

RATIONALISM OR FAITH

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“Casting down imaginations and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” 2 Corinthians 10:5.

A dictionary defines rationalism as: “A system of belief regulated by reason, not authority: a disposition to apply to religious doctrines the same critical methods as to science and history, and to attribute all phenomena to natural rather than miraculous causes” (Chambers 20th century Dictionary).

Opposed

If we take the above definition of rationalism, we can see that it is opposed to the teaching of the apostle in 2 Corinthians 10:5, regarding the preaching of the gospel. The gospel comes to us as a revelation from God, whose origin is not in the mind of man but in the mind of God (cp 1 Corinthians 2:4-12; 2 Peter 1:20,21). It indeed comes to the mind of man, by the Spirit taking the Word of God, and revealing it to men’s minds. So we do not say, therefore, that man’s mind is not used as he comes to a saving knowledge of the truth. But we do say that such knowledge does not *originate* in man’s mind, and cannot be known by him until God is pleased to reveal His truth to him. Rationalism, however, claims that the highest knowledge man can possess is that knowledge which originates in his mental capacities. Therefore, all knowledge that does not have its origin in his mental capacities is to be rejected. Rationalism demands of Christianity that it be subject to human reason; while the gospel calls for man’s reason to be subject to God’s revelation, as our text teaches us.

Christian faith is God-given, as it is man’s response to God’s revelation of Himself in the preaching of the gospel (cp 1 Corinthians 12:1). Faith is, as the apostle Paul prays for the Ephesian Christians, “the eyes of your understanding being enlightened, that ye may know what is the hope of your calling...” (Ephesians 1:18). Just as the eyes of the body take in the natural world, so “the eye” of faith looks upon the reality of the invisible world, even the everlasting kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, in which every spiritually regenerate person has a part (cp 2 Corinthians 4:18). Faith then, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is enabled to receive the Word of God, “not as the word of man, but as it is in truth, the Word of God” (1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Thessalonians 2:13).

Persuaded

It is possible for a man to be persuaded that the Bible is the Word of God on purely rationalistic grounds, and therefore believe he is a Christian and be looked upon as such, yet in reality, he is nothing of the sort! Faith, to be faith, should NOT STAND IN THE WISDOM OF MAN (Rationalism) but in THE POWER OF GOD (1 Corinthians 2:5). Rationalistic faith is NOT Christian faith; it has at best but “a form of godliness, denying the power thereof,” from which the apostle Paul exhorts Timothy, “turn away” (2 Timothy 3:5). The fact is that rationalistic faith, though it might be called Christian, “CANNOT see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3) since it is “enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed CAN be. So then they that are in the flesh, CANNOT please God” (See Romans 8:7,8). A man who has a rationalistic faith, “receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him, neither CAN he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (See 1 Corinthians 2:14). So it is, in contrast to those who have a rationalistic faith, those who possess God-given faith have a true knowledge of God, which human wisdom CANNOT know. (See 1 Corinthians 2:13-16).

The fruits of Rationalism

We must now try to see how it was that rationalism and its fruits gained its entrance in the professing

church, so that now it has more influence than God-given faith, “which is after godliness” (Titus 1:1). That it has done so is not new, for we read in the days of Jeremiah, that God’s revelation to His people through His prophets was generally rejected and ignored in favour of walking “in the counsels and in the imaginations of their own hearts” (Jeremiah 7:24 etc.). Reminding ourselves, therefore, of how rationalism and God-given faith are opposed to each other, we can do no better than go back to the year 1859. In that year was the publication of Charles Darwin’s book, *The Origin of the species by means of natural selection*, and a time of spiritual revival and awakening.

Darwin’s book represents the position of rationalism, whose influence upon our nation and the professing church has been so profound. The revival of that year represents the pouring out of God’s Spirit upon His people, and making Himself known so that the faith of God’s people was revived and strengthened. Instead of recognising the rationalism of Darwin’s position, and its opposition to Christian faith, the church then tried to harmonise the two mutually exclusive positions, with the inevitable weakening of its witness to genuine Christian faith. Eifion Evans in his book, *The Welsh Revival of 1904*, has written concerning Darwin’s influence: “The years which followed Darwin’s monumental book, also saw the rise of the new goddess of science, and optimism as to the possibilities that lay ahead for man, rose to a high level” (page 37).

He goes on to observe that even a man like Dr Lewis Edwards, principal of Bala Theological College from 1837-87, while defending the traditional view of the Scriptures as a divine revelation, did so on rationalistic grounds. Dr Evans is surely, therefore, correct in stating, regarding Dr Edwards:

“He was using the weapons of the flesh to defend the citadel of the Spirit. If the Bible was vulnerable in a way that necessitated a scintillating scholarship to defend it, the believer’s experience of the inward confirmatory testimony of the Spirit to the Bible’s divine origin, together with the relevant affirmation of the doctrinal standards traditionally accepted by the church, was of doubtful value indeed” (page 41).

We have seen that the apostle Paul makes it clear that the Christian faith is not established on rationalistic grounds, but by the witness and power of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:5). John MacLeod in his book *Scottish Theology*, has written, “This was the common teaching of the reformed schools. They resolved the question of the divine warrant of Christian faith into the witness of the Holy Ghost in the heart of the believer bearing witness to the evidence of the sacred books themselves, which contain in their body and framework, the token of the fact that they have come from God’s own hand as their supreme author” (page 52).

Concession to unbelief

Theologically speaking, we can say that to prove the truth of Scripture on rationalistic grounds (called an inductive method) rather than by “the witness of the Holy Ghost, etc. (as in the above quotation) means that we have made a concession to unbelief. The starting point is unbelief, since rationalism consists in those “imaginations” (i.e. reasonings) and every high thing which EXALTETH itself against the knowledge of God.” Faith, however, SUBMITS itself to the revelation of God, given in the Word by the Holy Spirit; and thus brings “into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.” The inductive method, which would establish the truth of Scripture on rationalistic grounds, is being held, according to Hywel Jones in a booklet, *The Doctrine of Scripture Today*: “By a growing body of opinion, particularly among younger evangelical scholars ... this claim means that the orthodox position regarding Scripture can no longer be established by an appeal to Scripture’s witness to itself (called a deductive method), and to a study of Scripture in the light of this statement” (page 17 - the booklet was based upon an address given at a BEC. meeting held in Liverpool in November 1968).

As we saw in John MacLeod’s book, the Scripture bears witness to its own divine inspiration, and this

witness is taken by the Holy Spirit to the heart and conscience of the believer. These are neither proved or disproved by natural science etc. as Charles Bridges in his commentary on Ecclesiastes points out: "Intelligence in all the branches of natural science gives no help to a right understanding of the gospel. It is a science of itself - peculiar to itself, and therefore only understood through its own organ - divine teaching - it is not knowledge itself - but knowledge under divine teaching that works the main end" (page 25).

Mutually exclusive

1859 then, shows us the two ways of rationalism and a divinely-given faith: the former in the thesis of Charles Darwin's book, and the latter in an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In a very short period, the church, instead of recognising that these two positions were mutually exclusive, sought to harmonise them, with the disastrous consequences which have followed since then. The influence of evolutionary thinking entered what was called Higher Criticism, and also the textual criticism of the latter end of the 19th century. The scholars who worked on the revision of our English Bible at that time were greatly influenced by the methods of Higher Criticism, which was in turn influenced by evolutionary thinking. Those evangelicals who oppose the conclusions of the higher criticism movement, with the thinking and methods of that movement, must, I believe, become influenced by the spirit of that movement - a spirit which is opposed to the Holy Spirit, whose prerogative it is to authenticate the truth of Scripture to the heart and conscience of believers. In our day, the influence of evolutionary thought lives on, while the divine power of the Holy Spirit is being withheld.

Carnality

Carnality in the form of the thinking which lies in the heart of unregenerate mankind predominates over the thinking of minds and hearts of those who "have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God" (1 Corinthians 2:12). May all who have been blessed of God with a divinely-given faith, ever seek for a fuller and deeper experience of the Holy Spirit in their lives (Luke 11:13), which will enable them to intercede and give God "No rest till HE establish, and till HE make Jerusalem (i.e. the church of God) a praise in the earth" (Isaiah 62:7). To the Christians at Rome, who were in dispute over the lawfulness of observing certain days or of eating certain meats, the apostle Paul taught that in these things true believers could legitimately differ, without any harm to the cause of God, so long as they kept in view the true nature of God's kingdom: namely, that "the kingdom of God is not meat or drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. For he that IN THESE THINGS serveth Christ, is acceptable to God and approved of men" (Romans 14:17,18).

To the disciples of our Lord who wanted to know whether the time had come to restore the kingdom to Israel, the Saviour turned their minds away from such considerations, which concerned God's secret counsels

and purposes, towards God's *revealed* will for them: namely, the one necessary consideration of their need that the Holy Spirit might come upon them, so that they might be witnesses unto Him, both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea; and in Samaria; and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). To the Corinthian church, the apostle Paul taught that the weapons that he employed in his ministry "are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds" (2 Corinthians 10:4). So it was, that he was enabled to oppose those

"whose notions, which were conclusions drawn from reason not sanctified and subdued to the will of God - St. Paul tells them that the gospel (which was the great weapon of his warfare) through the power of God, was mighty to pull down the strongholds which unbelief had in the carnal understanding of men; to overthrow their reasonings; the height of them, which exalted themselves against the doctrine of faith - so that whatsoever was revealed by the apostles from the Spirit of God, men readily agreed and yielded obedience to; whatever their thought or reasoning about it were; they gave

credit to it; not because it appeared rational to them; but UPON THE DIVINE AUTHORITY OF THE REVELATION, submitting their reason to that, and believing it the most rational thing in the world that they should believe what God affirmed; and do what God commanded; and this blessed effect the gospel had in all those who heartily embraced it: for indeed to give an assent to a proposition, merely upon a SENSIBLE AND RATIONAL DEMONSTRATION, IS NO FAITH, THAT IS, NO DIVINE FAITH”
(Matthew Poole’s Commentary on 2 Corinthians 10:5).

The true nature of our Christian faith is surely greatly obscured in our day and can only be manifested and restored by a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit, since it does not stand in the wisdom of man, but in the power of God” (1 Corinthians 2:5).

Footnote

As a footnote, I would like to add my personal testimony to this. I studied at an evangelical theological college in the 1960s, and the methods employed to oppose the conclusions of the higher critics were the rationalistic methods upon which they based that movement. In other words, to quote the above dictionary definition of rationalism, it was “a disposition to apply to religious doctrine the same critical methods as to science and history...” The result of this approach was, as I have suggested, to be influenced by the spirit of that movement, and therefore a concession to unbelief. This meant that we left college, greatly increased in rational knowledge, but certainly in my case, with less faith than when I entered college. The faith that was preserved in us, was preserved by the same way that we received it: namely, the gracious operation of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, testifying to the divine authority of Scripture. The Spirit thus operates subjectively upon our hearts and minds, to give us a true and right understanding of Scripture. Thus it is, that we do not conceive of the Spirit’s operations apart from the objective Word of Truth, otherwise it could obviously lead to all kinds of erroneous mysticism, which we see in our own day, and can appear in times of spiritual revival. We also do not conceive of receiving the Word of Truth, other than with the enlightening and enlivening power of the Holy Spirit, which would otherwise only lead to rationalism. Our faith then, during our time at college, was helped by a weekly devotional service, plus a whole day, once a term, when all academic study was set aside, and space given to seek the Lord in the way of faith. We would then return to our lectures, based upon concession to the rationalistic method of acquiring knowledge. In reality, this approach was a contradiction of the other, for they were opposed to each other. I think that many of us had a sense that this was so, but it has taken a long time to see things as they now appear to us.