

XXXVIII.

The Ministry of the Word.

"He shall lead you into all truth." —[John xvi. 13.](#)

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Let us now consider the second activity of the Holy Spirit in the Church, which we prefer to designate as His *care-taking* of the Word. In this we distinguish three parts, viz.: the *Sealing*, the *Interpretation*, and the *Application* of the Word.

In the first place, it is the Holy Spirit who *seals* the Word. This has reference to the "testimonium Spiritus Sancti," of which our fathers used to speak and by which they understood the operation whereby He creates in the hearts of believers the firm and lasting conviction concerning the divine and absolute authority of the Word of God.

The Word is, if we may so express it, a child of the Holy Spirit. He has brought it forth. We owe it entirely to His peculiar activity. He is its Auctor Primarius, *i.e.*, its Principal Author. And thus it can not seem strange that He should exercise that motherly care over the child of His own travail whereby He enables it to fulfil its destiny. And this destiny is, in the first place, to *be believed* in by the elect; secondly, to be *understood* by them; and lastly, to be *lived* by them; three operations that are successively effected in them by the sealing, the interpretation, and the application of the Word. The *sealing* of the Word quickens the "faith"; the *interpretation* imparts the "right understanding"; and the *application* effects the "living" of it.

We mention the *sealing* of the Word first, for without faith in its divine authority it can not be God's Word to us.

The question is: How do we come in real contact and fellowship with the Holy Scripture, which, as a mere external object, lies before us?

We are told that it is the Word of God; but how can this become our own firm conviction? It can never be obtained by investigation. In fact, it ought to be acknowledged that the more one investigates the Word the more he loses his simple and childlike faith in it. It can not even be said that the doubt created by superficial inquiry will be dispelled by deeper research; for even the profound scrutiny of earnest men has had but one result, viz., the increase of interrogation-points.

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We can not in this way examine the contents of the Scripture without destroying it for ourselves. If one wishes to examine the contents of an egg, he must not break it, for then he disturbs it and it is an egg no more; but he should ask them that know about it. In like manner we can learn the truth of the Scripture only by sealing and external communication.

For suppose that the final verdict of science will eventually confirm the divine authority of the Scripture, as we firmly believe it will, what would that avail us in our present spiritual need, since during our short life science will not reach that final verdict? And even if after thirty or forty years we should see it, would that avail my present distress? And if this diffi-

culty could also be removed, we would still ask: Is it not cruel to give spiritual assurance only to Greek and Hebrew scholars? Do not men see and understand, then, that the evidence of the divine authority of the Scripture must come to us in such a manner that the simplest old woman in the poorhouse can see it just as well as I can?

Hence all learned investigation, as the basis for *spiritual conviction*, is out of the question. He who denies this maltreats souls and introduces an offensive clericalism. For what is the result? The notion that the unscholarly can have no assurance of themselves; that is what ministers are for; they have studied the matter; they ought to know, and the simple folk must believe upon their authority.

The absurdity of this notion is obvious. In the first place, the learned gentlemen are frequently the greatest doubters. Secondly, one minister almost always contradicts what another has laid down as the truth. And, thirdly, the congregation, treated as a *minor*, is delivered again into the power of men; a yoke is laid upon it which our fathers could not bear; and the mistake is made of trying to prove the testimony of God by that of men.

If we must bear a yoke, then give us that of *Rome* ten times rather than that of *the scholars*; for altho Rome puts men between us and the Scripture, they speak at least with one mouth. They all repeat what the Pope has settled for them, and his authority rests not upon his scholarship, but upon his pretended *spiritual illumination*. Hence the Roman Catholic priests do not contradict one another. Neither is their teaching the fancy of a *defective* learning, but the result of a mental development that Rome attained in its most excellent men, and that in connection with the spiritual labor of many centuries.

Of all clericalism, that of the intellectual stamp is the most unbearable; for one is always silenced with the remark, "You don't know Greek," or, "You don't read Hebrew"; while the child of God feels *irresistibly* that in the matters that concern eternity, Greek and Hebrew can not have the last word. And this apart from the fact that to a number of these scholars Professor Cobet might say in turn: "Dear sir, do you still know Greek yourself?" Of the shallow knowledge of Hebrew in the largest number of cases, it is better not to speak.

No, in that way we never get there. To make the divine authority of the Holy Scripture real to us, we need not a *human*, but a *divine* testimony, equally convincing to the simplest and to the most learned—a testimony that must not be cast as pearls before swine, but be limited to those who can gather from it noblest fruit viz., to them that *are born again*.

And this testimony is not derived from the Pope and his priests, nor from the theological faculty with its ministers, but comes with the sealing from the Holy Spirit *alone*. Hence it is a divine testimony, and as such stops all contradiction and silences all doubt. It is a testimony the same to all, belonging to the peasant in the field and to the theologian in his study. Finally, it is a testimony which they alone receive who have open eyes, so that they can see *spiritually*.

However, this testimony does not work by magic. It does not cause the confused mind of unbelief suddenly to cry out: "Surely the Scripture is the Word of God!" If this were the case, the way of enthusiasts would be open, and our salvation would depend again upon a pretended spiritual insight. No, the testimony of the Holy Spirit works in an entirely different way. He begins to bring us into contact with the Word, either by our own reading or by the communication of others. Then He shows us the picture of the sinner according to the Scripture, and the salvation which mercifully saved him; and lastly, He makes us hear the song of praise upon his lips. And after we have seen this objectively, with the eye of the *understanding*, He then so works upon our *feeling* that we begin to see ourselves in that sinner, and to feel that the truth of the Scripture directly concerns *us*. Finally, He takes hold of the will, causing the very power seen in the Scripture to work in us. And when thus the whole man, mind, heart, and will, has experienced the power of the Word, then He adds to this the comprehensive operation of assurance, whereby the Holy Scripture in divine splendor commences to scintillate before our eyes.

Our experience is like that of a person who, from his brightly lighted room, looks out in the dusk. At first, owing to the brightness within, he sees nothing. But blowing out his light and looking out once more, he gradually distinguishes forms and figures, and after a while he enjoys the soft twilight. Let us apply this to the Word of God. So long as the light of our own insight flashes through the soul, we, looking through the window of eternity, fail to perceive anything. It is all wrapped in cloudy darkness. But when at last we prevail upon ourselves to extinguish that light, and look out again, then we see a divine world gradually coming up out of the gloom, and, to our surprise, where at first we saw nothing we now see a glorious realm bathed in divine light.

And thus God's elect obtain a firm assurance concerning the Word of God that nothing can shake, of which no learning can rob them. They stand firm as a wall. They are founded upon a rock. The winds may howl and the floods descend, but they fear not. They stay upon their indestructible faith, not only as a result of the Holy Spirit's first operation, but because He supports the conviction *continually*. Jesus said, "He abideth with you forever"; and this has primary reference to this testimony concerning the Word of God. In the believing heart He testifies continually: "Fear not, the Scripture is the Word of your God."

However, this is not all of the Holy Spirit's work in regard to the Word. It must also be *interpreted*.

And He, the Inspirer, alone can give the right interpretation. If among men each is the best interpreter of his own word, how much more here where no man shall ever have the boldness to say that he understands the Spirit's full and proper meaning as well as He Himself, if not better? Even if the authors of both Testaments should rise from the dead and tell us the meaning of their respective Scriptures—even that would not be the full and deep



interpretation. For they wrote things the comprehensive meaning of which they did not understand. *E g.*, when Moses wrote about the serpent's seed, it is obvious that he did not begin to see all that is contained in the "bruising of his heel."

Hence the Holy Spirit alone can interpret the Scripture. And how? After the manner of Rome, by means of an official translation as the Vulgate; an official interpretation of every word and sentence; and an official condemnation of every other explanation?, By no means. This would be very easy, but also very unspiritual. Death would cleave to it. The full, boundless ocean of truth would be confined within the narrow limits of a formula. And the refreshing fragrance of life, which always meets us from the sacred page, would at once be lost.

Surely the churches may not be given over to an arbitrary, irresponsible translation of the Word; and we greatly appreciate the mutual care of the churches in providing a correct translation in the vernacular. We consider it even highly desirable that, under the seal of their approval, the churches should publish expository marginal readings. But neither the one nor the other should ever replace the Scripture itself. Scriptural research must ever be free. And when there is spiritual courage, then let the churches revise their translation and see whether their expository readings need modification. Not, however, to unsettle things every three years, but that in every period of vigorous, animated, spiritual life the light of the Holy Spirit may be shed in larger measure upon the things that always need more light.

Hence the work of the Holy Spirit with reference to interpretation is indirect, and the means employed are: (1) scientific study; (2) the ministry of the Word; and (3) the spiritual experience of the Church. And it is by the cooperation of these three factors that, in the course of ages, the Holy Spirit indicates which interpretation deviates from the truth, and which is the correct understanding of the Word.

This interpretation is followed by the *application*.

The Holy Scripture is a wonderful mystery, which is intended to meet the needs and conflicts of every age, nation, and saint. When preparing it He foreknew those ages, nations, and saints, and with an eye to their necessities He so planned and arranged it as it is now offered to us. And only then will the Holy Scripture attain the end in view, when to every age, nation, church, and individual it shall be applied in such a way that every saint shall receive at last whatever portion was reserved for him in the Scripture. Hence this work of application belongs to the Holy Spirit alone, for only He knows the relation which the Scripture must sustain at last to every one of God's elect.

As to the manner in which the work is performed, it is either *direct* or *indirect*.

The *indirect* application comes most generally through the ministry, which attains its highest end when standing before his congregation the minister can say: "*This is the message of the Word which at this time the Holy Spirit intends for you.*" An awful claim, indeed, and



only attainable when one lives as deeply in the Word as in the Church. Besides this there is also an application of the Word brought about by the spoken or written word of a brother, which sometimes is as effectual as a long sermon. The quiet perusal of some exposition of the truth has sometimes stirred the soul more effectually than a service in the house of prayer.

The *direct* application of the Word the Holy Spirit effects by the reading of the Scripture or by remembered passages. Then He brings to remembrance words deeply affecting us by their singular power. And, altho the world smiles and even brethren profess ignorance concerning it, it is our conviction that the special application of that moment was for us and not for them, and that in our inward souls the Holy Spirit performed a work peculiar to Himself.

XXXIX.

The Government of the Church.

"No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost."—*1 Cor. xii. 3.*

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The last work of the Holy Spirit in the Church has reference to *government*.

The Church is a divine institution. It is the body of Christ, even tho manifesting itself in a most defective way; for as the man whose speech is affected by a stroke of paralysis is the same friendly person as before, in spite of the defect, so is the Church, whose speech is impaired, still the same holy body of Christ. The visible and invisible Church are one.

We have written elsewhere: "The Church of Christ on earth is at once visible and invisible. Even as a man is at once a perceptible and imperceptible being without being therefore two beings, so does the distinction between the Church visible and invisible in no wise impair its unity. It is one and the same Church, which according to its *spiritual being* is hidden in the spiritual world, manifest only to the spiritual eye, and which according to its *visible form* manifests itself externally to believers and the world.

"According to its *spiritual* and *invisible being* the Church is one in all the earth, one also with the Church in heaven. In like manner it is also a holy Church, not only because it is skilfully wrought of God, dependent entirely upon His divine influences and workings, but also because the spiritual defilement and indwelling sin of believers belong not to it, but war against it. According to its *visible form*, however, it manifests itself only in fragments. Hence it is local, *i.e.*, widely distributed; and the national churches originate because these local churches form such connection as their own character and their national relations demand. More extensive combinations of churches can only be temporal or exceedingly loose and flexible. And these churches, as manifestations of the invisible church, are not *one*, neither are they *holy*; for they partake of the imperfections of all earthly life, and are constantly defiled by the power of sin which internally and externally undermines their well-being."

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Hence the subject may not be presented as tho the spiritual, invisible, and mystical Church were the object of Christ's care and government, while the affairs and oversight of the visible Church are left to the pleasure of men. This is in direct opposition to the Word of God. There is not one visible Church and another invisible; but one Church, invisible in the spiritual, and visible in the material world. And as God cares both for body and soul, so does Christ govern the external affairs of the Church just as certainly as with His grace He nourishes it internally.

Christ is the Lord; Lord not only of the soul, but before He can be that He must be Lord of the Church as a whole.

It should be noticed that the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments belong not to the internal economy of the Church, but to the external; and that