

what is in this book, is 'spirited' out of the world, the world we know, or think we know; but 'spirited', too, because full of a spirit that will catch, and fill our lives. It is a life-time's interest really, a life; not another book, but *the* book; not just words, but *the* word, the first and last word; and the word, not about anything, or even everything, but about more than everything. It is the word of God.



THE SPIRIT AND THE BRIDE: II

St Luke's Witness to the Primitive Church

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THE claim of the sixteenth-century Reformers to return to the teaching of the primitive Church by the aid of the written Scriptures is still heard today, but not so often as formerly, because the spirit of liberal criticism has completely undermined that reverent confidence in the Word of God which was once so strong in the children of the Reformation. As *The Times* (London)¹ confessed not long ago, 'to the majority of Englishmen the open Bible is now a closed book. . . . The popular mind at present takes for granted that the Bible has been fatally discredited and that "nobody now believes that kind of thing"'. The Reformers have handed the Church (the writer means the non-Catholic churches, of course) today a problem which they could not have foreseen. Rejecting both the papal usurpation and the late-medieval abuses and corruptions, they sought to recover a "pure" Christianity. That meant for them a Scriptural Christianity. From that position there can be no retreat. On that the reformed Churches take their stand. One can hardly exaggerate the emphasis in the Anglican Prayer Book on Scripture as the final court of appeal. But who is to interpret the Scriptures and what is their title to authority?

The writer then proceeds to make an admission on his own behalf which reduces him to the situation of those who no longer read the Bible because they cannot trust it. 'The choice appeared

¹ 4 December, 1954, an article written by its religious correspondent.

to that generation to be one between two infallibilities; of the alternatives they chose the Bible. But in fact there is no infallible authority, in religion any more than anywhere else. The revelations of God to men in history can but come through fallible human agents.' So the hope of security of faith is an idle dream, for St Luke and much more for us today. All we can say of this is what has already been said with emphasis by the German liberal Protestant historian Harnack, whose study of the early Church led him to confess that, whatever sort of Church the Reformers established, it had no connection with the Church of the first and second centuries; and everyone who is familiar with the writings of the apostolic and post-apostolic age must come to the same conclusion. It is historically clear that for many years the Church lived and flourished on oral tradition without the aid of the written gospels, though not for so many years as was once firmly maintained by the opponents of Christian tradition. Gradually they have returned towards the traditional position until even an authority like Harnack has adopted a date for the gospels which hardly differs from our own. But it is also clear that even when the gospels were written and in circulation the preachers and apologists of the faith still preferred to appeal to what Papias in the first half of the second century called 'the living and abiding voice'. His words are preserved for us by Eusebius (265-339), who spent his whole life at the catechetical school of Caesarea in Palestine, gathering up the early traditions of the Church's teaching: 'For I considered', wrote Papias, 'that I should not get so much profit from what was written in books as from the voice which yet lives and remains'.²

Papias was born in the last quarter of the first century, became Bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia, and was associated with John the Evangelist if not directly at least through the medium of his friend Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna, who died a martyr in 155 when nearing his hundredth year, and who was certainly a disciple of John. Thus Papias was in an excellent position to appeal to the living and abiding voice. The same rule is laid down by Irenaeus (c. 130-200), Bishop of Lyons, who was born and grew up in the same quarter of the Church as Papias and Polycarp, who was a disciple of St Justin (martyred in 165), a man of Palestinian origin. Indeed, Irenaeus insists so strongly that the

² Eusebius, *Hist. Ecl.* III, 29.

unwritten tradition of the Church is the determinative voice in matters of faith, that he holds the opinion that the faith could have been safeguarded by this means alone even had the Apostles committed nothing to writing; which presupposes his conviction of the existence of a living infallible voice. Origen (185-253), brought up in the catechetical school of Alexandria, later its head and then master of the catechetical school of Caesarea, though he laboured so assiduously at the Scriptures nevertheless is equally insistent on the necessity of appeal to the living tradition in order to obtain security of faith. 'Whereas there are many who think they have the mind of Christ, and some hold views different from those of former times, let the Church's teaching be maintained which has been handed down in one succession from the Apostles and abides till the present day in the churches.'³ Tertullian (c. 160-250) bears the same witness for the great church of North Africa, expressed in his usual vigorous style. 'To know what the Apostles taught, that is what Christ revealed to them, recourse must be had to the churches which they founded and instructed by word of mouth and their letters.⁴ . . . Of the things practised (in the administration of baptism) and of other usages, if you ask for the written authority of Scripture none will be found. They spring from tradition which practice has confirmed and obedience ratified.⁵ . . . For nothing is gained from gathering together texts of Scripture but indigestion and headache. . . . You will only lose your voice in arguing, and all you gain will be anger against blasphemy. . . . Get things in their right order and put at the head that which is the only question at issue: Whose is the faith? Whose are the Scriptures? By whom, and through whom, and when, and to whom was delivered that teaching by which men are made Christians? You will find the truth of the Scriptures and of their meaning and of all Christian tradition there where you find the truth of Christian teaching and faith.'⁶ I need not run the risk of wearying the reader by adding the testimony of Cyprian, Eusebius, Basil, Epiphanius, Chrysostom, and many others of the early Fathers, because they all follow the rule laid down by St Luke, the rule that is still followed by the authentic successors of the Apostles when they are called upon solemnly to pronounce for the guidance of the faithful what

³ *De Princ.* prol. ii.

⁴ *De Praescriptionibus adversus Haereses*, 21.

⁵ *De Corona Militis*, c. 3, 4.

⁶ *De Praescriptionibus*, 17 and 19.

things are necessarily to be believed and to be done (faith and morals) in order to be secure in the faith of Jesus Christ.

But it needs no great penetration of mind to perceive that, no matter how strictly we adhere to the living and abiding voice of ecclesiastical tradition, it follows that neither we, nor the Fathers of the Church, nor St Luke himself could have any solid grounds for security of faith if we were in the position of the unfortunate writer in *The Times*. On his hypothesis tradition is no safer as a guide than Scripture; less so, in fact. If 'the revelations of God to man in history can but come through fallible human agents', then no security or certainty is possible; we are left with probabilities and mere opinions. That is the way to doubt and infidelity, for opinion means mental adhesion to one position with the fear that the opposite may be true. But what man can be content with opinion and probability where so much lies at stake? Certainly not St Paul with his confident boast: 'I know whom I have believed and I am certain'.⁷ Therefore he goes on to exhort Timothy to a like confidence: 'Hold the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and in love that is Christ Jesus. Keep that good deposit by the help of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us.'

For Luke, the companion and disciple of St Paul, that is the key to his view of the primitive Church, and it is demonstrated on every page of Acts which has been called the Gospel of the Holy Spirit. Fifty times he introduces the Spirit of God (once called the Spirit of Jesus) showing how the Church was born, taught, guided, and propagated under the influence of the Spirit. Nothing is further from Luke's mind than the idea that God's revelation to men is subject to the fallibilities of mere human agents. Time after time he repeats that the men to whom the faith was delivered were 'filled with the Holy Ghost' in order that they might faithfully deliver it to the world. They spoke 'as the Holy Ghost gave them to speak'. They are the divinely appointed channels through which the Holy Ghost is bestowed upon others, morally by prayer and preaching (viii, 15), physically by actual contact through the laying on of hands (viii, 17). It is the Holy Ghost who directs operations, filling up the gap in the number of the Apostles (i, 16-24), indicating the time and the persons for the work of spreading the Gospel to the Gentile world (xiii, 2-4),

⁷ 2 Tim. i, 12.

appointing bishops (xx, 28), guiding here, forbidding there, always in control. Moreover Luke declares that the Apostles, these divinely chosen agents through whom it pleases the Holy Ghost to operate, are fully conscious of the fact that there is a community of action between themselves and the Spirit of God whenever they are acting formally as his agents. See the astounding assertion made before the Sanhedrin when the Apostles made a declaration of their faith in Christ: 'We and the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to all that obey him, are the witnesses of these things' (v, 32). Again, when Ananias deceives the Apostles about the price of his land, Peter accuses him of trying to deceive the Holy Ghost (v, 3). But all this fades into comparative insignificance before the claim made by the Apostles and ancients of the Church at Jerusalem in their letter to the Gentile converts: 'It hath seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us' (xv, 28). If there is no authority for that claim then it is the height of blasphemy. But Luke does not fail to provide us with the authority for that claim in the express teaching of Christ contained in the third Gospel. The Spirit of God that filled John the Baptist, Elisabeth, and Zachary (i, i, 15, 41, 67), by whose power Mary conceived the Son of God (i, 35), that descended upon Jesus at his baptism (iii, 22), led him into the desert of temptation (iv, 1), brought him thence into Galilee to begin his ministry (iv, 14), anointed him to preach the gospel (iv, 18; cf. Peter's memory of this in Acts x, 38, also iv, 27), this is the same Spirit promised to the Apostles that they might be faithful witnesses to the teaching of Christ (xxiv, 49).

In the mind of Luke, then, the Church is the sphere of the Holy Spirit's activity and the Acts of the Apostles describes that activity. In no other book of the New Testament, not excluding the Epistles of St Paul, is the Holy Ghost so much brought to the forefront. In a word, according to Acts, the Spirit of God is the source of the whole life of the Church, and therefore meriting the title 'soul of the Church'; for soul is defined as the animating principle in things that live. And since the life of the Church is a spiritual life, and the two essential powers of a spirit are intelligence and will, so the animating spirit of the Church is the Spirit of Truth and the Spirit of Charity. But it is by no means Luke's intention to teach that every action of every disciple was inspired by the Holy Ghost received at baptism. Ananias and

Sapphira were presumably of the number of the first Christians; and Luke recalls in the words of Stephen that some resist the Holy Ghost (vii, 51). Nor does he give any ground for the opinion that every Christian comes under the influence of the Holy Ghost to the same degree and for the same purpose, so that, as some have supposed, the whole body of the faithful is the inspired and infallible source of Christian truth. Luke is too good a disciple of St Paul to think any such thing, and what the Apostle taught on this point is put with crystal clearness to his Corinthian converts in his doctrine of the mystical body of Christ. The one and same Spirit which animates that body manifests itself by diverse graces and diverse ministries, as the human soul manifests itself by different bodily activities. So through the instrumentality of some members of the mystical body the Spirit accomplishes the work of the apostolate, through others prophecy, through others teaching. Not all are apostles, not all are prophets or teachers, not all have the grace of interpretation. 'But all these things one and the same Spirit worketh, dividing to every one according as he will' (I Cor. xii, 4-30).

What other conclusion can we draw but this: that those who take their stand upon the Scriptures and those who appeal to the primitive Church ought to realize what this claim involves, and St Luke leaves us in no doubt upon that point. It is evident what he means by the Church: a divine institution, guided and taught by the Spirit of God, so firmly established and divinely guided that, in spite of human frailty and diabolical hostility, it will continue infallibly to be the 'support and firm foundation of truth' (I Tim. iii, 15) unto the end of the world. For Luke's is the gospel of universal salvation; he had heard his master Paul preach that 'God willeth all men to be saved'. But surely we cannot allow ourselves to think, or to attribute such an illogical conclusion to the logical-minded Luke, that all this marvellous activity of the Spirit of God ceased with the death of the Apostles. Indeed—and both the religious divisions of today as well as the anxious searching for unity witness to this—the further we get from the time of the Apostles the more urgent a need is there for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the preservation and exposition of the faith. Let us remind ourselves once more that the object of faith is supernatural truth, the Blessed Trinity, the Godhead of Christ, the destiny of man, the necessity and number of the

Sacraments as means of the grace required for the attainment of that destiny, and the rest. If these truths and the content of them 'can but come to us through fallible human agents', then there is no alternative to resigning ourselves to endless and ever-increasing division, with the inevitable consequence that Christianity will be progressively emptied of its supernatural content. Human reason and argument alone are powerless to define and determine supernatural truth. But at any rate human reason ought to carry us thus far: it would be unreasonable to accept the doctrine of the Incarnation in its fullness and its consequences, and at the same time suppose that God had not provided the means by which mankind could possess that security of faith which St Luke seeks to convey to his beloved Theophilus. That means is 'the living and abiding voice' by which the Holy Ghost speaks to the world through the Incarnate Son of God, through his Apostles, and through their true successors, as infallible today as in the beginning of the Church.

(Concluded)



FROM SYNAGOGUE TO EARLY CHRISTIAN ASSEMBLY: II

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The Scriptures in the Life of the Synagogue

THE primary object of the meetings in the Synagogue was the reading of the Scriptures, yet this was quite a recent innovation, seemingly introduced along with the new institution. In order to realize this better, we must go back to the time of the Temple.

In the old days, when Israel had been gathered together in her own land, leading a national life that centred round the Temple in Jerusalem and the big annual festivals held there, the whole People used to go up to the Temple to offer sacrifice. The indissoluble bond between the Temple and the sacrifices made there was indeed one of the basic requirements of the Old Testament religion.

The Scriptures had a large place in this liturgy both before