

The Holy Spirit 3

The Holy Spirit and Scripture

In the New Testament there are two important statements about scripture.

Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:20)

and

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness. (2 Timothy 3:16)

There are two words which we need to understand in particular. In the first text the word 'moved' means borne or carried along. That is to say, the words the 'holy men' used were not dictated by God, but the Holy Spirit was alongside them, guiding, assisting, leading, but not imposing. They were not in a trance, they were fully aware; indeed their consciousness was enhanced, they were thinking with their own minds. Sometimes they were groping because the thoughts that came to them were too great for them fully to assimilate; but the Holy Spirit never possessed them. The thoughts they wrote were their thoughts, but they came from their spirit which, in turn, was receiving ideas and impressions from the Holy Spirit.

The other word, from the second text, is 'inspiration'. Literally the word means 'God-breathed'. We usually translate it in a way that concentrates more on the reception of the word by the writers - they were inspired; but, of course, it refers also to the expiration of the word by God; he breathed it out. It is God expressing himself.

The problem about these statements that God is directly responsible for Scripture as we have it is that, whilst we refer to the Bible as the word of God, we tend to think of it as the words of God. We see it as statements straight from God. Some Christians, in particular those who call themselves evangelical, say, therefore, that the Bible is infallible and we regard it as a code book of belief.

Here, let me declare my own position. I do believe that the Bible is the Word of God, in a very similar sense to the way that I believe Jesus to be the Word of God. That is to say, words are a means of self expression and revelation, and both the Bible and Jesus are an expression of God; they both reveal God and reveal him truly and reliably. I must qualify that, however, and say that whilst the God they reveal is the true God in all his fullness, no words and no human life - not even that of Jesus - can reveal the totality of who and what God is in himself, any more than one instrument can reveal the whole of Beethoven's Fifth symphony. When eventually we stand before God we shall see that he is far greater than what he was able to reveal of himself through the words of Scripture and even through the perfect human life of Jesus.

I do not see the Bible as a code book of Christian belief, but rather as a form of biography. Strictly a biography is the life of an individual but I see the Bible as a record of a relationship between God and his people. So don't come to the Bible looking for bald statements about God. Oh, there are such statements, but they are always in a context; they arise out of situations in which God and his people meet together. Let me try to illustrate what I mean.

If I want to tell you what my father was like, what sort of a man he was, I could give you a series of descriptive words. I could

say he was a fine, honest and upright man; a warm personality. That would give you certain straight facts about him. Or I could tell you of experiences in my life. How he would take me out for walks, and talk about all sorts of things. Of how I failed my A levels which, because of the war, they had set me to take at 17 instead of 18. In those days, many more schools were fee-paying than is the case today, and I was at one of them. In common with most people then, times were very hard financially for my father, and if I was to get my exams it would mean staying on for another year to sit them again, with the difficulty of finding the fees. I remember coming home and breaking the news to my father that I had failed. He said, "Well, never mind, old lad, I'm sure you did your best." and he simply shared my disappointment.

If I went on telling you more of my experiences of my father you would begin to build up your own picture of him gradually. And that would be far more meaningful to you than if I just gave you a string of descriptive words - however correct these might be.

The People of God in the Old Testament set down what happened to them: their desperate state as slaves in Egypt and how Moses told them that he had felt a call from some being outside himself that he should lead them to freedom. The people hadn't had that call or that experience and so, when they saw the Egyptians advancing on them and the Red Sea blocking their escape, they began to panic and they turned on Moses, saying that it would have been better if he hadn't started all this and they had remained as slaves in Egypt. But Moses raises his staff and the sea divides and the people begin to walk across. The Egyptians follow them, but as the people reach the other side, the sea rushes back in and the Egyptians drown. Now that is the first real experience of God that the people have had; that, and the plagues which precipitated their departure from Egypt. You can imagine the effect on them. "Wow, what or who is this God, Moses is talking about and

claims he has met?" And we have the record also of just how Moses did meet with him. In this way a picture of God is built up, not from bald descriptions of his attributes but from the true experiences of a people living out their lives and discovering that God is with them.

I do not have time to develop this in greater detail, but once you grasp the concept, you can add to it yourselves. The Bible is a record of people meeting with God in lots of different ways. The people as a whole, and individual men and women within the people, were living out their lives and found that God met with them. That is the key to understanding the Bible. God was with them. That was what he told Moses :-

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" So He said, "I will certainly be with you." (Exodus 3:11-12)

God revealed himself and his will by being with his people. Do you remember when Jacob was running away because he was afraid what his brother Esau might do to him because he had stolen his birthright - his blessing, as the older child? He was on the run and in exhaustion lays down in the open to sleep. He has a dream of a ladder set up between heaven and earth with the angels of God going up and down it and God promising to bless him.

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!" (Genesis 28:16-17)

Jacob suddenly found that God was with him; it was a personal encounter and he learned something of what God was like. And the record of that experience has been set down for us, and so we learn also.

Now, of course, it is a developing understanding. God revealed himself to his people only as they were able to receive that revelation. If you have understood what I am saying, you will appreciate that if his people found themselves in a battle, it would be no use God saying to them, "I am a God of peace and I don't want you to fight." No, in the early days of their growing to understand him, the real God, the God they would feel able to trust, has to be the one who is stronger than any other God; and that means stronger than the gods of other nations. That is why God in the Old Testament seems to our eyes, a much more violent and wrathful God than he appears in the New Testament. God reveals himself in real situations.

If another tribe comes and kills some of your people, then the accepted way of dealing with the situation is that you go and kill a great number more of them. If you don't manage to do so, then your God, isn't really very much use. But gradually, as people realise that God is trustworthy, he is able to lead them on another stage and teach them that they must be measured in their retribution; only one eye may be taken from your enemy if he has caused the loss of one eye:

If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot (Exodus 21:23-24)

That text is often assumed to be justification for retribution but in the culture of the time it was a limitation of the amount of retribution.

By the time you get to the New Testament, Jesus can take them on another tremendous step:

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if

anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:38-44)

Because the revelation was gradual and arose out of his people's personal experience of God with them, it is important to realise that the events described in the opening of Genesis were not written down until at least 800 years after the period they describe, probably considerably more; that is, after Moses had led the people out of Egypt. So, whatever oral traditions had been handed down before then, they were edited and written down in the light of the understanding of God which Moses and the people had come to in the wilderness, and they may have been edited into the form we have them today much later than that. The creation stories were written when the people's understanding of God was fairly well developed.

It is important, therefore, that those who regard the Bible as a code book of right behaviour are very careful about which part of Scripture they go to in order to discover God's will, because it is a developing revelation. It would be wrong to claim that the 'eye for an eye' edict demands retribution on our enemies when that statement has clearly been superseded by Christ's command to love out enemies.

In the Old Testament God was One; there was no appreciation of him being three persons (even if the writers, carried along by the Holy Spirit as they set down their experiences, sometimes wrote about God saying "We" and "Us"). So we cannot expect any detailed understanding in the Old Testament of there being a Holy Spirit. The word in both Hebrew and Greek for 'spirit' is the one which means wind or breath. That is an effective way of explaining what happened to the prophets as they spoke out what God was doing and saying. God's breath was upon them or in

them. It conveyed the idea of some power which came from God, yet which was separate from him.

So let me repeat; the Bible is indeed God-breathed, but the Holy Spirit moved the writers *from within their own experience*. They were not writing in a vacuum, they were writing out of what they knew; of what had happened to them. Don't think of the Bible as a history book but rather more as a diary. God had said, "I will be with you". And they recorded just what that meant in their own experience.

Jesus continued the same method of revelation. He rarely made statements about himself and when he did it was in response to an actual situation he was going through. The way he revealed himself and his Father was by being with his disciples.

And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message. (Mark 12:14)

You see, they were to be with him, watch him at work, how he spoke and re-acted and how he lived his life. Then they could go and preach because they would have something to say. Through scripture we listen and look in, on the relationship the disciples had with the Lord and by looking in we learn also. St Matthew actually ends his Gospel with these words of Christ:

"And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."
(Matthew 28:20)

So, the way God revealed himself to his people in the Old Testament was by being with them. The way Jesus revealed God to his people in the New Testament was by being with them. Now, in that case, how do you think the Holy Spirit will reveal

God to his people today? Have a guess. Surprise, surprise! Do you remember what Jesus taught?

"And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you." (John 14:16-17)

It has been tough going for you to have to concentrate on what I have been trying to show you this morning. But now with that background, let me make the point I have been leading up to: Do not regard the Bible as a code book; rather as a case book. Now what do I mean by that?

Well, there was a time when God did give his people a code; he gave them the Ten Commandments. But notice that that was not his original intention. Do you remember how, after Adam and Eve had sinned they hid from God? Before then, obviously, they didn't hide; they were used to being in his presence. They were in communion with him because they knew he had told them not to eat of a particular tree. That evening:-

They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. (Genesis 3:8)

The obvious implication of that is that until then they had been used to meeting with him in the garden. They didn't need a written code of laws on how to behave. Indeed, they were not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; they were to rely on their direct knowledge of God to tell them what he wanted. *They were not under law.*

It was only when his people were in a state of sin, unable to have close communion with God, and so that he might lead them back to himself, that he gave them a set of laws: *and these were only temporary*. Jeremiah, thinking about God's plan for his people in a time when his judgement on them was severe and they were about to be taken into exile, is guided, carried along, by the Holy Spirit to see a time in the future:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt - a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

Ezekiel has a similar understanding but carries it along a little further.

I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. (Ezekiel 36:27)

Do you see? The law was only a temporary expedient. God's plan was to bring about a time when his people would be guided by his Spirit within them to follow his ways. Paul writes of this so clearly in both Romans and Galatians. He sums it up like this:

Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. (Galatians 3:24)

(The Authorised version says that the law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ.)

Jesus himself broke the law; but he never violated the principle which the law was designed but failed to achieve: e.g. he broke the law about keeping the Sabbath. The Israelites were punished directly by God if they gathered food, manna, on the Sabbath. But Jesus allowed the disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath.

We are always looking for a law; we go to Scripture to find a law on everything. But when will we get it into our heads that we are not under law, any longer; we are under grace?

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. (2 Corinthians 3:17)

I now realise that I used to put myself back under the law - perhaps I still do and I don't realise just when I am doing it. But let me give you one illustration of how I have changed: with regard to divorce. I went to Scripture and saw that Christ said that anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery. So I would never officiate at the marriage of someone who was divorced and whose spouse was still alive. I accepted that as a law of God but pastorally I met with problems which challenged my rigid application of that law. A husband abandons his wife and young children to go off with another woman. To ensure some form of regular income for herself and children, the wife divorces him and obtains a settlement. Some time later she meets a good Christian man who falls in love with her and is willing to love and adopt the children also. Perhaps her ex-husband has married his new partner; does God really want the ex-wife and mother to continue in her loneliness and deprivation when she could be in a loving relationship with a father figure for the children?

One day a couple came to me seeking marriage. The woman had been married to a man who was an alcoholic. He beat her and endangered their child, in the end she divorced him and he then

married someone else. That was many years previously but he was still alive. Now she had met up with a childhood sweetheart who had also been married but his wife had died and the two of them wanted to marry.

I had much sympathy for them but said I could not take a marriage service because the woman's ex-husband was still living, but I agreed to bless their marriage after a civil ceremony. (Actually I was acting illogically because the only real difference between a civil and religious ceremony is the blessing of God which I was willing to pronounce.) The date was fixed some 3 months ahead. A month before the wedding the woman's first husband died - that changed the whole situation; they asked for a full wedding service and, of course, I agreed. But that made me think. Was God really involved in such a sham? The first marriage had ended over 30 years beforehand and the man had married someone else. Did God really consider her still married to him all that time? Would she have been committing adultery by marrying someone else if he hadn't died, but it was all right now because he had died? I couldn't believe that God was involved in that sort of legalistic argument. I believe that it was the Spirit within me who was offended by the hypocrisy of it all.

On the other hand, of course, Christ must have meant something by saying what he did. My own understanding now is that in his statement, "he who divorces his wife and marries another" the word 'and' carries the sense of 'in order to'. (Note: I base this on the opinion of some Jewish Scholars at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, in the past 20 years.) Apparently some married Pharisees who wanted to marry another woman knew that to do this would be to commit adultery, but if they went through the process of first divorcing their wife then it would not be adultery. So Jesus was saying that if someone divorces his wife in order to marry someone else, then that is just as much adultery as if he hadn't bothered to go through the divorce. Of course it is. You

cannot use the law as a technicality to cover up a sin. I do not believe Jesus was talking about the sort of situation I was facing where the woman had divorced her husband some 30 years previously with no plans to marry again.

You may not agree with me and certainly you must not adopt my own understanding without seeking for yourself what you believe God is saying. I am simply opening your mind to a possibility you may not have considered. As Paul says, let each be fully persuaded in his own mind.

I am also aware that there is a great danger in what I am advocating. It is so much safer to have a law which can never be broken but then some people will be broken by that law because it is inflexible and cannot meet every need.

Let me make something clear at this point. On most occasions what the law says and what the Spirit says will agree, because they both have the same intention - that we shall fulfil the will of God. So be very, very careful before you disobey what the law says; especially if your personal desire is different from what Scripture apparently says - check with some other mature Christian before you take such a step. But Christ knew that the law cannot cope with the nuances of every situation, which is why he said:

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:13-15)

What the Father expresses is truth and wisdom; it is his plan for all creation which is shared with Christ. It is this that the Holy Spirit takes and leads us into all the truth. You see, we do not follow a code of law but a living Lord. The Bible is a case-book where we discover how God led his people and how Jesus reacted in different circumstances to the various situations he met. Through this we get to know him for ourselves.

For some reason Christian teachers apologise these days for saying that in each situation we should ask ourselves, "What would Jesus do?" I make no such apology; surely it is what we are called to do. When Jesus was confronted by the Jewish leaders with the woman caught in adultery they reminded him that the law said she should be stoned. He did not attempt to argue against that but brought compassion and love into the situation by saying that the one amongst them who was sinless should be the first to throw a stone. Jesus was not under law but he was totally obedient to the will of his Father.

Of course, it is all very well to say we should ask, "What would Jesus do?" in every situation we face, but there is the objection that we may get it wrong. I have already said that it is much easier to place ourselves under a law – "The Bible says she must be stoned". In the matter of divorce it causes far fewer problems to say no to a second marriage in every case; far fewer for the clergy person but nor for those seeking such a marriage. It is difficult to have to say 'no' to some when you say 'yes' to others. But I believe that is what we are called to. However, we are not alone; listen!

An unspiritual person refuses what belongs to the Spirit of God; it is folly to him; he cannot grasp it, because it needs to be judged in the light of the Spirit. But a spiritual person can judge the worth of everything, yet is not himself subject to judgement by others. Scripture indeed asks, "Who can know the mind of

the Lord or be his counsellor?' Yet we possess the mind of Christ. [1 Cor 2:14/16 REB]

Christ has left us his Spirit to guide us into all truth so that we may know the mind of Christ. It is true that we are not as totally committed to God as Jesus was in his earthly ministry and so our old nature may get in the way. But that must not be allowed to drive us away from following in the way Christ instructed; we are to walk in the Spirit. That does not mean we throw over the teaching of Scripture; far from it because the purpose of Scripture is the same as the purpose of Jesus – to glorify God and we may expect them to agree especially as Scripture was inspired by the same Spirit. But I say again, we follow a person, Jesus Christ revealed to us by the Holy Spirit not a written code.