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"HOW IS THE WORD RECEIVED BY MAN?"

by

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[Fr Hastings]

I have addressed myself to the theme of God's call and man's response, in particular, the ways in which a man may hear the Word of God. Mainly, I see God speaking to man in and through three forms:

- (a) The Scriptures
- (b) The Church
- (c) God's handling of a man - or, expressed anthropocentrically, the human experience.

God addressed man by His Word and His Work, and man's responsibility is to hear the former and see the latter. God's Word, therefore, is always both Word and Event. But, the practical consideration remains: How does man hear the Word? How does man see the Event?

1. Scripture

The prime source of the Word of God is Scripture: prime, in that it spans the whole Word and Work of God from man's creation in Adam to his re-creation in Christ; prime, in that it covers the whole gamut of human history and human experience.

When the Reformers rejected the magisterium of the Roman Church, they replaced that authority by the assertion of the objective validity of the Bible as an authority sufficient in itself, in other words, valid without the authorisation of the Church. This does not mean the right of private judgment, as so many liberal Protestants have proudly averred, nor is it an attack on the legitimate authority of the Church, as many Catholics have interpreted it. When Luther painfully cried in 1521, Hier stehe ich: ich kann nicht anders: he meant that no man can stand on any ground other than Scripture, Protestant man or Catholic man.

The Reformers did not argue that the Scriptures alone sufficed, neither did they seek to replace the authority of the Pope by the authority of a Book. The sufficiency of Scriptures meant to them that the Bible revealed what man can and must know about God. But they made two important qualifications to knowing and reading the Scriptures. The first was that only the heart and mind converted by God can read aright. The second was that God must aid the converted man to a right understanding through the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. Granted these two conditions, the Scriptures substantiated their own claim and vindicated themselves.

Yet this very principle, though a plank in the Reformers' platform, prevailed prior to the Reformation, and even if expressed in different terms, is a constituent part of Catholic theology. Ockham had taught that before a man could receive the thoughts of the Bible as divine, there must be a fides infusa, faith divinely implanted. In Ockham's case this concealed a very dangerous scepticism, a form of unbelief concealed behind submissive assent. Nevertheless, he was right in his central assertion. If Luther stressed the immediate and self-evidential appeal of Scripture as the Word of God to believing man, Calvin penetrated to the Holy Spirit as the cause of that state of mind which responds to Scripture as the Word of God. What is important to see is that when we read the Scriptures we are not handling a book, but God is handling us.

In other words, men were not talking about a Book, but about God, His divine activity in the past reaching through to the present: this was what was meant by the Word of God, the work and witness of the Holy Spirit, addressing men where they stood. This is what Luther meant when he argued that there is no other ground: Church and individual alike stand under this Word, never over it. Where that Word is operative, no proof is needed: where it is absent no proof will suffice.

Two important points follow from the sufficiency of Scripture. First, any speculation, rational or mystical, which imposes on a man or a church that which is not unequivocally enjoined therein, is unwarrantable, unnecessary and irreligious. I refer here to the addition of dogmas by the Roman Church de fide, (as for example, the assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary). From the other side, the rejection by liberal Protestantism of large areas of doctrine as allegedly untenable by modern man is still more destructive of the sufficiency of Scripture, and much more dangerous than Catholic deductive theology.

If the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture restrains churchmen from attraction and critics from detraction, it equally curbs the "enthusiast" with his claim of a direct line to the Holy Spirit. The Reformers were actually aware of the danger within the evangelical movement of inspirational individualism and private dealings with the Holy Spirit. They argued that the Holy Spirit worked through the Word of God as God had worked, and reached His highest work in illuminating and clarifying the Word and Work of Christ. Though the Reformers might be described as "restricted" to the confines of Scripture, a word they would not accept, they were not guilty of a biblicism, or what we now call fundamentalism. All the known canons of responsible critical scholarship, both of higher and lower criticism, were brought to bear on the sacred text.

It is important to understand the importance the Reformers attached to the right interpretation of Scripture. To them Scripture was harmonious and self-consistent; the final arbiter in any perplexity was Scripture itself, not the Church or current scholarship. Scriptura sacra . . . ipsa per se sui ipsius interpres was Luther's principle, which they all followed. Interpretation was of crucial importance to them. (Luther's regulative and scriptural norm of interpretation was Justification by Faith. No one who had not this faith in himself was competent: with it, Scripture became clear and cogent, without the "aid" of the Fathers or tradition. Though justification was taken as the master key, it must be seen as justification in Christ Only. Scripture was read from Christ backwards: He alone gave meaning to the Old Testament, He alone its constant theme.

In regarding Scripture as a self-authenticating unity the Reformers provided an authority beyond conscience, reason or secular power, all of which could err. Scripture provided the answer because it was not of man but of God, and because when men read it, studied it, pondered it, the power working through them was the witness of the Holy Spirit. To the question, but how can a man know the voice of the Holy Spirit, the Reformers answered that the elect, the Spirit-born, Spirit-led, indubitably know the voice of God.

Therefore, to the question how does man receive the Word of God, the first part of the answer would be the dwelling with the Scriptures, wherein God's Word and Work are so manifestly declared, in such a way that God's Word in the Holy Spirit breaks through into the contemporary situation. When a man reads how God handled Eli and his establishment, the Holy Spirit shows him God handling His Church today: when he reads God's Word to Jeremiah, the Holy Spirit speaks to him in terms he can hear and understand. When he reads how God destroyed Israel, the Holy Spirit warns him that his Church may well undergo the same fate: when he reads how God comforted, restored, and forgave Israel, it is a direct word of comfort to him and to his Church. When he reads the words and works of Christ he is in the presence of the Word of God made flesh addressing the saving Word to him; nay, still more, the Holy Spirit leads him further even than Christ could take those Galileans. God is not limited even by His Word.

2. The Church

All the Reformers had a high doctrine of the Church, and all were deeply conscious of the Church's unique role both in ministering and declaring the Word of God to the faithful, as well as delivering the prophetic Word to the unbelieving world. Their quarrel with the then Roman Church, dominated as it was by the papal curia, arose from the charge that it had long ceased to be the Church, long ceased to proclaim the Word. When the reformers found their protest unheeded and military force used to destroy their theology, and when all attempts to heal the schisms had broken down, they reformed the Church in their own area until such times as God would grant a free and open catholic council to go into the malaise of Christendom. The distinguishing characteristic of that Reformation was the centrality of the study of the Scriptures in Hebrew and Greek at the universities - Wittenberg, Zürich, Geneva - and the sending out of trained clergy as ministers of that Word. This feature has marked Protestantism everywhere ever since.

For the generality of man the Church may be a more important witness of the Word of God than is the Bible, for in its fellowship man should hear the Word in three important ways:

First, a man is addressed by God and hears God speak to him in the true preaching of the Word by faithful ministers of God, as preachers, teachers and ministers of the sacrament, which are simply verba visibilia.

Secondly, in the prayers and liturgy, where holy, humble, penitent men of God wait on God and await His Word. Here it is of prime importance for the Church to inculcate in the faithful the private habit of mind not of asking God for what they want from Him but of asking God what He wants of them. God's Word is most readily heard in prayer.

Thirdly, in the pastoral guidance and care exercised by the clergy, who must care for their people, reassuring them of God's love and mercy, and in the bitter perplexities of life speak to the faithful that Word from God without which all is vanity. In these ways a Church may be far more effective and penetrating than an individual with his Bible. ||

A word is called for on the relation of the Word to the Church, for it is at this point that disagreement may be expressed the most sharply. The Protestant always sees the Church as the servant of the Word and in no sense its master. The Church is under Scripture and never over it, and the supreme error of Romanism is to claim authority over it even to claim infallibility for its interpretations. Vatican II has gone a long way to modify this kind of thinking, but Protestant men hope that further development will continue in this direction. It is now much clearer that our deepest divisions lie in the area of extra-Biblical

assertions and that our deepest unanimity in the field of Biblical scholarship. This is a happy augury for the future. Quite certainly the Church must rid herself of the arrogance of thinking that God cannot do without her: God is no more bound by the Church than He is by the Sacraments, normative as they both are. The Word is the treasure of the Church, and her responsibility, but it is nevertheless all she has to offer to the world. God could wash His hands of the Church and all of us tonight, as He did more than once to His chosen people.

3. God's Handling of a Man

This section discusses the various kinds of way God speaks to man in his human situation, and how a man may hear God speak to him there.

(a) Wrath

A third way in which God speaks to man is in His Wrath. The Church needs to find again a true doctrine of the Wrath, before it can ever glimpse the depth of God's Love in Christ.

The Wrath is God's annihilating reaction to sin, and man being a sinner experiences this wrath continuously. The Wrath is His opus alienum that He may effect His opus proprium, but men need to learn that it is in the tasks and trials and tribulations of life that God speaks most loudly and certainly. In these He breaks the self-centredness of man so that He makes him a new creature: the thorns are finally fashioned as a crown. When man learns that his real experiences in life are where God meets him as an enemy, he learns of that Love which dies for an enemy. It is in these destructive, humiliating and annihilating experiences that man realises that God is nearest and that God Himself is talking. The Church needs to re-discover the emphasis the Reformers laid on the Wrath as the effective instrument of a God who loves and cares to the uttermost cost. Not that there is any wrath in God Himself; he is eitel Liebe as Luther emphasised. The wrath is in man in the form of sin and self-centredness. It is this God uses to defeat us, to sharpen our awareness of the enormity of our estrangement and hostility to God, to break our pride and make us penitent recipients of His Mercy and His Grace. I cannot see how modern man in his proud Titanism that he is now come of age can ever hear a Word of God, even know that there is a God, until we interpret for him and spell out for him, the hand of God devastating and destroying his fond towers of Babel. When he hears this Word of God he will learn why the Word came to seek and to save what was lost, and will be able to hear God speaking to Him in his contemporary situation, the only situation there is to which God can speak. Who has not sorrowed under God's Wrath can never rejoice in His Love and Forgiveness, and after all, that is God's Last Word.

My two last points are non-controversial and will be generally acceptable. They ought to be included for the sake of completeness, but are expressed with brevity as of no debatable importance.

(b) Conscience

A fourth way in which a man hears God's Word is in the activity of his conscience and the assuming of moral responsibility in the world. The divine disturbance is here most real, though not generally on the grander scale of Wrath. It is here that God speaks most certainly to the soul of omission, commission and of rank disobedience. It is in this activity that most men will perhaps begin to be aware of God speaking to them. In fact a case could be argued that the Reformation began as a movement of conscience, see, for instance, Luther's early ethical disputations long before the break with Rome. Further, there is clear historical evidence for the case that when God speaks to His world He generally addresses man at this level of conscience. I have in mind here all the great social and political movements of reform.

(c) Admonition

Lastly, but not always the least, it is in the voice of concerned admonition - from clergy, from husband or wife, son or daughter, friend or foe - that the critical word of admonition speaks most certainly to our self-will. The dimension, if not in terms of God's Word, certainly has the same effect as God's Words. The Christian congregation has lost the art of gentle admonition. The word can hardly claim the authority of the Word of God, but in that it erodes our pride and self-centredness it prepares our soul to hear the Word of God more readily.