men, he yet had an intense conviction of the truth of what he wrote; and nothing would be gained by adding, "I believe this with all my heart," though possibly I may be mistaken". It would only have weakened his argument. Yet he is not always dogmatic. He gives, as before noted, his "judgments" on certain matters. He appeals to tangible evidence to support his claim to the Apostleship, I Cor. 9:12, 12:12; and as proof that he speaks the commands of God he appeals to the spiritual discernment of his readers. I Cor. 14:37.

The greatest problem for the religious teacher of to-day, in connection with the inspiration of St Paul, is, can these high claims be substantiated? And as we said at the beginning the discussion of this

problem can only be outlined. The whole treatment of it would fill volumes, since it would involve that of all of Paul's theological tenets.

In addition to the general test of inspiration before mentioned, for that of a particular individual we may set forth the following:

1. The influence which he has exerted through his personality or his writings, upon any period of history.

2. The extent to which his doctrines stand the universal test of truth.

So far as the first of these tests are concerned, Paul's reputation is secure. If the old Hebrew prophets were inspired to give to their age a message, and a revelation of God sufficient for its needs: if Buddha, and Confucius, and Socrates and Mohammed gave a message to their countrymen which for a time shed light on the pathway of their lives; then surely Paul whose influence has been more powerful and enduring than any of those has justified his claim to inspiration.

His doctrines may be divided into three general classes;

1. Those which pertain to the religious life and experience of men. These are the great bulwark of Paul's authority. They find an answering echo in the experience of men of every age and race and temper. His great central doctrine of justification by faith which was so revolutionary at the time of its promulgation, has been amply justified, not only in the best thought and life of the race, but also in the universality and adaptability of the Christian religion. A growing good sense and discernment have heartily approved the close connection which he makes between morality and religion, as well as his insistence upon the spirit as distinguished from the letter. The great stress which he laid on the conscious life with God—the assurance of acceptance, the gracious help, the divine indwelling—finds its justification in the fact that this is one of the commonest elements in the religious life of believers.

2. Over another class of doctrines—those which are metaphysical in their nature have been waged the world's great theological battles. Such are his doctrine of God, of angels, the Fall of man, the Atonement, and Christology in general, the divine Election. Much of the controversy has resulted from diversity of interpretation, but even though all come to agreement here, the battle will not be over until all questions of metaphysics are forever settled. Hence Paul's inspir-

ation on these subjects must for the present remain undecided.

3. Nor can the third class of doctrines, namely, those relating to Eschatology be tested except as they furnish a satisfactory object of our faith. It can only be said that, in the main, the faith of Christendom has reposed joyfully and securely in Paul's doctrines of Immortality, the Resurrection, the General Judgment, reward and retribution, and the final triumph of the Redeemer's Kingdom. And if Paul be mistaken here, he has still brought a bright hope to a troubled world, and strength for its toil.

The End.

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