

The Inspiration of the Bible

By Benjamin B. Warfield, D.D., LL.D.

A lecture. From "Bibliotheca Sacra," v. 51, 1894, pp. 614-640.

THE SUBJECT OF THE INSPIRATION OF THE BIBLE is one which has been much confused in recent discussion. He who, seeking to learn the truth, should gather about him the latest treatises, hearing such titles as, "Inspiration, and other Lectures," "Inspiration and the Bible," "What is Inspiration?" "How did God inspire the Bible?" "The Oracles of God?"¹ – would find himself led by them in every conceivable direction at once. No wonder if he should stand stock-still in the midst of his would-be guides, confounded by the Babel of voices. The old formula, *quot homines tot sententiae*, seems no longer adequate. Wherever five "advanced thinkers" assemble, at least six theories as to inspiration are likely to be ventilated. They differ in every conceivable point, or in every conceivable point save one. They agree that inspiration is less pervasive and less determinative than has heretofore been thought, or than is still thought in less enlightened circles. They agree that there is less of the truth of God and more of the error of man in the Bible than Christians have been wont to believe. They agree accordingly that the teaching of the Bible may be, in this, that, or the other, – here, there, or elsewhere, – safely neglected or openly repudiated. So soon as we turn to the constructive side, however, and ask wherein the inspiration of the Bible consists; how far it guarantees the trustworthiness of the Bible's teaching; in what of its elements is the Bible a divinely safeguarded guide to truth: the concurrence ends and hopeless dissension sets in. They agree only in their common destructive attitude towards some higher view of the inspiration of the Bible, of the presence of which each one seems supremely conscious.

It is upon this fact that we need first of all to fix our attention. It is not of the variegated hypotheses of his fellow-theorizers, but of some high doctrine of inspiration, the common object of attack of

¹ Titles of recent treatises by Rooke, Horton, DeWitt, Smyth, and Sanday respectively.

them all, that each new theorizer on the subject of inspiration is especially conscious, as standing over against him, with reference to which he is to orient himself, and against the claims of which he is to defend his new hypothesis. Thus they themselves introduce us to the fact that over against the numberless discordant theories of inspiration which vex our time, there stands a well-defined church-doctrine of inspiration. This church-doctrine of inspiration differs from the theories that would fain supplant it, in that it is not the invention nor the property of an individual, but the settled faith of the universal church of God; in that it is not the growth of yesterday, but the assured persuasion of the people of God from the first planting of the church until today; in that it is not a protean shape, varying its affirmations to fit every new change in the ever-shifting thought of men, but from the beginning has been the church's constant and abiding conviction as to the divinity of the Scriptures committed to her keeping. It is certainly a most impressive fact, – this well-defined, aboriginal, stable doctrine of the church as to the nature and trustworthiness of the Scriptures of God, which confronts with its gentle but steady persistence of affirmation all the theories of inspiration which the restless energy of unbelieving and half-believing speculation has been able to invent in this agitated nineteenth century of ours. Surely the seeker after the truth in the matter of the inspiration of the Bible may well take this church-doctrine as his starting-point.

What this church-doctrine is, it is scarcely necessary minutely to describe. It will suffice to remind ourselves that it looks upon the Bible as an oracular book, – as the Word of God in such a sense that whatever it says God says, – not a book, then, in which one may, by searching, find some word of God, but a book which may be frankly appealed to at any point with the assurance that whatever it may be found to say, that is the Word of God. We are all of us members in particular of the body of Christ which we call the church: and the life of the church, and the faith of the church, and the thought of the church are our natural heritage. We know how, as Christian men, we approach this Holy Book, – how unquestioningly we receive its statements of fact, bow before its enunciations of duty, tremble before its threatenings, and rest upon its promises. Or, if the subtle

spirit of modern doubt has seeped somewhat into our hearts, our memory will easily recall those happier days when we stood a child at our Christian mother's knee, with lisping lips following the words which her slow finger traced upon this open page, – words which were her support in every trial and, as she fondly trusted, were to be our guide throughout life. Mother church was speaking to us in that maternal voice, commending to us her vital faith in the Word of God. How often since then has it been our own lot, in our turn, to speak to others all the words of this life! As we sit in the midst of our pupils in the Sabbath-school, or in the centre of our circle at home, or perchance at some bedside of sickness or of death; or as we meet our fellow-man amid the busy work of the world, hemmed in by temptation or weighed down with care, and would fain put beneath him some firm support and stay: in what spirit do we turn to this Bible then? with what confidence do we commend its every word to those whom we would make partakers of its comfort or of its strength? In such scenes as these is revealed the vital faith of the people of God in the surety and trustworthiness of the Word of God.

Nor do we need to do more than remind ourselves that this attitude of entire trust in every word of the Scriptures has been characteristic of the people of God from the very foundation of the church. Christendom has always reposed upon the belief that the utterances of this book are properly oracles of God. The whole body of Christian literature bears witness to this fact. We may trace its stream to its source, and everywhere it is vocal with a living faith in the divine trustworthiness of the Scriptures of God in every one of their affirmations. This is the murmur of the little rills of Christian speech which find their tenuous way through the parched heathen land of the early second century. And this is the mighty voice of the great river of Christian thought which sweeps through the ages, freighted with blessings for men. Dr. Sanday, in his recent Bampton Lectures on “Inspiration” – in which, unfortunately, he does not teach the church-doctrine – is driven to admit that not only may “testimonies to the general doctrine of inspiration” from the earliest Fathers, “be multiplied to almost any extent; but [that] there are some which go further and point to an inspiration which might be described as ‘verbal’”; “nor does this idea,” he adds, “come in

tentatively and by degrees, but almost from the very first.”² He might have spared the adverb “almost.” The earliest writers know no other doctrine. If Origen asserts that the Holy Spirit was co-worker with the Evangelists in the composition of the Gospel, and that, therefore, lapse of memory, error or falsehood was impossible to them,³ and if Irenaeus, the pupil of Polycarp, claims for Christians a clear knowledge that “the Scriptures are perfect, seeing that they are spoken by God’s Word and his Spirit”;⁴ no less does Polycarp, the pupil of John, consider the Scriptures the very voice of the Most High, and pronounce him the first-born of Satan, “whosoever perverts these oracles of the Lord.”⁵ Nor do the later Fathers know a different doctrine. Augustine, for example, affirms that he defers to the canonical Scriptures alone among books with such reverence and honor that he most “firmly believes that no one of their authors has erred in anything, in writing.”⁶ To precisely the same effect did the Reformers believe and teach. Luther adopts these words of Augustine’s as his own, and declares that the whole of the Scriptures are to be ascribed to the Holy Ghost, and therefore cannot err.⁷ Calvin demands that whatever is propounded in Scripture, “without exception,” shall be humbly received by us, – that the Scriptures as a whole shall be received by us with the same reverence which we give to God, “because they have emanated from him alone, and are mixed with nothing human.”⁸ The saintly Rutherford, who speaks of the Scriptures as a more sure word than a direct oracle from heaven,⁹ and Baxter, who affirms that “all that the holy writers have recorded is true (and no falsehood in the Scriptures but what is from the errors of scribes and translators),”¹⁰ hand down this supreme trust in the Scripture word to our own day – to our own Charles Hodge and Henry B. Smith, the one of whom asserts that the Bible “gives us

² Sanday, “Inspiration,” p. 34.

³ On Matt. xvi. 12 and John vi. 18.

⁴ *Adv. Haer.*, ii. 28.

⁵ *Ep. ad Phil.*, cap. vii.

⁶ *Ep. ad Hier.* lxxxii. 3.

⁷ *Works* (St. Louis ed.), xix. 305; (Erlangen ed.), xxxvii. 11 and xxxviii.

⁸ *Institutes*, i. 18; *Commentary on Romans*, xv. 4, and on 2 Tim. iii. 16.

⁹ “Free Disputation against Pretended Liberty of Conscience,” p. 373.

¹⁰ “Works,” xv. 65.

truth without error,”¹¹ and the other, that “all the books of the Scripture are equally inspired; . . . all alike are infallible in what they teach; . . . their assertions must be free from error.”¹² Such testimonies are simply the formulation by the theologians of each age of the constant faith of Christians throughout all ages.

If we would estimate at its full meaning the depth of this trust in the Scripture word, we should observe Christian men at work upon the text of Scripture. There is but one view-point which will account for or justify the minute and loving pains which have been expended upon the text of Scripture, by the long line of commentators that has extended unbrokenly from the first Christian ages to our own. The allegorical interpretation which rioted in the early days of the church was the daughter of reverence for the biblical word; a spurious daughter you may think, but none the less undeniably a direct offspring of the awe with which the sacred text was regarded as the utterances of God, and, as such, pregnant with inexhaustible significance. The patient and anxious care with which the Bible text is scrutinized today by scholars, of a different spirit no doubt from those old allegorizers, but of equal reverence for the text of Scripture, betrays the same fundamental viewpoint, – to which the Bible is the Word of God, every detail of the meaning of which is of inestimable preciousness. No doubt there have been men who have busied themselves with the interpretation of Scripture, who have not approached it in such a spirit or with such expectations. But it is not the Jowetts, with their supercilious doubts whether Paul meant very much by what he said, who represent the spirit of Christian exposition. This is represented rather by the Bengels, who count no labor wasted, in their efforts to distill from the very words of Holy Writ the honey which the Spirit has hidden in them for the comfort and the delight of the saints. It is represented rather by the Westcotts, who bear witness to their own experience of the “sense of rest and confidence which grows firmer with increasing knowledge,” as their patient investigation has dug deeper and deeper for the treasures hid in the words and clauses and sentences of the Epistles of John,¹³ – to the sure conviction which forty years of study of the Epistle to the

¹¹ Henry B. Smith, “Sermon on Inspiration” (Cincinnati ed.), p. 19.

¹² Charles Hodge, “Syst. Theol.,” i. 163.

¹³ B. F. Westcott, “The Epistles of St. John,” p. vi.

Hebrews has brought them that “we come nearer to the meaning of Scripture by the closest attention to the subtleties and minute variations of words and order.” It was a just remark of one of the wisest men I ever knew, Dr. Wistar Hodge, that this is “a high testimony to verbal inspiration.”¹⁴

Of course the church has not failed to bring this, her vital faith in the divine trustworthiness of the Scripture word, to formal expression in her solemn creeds. The simple faith of the Christian people is also the confessional doctrine of the Christian churches. The assumption of the divine authority of the scriptural teaching underlies all the creedal statements of the church; all of which are formally based upon the Scriptures. And from the beginning, it finds more or less full expression in them. Already, in some of the formulas of faith which underlie the Apostles’ Creed itself, we meet with the phrase “according to the Scriptures” as validating the items of belief; while in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, amid the meager clauses outlining only what is essential to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, place is given to the declaration that He is to be found speaking in the prophets – “who spake by the prophets.” It was in conscious dependence upon the immemorial teaching of the church that the Council of Trent defined it as of faith in the Church of Rome, that God is the author of Scripture, – a declaration which has been repeated in our own day by the Vatican Council, with such full explanations as are included in these rich words: “The church holds” the books of the Old and New Testaments, “to be sacred and canonical, not because, having been carefully composed by mere human industry, they were afterwards approved by her authority; nor merely because they contain revelation with no admixture of error; but because, having been written by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, they have God for their author.” Needless to say that a no less firm conviction of the absolute authority of Scripture underlies all the Protestant creeds. Before all else, Protestantism is, in its very essence, an appeal from all other authority to the divine authority of Holy Scripture. The Augsburg Confession, the first Protestant creed, is, therefore, commended to consideration, only on the ground that it is “drawn from the Holy Scriptures and the pure word of God.” The later Lutheran creeds, and especially the Reformed creeds, grow

¹⁴ C. Wistar Hodge, “Presbyterian and Reformed Review,” ii. 330.

progressively more explicit. It is our special felicity, that; is Reformed Christians, and heirs of the richest and fullest formulation of Reformed thought, we possess in that precious heritage, the Westminster Confession, the most complete, the most admirable, the most perfect statement of the essential Christian doctrine of Holy Scripture which has ever been formed by man. Here the vital faith of the church is brought to full expression; the Scriptures are declared to be the word of God in such a sense that God is their author, and they, because immediately inspired by God, are of infallible truth and divine authority, and are to be believed to be true by the Christian man, in whatsoever is revealed in them, for the authority of God himself speaking therein.

Thus, in every way possible, the church has borne her testimony from the beginning, and still in our day, to her faith in the divine trustworthiness of her Scriptures, in all their affirmations of whatever kind. At no age has it been possible for men to express without rebuke the faintest doubt as to the absolute trustworthiness of their least declaration. Tertullian, writing at the opening of the third century, suggests, with evident hesitation and timidity, that Paul's language in the seventh chapter of First Corinthians may be intended to distinguish, in his remarks on marriage and divorce, between matters of divine commandment and of human arrangement. Dr. Sanday is obliged to comment on his language: "Any seeming depreciation of Scripture was as unpopular even then as it is now."¹⁵ The church has always believed her Scriptures to be the book of God, of which God was in such a sense the author that every one of its affirmations of whatever kind is to be esteemed as the utterance of God, of infallible truth and authority.

In the whole history of the church there have been but two movements of thought, tending to a lower conception of the inspiration and authority of Scripture, which have attained sufficient proportions to bring them into view in an historical sketch.

(1) The first of these may be called the Rationalistic view. Its characteristic feature is an effort to distinguish between inspired and uninspired elements within the Scriptures. With forerunners among the Humanists, this mode of thought was introduced by the Socinians, and taken up by the Syncretists in Germany, the

¹⁵ Sanday, "Inspiration," p. 42 (note).

Remonstrants in Holland, and the Jesuits in the Church of Rome. In the great life-and-death struggle of the eighteenth century it obtained great vogue among the defenders of supernatural religion, in their desperate efforts to save what was of even more importance, – just as a hardpressed army may yield to the foe many an outpost which justly belongs to it, in the effort to save the citadel. In the nineteenth century it has retained a strong hold, especially upon apologetical writers, chiefly in the three forms which affirm respectively that only the mysteries of the faith are inspired, i. e. things undiscoverable by unaided reason, – that the Bible is inspired only in matters of faith and practice, – and that the Bible is inspired only in its thoughts or concepts, not in its words. But although this legacy from the rationalism of an evil time still makes its appearance in the pages of many theological writers, and has no doubt affected the faith of a considerable number of Christians, it has failed to supplant in either the creeds of the church or the hearts of the people the church doctrine of the plenary inspiration of the Bible, i. e. the doctrine that the Bible is inspired not in part but fully, in all its elements alike, – things discoverable by reason as well as mysteries, matters of history and science as well as of faith and practice, words as well as thoughts.

(2) The second of the lowered views of inspiration may be called the Mystical view. Its characteristic conception is that the Christian man has something within himself, – call it enlightened reason, spiritual insight, the Christian consciousness, the witness of the Spirit, or call it what you will, – to the test of which every “external revelation” is to be subjected, and according to the decision of which are the contents of the Bible to be valued. Very varied forms have been taken by this conception; and more or less expression has been given to it, in one form or another, in every age. In its extremer manifestations, it has formerly tended to sever itself from the main stream of Christian thought and even to form separated sects. But in our own century, through the great genius of Schleiermacher it has broken in upon the church like a flood, and washed into every corner of the Protestant world. As a consequence, we find men everywhere who desire to acknowledge as from God only such Scripture as “finds them,” – who cast the clear objective enunciation of God’s will to the mercy of the currents of thought and feeling which sweep

up and down in their own souls, – who “persist” sometimes, to use a sharp but sadly true phrase of Robert Alfred Vaughan’s, “in their conceited rejection of the light without until they have turned into darkness their light within.” We grieve over the inroads which this essentially naturalistic mode of thought has made in the Christian thinking of the day. But great and deplorable as they have been, they have not been so extensive as to supplant the church-doctrine of the absolute authority of the objective revelation of God in his Word, in either the creeds of the church, or the hearts of the people. Despite these attempts to introduce lowered conceptions, the doctrine of the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, which looks upon them as an oracular book, in all its parts and elements, alike, of God, trustworthy in all its affirmations of every kind, remains to-day, as it has always been, the vital faith of the people of God, and the formal teaching of the organized church.

The more we contemplate this church-doctrine, the more pressing becomes the question of what account we are to give of it, – its origin and persistence. How shall we account for the immediate adoption of so developed a doctrine of inspiration in the very infancy of the church, and for the tenacious hold which the church has kept upon it through so many ages? The account is simple enough, and capable of inclusion in a single sentence: this is the doctrine of inspiration which was held by the writers of the New Testament and by Jesus as reported in the Gospels. It is this simple fact that has commended it to the church of all ages as the true doctrine; and in it we may surely recognize an even more impressive fact than that of the existence of a stable, abiding church-doctrine standing over against the many theories of the day, – the fact, namely, that this church-doctrine of inspiration was the Bible doctrine before it was the church-doctrine, and is the church doctrine only because it is the Bible doctrine. It is upon this fact that we should now fix our attention.

In the limited space at our disposal we need not attempt anything like a detailed proof that the church-doctrine of the plenary inspiration of the Bible is the Bible’s own doctrine of inspiration. And this especially for three very obvious reasons:

First, because it cannot be necessary to prove this to ourselves.

We have the Bible in our hands, and we are accustomed to read it. It is enough for us to ask ourselves how the apostles and our Lord, as represented in its pages, conceived of what they called “the Scriptures,” for the answer to come at once to our minds. As readers of the New Testament, we know that to the men of the New Testament “the Scriptures” were the Word of God which could not be broken, i. e. whose every word was trustworthy; and that a simple “It is written” was therefore to them the end of all strife. The proof of this is pervasive and level to the apprehension of every reader. It would be an insult to our intelligence were we to presume that we had not observed it, or could not apprehend its meaning.

Secondly, it is not necessary to prove that the New Testament regards “Scripture” as the mere Word of God, in the highest and most rigid sense, to modern biblical scholarship. Among untrammelled students of the Bible, it is practically a matter of common consent that the writers of the New Testament books looked upon what they called “Scripture” as divinely safeguarded in even its verbal expression, and as divinely trustworthy in all its parts, in all its elements, and in all its affirmations of whatever kind. This is, of course, the judgment of all those who have adopted this doctrine as their own, because they apprehend it to be the biblical doctrine. It is also the judgment of all those who can bring themselves to refuse a doctrine which they yet perceive to be a biblical doctrine. Whether we appeal, among men of this class, to such students of a more evangelical tendency, as Tholuck, Rothe, Farrar, Sanday, or to such extremer writers as Riehm, Reuss, Pfeleiderer, Keunen, they will agree in telling us that the high doctrine of inspiration which we have called the church-doctrine, was held by the writers of the New Testament. This is common ground between believing and unbelieving students of the Bible, and needs, therefore, no new demonstration in the forum of scholarship. Let us pause here, therefore, only long enough to allow Hermann Schultz, surely a fair example of the “advanced” school, to tell us what is the conclusion in this matter of the strictest and coldest exegetical science. “The Book of the Law,” he tells us, “seemed already to the later poets of the Old Testament, the ‘Word of God.’ The post-canonical books of Israel regard the Law and the Prophets in this manner. And for the men of the New Testament, the

Holy Scriptures of their people are already God's word in which God himself speaks." This view, which looked upon the scriptural books as verbally inspired, he adds, was the ruling one in the time of Christ, was shared by all the New Testament men, and by Christ himself, as a pious conception, and was expressly taught by the more scholastic writers among them.¹⁶ It is hardly necessary to prove what is so frankly confessed.

The *third* reason why it is not necessary to occupy our time with a formal proof that the Bible does teach this doctrine, arises from the circumstance that even those who seek to rid themselves of the pressure of this fact upon them, are observed to be unable to prosecute their argument without an implied admission of it as a fact. This is true, for example, of Dr. Sanday's endeavors to meet the appeal of the church to our Lord's authority in defense of the doctrine of plenary inspiration.¹⁷ He admits that the one support which has been sought by the church of all ages for its high doctrine has been the "extent to which it was recognized in the sayings of Christ himself." As over against this he begins by suggesting "that, whatever view our Lord himself entertained as to the Scriptures of the Old Testament, the record of his words has certainly come down to us through the medium of persons who shared the current view on the subject." This surely amounts to a full admission that the writers of the New Testament at least, held and taught the obnoxious doctrine. He ends with the remark that "when deductions have been made . . . there still remains evidence enough that our Lord, while on earth *did* use the common language of his contemporaries in regard to the Old Testament." This surely amounts to a full admission that Christ as well as his reporters taught the obnoxious doctrine.

This will be found to be a typical case. Every attempt to escape from the authority of the New Testament enunciation of the doctrine of plenary inspiration, in the nature of the case begins by admitting that this is, in very fact, the New Testament doctrine. Shall we follow Dr. Sanday, and appeal from the apostles to Christ, and then call in the idea of *kenosis*, and affirm that in the days of his flesh, Christ did not speak out of the fullness and purity of his divine knowledge, but on becoming man had shrunk to man's capacity, and in such matters

¹⁶ Hermann Schultz, "Grundriss d. Evang. Dogmatik," p. 7.

¹⁷ "Inspiration," p. 393 *seq.*

as this was limited in his conceptions by the knowledge and opinions current in his day and generation? In so saying, we admit, as has already been pointed out, not only that the apostles taught this high doctrine of inspiration, but also that Christ too, in whatever humiliation he did it, yet actually taught the same. Shall we then take refuge in the idea of accommodation, and explain that, in so speaking of the Scriptures, Christ and his apostles did not intend to teach the doctrine of inspiration implicated, but merely adopted, as a matter of convenience, the current language, as to Scripture, of the time? In so speaking, also, we admit that the actual language of Christ and his apostles expresses that high view of inspiration which was confessedly the current view of the day – whether as a matter of convenience or as a matter of truth, the Christian consciousness may be safely left to decide. Shall we then remind ourselves that Jesus himself committed nothing to writing, and appeal to the uncertainties which are accustomed to attend the record of teaching at second-hand? Thus, too, we allow that the words of Christ as transmitted to us do teach the obnoxious doctrine. Are we, then, to fall back upon the observation that the doctrine of plenary inspiration is not taught with equal plainness in every part of the Bible, but becomes clear only in the later Old Testament books, and is not explicitly enunciated except in the more scholastic of the New Testament books? In this, too, we admit that it is taught in the Scriptures; while the fact that it is taught not all at once, but with progressive clearness and fullness, is accordant with the nature of the Bible as a book written in the process of the ages and progressively developing the truth. Then, shall we affirm that our doctrine of inspiration is not to be derived solely from the teachings of the Bible, but from its teachings and phenomena in conjunction; and so call in what we deem the phenomena of the Bible to modify its teaching? Do we not see that the very suggestion of this process admits that the teaching of the Bible, when taken alone, i. e., in its purity and just as it is, gives us the unwelcome doctrine? Shall we, then, take counsel of desperation and assert that all appeal to the teaching of the Scriptures themselves in testimony to their own inspiration is an argument in a circle, appealing to their inspiration to validate their inspiration? Even this desperately illogical shift to be rid of the scriptural doctrine of

inspiration, obviously involves the confession that this is the scriptural doctrine. No, the issue is not, What does the Bible teach? but, Is what the Bible teaches true? And it is amazing that any or all of such expedients can blind the eyes of any one to the stringency of this issue.

Even a detailed attempt to explain away the texts which teach the doctrine of the plenary inspiration and unvarying truth of Scripture, involves the admission that in their obvious meaning such texts teach the doctrine which it is sought to explain away. And think of explaining away the texts which inculcate the doctrine of the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures! The effort to do so is founded upon an inexplicably odd misapprehension – the misapprehension that the Bible witnesses to its plenary inspiration only in a text here and there: texts of exceptional clearness alone probably being in mind, – such as our Savior’s declaration that the Scriptures cannot be broken; or Paul’s, that every scripture is inspired of God; or Peter’s, that the men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. Such texts, no doubt, do teach the doctrine of plenary inspiration, and are sadly in need of explaining away at the hands of those who will not believe this doctrine. As, indeed, we may learn from Dr. Sanday’s treatment of one of them, that in which our Lord declares that the Scriptures cannot be broken. Dr. Sanday can only speak of this as “a passage of peculiar strangeness and difficulty”; “because,” he tells us, “it seems to mean that the *dicta* of Scripture, even where we should naturally take them as figurative, must be true.” Needless to say that the only “strangeness and difficulty” in the text arises from the unwillingness of the commentator to approach the Scriptures with the simple trust in their detailed divine trustworthiness and authority which characterized all our Lord’s dealings with them.

But no grosser misconception could be conceived than that the Scriptures bear witness to their own plenary inspiration in those outstanding texts alone. These are but the culminating passages of a pervasive testimony to the divine character of scripture, which fills the whole New Testament; and which includes not only such direct assertions of divinity and infallibility for Scripture as these, but, along with them, an endless variety of expressions of confidence in, and

phenomena of use of, Scripture which are irresistible in their teaching when it is once fairly apprehended. The induction must be broad enough to embrace, and give their full weight to, a great variety of such facts as these: the lofty titles which are given to Scripture, and by which it is cited, such as “Scripture,” “the Scriptures,” even that almost awful title, “the Oracles of God”; the significant *formulae* by which it is quoted, “It is written,” “It is spoken,” “It says,” “God says”; such modes of adducing it as betray that to the writer “Scripture says” is equivalent to “God says,” and even its narrative parts are conceived as direct utterances of God; the attribution to Scripture, as such, of divine qualities and acts, as in such phrases as “the Scriptures foresaw”; the ascription of the Scriptures, in whole or in their several parts as occasionally adduced, to the Holy Spirit, as their author, while the human writers are treated as merely his *media* of expression; the reverence and trust shown, and the significance and authority ascribed, to the very words of Scripture; and the general attitude of entire subjection to every declaration of Scripture of whatever kind, which characterizes every line of the New Testament. The effort to explain away the Bible’s witness to its plenary inspiration reminds one of a man standing safely in his laboratory and elaborately expounding – possibly by the aid of diagrams and mathematical *formulae* – how every stone in an avalanche has a defined pathway and may easily be dodged by one of some presence of mind. We may fancy such an elaborate trifler’s triumph as he would analyze the avalanche into its constituent stones, and demonstrate of stone after stone that its pathway is definite, limited, and may easily be avoided. But avalanches, unfortunately, do not come upon us, stone by stone, one at a time, courteously leaving us opportunity to withdraw from the pathway of each in turn: but all at once, in a roaring mass of destruction. Just so we may explain away a text or two which teach plenary inspiration, to our own closet satisfaction, dealing with them each without reference to its relation to the others: but these texts of ours, again, unfortunately do not come upon us in this artificial isolation; neither are they few in number. There are scores, hundreds, of them: and they come bursting upon us in one solid mass. Explain them away? We should have to explain away the whole New Testament. What a pity it is that

we cannot see and feel the avalanche of texts beneath which we may lie hopelessly buried, as clearly as we may see and feel an avalanche of stones! Let us, however, but open our eyes to the variety and pervasiveness of the New Testament witness to its high estimate of Scripture, and we shall no longer wonder that modern scholarship finds itself compelled to allow that the Christian church has read her records correctly, and that the church-doctrine of inspiration is simply a transcript of the biblical doctrine; nor shall we any longer wonder that the church, receiving these Scriptures as her authoritative teacher of doctrine, adopted in the very beginnings of her life, the doctrine of plenary inspiration, and has held it with a tenacity that knows no wavering, until the present hour.

But, we may be reminded, the church has not held with such tenacity to all doctrines taught in the Bible. How are we to account, then, for the singular constancy of its confession of the Bible's doctrine of inspiration? The account to be given is again simple, and capable of being expressed in a single sentence. It is due to an instinctive feeling in the church, that the trustworthiness of the Scriptures lies at the foundation of trust in the Christian system of doctrine, and is therefore fundamental to the Christian hope and life. It is due to the church's instinct that the validity of her teaching of doctrine as the truth of God, – to the Christian's instinct that the validity of his hope in the several promises of the gospel, – rests on the trustworthiness of the Bible as a record of God's dealings and purposes with men.

Individuals may call in question the soundness of these instinctive judgments. And, indeed, there is a sense in which it would not be true to say that the truth of Christian teaching and the foundations of faith are suspended upon the doctrine of plenary inspiration, or upon any doctrine of inspiration whatever. They rest rather upon the previous fact of revelation: and it is important to keep ourselves reminded that the supernatural origin and contents of Christianity, not only may be vindicated apart from any question of the inspiration of the record, but, in point of fact, always are vindicated prior to any question of the inspiration of the record. We cannot raise the question whether God has given us an absolutely trustworthy record of the supernatural facts and teachings of

Christianity, before we are assured that there are supernatural facts and teachings to be recorded. The fact that Christianity is a supernatural religion and the nature of Christianity as a supernatural religion, are matters of history; and are independent of any, and of every, theory of inspiration.

But this line of remark is of more importance to the Christian apologist than to the Christian believer, as such; and the instinct of the church that the validity of her teaching, and the instinct of the Christian that the validity of his hope, are bound up with the trustworthiness of the Bible, is a perfectly sound one. This for three reasons:

First, because the average Christian man is not and cannot be a fully furnished historical scholar. If faith in Christ is to be always and only the product of a thorough historical investigation into the origins of Christianity, there would certainly be few who could venture to preach Christ and him crucified with entire confidence; there would certainly be few who would be able to trust their all to him with entire security. The Christian scholar desires, and, thank God, is able to supply, a thoroughly trustworthy historical vindication of supernatural Christianity. But the Christian teacher desires, and, thank God, is able to lay his hands upon, a thoroughly trustworthy record of supernatural Christianity; and the Christian man requires, and, thank God, has, a thoroughly trustworthy Bible to which he can go directly and at once in every time of need. Though, then, in the abstract, we may say that the condition of the validity of the Christian teaching and of the Christian hope, is no more than the fact of the supernaturalism of Christianity, historically vindicated; practically we must say that the condition of the persistence of Christianity as a religion for the people, is the entire trustworthiness of the Scriptures as the record of the supernatural revelation which Christianity is.

Secondly, the merely historical vindication of the supernatural origin and contents of Christianity, while thorough and complete for Christianity as a whole, and for all the main facts and doctrines which enter into it, does not by itself supply a firm basis of trust for all the details of teaching and all the items of promise upon which the Christian man would fain lean. Christianity would be given to us; but it would be given to us, not in the exact form or in all the fulness

with which God gave it to his needy children through his servants, the prophets, and through his Son and his apostles; but with the marks of human misapprehension, exaggeration, and minimizing upon it, and of whatever attrition may have been wrought upon it by its passage to us through the ages. That the church may have unsullied assurance in the details of its teaching, – that the Christian man may have unshaken confidence in the details of the promises to which he trusts, – they need, and they know that they need, a thoroughly trustworthy Word of God in which God himself speaks directly to them all the words of this life.

Thirdly, in the circumstances of the present case, we cannot fall back from trust in the Bible upon trust in the historical vindication of Christianity as a revelation from God, inasmuch as, since Christ and his apostles are historically shown to have taught the plenary inspiration of the Bible, the credit of the previous fact of revelation – even of the supreme revelation in Christ Jesus – is implicated in the truth of the doctrine of plenary inspiration. The historical vindication of Christianity as a revelation from God, vindicates as the truth of God all the contents of that revelation; and, among these contents, vindicates, as divinely true, the teaching of Christ and his apostles, that the Scriptures are the very Word of God, to be trusted as such in all the details of their teaching and promises. The instinct of the church is perfectly sound, therefore, when she clings to the trustworthiness of the Bible, as lying at the foundation of her teaching and her faith.

Much less can she be shaken from this instinctive conviction by the representations of individual thinkers who go yet a step further, and, refusing to pin their faith either to the Bible or to history, affirm that “the essence of Christianity” is securely intrenched in the subjective feelings of man, either as such, or as Christian man taught by the Holy Ghost; and therefore that there is by no means needed an infallible objective rule of faith in order to propagate or preserve Christian truth in the world. It is unnecessary to say that “the essence of Christianity” as conceived by these individuals, includes little that is characteristic of Christian doctrine, life, or hope, as distinct from what is taught by other religions or philosophies. And it is perhaps equally unnecessary to remind ourselves that such individuals, having

gone so far, tend to take a further step still, and to discard the records which they thus judge to be unnecessary. Thus, there may be found even men a ill professing historical Christianity, who reason themselves into the conclusion that “in the nature of the case, no external authority can possibly be absolute in regard to spiritual truth”;¹⁸ just as men have been known to reason themselves into the conclusion that the external world has no objective reality and is naught but the projection of their own faculties.

But as in the one case, so in the other, the common sense of men recoils from such subtleties; and it remains the profound persuasion of the Christian heart that without such an “external authority” as a thoroughly trustworthy Bible, the soul is left without sure ground for a proper knowledge of itself, its condition, and its need, or for a proper knowledge of God’s provisions of mercy for it and his promises of grace to it, – without sure ground, in a word, for its faith and hope. Adolphe Monod gives voice to no more than the common Christian conviction, when he declares that, “If faith has not for its basis a testimony of God to which we must submit, as to an authority exterior to our personal judgment, and independent of it, then faith is no faith.”¹⁹ “The more I study the Scriptures, the example of Christ, and of the apostles, and the history of my own heart,” he adds, “the more I am convinced, that a testimony of God, placed without us and above us, exempt from all intermixture of sin and error which belong to a fallen race, and received with submission on the sole authority of God, is the true basis of faith.”²⁰

It is doubtless the profound and ineradicable conviction, so expressed, of the need of an infallible Bible, if men are to seek and find salvation in God’s announced purpose of grace, and peace and comfort in his past dealings with his people, that has operated to keep the formulas of the churches and the hearts of the people of God, through so many ages, true to the Bible doctrine of plenary inspiration. In that doctrine men have found what their hearts have told them was the indispensable safeguard of a sure word of God to them, – a word of God to which they could resort with confidence in every time of need, to which they could appeal for guidance in every

¹⁸ Professor W. F. Adeney, “Faith and Criticism,” p. 90.

¹⁹ “Life of Adolphe Monod,” p. 224.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 357.

difficulty, for comfort in every sorrow, for instruction in every perplexity; on whose “Thus saith the Lord” they could safely rest all their aspirations and all their hopes. Such a Word of God, each one of us knows he needs, – not a Word of God that speaks to us only through the medium of our fellow-men, men of like passions and weaknesses with ourselves, so that we have to feel our way back to God’s word through the church, through tradition, or through the apostles, standing between us and God; but a Word of God in which God speaks directly to each of our souls. Such a Word of God, Christ and his apostles offer us, when they give us the Scriptures, not as man’s report to us of what God says, but as the very Word of God itself, spoken by God himself through human lips and pens. Of such a precious possession, given to her by such hands, the church will not lightly permit herself to be deprived. Thus the church’s sense of her need of an absolutely infallible Bible, has co-operated with her reverence for the teaching of the Bible to keep her true, in all ages, to the Bible doctrine of plenary inspiration.

What, indeed, would the church be – what would we, as Christian men, be – without our inspired Bible? Many of us have, no doubt, read Jean Paul Richter’s vision of a dead Christ, and have shuddered at his pictures of the woe of a world from which its Christ has been stolen away. It would be a theme worthy of some like genius to portray for us the vision of a dead Bible, – the vision of what this world of ours would be, had there been no living Word of God cast into its troubled waters with its voice of power, crying, “Peace! Be still!” What does this Christian world of ours not owe to this Bible! And to this Bible conceived, not as a part of the world’s literature, – the literary product of the earliest years of the church; not as a book in which, by searching, we may find God and perchance somewhat of God’s will: but as the very Word of God, instinct with divine life from the “In the beginning” of Genesis to the “Amen” of the Apocalypse, – breathed into by God, and breathing out God to every devout reader. It is because men have so thought of it that it has proved a leaven to leaven the whole lump of the world. We do not half realize what we owe to this book, thus trusted by men. We can never fully realize it. For we can never even in thought unravel from this complex web of modern civilization, all the threads

from the Bible which have been woven into it, throughout the whole past, and now enter into its very fabric. And, thank God, much less can we ever untwine them in fact, and separate our modern life from all those Bible influences by which alone it is blessed, and sweetened, and made a life which men may live. Dr. Gardiner Spring published, years ago, a series of lectures in which he sought to take some account of the world's obligations to the Bible, – tracing in turn the services it has rendered to religion, to morals, to social institutions, to civil and religious liberty, to the freedom of slaves, to the emancipation of woman and the sweetening of domestic life, to public and private beneficence, to literary and scientific progress, and the like.²¹ And Adolphe Monod, in his own inimitable style, has done something to awaken us as individuals to what we owe to a fully trusted Bible, in the development of our character and religious life.²² In such matters, however, we can trust our imaginations better than our words, to remind us of the immensity of our debt.

Let it suffice to say that to a plenary inspired Bible, humbly trusted as such, we actually, and as a matter of fact, owe all that has blessed our lives with hopes of an immortality of bliss, and with the present fruition of the love of God in Christ. This is not an exaggeration. We may say that without a Bible we might have had Christ and all that he stands for to our souls. Let us not say that this might not have been possible. But neither let us forget that, in point of fact, it is to the Bible that we owe it that we know Christ and are found in him. And may it not be fairly doubted whether you and I, – however it may have been with others, – would have had Christ had there been no Bible? We must not at any rate forget those nineteen Christian centuries which stretch between us and Christ, whose Christian light we would do much to blot out and sink in a dreadful darkness if we could blot out the Bible. Even with the Bible, and all that had come from the Bible to form Christian lives and inform a Christian literature, after a millennium and a half the darkness had grown so deep that a Reformation was necessary if Christian truth was to persist, – a Luther was necessary, raised up by God to rediscover the Bible and give it back to man. Suppose there had been

²¹ Gardiner Spring, "Obligations of the World to the Bible." (New York: M. W. Dodd. 1855.)

²² Adolphe Monod, "L'Inspiration prouvée par ses Œuvres."

no Bible for Luther to rediscover, and on the lines of which to refound the church, – and no Bible in the hearts of God’s saints and in the pages of Christian literature, persisting through those darker ages to prepare a Luther to rediscover it? Though Christ had come into the world and had lived and died for us, might it not be to us, – you and me, I mean, who are not learned historians but simple men and women, – might it not be to us as though he had not been? Or, if some faint echo of a Son of God offering salvation to men could still be faintly heard even by such dull ears as ours, sounding down the ages, who would have ears to catch the fullness of the message of free grace which he brought into the world? who could assure our doubting souls that it was not all a pleasant dream? who could cleanse the message from the ever-gathering corruptions of the multiplying years? No: whatever might possibly have been had there been no Bible, it is actually to the Bible that you and I owe it that we have a Christ, – a Christ to love, to trust and to follow, a Christ without us the ground of our salvation, a Christ within us the hope of glory.

Our effort has been to bring clearly out what seem to be three very impressive facts regarding the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, – the facts, namely, that this doctrine has always been, and is still, the church-doctrine of inspiration, as well the vital faith of the people of God as the formulated teaching of the official creeds; that it is undeniably the doctrine of inspiration held by Christ and his apostles, and commended to us as true by all the authority which we will allow to attach to their teaching; and that it is the foundation of our Christian thought and life, without which we could not, or could only with difficulty, maintain the confidence of our faith and the surety of our hope. On such grounds as these is not this doctrine commended to us as true?

But, it may be said, there are difficulties in the way. Of course there are. There are difficulties in the way of believing anything. There are difficulties in the way of believing that God is, or that Jesus Christ is God’s Son who came into the world to save sinners. There are difficulties in the way of believing that we ourselves really exist, or that anything has real existence besides ourselves. When men give their undivided attention to these difficulties, they may become, and

they have become, so perplexed in mind, that they have felt unable to believe that God is, or that they themselves exist, or that there is any external world without themselves. It would be a strange thing if it might not so fare with plenary inspiration also. Difficulties? Of course there are difficulties. It is nothing to the purpose to point out this fact. Dr. J. Oswald Dykes says with admirable truth: “If men must have a reconciliation for all conflicting truths before they will believe any; if they must see how the promises of God are to be fulfilled before they will obey his commands; if duty is to hang upon the satisfying of the understanding, instead of the submission of the will, – then the greater number of us will find the road of faith and the road of duty blocked at the outset.”²³ These wise words have their application also to our present subject. The question is not, whether the doctrine of plenary inspiration has difficulties to face. The question is, whether these difficulties are greater than the difficulty of believing that the whole church of God from the beginning has been deceived in her estimate of the Scriptures committed to her charge – are greater than the difficulty of believing that the whole college of the apostles, yes and Christ himself at their head, were themselves deceived as to the nature of those Scriptures which they gave the church as its precious possession, and have deceived with them twenty Christian centuries, and are likely to deceive twenty more before our boasted advancing light has corrected their error, – are greater than the difficulty of believing that we have no sure foundation for our faith and no certain warrant for our trust in Christ for salvation. We believe this doctrine of the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures primarily because it is the doctrine which Christ and his apostles believed, and which they have taught us. It may sometimes seem difficult to take our stand frankly by the side of Christ and his apostles. It will always be found safe.

²³ J. Oswald Dykes, “Abraham,” etc. (1877), p. 257.