

The Church Doctrine of Inspiration

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The starting-point of the Church's doctrine of inspiration is obviously to be found in the self-witness of the Bible itself. This has already been treated in a previous chapter, and no more than a brief summary is required in the present context. As far as the Old Testament is concerned, both the Law and the prophetic writings purport to come from God, and in specific cases the New Testament links the giving of messages through human speakers or writers with the activity of the Holy Spirit. Inspiration thus arises naturally and necessarily from the divine source and authority. Nor does it refer only to an ecstatic upsurge of the human spirit; the reference is plainly to the inworking of the Holy Ghost. In the New Testament it is made clear that divine authority extends to the whole of the Old; for example, our Lord shows his disciples "in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). Again, the activity of the Holy Spirit is given a general reference. We read that the Psalmist speaks in the Spirit in Psalm 110 (Matt. 22:43). And finally the two primary verses in II Timothy 3:16 and II Peter 1:21 tell us that "all scripture is given by inspiration of God," and that "holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost."

It is to be noted that the linking of the Biblical writings with the Holy Spirit means that they are brought into direct relationship with the work of the Spirit, namely, to bear witness to Jesus Christ. This is true of the Old Testament with its prophetic testimony, for we read that Jesus himself said of these writings: "They are they which testify of me" (John 5:39). But it is also true of the New, and gives the backward-looking apostolic

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testimony an assured place alongside the prophetic. For in John 14:26 we are told that the Holy Spirit would bring all things to the remembrance of the apostles; in Acts (e.g., 2:4, 4:8 and *passim*) we find that the Holy Spirit is their co-worker, and in II Peter 3:16 there is a classification of the epistles of Paul with the Scriptures which certifies the divine authority of this written testimony.

A derivative point specifically developed in II Corinthians 3 (cf. I Corinthians 1 and 2) is that the Holy Spirit who gave the Scriptures is the living Lord whose voice must be heard in and through Scripture if its message is to be understood and received. This continuing work of the Spirit does not seem to be described by the Bible as the proper work of inspiration. But it is an unavoidable implicate. If the message is really from the Holy Spirit, it cannot be received merely by the natural understanding. Without the Holy Ghost it can be read only on the level of the human letter. What is given by the Spirit must be read in the Spirit. To the objective inspiration of Scripture there corresponds the subjective illumination of the understanding which safeguards the doctrine against the constant threat of an "Apollinarian" interpretation, and the consequent notion of an *ex opere operato* efficacy.

I. ALIEN CONCEPTIONS THREATENING THE EARLY CHURCH

It is as well to mention this derivative point at once because one of the alien influences to which the early Church was also exposed tended to press it in the direction of this distorted interpretation. This was the Jewish or Judaistic understanding to which there is an oblique allusion in John 5:39, 40, and to which Paul is specifically referring in II Corinthians 3. To be sure, the Jews stood for a high doctrine of inspiration, particularly in relation to the Law. To the extent that their teaching helped to safeguard the Church against the equation of the Bible with "inspired" religious literature we may describe it as salutary. For after all, it had its roots in the Bible itself. But it carried with it a threefold danger. In the first place, it tended to abstract the divine nature and authority of the Bible from the human authors and situations, i.e., from the whole movement of God's saving work in and through the history of Israel and the persons concerned. Second, it clearly abstracted the Bible from the object of its witness when it failed or refused to see in Jesus Christ the object of its witness, thus being left with a mere textbook of doctrine, ethics and ceremonial. Third, in rejecting Jesus Christ it refused the witness of the Holy Spirit, so that in its reading the Old Testament was deprived of its living power. The result of this threefold abstraction is the contradiction that the human element in the Bible is almost completely subsumed into the divine on the one side, but in practice the divine and authoritative text falls victim to only too human exegesis and schematization on the other.

The Judaistic was not, of course, the only danger threatening the infant

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Church. Gentile Christians especially were perhaps even more vulnerable to pagan notions. For the heathen religions also had their inspiration, whether in the ecstatic utterances and movements of devotees, the pronouncements of the oracles, the writings of the Sybillines, or literature generally. A writer like Philo had already succumbed to the temptation to bring together the prophetic inspiration of the Old Testament and these pagan phenomena. After all, had not the early prophets given evidence of this type of ecstatic possession? The statement of Plato: "And for this reason God takes away the mind of these men and uses them as his ministers, just as he does soothsayers and godly seers, in order that we who hear them may know... that it is God Himself who speaks and addresses us through them" (Ion, 533), thus finds a clear parallel in Philo's interpretation of the Old Testament: "For a prophet has no utterance of his own, but all his utterances come from elsewhere, the echoes of another's voice... he is the vocal instrument of God smitten and played by His invisible hand" (*Who is the Heir?*, p. 259). In some sense, this is no less a high view than that of Judaism, and it has the advantage of emphasizing the living movement. But apart from its pagan associations, it has the same twofold and apparently contradictory disadvantage of destroying the human element on the one side, yet in so doing, of reducing inspiration to a familiar and psychologically explicable human phenomenon on the other.

II. THE PATRISTIC PERIOD

When we turn to the patristic period, we are struck at once by the way in which all writers accepted the inspiration and authority of Holy Scripture as self-evident. The actual writings of the Old and New Testaments are seen to derive from the Holy Spirit and therefore carry the

divine message. Nor is this merely a general inspiration; it extends to the detailed phraseology of the Bible in accordance with the saying of Christ in Matthew 5:18. Thus Clement of Alexandria tells us that not one jot nor tittle can pass because all has been spoken by the mouth of the Lord (*Protrepticus*, IX, 82, 1); and Gregory Nazianzus writes that even the smallest lines in Scripture are due to the minute care of the Holy Spirit, so that we must pay careful attention to every slightest shade of meaning (*Orat.*, 2, 105). In order to emphasize the perfection and authority of the Bible, Irenaeus can say that they are actually spoken by God himself through his Word and Spirit (*C.O.H.*, II, 28, 2). What the authors say is really said by God himself, and must be received and studied not merely or primarily as the word of man but as the Word of God. This emphasis on the divine inspiration of the Bible is obviously reflected again in the many statements in the Fathers which refer to the supreme authority of the Bible in the Church, as in the dictum of Augustine quoted in Cranmer's *Confutation of Unwritten Verities*: "For I do not account Cyprian's writings as canonical, but weigh them by the canonical scriptures;

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and that in them which agreeth with canonical I allow to his praise; but that that agreeth not, by his favour I refuse" (*Parker Society ed.*, II, p. 33).

There can be little doubt that a sound and scriptural doctrine of inspiration was for the most part maintained and developed in the patristic period. The primary fact of inspiration was never in doubt. There was no temptation to restrict its range to favored passages of the Bible. It was not abstracted from the true theme of the Bible in Jesus Christ, the temptation in most writers being to find rather fanciful and extravagant allusions to Christ and his work in the most unlikely ways and places (cf. especially the *Epistle of Barnabas*). And no attempt was made to work out a systematic understanding of inspiration along lines which might replace its true miracle and mystery by a false.

At the same time there are elements in the patristic teaching which show that the pressure of Judaistic and pagan doctrine was not without its effect. The latter is reflected in the typical attempt by the Apologists to commend the Bible by comparing it with the Sibyllines (cf. Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad autol.*, 2, 9), and more seriously perhaps by the doubtful suggestions of Athenogoras that the Holy Spirit uses the prophets as a flute-player blowing on his flute (*Leg. pro Chrt.*, 7 and 9) or of Hyppolytus that he plays on them as on a zither or harp (*De Antichristo*, 2). Fortunately, perhaps, the excesses of Montanism served as a decisive check to thinking in terms of pagan ecstaticism. But the impulse to depreciate the human element found no less serious expression in another form. Augustine, for example, approached the thought of a dictation of the Holy Scriptures when he stated that the Christ used the evangelists "as if they were his own hands" (*De consensu evang.*, I, 35),¹ and this was pressed almost unbearably (though not without a real element of truth) by Gregory the Great when he said of Job: "He Himself wrote them, who dictated the things that should be written. He did Himself write them, who both was present in the saint's work, and by the mouth of the writer," the identity of the author being of no consequence (*Moralia praef.*, I, 2). This tendency was the more dangerous because the reaction against Montanism entailed a

¹ Although in the context this does not mean more than that the members of Christ's body act in behalf of Christ himself as the Head.

concentration upon the given letter at the expense of the free movement of the Holy Spirit, not in divorce from the letter as in Montanism, but in his disposal of it.

We must not exaggerate these weaknesses in relation to the real strength of the patristic doctrine and its avoidance of cruder errors especially in relation to pagan ecstaticism. Indeed, even the human element is not altogether lost in the divine, for Augustine can find a place for this side by side with his doctrine of dictation (*De consensu evang.*, II, 12), and it was realized that the unpolished style of some of the authors could not be attributed to the Spirit except by way of condescension. Indeed, some writers like Origen and Theodore of Mopsuestia were prepared to go further and speak of various.

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levels of inspiration, although fortunately this opposite extreme did not find general acceptance in the early Church. On the other hand, it has to be conceded that there were dangerous tendencies in this primitive period. The phrase "dictation" can be understood, and was probably intended, in a true sense, but it opens the way to a mechanical view which makes it difficult to appreciate the original setting of the messages, and at the same time eliminates the present work of the Holy Spirit in the illumination of the reader. In addition, there is involved a possible relativization of the Bible which in the long run jeopardizes rather than secures its true authority, placing it side by side with other historically demonstrable phenomena such as extra-Biblical tradition, the Church and at a later date the Papacy.

III. THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

The incipient dangers in the patristic doctrine come to fruition in the medieval Church, which presents us with the paradox of a high doctrine of inspiration accompanied by a muzzling of its authority and in the later stages a virtual elimination of its living power. In point of fact the Scholastic period is particularly sterile in the matter of inspiration, being far more interested in defining the status of the Bible in relation to that of other authorities in the Church. Abelard, as might be expected, makes a plea for a more human understanding, and expresses doubt as to the inerrancy of Scripture from a historical standpoint. Aquinas has a full and careful discussion of the relation of the human authors and readers to the Holy Spirit as the true Author, and with his usual acuteness he finds a real place for the ordinary element (cf. *S. Theol.* II, 2 qu. 171 ff.). But the whole discussion relates to a Bible Judaistically understood as a textbook of divine truth, divinely given and therefore to be approached with respect, but accessible to human study like any other textbook,² and accompanied by other and hardly less important authorities. In these circumstances it is not surprising that over large tracts of medieval life the Bible could not do its vivifying and reforming work, for all that its inspiration was so fully accepted. It is not surprising that the human element excluded in the understanding of the Bible should rise up the more strongly in other spheres and successfully challenge and subjugate the divinely dictated Scriptures. It is not surprising that the Bible should become a mere source-book for dogmatic disputation, ossified in an alien tongue, instead of the living Word of Jesus Christ to the churches. This is not to say that the medieval doctrine was wrong in basic substance. It is not to say that a less high doctrine of inspiration is demanded. It is not to say that the Bible should be understood in terms of religious philosophy or poetry. But it is a warning that even a materially impeccable doctrine may be

² i.e., in virtual abstraction from the Holy Spirit as its necessary Interpreter.

held and taught and applied in such a way that the true insights of the Bible are suppressed, and the result is a distortion which

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achieves the very opposite of what is intended, and is almost worse than naked error.

IV. THE REFORMATION

This was the kind of situation which the Reformers had to retrieve in their doctrine of the Bible, and it is against this background that we must try to understand their doctrine of inspiration. In the first place, we can hardly fail to note that it does not play any decisive part in their theology. Their concern is primarily with other matters. Yet this does not mean that it is unimportant, let alone that it is absent. It simply means that they can almost afford to take it for granted. The high inspiration of the Bible; the fact that God himself is the true Author of Scripture; the divine origin of even the detailed wording—these are matters which are not disputed. Luther makes it plain that the whole of the Bible must be accepted as the inspired Word of God (cf. *Weimarer Ausgabe*, 54, 158, 28). Zwingli appeals consistently to the divinely inspired record of the Old and New Testaments in assertion and defense of pure Christian doctrine. Calvin is perhaps the clearest and firmest on this point. He describes the Scriptures as the "only record in which God has been pleased to consign his truth to perpetual remembrance," and says that we cannot have an established faith in doctrine "until we have a perfect conviction that God is its author," i.e., through Scripture (*Institutes*, I, 7, 2 and 4). In his sermon on II Timothy 3:16, he constantly refers to God as the author of the Bible, and in his commentary on this passage he can even speak in terms of "dictation" (*C.R.*, 54, 283 f.). Among the Anglicans, Whitaker has a similar passage in answer to the Romanist contention that the Bible is only mediately the voice of God: "We confess that God hath not spoken of 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" (*Parker Society ed.*, p. 296). In view of the controversy regarding Reformation teaching, and the suggestion in some quarters that the Reformers more or less abandoned the traditional doctrine of inspiration, it is as well to emphasize this primary element in their thinking. Nowhere, perhaps, is it more authoritatively summed up than in Barth's *Church Dogmatics*: "The Reformers took over unquestioningly and unreservedly the statement on the inspiration, and indeed the verbal inspiration, of the Bible, as it is explicitly and implicitly contained in those Pauline passages which we have taken as our basis, even including the formula that God is the author of the Bible, and occasionally making use of the idea of a dictation through the biblical writers" (I, 2, p. 520).

Yet even a cursory examination of the Reformation literature makes it plain that in three important respects the Reformers moved back from the

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traditional teaching and its Judaistic basis to a more genuinely scriptural understanding. In the first place, they had a clear realization that Christ is the true theme of the Bible. The Bible is not a mere source-book of Christian teaching to be handled with legalistic rationalism (i.e. for

attainment of self-righteousness and self-wisdom) by scholars, ecclesiastics and canonists. It is the book to lead us to Christ, not merely to a mystical Christ, but to Christ prepared and prophesied in the Old Testament, and incarnate, crucified, risen and ascended in the New. Luther makes this point with greatest clarity: "But Holy Scripture refuses to know or put before us anything but Christ. And whoso therefore goes to Scripture or is led by Scripture to Christ, it is well with him and he is on the right path" (*W.A.*, 16, 113, 22). But Zwingli has it too: In the Bible "Christ stands before you with open arms, inviting you and saying, 'Come unto me...'" (*Library of Christian Classics*, XXIV, p. 84). And although Calvin does not make it quite so explicitly, it is the theme of his whole understanding of the Biblical story as developed in the main part of the *Institutes* (II, 6 f.).³

Secondly, and in consequence, there is a better appreciation of the human aspects of the Bible, not in isolation from the divine work, but in conjunction with it. The Bible tells us the story of God's dealings in salvation and judgment. It treats of a people, of the men of this people, and of the One to whom they led and in whom they found fulfillment. The authors have their own place in the development or outworking or recounting of this story. God uses them in their own place and time, and according to their own capacity and endowment. The fact that the Bible is fully inspired does not mean that we have to look for a hidden or allegorical sense, but that the divine message is given in and through the human. It is for this reason that the Reformers dismiss the complicated exegesis of the Middle Ages and insist upon straightforward exposition (cf. Whitaker, *op. cit.*, p. 405 f.), relating the various passages primarily to their human setting. But they are also aware that in this respect the Bible conforms to a christological pattern. As the Word became flesh, and was very man no less than very God, so the written Word is no less fully a human word than a divine. To allow the human word to be minimized or even swallowed up in the divine is not to do true honor to the Bible, but to miss its true miracle and message.

Thirdly, the Reformers all have a vivid sense that, although the meaning of the Bible is for the most part clear and simple in itself, its message cannot be received merely by human reading or scholarship or historical research. There is needed in the reader the work of the same Spirit who gave the writings. This is one of the most widely and firmly attested of all the points made by the Reformers, for it was of crucial importance in their attack on the medieval doctrine and their whole resistance to the traditional view of authority. Luther puts it in this way: "The Bible cannot be mastered by

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study or talent; you must rely solely on the influx of the Spirit" (*Briefwechsel*, ed., Enders & Kawerau, I, 141). Zwingli bases his appeal to the nuns of Oetenbach upon it: "Even if you hear the gospel of Jesus Christ from an apostle, you cannot act upon it unless the heavenly Father teach and draw you by the Spirit" (*op. cit.*, p. 79 and cf. the whole contents, pp. 75-95). Calvin gives us the forceful statement: "For as God alone can properly bear witness to his own words, so these words will not obtain full credit in the hearts of men, until they are sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who spoke by the mouth of the prophets, must penetrate our hearts, in order to convince us that they faithfully delivered

³ And cf. *Commentary* on John 5:39, "We ought to read the Scriptures with the express design of finding Christ in them."

the message with which they were divinely entrusted" (*Institutes*, I, 7, 4).⁴ The same emphasis is to be found in Whitaker: "We say that the Holy Spirit is the supreme interpreter of scripture, because we must be illuminated by the Holy Spirit to be certainly persuaded of the true sense of scripture," and again: "For no saving truth can be known without the Holy Ghost" (*op. cit.*, p.415).

Two subsidiary points are to be noted in passing. The first is that, since Christian understanding rests upon the work of the Spirit, the Bible cannot be treated as a Euclid of Christian faith and conduct to be learned, schematized and applied by the ordinary ways of reason and scholarship. On the basis of a sound doctrine of inspiration, Biblical theology is always a venture of prayer, humility and obedience in the Spirit, and nowhere is this better illustrated than in the works of the Reformers themselves. But second, since the Holy Spirit himself attests the word which he has given, there can be a relative unconcern in relation to its human qualifications. It does not have to be proved that the Bible is the oldest of books, or the best literature, or of superior majesty, though some of these points may well be made by way of confirmation. Again, it need not be *demonstrated with absolute finality* that all the predictions of the Old Testament are fulfilled to the letter, although Christians taught by the Spirit will rejoice as the Reformers did in the fact that this is the case. Finally, the credibility of Scripture does not stand or fall with the ability to prove that all the events recorded took place exactly as reported, although for all their freedom in face of apparent contradictions the Reformers have obviously not the slightest doubt that this is the case. As Calvin judiciously points out, these proofs are "not so strong as to produce and rivet a full conviction in our minds," but when the necessary foundation of a higher assurance is laid "they become most appropriate helps" (*Institutes*, I, 8, 1).

V. THE POST-REFORMATION PERIOD

The post-Reformation period presents us with a multiplicity of material on the theme of inspiration which makes it impossible to do more than pick

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out the leading tendencies. As in Reformation doctrine, it was commonly accepted that God is the true Author, not merely of the doctrine of Scripture, but of the writings themselves (Gerhard, *Loci Theologici*, II, 17, Coccius, *S.T.*, IV, 39). Inspiration applies to the whole Scripture, and not merely to particular parts (Hollaz, *E.T.A.*, p. 90). It does not rule out a concomitant action on the part of the human authors (*ibid.*, p. 91, *Leiden Synopsis*, III, 7). Yet it is more than a mere guidance of the authors in their human action, and is not equivalent to ordinary artistic "inspiration" (Quenstedt, *T.D.P.*, I, 69). It extends to the very words in which the statements are clothed, (*ibid.*, I, 72, Cocceius, *op. cit.*, IV, 41), and includes passages which deal with historical and scientific as well as doctrinal and ethical matters (Hollaz, *op. cit.*, p. 89). It is supported both by the witness of Scripture itself and also by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit through the word (Quenstedt, *op. cit.*, I, 87).

In all these matters it is evident that the Lutheran and Reformed dogmaticians of the seventeenth century are in line with the main teaching of the Reformers themselves. But certain features call for notice which pose the question whether their full and careful

⁴ And see esp. *Commentaries* on I Corinthians 20 ff.; II Corinthians 3:6.

codification of doctrine has not involved certain shifts of emphasis, slight in themselves but serious in their historical consequences. In the first place, there is a tendency to return to the patristic overwhelming of the human author by the divine. This must not be exaggerated, for most authors agree that the authors write intelligently and voluntarily, and are certainly not to be regarded as mere machines (H. Heidegger, *S.T.*, II, 36, Scherzer, *Systema Theologiae*, p. 8). But there is a distinct development of the theory of dictation, not merely in the use of the rather ambiguous ditto (Calov, *Systema*, I, 555), but in the employment of such phrases as "assistants and amenuenses" (Gerhard, *L.T.*, ii., 26 ff., W. Bucan, *Inst. theol.*, L. IV, 2), and even in the revival by Heidegger of the dubious image of the flute-player (H. Heidegger, *Corp. Theol.*, II, 34). Secondly, there is a tendency to press to an unnecessary extreme the intrinsically true doctrine of verbal inspiration, as in the insistence that even the Hebrew vowel points must be regarded as inspired (Gerhard, *L.T.*, 265). Third, there is a tendency to give a false importance to the doctrine of inerrancy, as if the inspiration of Scripture were finally suspended upon the ability to prove it correct in every detail. To be sure, inspiration is itself the basis of inerrancy, and there is no obligation to prove the latter (Quenstedt, *op. cit.*, I, 77). But in face of attacks upon the inerrancy of the Bible, whether by those who do not regard it as essential to inspiration or by those who deny both, it is only too easy to reverse the true relationship and to come to think of inerrancy as the basis of inspiration (Calov, *op. cit.*, I, 552). Fourth, and in consequence, there is a tendency to subordinate the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, still forcefully maintained, to the external and internal criteria of the authenticity and authority of the Bible. If final assurance comes only with the Holy Spirit, the criteria are of great importance in engendering

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intellectual conviction and even giving spiritual certainty (Hollaz, *op. cit.*, p. 121), so that even a careful and sympathetic student like Preus is forced to see in the Lutherans "a certain concession to rationalism" at this point (R. Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture*, p. 114). Finally, and underlying the whole conception, there is a tendency to subject genuinely scriptural material to alien Aristotelian or 'Cartesian principles and modes of presentation which result in a measure of distortion from the standpoint of true Biblical and Reformation doctrine, which give an ambiguity still reflected in scholarly assessments of the period, and which, contrary to the intentions of the dogmatists, expose the doctrine of inspiration to the violent reactions of the period of the Enlightenment and theological liberalism.

Whether the post-Reformation orthodox could have contended for the truth of inspiration along other lines is a point worth considering before we rush on to the sweeping and exaggerated condemnations which mark some dogmatic scholars. After all, they were faced by very real difficulties: the demand of the Romanists that they should produce as evident an authority as that of the Church and Papacy (*ibid.*, pp. 93 ff.); the attacks of Socinians upon the historical reliability of Scripture (*ibid.*, pp. 81 f.) and the willingness of Arminians to compromise on this matter (*ibid.*, pp. 83 f.); and the revived Montanism of the sectaries with their appeal to inward illuminations of the Spirit apart from the letter of the Bible (*ibid.*, p. 46). It is also to be recalled that in the matters referred to we are dealing for the most part only with tendencies within a general loyalty, or intention of loyalty, to the Reformation position. Yet the fact can hardly be disputed that a new and non-Biblical rationalism of presupposition, method and approach threatens the Protestant doctrine with these dogmatists (*ibid.*, pp. 210 f.), that they clearly repeat in some degree the same kind of Judaizing movement as that of the

early and medieval Church, and that in so doing they incur a measure of both positive and negative responsibility for the disasters which follow.

VI. EIGHTEENTH CENTURY RATIONALISM

By the inversion characteristic of theological history, the application of inspiration to the minutiae of the Biblical text led to a concentration of interest on the actual documents and history. Hence the eighteenth century saw a rapid and intensive development (e.g., by Michaelis and Semler) of the linguistic and textual studies which had commenced with the Renaissance (cf. K. Aner, *Die Theologie der Lessingzeit*, pp. 202 ff.) Much of this work had no direct bearing upon the doctrine of inspiration. But the case was different when literary and historical questions were raised, for rationalistic attacks upon the reliability and even the authenticity of the records implied a rejection of its inspiration. The calumnies of Voltaire and the Encyclopedists were too outrageous to be seriously effective, but the Wolff *enbüttel Fragmente* constituted a direct challenge with their discussion of the

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resurrection narratives, and theologians who had already committed themselves to rationalist presuppositions found it difficult to avoid some kind of compromise solution. After all, it was argued, "historical truths cannot be demonstrated," as Lessing maintained (*Werke*, ed., Gosche, VI, p. 241). To try to defend inspiration in terms of inerrancy is thus to commit it to inevitable relativization. Surely the better course is to intellectualize the concept. Irrespective of its historical reliability, the Bible contains general truths which are inspired, not in a special or supernatural sense, but insofar as they conform to the teaching of pure reason. This was the new version of inspiration in neological circles (Aner, *op. cit.*, p. 296), and the tragedy was that orthodox apologists like Schumann, Riss and Goeze, attempting to meet the attackers on their own ground, accepted the basic presuppositions instead of challenging the real enemy in the name of a genuinely Biblical and Reformation understanding.

In its own way, rationalism was no less an evasion of the historical element than pure supernaturalism. But many forces were making for a study of the Bible, not merely as an ancient text, nor as a repository of abstract divine or human truth, but as divine truth in the form of a human product. This was the contention of Herder, first expressed in his *Riga Sermon on the Bible*, and then worked out in the *Theological Letters* and *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*. As Herder saw it, the human element in the Bible must be taken quite seriously. The Bible is a work of literature, written at a particular time, by a particular people, in particular situations, and conditioned by race, language, thought-forms, and historical and geographical milieu (*Werke*, ed. Muller, II, X, p. 257). Its inspiration is not to be denied, but it is not to be absolutized. It is that of great religious thinkers and poets through whom God is speaking as he speaks elsewhere through nature, philosophy and the arts (*ibid.*, p. 271). It is simply a heightened form of true conviction, of religious enthusiasm in the purer and deeper sense (*ibid.*, XVIII, pp. 53 f.). As such, it commends itself to the sincere and seeking reader, not by its outward singularity, but by the direct message which it carries to the soul (*ibid.*, p. 275). Herder can thus unite a conception of the inward testimony of the Spirit with his basic reduction of inspiration to the aesthetic level. The gain in this understanding is that it does take the human element in the Bible with a sympathetic seriousness hardly attained before in the whole history of the doctrine. But this gain does not offset the failure to see that on its

own terms the Biblical literature and history cannot be classified as merely one manifestation of the divine Spirit among others, nor its inspiration regarded as one particular species in a common genus. And it is no real compensation that a place is found for the direct speech of the Bible to the heart, for although this contains an element of truth it is a highly emotionalized and subjectivized version of the authentic witness of the Holy Spirit, and no less exposed than the Biblical history to empirical criticism and interpretation in the form of psychological analysis.

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With his program of historical Biblical study, Herder initiated the intensive research of the modern period and its more or less sustained polemic against the inerrancy and therefore the special inspiration of the Bible. But theologically his subjectivization of inspiration was no less important, for it combined with Empiricism, Pietism and Kantian Idealism to produce the thoroughgoing subjectivization of Christianity by Schleiermacher which has dominated the whole movement of liberal Protestantism. As Schleiermacher sees it, all religions are relative formulations or descriptions of the basic religious feeling of dependence (*Reden*, p. 21). Of these Christianity is the best because in it this feeling finds perfect expression (p. 212). The doctrines of Christianity are all true and important as the more detailed expressions of emotional states (pp. 84 ff.), the Holy Spirit being the common spirit of the Church (*Der Christliche Glaube*, II, pp. 372 ff.), the Scriptures the first of a series of attempts to express the Christian faith (*ibid.*, pp. 409 ff.), and inspiration the working of the common spirit of believers no less evident in any great doctrinal or devotional work than in the apostolic literature (*loc. cit.*). The almost complete supernaturalizing of the seventeenth century is thus completely reversed and avenged by a no less thorough absorption of the divine element into the human, and the stage is set for the long tragedy of an anthropocentric understanding with all its vanities and vulnerabilities, with its illusory hopes and eventual disillusionment and despair.

Conclusion

Why is it that for all the tenacity displayed and scholarship deployed, orthodoxy has proved so feeble and ineffective in face of this upsurge of the human spirit with its claiming of the Bible and its inspiration for itself? The answer to this question is undoubtedly to be found in the approximation of orthodoxy itself to an abstract, schematized and basically Judaistic understanding of inspiration instead of a genuinely Biblical and Reformed. The attack on the historical reliability of the Bible was damaging just because orthodoxy no longer had full confidence in the witness of the Spirit but must find for it rationalistic support by a reversal of the relationship between inspiration and inerrancy, suspending the former on the latter. The neological compromise was tempting and misleading just because orthodoxy was already finding in the Bible a mere textbook of dogmatic truth rather than a concrete and living attestation of Jesus Christ. The historical program was convincing and dangerous just because orthodoxy found so little place for the human and historical element, and could not contend for the genuinely historical understanding of the Bible in terms of itself to which Biblical scholarship is finding its way after so much debate and confusion. The subjectivization of the Bible and its inspiration was so powerful just because orthodoxy was guilty of all these unfortunate tendencies, suppressing man in his proper place yet exalting him in his

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Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "The Church Doctrine of Inspiration," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.205-217.

rationality, losing sight of Jesus Christ as the true theme and center of the Bible, and showing so little genuine appreciation for the illumination of the Holy Spirit and his work.

In this as in so many matters, the way forward is the way back, namely, to the Reformers, and through them to the Bible and its self-witness by which all our views of inspiration must be tested, corrected, strengthened and empowered. This certainly does not mean that the doctrine of inspiration must be weakened, or a compromise arranged. It means that it must be genuinely asserted, not only in face of error, but also in face of distortions or dilutions of the truth. The prophetic and apostolic word is the word of divine wisdom by which all the rationalism of man is summoned to repentance and renewal. The historical record of the Bible is the account of the divine dealings with man which alone give meaning and direction to all other history. The theme of the Bible is the incarnate Word in whom alone we can find truth, freedom and salvation, and to whom the written Word conforms in divine and human structure. The inspiration of Scripture is genuinely the work of the sovereign Spirit, whose operation cannot finally be subjected to human analysis, repudiation or control, but who remains the internal Master of that which he himself has given, guaranteeing its authenticity, and declaring its message with quickening and compelling power.

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