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## THE BIBLE AND YOU (PART II)

In order to understand the teaching of the Bible, the Church needed reason, and not just the reason of the individual, not just the musings of you and me, but the best reason of mankind, which in the course of providence was that of the Greeks. It was this reason that the Church took and baptized, as it were, converting the understanding, and conforming it to the revelation of God in the Holy Scriptures. Athanasius found the word homoousios in the Neoplatonists, Plotinus and Porphyry. They were themselves thinking about the nature of the divine.

In our day there is a prejudice against the use of reason, one that would have been unfamiliar and anathema to the whole history of Christian scholars from Justin Martyr to John Calvin and beyond. Even the remarkable Tertullian (160 A.D. - 220 A.D.), who gave us much theological language, as for instance the word trinitas, and who asked skeptically what Jerusalem has to do with Athens, would resort to the language of the Stoics and even the philosophy of Aristotle. He ultimately gave himself over to the extreme charismatics of his day and the private inspirations of the Spirit - for which he was chastised by the Church.

Like a rip tide, hidden and potentially lethal, current scholarship over the past half century has endeavored to dispense with Greek philosophical language. They have favored notions that make God a creature like us, subject to time and space, learning lessons by trial and error.

But such thinking can only amount to one thing; a God that develops like us can never grow perfect enough to save us; nor can salvation itself, an eternal idea, ever become reality. The finite cannot of its own accord become infinite.

The early theologians saw this so clearly that they were able to distinguish theological terms that are adequate to the biblical imagination. The moderns, having cut out the roots of their theological history, cannot do this.

To stay with the modern theologians who maintain that God develops alongside us is merely to make our wretched state everlasting. While they keep the anthropomorphic images of Scripture, they lose the essence of God's self-revelation. Isaiah's statement, "Now the Egyptians are men, and not God; and their horses flesh, and not spirit"

is unintelligible to them (31:3).

So what is finally my point? Christians need reason to understand the Bible. And the Church, led by the most brilliant men and women of their times, have over and over again reasoned for us. Now it is our privilege to think their thoughts with them, to have the same understanding formed in us that they discovered.

But two further points remain, and then a conclusion, so that this reflection will not go on interminably. The first is the necessity of providence, and the second the end goal of our personal reading of the Bible.

In accordance with the teaching of the Bible, the early Church had no fear of whatever truth might be revealed among non-Christians. They believed that all truth, whatever its source, was fulfilled in Christ. They understood, with St. Paul, that God had a plan including both Jew and Greek. In this, Paul followed the Old Testament teaching that in the seed of Abraham all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Romans 4:14-25). Or as Isaiah had said, "There shall be a root of Jesse, and he that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles trust" (Romans 15:12).

And so St. Clement of Alexandria (150 A.D.-215 A.D.), following St. John the Evangelist, had taught that the Word of God "lighteth every man that cometh into the world" (John 1:9). For him, the Greeks were the means through which God provided the necessary philosophical foundation for the Gospel of Christ.

So then, wherever one turns among the Fathers of the Church, the single most important presupposition is that God is one, and in the oneness of God there is a single plan, a unitary providential course to all things, which God weaves according to his infinite and inscrutable will. There is no fear of finding truth among the pagans. There is rather an ability to think through reason as God's gift and to bring the conclusions of reason to completion by the revelation of the Holy Scriptures.

Finally then, what about our personal reading of the Holy Scriptures? The Bible is our treasure. It is God's word written. The Lord's word is always "a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Psalm 119:105). There is no other book in the history of man that teaches infallibly what is necessary for our salvation. No other book can compare in its beauty and majesty, its complexity and simplicity, its fearful judgments and joy of mercy. And yet it is not our private book. It is the Church's book.

In his magnificent collect for the Second Sunday in Advent, Thomas Cranmer teaches us the first place of Scripture as what we hear and then read. "Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them." We hear the Bible first as it is read within the liturgy of the church, for it is in the liturgy of the Church that the Scriptures are most perfectly understood. It is within the teaching of the Church that we apprehend the word of God aright.

But now I want to end this reflection with the awesome teaching of St. Augustine. In his *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine places the Holy Scriptures in the realm of signs. The words of the Bible are signs, signs

which are indeed instructive for eternal life, but the Scriptures are not themselves eternal life. They are the means, says Augustine, for us to come to faith, hope, and charity. Those few saints most schooled in these virtues, for whom these virtues have become life's way, no longer need the Bible, except to instruct others. They have it, as it were, written on their hearts.

And in the life to come, when faith and hope cease to exist, and we know as we are known, and grasp all that God gives in the perfection of charity, then too we shall have no need of the Bible. It will have done its work, showing us the way, lighting our path, the path which ends at the feet of the Author himself. And there, only the union of Love will do.

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