

# God Has Spoken

*Revelation and the Bible*

Third Edition

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# Contents

Foreword (1993)	ii
1 Introduction (1979)	19
2 The Lost Word	31
3 God's Word Spoken (I)	59
4 God's Word Spoke (II)	79
5 God's Word Written	105
6 God's Word Heard	141
Appendix I: The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978)	155
Appendix II: The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics (1982)	171
Suggestions for Further Reading	193
Endnotes	197
General Index	205
Scripture Index	207

*To my colleagues at  
Tyndale Hall and Trinity College, Bristol  
1970–79  
with affection and gratitude*

## Introduction (1979)

THE FIRST VERSION OF THIS BOOK was published in 1965, in a series called *Christian Foundations*. The series was by Anglicans for Anglicans, which is why so much Anglican matter was deployed in my text. The present revised and enlarged reissue is less specifically Anglican in its angle, though its demonstration of the Bible-based, Bible-oriented character of the Church of England formularies (the Thirty-nine Articles of 1563, the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, and the Homilies attested in Article 35) remains intact, as a testimony to my fellow-Anglicans of where their true roots are. Material from other traditions, is, however, freely used as well. Positions taken in 1965 are maintained, so far as I am aware, unchanged, but some of them are now amplified, illustrated and applied in a way that restrictions of length previously forbade.

My aim throughout is to prepare the minds of thinking Christian people to read and study their Bibles as Christians should. That aim determines both the contents and the spirit of what I now write.

## Enjoying Your Bible

A very helpful wayfarer's introduction to Bible study is John Blanchard's *Enjoy Your Bible*. His title has history: it belonged first to a book of a generation ago by the late G. Hardin Wood, written to do essentially the same job, and it echoes the title of another fine book which went the rounds a generation before that, Harrington C. Lees' *The Joy of Bible Study* (1909). You see the emphasis: what is being highlighted is the prospect of pleasure through coming closer to the Scripture. And this emphasis is right. Pleasure, unalloyed and unending, is God's purpose for His people in every aspect and activity of their fellowship with Him. "You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Ps. 16:11).

I hold the heady doctrine that no pleasures are so frequent or intense as those of the grateful, devoted, single-minded, whole-hearted, self-denying Christian. I maintain that the eating and mating, or arts and crafts, of playing and watching games, of finding out and making things, of helping other people, and all the other noble pleasures that life affords, are doubled for the Christian; for, as the cheerful old Puritans used to say (no, sire, that is not a misprint, nor a Freudian lapse, I mean Puritans—the real, historical Puritans, as distinct from the smug sourpusses of last-century Anglo-American imagination), the Christian tastes God in all his or her pleasures, and this increases them, whereas for other people pleasure brings with it a sense of hollowness which reduces it. Also, I maintain that every encounter between the sincere Christian and God's Word, "the law from your mouth" (Ps. 119:72), however harrowing or humbling its import, brings joy as its spin-off, just as Blanchard, Wood and Lees imply, and the keener the Christian the greater the joy.

I know for myself what it is to enjoy the Bible—that is, to be glad at finding God and being found by Him in and through the Bible; I know by experience why the psalmist called God’s message of promise and command his *delight* (Ps. 119:16, 24, 35, 47, 70, 77, 92, 143, 174—nine times!) and his *joy* (vs. iii, cf. 14, 162; Ps. 19:8), and why he said that he *loved* it (Ps. 119:47, 48, 97, 113, 119, 127, 140, 159, 163, 167—ten times!); I have proved, as have others, that as good food yields pleasure as well as nourishment, so does the good Word of God. So I am all for Christians digging into their Bibles with expectations of enjoyment, and I applaud these writers for highlighting the prospect of joy to counter the common idea that Bible study is bound to be dry and dull. But for all that a balancing point needs, I think, to be made.

What is enjoyment? Essentially, it is a by-product: a contented, fulfilled state which comes from concentrating on something other than enjoying yourself. If enjoyment, as such, is your aim, you can expect to miss it, for you are disregarding the conditions of it. Pleasure-seeking, as we learn by experience, is a barren business; happiness is never found till we have the grace to stop looking for it, and to give our attention to persons and matters external to ourselves. In this case, Bible study will only give enjoyment if conforming to our Creator in belief and behavior, through trust and obedience, is its goal. Bible study for our own pleasure rather than for God ends up giving pleasure neither to Him nor to us.

When Paul reached Berea, the Jews there “received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11). The “word” was the message of salvation for lost mankind through Jesus Christ alone—“there is no other name under heaven . . . by which we must be saved”; “believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (4:12, 16:31).

The “eagerness” sprang, no doubt, from a sense that each man’s first need is to get clear on the issues of eternal destiny which the gospel focuses and resolves. Such eagerness might nowadays be called “existential concern,” though “eagerness” remains a clearer word for most people. The many Bereans who believed (17:12) doubtless testified afterwards to the joy of that spell of Bible study; what they undertook it for, however, was not joy as such, but certainty about God’s way of salvation, and their joy came from finding what they sought—even though it must have cut across their previous ideas, and brought them a sense of sin and shame and helplessness that they had not known before. So for us: what brings joy is finding God’s way, God’s grace and God’s fellowship through the Bible, even though again and again what the Bible says—that is, what God in the Bible tells us—knocks us flat.

Thus, the joy of Bible study is not the fun of collecting esoteric titbits about God and Magog, Tubal-cain and Methuselah, Bible numerics and the beast, and so on; nor is it the pleasure, intense for the tidy-minded, of analyzing our translated text into preacher’s pretty patterns, with neatly numbered headings held together by apt alliteration’s artful aid. Rather, it is the deep contentment that comes of communing with the living Lord into whose presence the Bible takes us—a joy which only His own true disciples know.

### **Scripture and Salvation**

In the last two paragraphs, as elsewhere in this book, I imply that our eternal destiny may depend on our attending to the Bible. In an age in which many do not attend to the Bible, some may find this implication at first blush incredible. So I had best come clean and face at once the question: do you really mean that? and are you really asking us to swallow it? The answer is yes, in the following sense.

First, in speaking of eternal destiny, I refer to that state of joy or grief beyond death of which I have learned from Jesus Christ, God's incarnate Son, who rose from the dead, and about which the authors of the New Testament, whom I take to be God-inspired and therefore worthy of trust, all agree. I am talking not of survival as such, but of a future state in which we consciously reap what we have actually sown. The New Testament makes plain that this life, in which bodies grow and wear out while characters get fixed, is an ante-chamber, dressing-room and moral gymnasium where, whether we know it or not, we all in fact prepare ourselves for a future life which will correspond for each of us to what we have chosen to be, and will have in it more of joy for some and distress for others than this world ever knows. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10).

Granted, secular fashion treats this life as the only life, and sees physical death as personal extinction, and cocks a snook at the notion of divine judgment. Granted, the self-absorbed passion for personal survival which pops up constantly in the modern West takes cranky and repellent forms. Granted, many Protestants (fewer Roman Catholics and Orthodox, to their credit) are so cowed by Marxist mockery of pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die, and so keen to string along with secular options, that they are no longer ready to tell anyone that life hereafter matters more than life here, and indeed they often themselves forget that this is actually so. (And what trouble that brings! Whenever God's providential program of preparing us to enjoy Him hereafter proves to include physical or mental disability, cruelty or injustice from others, poverty, pain or deprivation—what the realistic old Puritans called "losses and



crosses”—these Protestants are at once bewildered and thrown off balance, and turn out to be pastorally useless; for, as Heb. 12:1–14 shows, it is only by reference to the life to come that these things make sense.) Granted, too, exponents of biblical other-worldliness sometimes feed it into a funk-hole theology in which action for abolishing injustice, altering demonic power structures, controlling use of natural resources and reforming social evils is never a duty; and we cannot wonder if those who see these as obligatory concerns feel hostile to the doctrine which, as they think, teaches neglect of them. So anyone facing either the typical irreligion or the typical religion of the contemporary West might well feel uncertain and suspicious at any mention of the life beyond.

But wise persons will discount the emotional and reactionary element in their immediate thinking, and take seriously the sustained witness of Jesus and His apostles to the world to come, in which the abiding consequences of choices and commitment made here will be revealed and received. “God ‘will give to each person according to what he had done.’ To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour . . . follow evil, there will be wrath and anger” (Rom. 2:6–8). Wise persons will keep in view this truth, which their own conscience will confirm to them if they let it speak, and will not let themselves fall victim to reactionary skepticism, even if others around them do so. Wise people know that reaction is never a sure guide to what is right and true.

Second, when I speak of attending to the Bible, I do so in terms of a distinction between its content, the message it embodies, and its outward form as a book now standing on your shelf or lying on your desk or by your bed. Having drawn the distinction, I can say at once that what determines our destiny is whether in our hearts we accept or reject the message of the Bible, and that message can

be savingly received through liturgy, sermons, literature or conversations without ever reading the Bible for oneself. Christians who lived before the age of printed books, Christians who lived and died in illiteracy, and Roman Catholic Christians of the bad old days who were told that a vernacular Bible is a Protestant book, and lay study of it a Protestant vice which good Catholics eschew, and who believed this, but yet loved the Lord Jesus, are all proof of our point. God in His mercy will give understanding of His truth, knowledge of Christ and spiritual life, to any who sincerely seek Him, irrespective of the means by which His truth reaches them. So it is not absolutely necessary for salvation that one must read and study the biblical text. It would be gross superstition to think there is saving magic in the mere reading of the text where understanding and faith are lacking; it would be equally superstitious to suppose that God withholds grace from folk who know the Christian facts but, for whatever reason, fail to read the Bible for themselves.

Yet, as contemporary Roman Catholicism no less than historic Protestant evangelicalism knows and urges, one who fails to read the Bible is at an enormous disadvantage. Rightly are Bible reading and Bible-based meditation seen as prime means of grace. Not only is Scripture the fountain-head for knowledge of God, Christ and salvation, but it presents this knowledge in an incomparably vivid, powerful and evocative way. The canonical Scriptures are a veritable book of life, showing us God in relation to the most dramatic human crises (births, sicknesses, deaths, loves, losses, wars, falls, risks, disasters, failures, victories), the most elemental human emotions (joy, grief, love, hate, hope, fear, pain, anger, shame, awe) and the most basic human relationships (to parents, spouses, children, friends, neighbours, civil authorities, enemies, fellow-believers). Purely as

man-to-man communication, simple, economical, imaginative, logical, Scripture is superb; it is no wonder that during the present century it has been the world's best-seller. On top of that, the fellowship of God with us humans to which it testifies is the most momentous reality we can ever know, and the power of the Bible in its readers' lives, a power springing both from its precious subject-matter and from its unique divine inspiration, is overwhelming.

The godly old Puritans called Scripture a "cordial," meaning that it does for the soul what hot spirits do for the body, and everyone who reads the Bible seeking God finds this to be true. Scripture, which on the face of it is human witness to God, a compendium of sixty-six items put together over more than a millennium, proves itself to be God's authentic Word by mediating God's presence, power and personal address to us in and by its record of men's knowledge of Him long ago. Still, as on the Emmaus road, nothing brings such balm and such a glow to the sad heart as to find that some part of Scripture, written centuries ago, nonetheless deals with precisely one's own personal problem, and that central to its resolution of that problem is the abiding reality of the person, place, work and grace of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (cf. Luke 24:13–35). Still, through the records of His earthly ministry, the quickening voice of Christ Himself is heard. Still, through the written Word,

He speaks, and, listening to his voice,  
 New life the dead receive;  
 The mournful, broken hearts rejoice,  
 The humble poor believe.

Clearly, then, anyone who wants to know God will want to know as much as he or she can of what is in the Bible, and needs

to know it too. Clearly, therefore, anyone who cannot read the Bible stands to forfeit a great deal of knowledge and of joy. Equally clearly, professed Christians who are able to dig into the Bible but neglect to do so cast doubt on their own sincerity; for inattention to Scripture is right out of character for a child of God.

Third, when I say that our attitude to the Bible (attention or inattention; compliance or defiance; acceptance or rejection) may determine our destiny, I have in mind the specific fact that all Scripture is a witness and a signpost pointing to the living, saving Lord Jesus Christ. “You diligently study the Scriptures” said Jesus to a group of learned Jewish theologians, “because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet *you refuse to come to me* to have life” (John 5:39f). “God has given us eternal life,” declares John, “and *this life is in his Son*” (1 John 5:11). Paul congratulates Timothy because “from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation *through faith in Christ Jesus*” (2 Tim. 3:15). What Jesus and Paul say of the Old Testament may be said equally of the New, and so of the whole Bible: it all directs us to Christ. The written Word of the Lord leads us to the living Lord of the Word, and our attitude to Him is effectively our choice of destiny. For the one who truly attends to the Bible will attend to its God, and will learn from Him that the way to serve Him is to receive His Christ as Saviour and Master; and in thus finding Christ he will find life.

The contents page of the first printing of this book told its readers, “R.S.V.P. denotes Revised Standard Version.” Not so, alas; but R.S.V.P. (*reply, please*) is precisely God’s request to us in relation to Holy Scripture. I hope this book will help some to hear and meet God’s request.

Two last points, both brief.

First, this is a study book, hence its compressed style (which saves paper, and thus, I hope, reduces the price to the reader). I have tried to ensure that clarity does not suffer through brevity. The Bible references in the text are nether ornament nor clutter, but part of my argument, and are meant to be looked up.

### A Variety of Versions

Second, a word on translations. This century has brought forth a large litter of new versions, so many indeed that some folk now feel swamped, and by a natural if irrational reaction are resolved to trust none of them, but stick to the King James Version of 1611. In fact, however, all of the main modern renderings are very good; no English-speaking generation was ever better served with vernacular Bibles than ours. They fan out. At one extreme are paraphrases and “dynamic equivalent” versions, aiming at a total impact like that of the original on its own first readers. Such versions cut loose from the word-order and sentence-structure of the original, thus concealing the terms, and therefore the existence, of many problems of interpretation, and identify with one current literary culture. Thus, Kenneth Taylor’s *Living Bible* reflects American “pop” magazines and paperbacks, the *Good News Version* sticks as closely as it can to Basic English, and J. B. Phillips’ *New Testament in Modern English* uses the full resources of twentieth-century English prose. At the other extreme are versions which as far as possible are word-for-word, clause-for-clause and sentence-for-sentence; the English Revised Version of 1881, and the New American Standard Version, go this way, but sacrifice smooth English in the process. Striking a balance between these extremes are two sober and steady versions, the New International and the Revised Standard, and two brilliant

but uneven ones, the New English Bible and the Jerusalem Bible, a Roman Catholic translation. The two former aim at good plain English, and achieve it; the latter pair are more “literary” in style, sometimes with odd results. All have the defects of their qualities and the limitations of their strengths.

So what to do? No perfect, definitive version of the Bible is possible, any more than a definitive performance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony or C sharp minor quartet is possible; there is more in it waiting to be expressed than any one rendering can encompass. Both the word-for-word and the “dynamic equivalent” versions are needed if we are fully to appreciate the meaning and force of the original: the former safeguards accuracy, the latter deepens understanding. I suggest that you try, as I do, to get the best of all worlds by having four Bibles at hand—the King James, with its majestic language and hallowed associations; a paraphrase; a word-for-word version; and one from the middle—and regularly comparing them. In any case, however, concentrate on one version for reading and memorizing. This brings more benefit with least confusion.



## The Lost Word

*“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord GOD, “when I will send a famine on the land—not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it.”*

AMOS 8:11–12

EIGHT CENTURIES BEFORE CHRIST, the northern kingdom of Israel was in confident mood. True, moral standards had crashed, little honesty was left in business, poor people were badly treated, and upper-class debauchery was a byword; but there was a trade boom on, money was flowing into the country, and society as a whole was affluent (“we never had it so good”). How could anyone be worried in such prosperity? Also, Israel had a national faith. Figures for church attendance were high. Public worship, with



rich ritual and fine music, was a recognized part of community life (though congregations had publicly stated that they would not stand for sermons! — see Amos 2:12). Living on the capital of a great religious heritage, Israel did not doubt that God was on her side and would see her through all that the future might bring.

Into this complacent community God dropped a bombshell, in the shape of farmer Amos. Amos came storming into Samaria as a prophet of doom for the church and nation. God, he said, was about to judge His people (2:6–4:3). The wheel of retribution was already spinning, and would soon go faster. Recent disasters—the drought, the bad harvest, the famine, the epidemic, the earthquake—had shown God’s displeasure clearly enough (4:6–11), and these were only a beginning; soon the whole nation would be enslaved and deported (5:27). (This happened fifty years later, under the Assyrians: see 2 Kings 17.) Worse still, the streams of revelation were going to dry up. There would be “a famine of hearing the words of the LORD.”

To appreciate what this meant, we must remember that Israel, as the covenant people of God, had been promised guidance by divine revelation whenever it was needed. Besides giving Israel His law, and charging the priests to teach it (Deut. 31:9ff.; cf. Neh. 8:1ff.; Hag. 2:11f.; Mal. 2:7f.), God had undertaken to send a succession of prophets, men with His Word in their mouths, who could give direction in times of personal and national perplexity. This was the immediate meaning of Moses’s statement in Deuteronomy 18:15, “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers” (cf. verse 18). In the passage from which these words come, Moses forbids the Israelites to take up with sorcery, spiritism, or any of the other occult practices to which the Canaanites turned for day-to-day guidance (verses 9ff.).

To do so, he says, will be both ungodly and unnecessary, since God Himself through His messengers will supply all the guidance they need. Down the centuries, God had fulfilled this promise by giving Israel both great individual prophets who brought oracles for the whole nation (men like Amos himself) and also a host of lesser figures, “seers” or cult-prophets, who gave oracles of guidance to individual on consultation (for examples of this ministry, see 1 Sam. 9:6ff.; 1 Kings 14:1ff.; 22:5ff.; 2 Kings 8:8ff.; and Num. 22–24). But now, Amos declared, God purposes as an act of judgment to bring this whole prophetic ministry to an end. Prophecy would fail (and perhaps the teaching of the law too: cf. Ezek. 7:26). Those who would not listen to prophets when God sent them (Amos 2:11f.) would find that there were now no prophets to listen to (cf. Mic. 3:5–7; Lam. 2:9; Ps. 74:9). However much people might desire a word of guidance or assurance from God, they would not be able to find one. Amos pictured the scene of spiritual destitution that would result: restless, frantic souls wandering distractedly round the country, listening to all that was being said in hope of hearing God’s voice, and listening in vain. Their hearts would be hungry, and their hunger would go unsatisfied. For them, the Word of God would be truly *lost*.

### **The Infection of Uncertainty**

Amos is a prophet for today. His words show us the present state of much of Christendom. His vision of spiritual starvation in Israel pictures ours: the famine with which he foresaw that God would judge His people is the present experience of a great part of the world church.

Now this is an entirely unnatural state of affairs. The New Testament represents the church as inheriting through Christ all God’s

promises of spiritual life and welfare (see 2 Cor. 1:20; Rom. 15:8ff.; Gal. 3:16ff., 31; and cf. Rom. 4:16–23; Heb. 6:12–20; 10:15–23; 13:5f.). The church, therefore, has the promise of constant instruction, assurance, and guidance from God, just as Old Testament Israel had. Not, indeed, that the church is promised a perpetual succession of prophets speaking by immediate inspiration, as in Old Testament times; instead, the Holy Spirit, “who spoke by the prophets,” is given to abide with the church and to interpret, authenticate, and apply Old Testament and apostolic teaching to each Christian generation (see John 14:16; 16:7–14, with 6:45; 1 Cor. 2:4f., with verses 9–16; 2 Cor. 3:1–4:6; 1 Thess. 1:5; 2:13; 4:9; Heb. 3:7ff.; 1 John 2:20–27). This is how the promise of divine instruction is to find its fulfilment in the Christian era. In the light of this, we would expect to find the church of every age, including our own, firmly convinced that the prophetic and apostolic witness of the two Testaments is the Word of God; clear as to its central message concerning God in Christ; and able to see plainly how this message impinges on us, with its demand for conversion and a life of faith, hope, love and obedience. To the extent to which clarity on these matters is lacking, we are forced to conclude that the church is unhealthy and out of sorts.

What, then, must be said of the mass of our churches today? For at no time, perhaps, since the Reformation have Protestant Christians as a body been so unsure, tentative and confused as to what they should believe and do. Certainty about the great issues of Christian faith and conduct is lacking all along the line. The outside observer sees us as staggering on from gimmick to gimmick and stunt to stunt like so many drunks in a fog, not knowing at all where we are or which way we should be going. Preaching is hazy; heads are muddled; hearts fret; doubts drain our strength;

uncertainty paralyses action. We know the Victorian shibboleth that to travel hopefully is better than to arrive, and it leaves us cold. Ecclesiastics of a certain type tell us that the wish to be certain is mere weakness of the flesh, a sign of spiritual immaturity, but we do not find ourselves able to believe them. We know in our bones that we were made for certainty, and we cannot be happy without it. Yet, unlike the first Christians who in three centuries won the Roman world, and those later Christians who pioneered the Reformation, and the Puritan awakening, and the Evangelical revival, and the great missionary movement of the last century, we lack certainty. Why is this? We blame the external pressures of modern secularism, but this is like Eve blaming the serpent. The real trouble is not in our circumstances, but in ourselves. The truth is that we have grieved the Spirit, and God has withheld the Spirit. We stand under divine judgment. For two generations and more our churches have suffered from a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. For us, too, the Word of God is in a real sense *lost*.

### **A Wrong Turning in Biblical Criticism**

Why is this? For it is not as if the Bible were no longer read and studied in the churches. It is read and studied a great deal; but the trouble is that we no longer know what to make of it. Mesmerized by the problems of rationalistic criticism, we can no longer hear the Bible as the Word of God. Liberal theology, in its pride, has long insisted that we are wiser than our fathers about the Bible, and must not read it as they did, but must base our approach to it on the “assured results” of criticism, making due allowance for the human imperfections and errors of its authors. This insistence has a threefold effect. It produces a new papalism—the infallibility of the scholars, from whom we learn what the “assured results” are.

It raises a doubt about every single biblical passage, as to whether it truly embodies revelation or not. And it destroys the reverent, receptive, self-distrusting attitude of approach to the Bible, without which it cannot be known to be “God’s Word written” (Article XX). The result? The spiritual famine of which Amos spoke. God judges our pride by leaving us to the barrenness, hunger, and discontent which flow from our self-induced inability to hear His Word.

The situation is as paradoxical as it is pathetic, for critical scholarship has always claimed that its microscopic historical analysis of the books of Scripture gives the church the Bible in a way in which the church never had the Bible before, and in one sense this is perfectly true. Critical scholarship has sharpened the tools of biblical exposition and clarified the meaning of many biblical passages. It has given us commentaries of the highest value. It has invented a technique of analyzing Scripture thematically without which the theological dictionaries and biblical theologies of the past sixty years could never have been written. In these respects it has paid rich dividends. It would be a sin against light to deny this. The 1958 Lambeth Conference was right to record “our debt to the host of devoted scholars who . . . have enriched and deepened our understanding of the Bible.”<sup>1</sup> Yet the constant complaint against critical scholarship from its inception has been that it takes away the Bible from the faithful—the opposite of what it intends. And this complaint is true also. Here lies the paradox of the critical movement: that it has given the church the Bible in a way that has deprived the church of the Bible, and led to a famine of hearing the words of the Lord.

What went wrong, we ask, to produce such an effect? Why, this. From the start, biblical criticism drove a wedge between revelation (the Word of God) and the Bible (man’s written witness to the Word

of God). It viewed the Bible as a library of human documents, fallible and often fallacious, and defended this as the only “scientific” view. While allowing that the Word of God in history was the writers’ theme, and that their writings do in some fashion mediate that Word, it refused to identify the writings with the Word. God’s Word was one thing, Holy Scripture was another. By taking this line, the critical movement broke with the historic Christian understanding of the nature of Scripture, crystallized by Augustine when he put into God’s mouth the words: “Indeed, O man, what My Scripture says, I say.”<sup>2</sup> Treating this view, not as a mystery of the faith, but as a mere ignorant mistake, critical scholarship committed itself to a method of study which assumed that Scripture might err anywhere. It told the church that the Bible could never be rightly understood till belief in its inerrancy was given up. It prescribed a new agenda for theology—not just to integrate and apply the biblical account of things, but also to check and correct it; and it condemned as unscientific all types of theology that did not accept this program. Even today, its spokesmen remain convinced that those who hold the Bible to be inerrant cannot really understand it, and they still wage war against the classical Christian view of inspiration. Thus, by insisting that the Scriptures are not a fully trustworthy word from God, biblical criticism has taken from the church the Bible that once it had.

It is as well to say at once where, at bottom, this approach seems to go astray. Its mistake is to ignore the fact that Jesus and His apostles taught a definite doctrine of the nature of Scripture, a doctrine just as integral to their message as were their beliefs about the character of God. This doctrine appears in such statements as “the Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35); “it is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to

drop out of the Law” (Luke 16:17); “all Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16); and it appears also in the designation of the Old Testament as “the very words of God” (Rom. 3:2; cf. Acts 7:38). It is further manifested whenever Christ and His apostles cite an Old Testament text to settle a point and clinch an argument, or quote an Old Testament statement, not ascribed to God in its context, as an utterance of God spoken through human lips. Examples are, “the Creator . . . said . . .” (Matt. 19:4, citing Gen. 2:24); “Sovereign Lord . . . You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David . . .” (Acts 4:24, citing Ps. 2:1f.; cf. Acts 1:16); “the Holy Spirit spoke the truth . . . through Isaiah . . .” (Acts 28:25, citing Isa. 6:9f.); “about the Son he (God) says . . .” (Heb. 1:8ff., citing Pss. 45:6f.; 102:25ff.); “as the Holy Spirit says . . .” (Heb. 3:7, citing Ps. 95:7ff.); “the Holy Spirit also testifies to us . . .” (Heb. 10:16f., citing Jer. 31:33). Indeed, this doctrine of Scripture underlies the whole New Testament, Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Revelation alike, inasmuch as they all represent the Christian dispensation of grace through Christ as God’s fulfilment of His predictions made in the Old Testament. The conception of Scripture as a transcript of divine speech is just as basic to (say) the epistles to the Romans and the Hebrews as belief in divine providence is to the narrative of Acts, or belief in the church’s real union with Christ is to the argument of Ephesians. Belief that (to echo Augustine) God says what the Scriptures say is in truth the foundation-stone of all New Testament theology.

That being so, the issue between the modern critical movement and the older approach reduces to this: are the New Testament writers trustworthy teachers? and was the Lord Jesus Christ a trustworthy teacher? What grounds are there for accepting the New Testament account of any act of God in this world, if we re-

ject its account of His act of inspiring the Bible? If, on dominical and apostolic authority, we believe that God made His Son man, and redeemed us through the Cross, and regenerates believers by uniting them to the risen Christ, how can we withhold belief when the same authorities tell us that God so inspired the biblical writers that their word is also His Word? The grounds for accepting the instruction of Christ and His apostles on this point are the same as they are for accepting it on any other. The very reasons which we have for believing what they teach about sin, salvation, and the church, forbid us to disbelieve what they teach about the Bible. Certainly, the fact of biblical inspiration cannot be verified by independent inquiry, but then neither can such facts as forgiveness or adoption. We believe in these things, not because we can prove them, “scientifically,” but because we are assured of them by Christ and His apostles, whom we regard as teachers worthy of our trust. But we must not pursue these thoughts at present.

### **New Views of Revelation and Inspiration**

A further fact heightens the paradox of our present situation. The era of biblical criticism has been marked, not only by intense study of the biblical text, but also by an unprecedented interest in the subjects of revelation and inspiration. Never in Christian history have these themes received so much concentrated attention as in the past hundred years. Never has the relevant biblical material been examined so thoroughly. And yet, for all this, the Word of God has been lost. Again we ask, what has gone wrong? Why has all this elaborate discussion, intended as it was to make the Word of God more plain and accessible to us, actually had a contrary effect? The answer is as before. The weakness of these theological discussions, as of the biblical studies that went with them, was that



they drove a wedge between the living God in His revelation and the written Word of the Bible.

Up to the nineteenth century, Protestant theology was accustomed to bracket revelation and inspiration together, subsuming the former under the latter. Revelation in the passive sense, meaning “that which is revealed,” was equated with the teaching of Holy Scripture, and God’s revelatory action was discussed almost entirely in connection with the inspiring of the Bible. Revelation, it was said, was the process whereby God disclosed to chosen men things otherwise unknowable (a definition based on Dan. 2:22, 28ff., 47; 10:1; 1 Cor. 2:9f.; Eph. 3:4f.; Rev. 1:1f), and inspiration was the correlative process whereby He kept them from error when communicating, *viva voce* or in writing, that which He had shown them. A typical statement of this position is given by Charles Hodge in his *Systematic Theology* (1873). Referring to 1 Corinthians 2:7–13 (“a wisdom that has been hidden . . . none . . . of this age understood it . . . but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit . . . we speak . . . in words . . . taught by the Spirit”) Hodge writes: “There is neither in the Bible nor in the writings of men, a simpler or clearer statement of the doctrines of revelation and inspiration. Revelation is the act of communicating divine knowledge by the Spirit to the mind. Inspiration is the act of the same Spirit, controlling those who make the truth known to others. The thoughts, the truths made known, and the words in which they are recorded, are declared to be equally from the Spirit. This, from first to last, has been the doctrine of the Church . . .”<sup>3</sup>

In the discussions of revelation and inspiration that went on under critical auspices, however, this neat correlation was given up. Also, the center of interest shifted. Instead of being a mere preamble to the doctrine of inspiration, revelation now became a subject for

study in its own right. It was seen that the biblical idea of revelation includes more than the older theology dealt with under this head. Revelation means the whole work of God making Himself known to men and women; the theme embraces, on the one hand, all the words and deeds of God in which the biblical writers recognized His self-disclosure, and, on the other hand, all that is involved in the encounter through which God brings successive generations to know Him through knowledge of the biblical facts. The Bible is thus the link between the revelatory events of the past and the knowledge of God in the present. Inspiration, therefore, should be studied as a subsection of the doctrine of revelation, rather than vice versa. Inspiration is one of a long series of steps that God has taken to make Himself known to us, and ought to be treated as such.

This enlarging of the idea of revelation, and the dovetailing of inspiration into it, seems biblical and right. Less welcome, however, is the shrinking of the concept of inspiration that has accompanied it. The belief that denials of the detailed truth of Scripture, made in the name of natural and historical science, were unanswerable, and, in particular, that Wellhausen's theory of pentateuchal origins, which dismissed much of the first five books of the Bible as non-Mosaic and non-factual, had to be accepted (as it still is in most text-books on the Old Testament),<sup>4</sup> led to reduced accounts of inspiration. According to these, inspiration was an enlightening of the biblical authors which, while it gave them moral and spiritual insight, and made their work "inspiring" (or, as some say, a vehicle of God's Word to their readers), did not guarantee theological or historical trustworthiness to all that they actually wrote. Such accounts of inspiration are now largely standard in Protestant circles.

Hence, unlike their predecessors, modern Protestant theologians regularly insist that revelation and Scripture are two distinct

things, and that to think of Scripture as written revelation is more misleading than helpful. Towards the close of *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought* (1956), John Baillie wrote: "Each of the recent writers whom we have cited has been concerned to warn us against any simple identification of the Christian revelation with the contents of the Bible, and each has been well aware that in this respect he was breaking with a long-standing tradition."<sup>5</sup> Once the idea of inspiration is weakened in the way described, this break is inevitable: we cannot identify the misconceptions of men with the Word of God. But now come the questions: if the relation between Scripture and revelation is not one of identity, what is it? And how, in detail, are we to distil God's revelation from the total contents of the Bible? It is easy to say that Scripture "inspires," and "mediates the word of God," but what is the cash-value of such formulae when we have constantly to allow for undetectable possibilities of error on the part of each biblical author? These problems constitute a blank wall at which many present-day Protestants are staring. Much writing is addressed to them, but no greed or even coherent solution has appeared so far; nor, perhaps, is one likely to. meanwhile, uncertainty about the Bible pervades our churches, and we suffer from a famine of hearing the words of the Lord.

### The Enfeebling of the Churches

The loss of the historic conviction that what Scriptures says, God says, is the deepest root of what James D. Smart, in a telling book title, called *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*. It has weakened Protestant church life in this century in a number of ways.

First, it has *undermined preaching*. The true idea of preaching is that the preacher should become a mouthpiece for his text, opening

it up and applying it as a word from God to his hearers, talking only in order that the text may speak itself and be heard, making each point from his text in such a manner “that the hearers may discern how God teacheth it from thence” (Westminster Directory, 1645). But where there is doubt as to whether the texts of Scripture are words of God, preaching in this sense is impossible. All one can do then is purvey from the pulpit either “church teaching,” or else one’s own private opinions. It is no wonder that the great evangelical preaching tradition of past days has almost petered out, and that many today have lost confidence in preaching as a means of grace.

Second, loss of conviction about the divine truth of the Bible has *undercut teaching*. Clergy are not sure what to inculcate as Christian truth; layfolk doubt whether what is taught in the Bible is worth learning. A spirit of unconcern about doctrine is abroad, a feeling that, since on so many issues it is anyone’s guess what is true, it cannot much matter whether one has an opinion about them or not. Some clergy have ceased to try to teach the faith; many loyal church folk would not dream of trying to learn it. No wonder that a steady trickle of Anglicans, seeking certainty, turn to the Church of Rome or the cults.

Third, uncertainty as to whether the Bible teaching is God’s truth has *weakened faith*. St. Paul is insistent that religious devotion pleases God only so far as it expresses faith; otherwise it is mere unacceptable superstition (see Acts 71:22f., 30; Rom. 14:23). But faith, according to Paul, means the subjecting of mind and conscience to the Word of God, recognized as such (see Rom. 10:17; 1 Cor. 2:1–5; 1 Thess. 2:13). In the absence of certainty as to just what the Word of God is, superstition prevails, and instead of faith there is fog. Professed Christians, though earnest and sincere, then become like the Jews: “zealous for God, but their zeal is not based

on knowledge” (Rom. 10:2). Much devotion in churches today is hazy, anxious, and joyless, simply because people have not been taught, or do not dare, to slot their faith into Holy Scripture and venture their lives upon its “very great and precious promises” (2 Pet. 1:4) as the sure words of a faithful Creator. Doubts and uncertainties about God and our standing with Him are poor companions to live and die with; but many today are never out of their company, because they know of no assurances from God on which their faith may rest. No wonder that the tide of faith ebbs, and that church people as a body are in low spirits, suffering from apathy and lassitude.

Fourth, perplexities about Holy Scripture have *discouraged lay Bible reading*. The idea has spread that the Bible is a book full of pitfalls which only the learned can hope to avoid, that you cannot in any case trust it all, even when you have found out its meaning, and that it is really too hard a book for ordinary Christians to study with profit. Here, at least (some feel), the Reformers, with their insistence on the clarity of Scripture, were wrong, and the Romanists right! Well-meant popular books, rewriting the biblical message in the light of “the assured results of criticism,” deepen rather than dispel this impression. “It is perhaps a pity,” wrote D. E. Nineham in 1963, “that the proposed new Anglican catechism appears to regard the private reading of the Bible as mandatory for every literate member of the Church. Is that realistic . . . ?”<sup>6</sup> Many would echo Nineham’s doubt. No wonder the Bible is not much studied by the average churchgoer.

Fifth, and saddest of all, skepticism about the Bible has *hidden Christ from view*. We are told not to think of the person whose fourfold portrait the Gospels draw, and whose many-sided mediation the Epistles describe, as any more than a product of fertile

religious imagination. That the Jesus of history, the “real” Jesus, differed significantly from the Man in the Gospels we can now be sure, and what was once taken as revealed truth in the Epistles must now be read as the man-made, culturally conditioned mythology of the Christian mystery-cult, telling us only of some feelings which early Christians had. So the New Testament Jesus is no longer the Christ who is “there” (to echo the late Francis Schaeffer’s phrase); the historical Jesus is inaccessible to us, and “Christ” exists only as a legendary and symbolic figure in Christian minds, like Robin Hood or Puck. Thus shouts skepticism today. In the acid-baths of skeptical scholarship, the Christ of the Bible has been completely dissolved. No wonder, then, that relatively few in our churches seem to know, let alone to know that they know, Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord.

We have grown so used to this state of affairs that we tend to regard it as natural and normal. Sometimes, indeed, we represent it as a state of virtue (as is man’s way with his weaknesses), censuring our predecessors for being too definite and dogmatic, and complimenting ourselves on being open-minded, flexible, and free from obscurantism. We must, however, be careful here. It has been well said that if you open your mind wide enough a great deal of rubbish will be tipped into it. The flexibility of those who are “tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every win of teaching” (Eph. 4:14), “always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth” (2 Tim. 3:7) is not commended by the apostle. Obscurantism—shutting one’s eyes to God’s facts—is always of the devil, and it would certainly be sin if, in the name of loyalty to Scripture, we closed our eyes to (not theories, but) facts found by history and science,<sup>7</sup>; but we cannot regard ourselves as free from obscurantism if, out of supposed deference to history

and science, we decline to face the fact that New Testament faith is marked by dogmatism throughout, and that this dogmatism is rooted in the conviction that the words of the Old Testament writers, and of Christian and His apostles, were words from God. Generally, however, modern Protestant theology does not reckon with this fact; hence it breathes a spirit very different from that of the New Testament. Self-styled radicals tell us that to put new life into us we need a wholly new theology, one that sits looser to biblical modes of thought than any before, in which our twentieth-century Christian consciousness may find its full expression. But if what we have said is right, our twentieth-century Christian consciousness is already far astray, and the course proposed would only lead us deeper into skepticism and spiritual barrenness. It is vain to push on along the wrong road. It would be disastrous to pin our hopes to ever more drastic applications of the false principle that theology is an exercise in religious self-expression. Many clergy and academics, with desperate ingenuity, are already developing “radical” theologies of this kind, in hope of alleviating our spiritual destitution and evangelistic impotence. But the epitaph on such theologies would seem to have been spoken already by Amos: “*Men will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the LORD, but they will not find it.*” Our condition will never be eased till we humbly retrace our steps to the point where we first went wrong.

### Historic Reformed Teaching

It will help us to do this if we now take note of what some of the formularies of the Reformation period teach about the Bible. Their position as a whole contrasts strikingly with that of many Protestants today. I shall quote most fully from the Thirty-nine

Articles, Homilies and Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England, partly because the Homilies and Prayer Book show us principles about Scripture finding practical expression in worship and devotion, which is our special area of interest in this chapter. But the Lutheran and Reformed foundation-documents all point the same way; their solidarity with regard to Scripture is complete. Their teaching may for our purpose be summarized under three headings, as follows.

*1. The Inspiration of Scripture as the Word of God*

Our formularies are emphatic that the ultimate author of Scripture is God Himself. The Bible is “God’s Word written” (Article XX), “the very pure Word of God” (Preface, Concerning the Service of the Church). God “caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning” (collect for Advent II; cf. “God, who hast written thy holy Word for our learning”: Visitation of the Sick). The Scriptures as a body were “written by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost” and are thus “the Word of the living God,” “his infallible Word” (“An Information for them which take offence at certain places of the Holy Scripture”: *The Homilies*).<sup>8</sup>

As such, the Scriptures are words of truth and wisdom: if we cannot see this, the fault is in us, the pupils, rather than in them, the text-book. “It cannot . . . but be truth which proceedeth from the God of all truth; it cannot but be wisely and prudently commanded, what almighty God hath devised, how vainly soever, through want of grace, we miserable wretches do imagine and judge of His most holy Word” (op. cit., p. 378). The Scriptures are wholly self-consistent, for the God of truth cannot contradict Himself; therefore “it is not lawful for the Church to . . . so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another” (Article XX).



All that Scripture says, our formularies tell us, God Himself says. Biblical teaching is wholly divine. “We are taught *by thy holy Word*, that the hearts of Kings are in thy rule” (Holy Communion; see Prov. 21:1). God is the One “who *by thy holy Apostle* hast taught us to make prayers . . . for all men” (Holy Communion; see 1 Tim. 2:1). From reading “God’s cursing against impenitent sinners” in Deuteronomy 27 we are “admonished of the great indignation of God” towards such, and so moved to repentance (A Communion). The precepts and commands of Scripture are treated throughout our formularies as abidingly valid expressions of God’s will. So are its promises: note, as one example, the words from the prayer of St. Chrysostom, “who . . . *dost promise* [the tense is a continuous present] that when two or three are gathered together in thy Name thou wilt grant their requests” (cf. Matt. 18:19f.). The gracious words which Scripture records Christ as having spoken when on earth are words which He speaks still: “Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ (not said, but) *saith* . . .” (Holy Communion; compare “our Saviour Christ *saith*” at the start of the baptismal services).

Also, the biblical accounts of God’s acts in mercy and judgment are uniformly treated as reliable, both as statements of fact and as disclosures of the character of Him with whom we have to do, so that we have prayers like this: “O Almighty God, who in thy wrath didst send a plague upon thine own people, in the wilderness . . . and also, in the time of King David, didst slay with the plague of pestilence threescore and ten thousand, and yet remembering thy mercy didst save the rest: Have pity upon us . . . that like as thou didst then accept of an atonement, and didst command the destroying Angel to cease from punishing, so it may now please thee to withdraw from us this plague . . . through Jesus Christ our

Lord” (prayer for times of plague; cf. the prayer for fair weather, the second prayer for times of dearth, and the references to the Flood and the Exodus in the first prayer of the public baptismal services, and to Adam and Eve, Isaac and Rebekah, and Abraham and Sarah, in the marriage service).

A similar stress on the divine origin of Scripture as the authoritative Word which God spoke and speaks is found in the Scots Confession of 1560, which speaks of “the written Word of God, that is, the Old and New Testaments, in those books which were originally reckoned canonical,” and of “the Spirit of God by whom the Scriptures were written” (XVIII), and affirms that in listening to the instruction of Scripture the church “hears . . . the voice of her own Spouse and pastor” (XIX). The First Helvetic Confession (1536) says: “The holy. Divine, biblical Scripture, which is the Word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit and delivered to the world by the prophets and apostles . . . alone deals with everything that serves the true knowledge, love and honour of God, along with true piety and the achieving of a godly, honest and blessed life” (I). The Second (1566) declares that “the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments are the true Word of God,” having intrinsic authority; “for God Himself spake to the fathers, prophets, apostles and stills peaks to us through the Holy Scriptures” (I).

The ideas of biblical inspiration and authority which these statements reflect were amplified in the Westminster Confession of 1647: “It pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto His Church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth . . . to commit the same wholly until writing . . . The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed,

dependeth . . . wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God” (I, i. iv).

Since God is their “only author” (“A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture”: *The Homilies*, p. 10), reverence for the Scriptures is a mark of godliness, while lack of reverent attention to them (“contempt of thy Word and Commandment”: The Litany, cf. the third Good Friday collect) is the height of irreligion, and brings its own judgment. “Be ye not scorers of God’s most holy Word; provoke him not to pour out his wrath now upon you. . . . Be not wilful murderers of your own souls” (*The Homilies*, p. 380).

## *2. The Authority of Scripture as a Rule of Faith and Life*

Anglican formularies define this principle of biblical control both positively and negatively, insisting that the way to serve God is by receiving and following all that the Bible teaches, without either addition or subtraction. They represent the service of God, in both liturgy and life, as a matter of observing what “the holy Scripture doth say” (marriage service) and doing throughout what “the Scripture moveth us” (Morning and Evening Prayer) to do, obeying the biblical commands, trusting the biblical promises and cleaving to the recorded doctrine of the apostles (cf. collects of the days of St. John the Evangelist, St. Mark, St. Bartholomew, St. Luke, St. Simon and St. Jude). The baptism services interpret the baptismal vow as a promise that one will “constantly believe God’s holy Word, and obediently keep his commandments.” The supreme good which we request in the Litany is “increase of grace, to hear meekly thy Word, and to receive it with pure affection, and to bring forth the fruits of the Spirit,” “the grace of thy Holy Spirit,

to amend our lives according to thy holy Word.” (Compare the similar request, that “with meek heart and due reverence” we may “hear and receive they holy Word,” in the holy communion service.) The supreme blessing sought for the newly-weds in the marriage service is that their life together may be ruled by the Bible—“that whatsoever in thy holy Word they shall profitably learn, they may in deed fulfil the same.” The ideal for all Christian people is to “desire God’s holy Scriptures; love them; embrace them; so as at length we may be transformed and changed into them” (*The Homilies*, p. 371), in the sense that we may come to “love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise” (collect for Easter IV). The Scriptures are thus acknowledged to be, so to speak, God’s mould for shaping our whole lives.

A formal statement of the supremacy of Scripture as a rule of faith and life appears in the opening sentences of the Lutheran Formula of Concord (1580): “We believe, confess and teach that the sole rule and standard by which all dogmas and all teachers must be assessed and judged is nothing other than the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old And New Testaments, as it is written: *Thy word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my paths.*” This principle is in fact implicit, if not explicit, in all Reformation confessional statements; it is the great methodological axiom which gives Reformation theology, Lutheran and Reformed, Swiss, French, German, Italian, English, Scottish, Spanish and Scandinavian, its impressive unity of substance.

The Anglican Articles develop the principle of biblical authority polemical. Against Rome they affirm the sufficiency of Scripture. “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not . . . an article of the Faith, or . . . necessary to salvation” (Article

VI). The first homily draws the moral: “Let us diligently search for the well of life in the books of the New and Old Testament, and not run to the stinking puddles of men’s traditions . . . for our justification and salvation; (*The Homilies*, p. 2). Article XX states, also against Rome, the further principle that the church must subordinate itself to Scripture in all its enactments. “Although the Church be a witness and a keeper of holy Writ, yet, as it ought not to decree anything against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce anything to be believed for necessary of salvation.” All that the church puts forward must be exposed to the critical judgment of Holy Scripture. The historic creeds are commended, because they pass this test (Article VIII); but not all the recorded decisions of general councils and particular churches do (Articles, XXI, XIX); nor do such notions as works of supererogation (Article XIV), purgatory, indulgences, image- and relic-worship, invoking the saints (Article XXII), worship in a foreign tongue (Article XXIV), and transubstantiation (Article XXVIII).

The Articles also apply the principle of biblical authority to ideas attributes to Anabaptist sects, whose way it was to put too much trust in “spiritual” insights taught by their leaders and to take neither the unity nor the decisiveness of Scripture quite seriously. On grounds drawn from the Bible the Articles challenge notions of the incoherence of the two Testaments (Article VII), of post-baptismal perfection (Articles XV, XVI), of post-baptismal sin being unpardonable (Article XVI), of salvation by sincerity apart from Christ (Article XVIII), of pacifism being obligatory (Article XXXVII) and responsible oath-taking unlawful (Article XXXIX).

A key principle of the Reformation witness to biblical authority is that all private and traditional interpretations of Scripture must be scrutinized lest unwittingly they misrepresent the detailed instruc-

tion of Scripture by distorting its plain, natural sense, as determined from within by study of the language used in relation to overall biblical idiom and other biblical passages. “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself” (Westminster Confession, I, ix). “The holy, divine Scripture is to be interpreted in no other way than out of itself” (First Helvetic Confession, II). The church may not “so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another” (Article XX).

### *3. Our Dependence upon Scripture as a Means of Grace*

All our material under this heading will be drawn from the Anglican formularies, for they are extraordinarily full and forceful on the subject. They regularly represent the written Word—read, preached, heard, applied—as the main channel of life from God to mankind. “The Scripture of God is the heavenly meat of our souls; . . . it is a light lantern to our feet; it is a sure, steadfast, and everlasting Instrument of salvation; . . . it comforteth, maketh glad, cheereth, and cherisheth our conscience. . . . The words of Holy Scripture be called, word of *everlasting life*; for they be God’s instrument, ordained for the same purpose. They have power to turn, through God’s promise . . . and being received in a faithful heart, they have ever an heavenly spiritual working in them” (*The Homilies*, p. 3). Christ Himself, “promising to be present with His Church till the world’s end, doth perform His promise . . . in this, that He speaketh presently [that is, here and now] unto us in the Holy Scriptures” (op. cit. p. 370f.) Thus we are “called by thy holy Word” to faith in Christ (collect for St. Andrew’s Day). Through the Word we are sanctified: when heard and “grafted inwardly in our hearts,” it will “bring forth in us the fruit of good living” (holy communion). It is through “comfort of the Scriptures” that God

gives hard-pressed Christians hope (collect for Advent II), and bestows on the individual “troubled in mind or in conscience” “a right understanding of himself, and of thy threats and promises; that he may neither cast away his confidence in thee, nor place it anywhere but in thee” (Visitation of the Sick). In all these ways saving grace (that is, living and working faith) is mediated through the Scriptures. Therefore we pray for confirmation candidates that God will “so lead them in the knowledge and obedience of thy Word, that in the end they may obtain everlasting life” (Order of Confirmation). And when deacons are made presbyters we ask that their preaching of the Word may be blessed to us—“that we may have grace to hear and receive what they shall deliver out of thy most holy Word, or agreeable to the same, as the means of our salvation” (Ordering of Priests).

The formularies are concerned that the Word be *publicly read*: Hence the Prayer Book lectionary, covering the Old Testament and Revelation once, and the rest of the New Testament twice, each year. Hence, too, the mass of Scripture woven into the set services. No form of worship in Christendom prescribes so much of the Bible for public use as does the Prayer Book.

The formularies are further concerned that the Word be *publicly preached*: hence the ordination charge to presbyters “out of the same Scriptures to instruct the people,” and “to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrines contrary to God’s Word” (Ordering of Priests). Hence also the prayer in the Litany (and the very similar prayer in the holy communion service) that God will “illuminate all Bishops, Priests, and Deacons, with true knowledge and understanding of thy Word; and that both by their preaching and living they may set it forth.” Hence, too, the question to candidates for the diaconate, “Do you unfeignedly believe all the

Canonical Scriptures?,” and the charge to bishops, “Think upon the things contained in this Book. Be diligent in them . . .” The Prayer Book reveals an overmastering desire that Anglican clergy should above all things be men and women of the Word.

Finally, the formularies are concerned that the Word be *privately studied*: not just by the clergy, but by all members of their congregations. “Unto a Christian man, there can be nothing either more necessary or more profitable than the knowledge of Holy Scripture . . . as many a be desirous to enter into the right and perfect way until God, must apply their minds to know Holy Scripture.” “These books, therefore, ought to be much in our hands, in our eyes, in our ears, in our mouths, but most of all in our hearts.” “There is nothing that so much strengtheneth our faith and trust in God, that so much keepeth up innocency and pureness of the heart, and also of outward godly life and conversation, as continual reading and recording [that is, recalling] of God’s Word . . . on the other side, nothing more darkeneth Christ and the glory of God, nor bringeth in more blindness and all kinds of vices, than doth the ignorance of God’s Word.” “To be ignorant of the Scriptures is the cause of error . . . as St. Jerome saith, ‘Not to know the Scriptures is to be ignorant of Christ.’” “I say not nay, but a man may profit with only hearing; but he may much more prosper with both hearing and reading.” Therefore, “let us night and day muse, and have meditation and contemplation in them. Let us ruminat and, as it were, chew the cud, that we may have the sweet juice, spiritual effect, marrow, honey, kernel, taste, comfort, and consolation of them. . . . Let us pray to God, the only author of these heavenly studies, that we may speak, think, believe, live, and depart hence, according to the wholesome doctrine and verities of them. And, by that means, in this world we shall have God’s defence, favour, and



grace, with . . . peace and quietness of conscience; and . . . shall enjoy the endless bliss and glory of heaven” (*The Homilies*, pp. 1, 3, 4f., 372, 377, 379f.).

But is not the study of Scripture too bewildering and dangerous a business for laypeople to engage in profitably? The first homily is at pains to insist that it is not. God is faithful, and will not let the humble go astray. “I shall shew you how you may read it [the Bible] without danger or error. Read it humbly with a meek and a lowly heart, to the intent you may glorify God, and not yourself, with the knowledge of it: and read it not without daily praying to God, that He would direct your reading to good effect; and take it upon you to expound it no further than you can plainly understand it” (p. 6f.). The self-distrustful, prayerful Bible student will find that the meaning of the Word soon grows plain, one text interpreting another, through the illumination of “the Holy Ghost, who inspireth the true meaning unto them that with humility and diligence do search therefor” (p. 8, quoting Chrysostom). The Bible is thus a book for all to “read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” (collect for Advent II), for their soul’s health and as the means of their salvation.

### **The Task before Us**

There is a great and painful contrast between this rapt extolling of the Bible as our true light and chief means of grace and the casual, blasé, patronizing, superior attitude towards the Bible which is all too common today. Whereas the Reformers revered it, awestruck at the mystery of its divinity, hearing Christ and meeting God in their reading of it, we rather set ourselves above it, acting as if we already knew its contents inside out, and were indeed in a position to fault it as being neither wholly safe nor

wholly sound as a guide to the ways of God. Both the spirit and the sentiment of the clergyman who once in a national synod spoke of the Old Testament as containing “spiritual junk” are unhappily typical of our age. Naturally, coming to Scripture in this frame of mind, we fail to gain a proper understanding of what it is all about. One of the many divine qualities of the Bible is this, that it does not yield its secrets to irreverent and censorious. Down the ages the accusing voices of our Reformation formularies charge us to consider whence and how far we have fallen. They make us realize that through losing faith in the Bible we have also lost touch with God’s law and gospel, His commandments and His promises, and indeed with His Christ, who is the Christ of the Bible. (And what, after all, are the “new theology” and “new morality” of our day but exotic ways of advertising our ignorance of these things?) Our formularies teach us that our defection from the Bible is in truth a defection from the gospel and from Christ Himself, and that this defection has brought us under judgment. The application which we have made of Amos 8:11f. is confirmed by the following passage from the homily entitled “A Sermon, how dangerous a thin it is to fall from God”:

“The displeasure of God towards us is commonly expressed in the Scripture by these two things: by shewing His fearful countenance upon us, and by turning His face or hiding it from us . . . by turning His face or hiding thereof is . . . signified . . . that He clearly forsaketh us, and giveth us over . . . when he *withdraws from us His Word, the right doctrine of Christ*, his gracious assistance and aid, which is ever joined to His Word, and *leaveth us to our own wit*, our own will and strength, He declareth then that He beginneth to forsake us . . .” (*The Homilies*, p. 81).

The present state of our churches makes it hard to doubt that God has begun to forsake us in these days, as a judgment for our irreverent disregard of His written Word.

What are we to do? We cannot recall the Holy Spirit and revive God's work among us by our own actions: to quicken us again is God's prerogative, and His alone. But we can at least take out of the way the stumbling-stones over which we have fallen. We can set ourselves to rethink the doctrines of revelation and inspiration in a way that, while not refusing the light which modern study has thrown on the human aspects of the Scriptures, cultural, linguistic, historical, and so forth, will eliminate its skepticism about their divinity and eternal truth. No task, surely, is more urgent. And this is the task which we shall attempt, at any rate in outline, in the following pages.