

The Authority & Power of the Word upon the Heart

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God is essentially invisible. "He dwells in the light which no man can approach unto, whom no man has seen, nor can see." (1 Tim. 6:16.) When, therefore, he would make himself known to the sons of men, it must be by his works or by his words. The first way of making his power and glory known is beautifully unfolded in Psalm 19—"The heavens tell of the glory of God. The skies display his marvelous craftsmanship. Day after day they continue to speak; night after night they make him known. They speak without a sound or a word; their voice is silent in the skies; yet their message has gone out to all the earth, and their words to all the world." This is the testimony which God gave of himself to the Gentile world, but which, through the depravity of man's heart, has been universally misunderstood, perverted and abused, as the Apostle speaks—"since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened." (Rom. 1:19-21.)

The secret spring whence this flows, and the eternal foundation on which this rests, is the incarnation of God's dear Son. He is "the Word"—the Word emphatically, originally, essentially; and so called not only because he is the express image of the Father, as the word is the image of the thought, but because he has declared or made him known, as our uttered word makes our thoughts known. John therefore bare witness of him—"No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." Had there, then, been no incarnate Word, there would have been no revealed word; and had there been no revealed word, there would have been no written word; for all that was revealed was not necessarily written, as John was bidden to seal up those things which the seven thunders uttered, and write them not. (Rev. 10:4.) And as without the incarnate Word there would have been no revealed or written word—so the power of the written word is derived from the power of the incarnate Word.

God's witness by his works, then, being insufficient, and failing, so to speak, through the depravity of man's heart, he has revealed himself by and in his word—in those precious Scriptures which we hold in our hands, and the power of which some of us have felt in our hearts. It is, then, of this power of the written word that we have now to speak. But when we speak of the power of the word of

God we do not mean thereby to convey the idea that it possesses any power of its own, any actual, original, innate force, which acts of itself on the heart and conscience. The word of God is but the instrument of a higher and distinct power, even the power of that Holy and eternal Spirit, the revealer and testifier of Jesus, by whose express and immediate inspiration it was written.

The power of an instrument is the power of him who uses it. This is true literally. The strength of the sword is in the hand of him who wields it. A child may take up a warrior's sword, but can he use it as a warrior? If, then, the word of God is "quick (or living, as the word means) and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword," it is because he wields it of whom it is said, "You are the most handsome of all. Gracious words stream from your lips. God himself has blessed you forever. Put on your sword, O mighty warrior! You are so glorious, so majestic!" (Psalm 45:2, 3.) John, therefore, saw him in vision, as one "out of whose mouth went a sharp two-edged sword," (Rev. 1:16,) both to pierce the hearts of his people and to smite the nations. (Rev. 19:13.)

So with the word which he wields. "Where the word of a king is there is power." (Eccles. 8:4.) And why? Because it is the word of the king. Another may speak the word, but it has no power because he who speaks it has no power to execute it. When "the king said to Haman, Make haste, and take the apparel and the horse, as you have said, and do even so to Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate; let nothing fail of all that you have spoken," (Esther 6:10,) it was done. The man whom the king delighted to honor was honored. (Esther 6:10, 11.) When again the king said, "Hang him thereon," it was done—"So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai." (Esther 7:9, 10.) Here were life and death in the power of the tongue. (Prov. 28:21.) Thus we ascribe no power to the word itself, but to the power of him who speaks it. The Apostle therefore says of his speech and preaching that it was "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power;" (1 Cor. 2:4;) and of his gospel, that is, the gospel which he knew, felt, and preached, that it came unto the Thessalonians "not in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance." (1 Thess. 1:5.) Twice had David heard, that is on two solemn and special occasions, "that power belongs unto God." (Psalm 62:11.) To understand and explain this power passes our comprehension. It may be and is felt, and its effects seen and known, but "the thunder of his power who can understand?" (Job 26:14.) When God said, "Let there be light," light burst forth at his creative fiat. But who can understand or explain how light came? Yet it could be seen when it filled the future creation with its bright effulgence.

But now let us consider **the exercise and display of this power in its first movements upon the heart.** Man being dead in sin, needs an almighty power to make him alive unto God; for what communion can there be between a dead soul and a living God? This, then, is the first display of the power of the word of God in the hands of the eternal Spirit. "You has he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins." (Eph. 2:1.) And how? By the word. "Of his own will begat

he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures." (Jas. 1:18.) So testifies Peter—"Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which lives and abides forever." (1 Pet. 1:23.) What James calls "begetting" Peter terms "being born again;" and this corresponds with what the Lord himself declared to Nicodemus—"Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3.) Almost similar is the language of John himself as taken, doubtless, from his divine Master—"Who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man—but of God." (John 1:13.) So in his first epistle—"Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God; and every one that loves him that begat loves him also that is begotten of him." (1 John 5:1.) We need not therefore enter into the controversy about the difference between begetting and being born again, as if the new birth exactly corresponded with the old, and as if the analogy could be precisely carried out between natural and spiritual generation. Figures (and this is a figure) must not be pressed home to all their logical consequences, or made to fit and correspond in all their parts and particulars. It is sufficient for us to know that the mighty change whereby a sinner passes from death unto life, (1 John 3:14,) is "delivered from the power of darkness, and translated into the kingdom of his dear Son," (Col. 1:13,) is by the power of the word of God upon his soul.

Nor shall we, as we wish to avoid controversial topics, enter at any length into the question whether light or life first enters into the heart—"The entrance of your words gives light." (Psalm 119:130.) There it would seem that light came first. And so the passage—"To open their eyes, and turn them from darkness to light." (Acts 26:18.) So Saul at Damascus' gate saw and was struck down by the light before the quickening words came—"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4.) In grace, if not in nature, it would seem evident that we see before we feel; and thus the disciples "beheld his glory, as of the only begotten of the Father," before they received the Son of God into their hearts and believed on his name. It will be seen from these hints that without entering into the controversy, or pronouncing any dogmatical opinion, our own view inclines to the point held by Mr. Huntington, that light precedes life. And yet, when we look back on our own experience, how difficult it is to determine whether we saw light before we felt life, or whether the same ray which brought light into the mind did not bring at the same moment life into the heart. At any rate we saw what we felt, and we felt what we saw. "In your light do we see light." To see this light is to be "enlightened with the light of the living." (Job 33:30.) And this our blessed Lord calls "the light of life." "Then spoke Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world; he who follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." (John 8:12.)

So we will not put asunder what God has joined together—light and life. We know, however, the effect better than the cause; and need we wonder that we can neither understand nor explain the mystery of regeneration? Does not the Lord himself say—"The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound

thereof, but can not tell whence it comes and where it goes; so is every one that is born of the Spirit." (John 3:8.) It is our mercy if we have seen light in God's light and felt the Spirit's quickening breath, if we cannot understand whence it came or where it goes, except to believe that it came from God and leads to God—it began in grace and will end in glory.

The beginning of this work upon the soul is in Scripture frequently termed "a calling," as in the well-known passage—"But unto them who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For you see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called." (1 Cor. 1:24-26.) And thus we find "calling" one of the links in that glorious chain which, reaching down to and stretching through time, is fastened at both ends to eternity—"For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the first-born among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called; and whom he called, them he also justified; and whom he justified, them he also glorified." (Rom. 8:29, 30.)

The very word "call" has a reference to something spoken or uttered, that is, a word addressed to the person called. If I call to a man, I speak to that man. My word to him is my call to him. Thus our Lord said to Levi, the son of Alphaeus, sitting at the receipt of custom, "Follow me." Power attended the word. It fell upon Matthew's heart. Light and life entered into his soul. His understanding was enlightened, his will renewed, his heart changed. What was the instantaneous effect? "And he arose and followed him." (Mark 2:14.) Similar in cause and effect was the calling of Peter and Andrew, of James and John. (Matt. 4:18-22.) This calling is "by grace" or the pure favor of God; (Gal. 1:15;) a "heavenly calling," as coming from heaven and leading to heaven; (Heb. 3:1;) a "holy calling," (2 Tim. 1:9,) not only holy in itself, but leading to and productive of that "holiness without which no man shall see the Lord;" (Heb. 12:14;) and therefore a calling "to glory and virtue," or excellency, as the word means—excellency here, (Phil. 1:10; 4:8,) glory hereafter. It is also a calling out of the world, as Abraham was called to "leave his country, and his kindred, and his father's house;" and so we are bidden to "come out from among them and be separate, and not touch the unclean thing." (2 Cor. 6:17.) It is "a high calling," and therefore free from everything low, groveling, and earthly; "into the grace of Christ;" (Gal. 1:6;) a calling "to the fellowship of the Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord;" (1 Cor. 1:9;) a calling "to peace" with God and his dear people, and as far as lies in us with all men; (Col. 3:15; 1 Cor. 7:15; Rom. 12:18;) "to liberty," (Gal. 5:13,) to a "laying hold of eternal life," (1 Tim. 6:12,) and "to the obtaining of the eternal glory of the Lord Jesus Christ." (2 Thess. 2:14; 1 Pet. 5:10; John 17:22-24.)

As, then, those who are thus called are called to the experimental enjoyment of these spiritual blessings, with all of which they were blessed in heavenly places in Christ Jesus, according as they were chosen in him before the foundation of

the world, it is plain that they must have a knowledge of them communicated to their soul; and as we know nothing of divine truth but through the written word and cannot by any wisdom of our own, even with that word in our hands, attain to a saving knowledge of these divine realities—it is equally plain that **they must be revealed to us by a spiritual and supernatural power.**

This is clearly and beautifully unfolded by the Apostle in 1 Cor. 2. We cannot quote the whole chapter, which, to be clearly understood, should be read in its full connection, but we cannot forbear citing a few verses as being so appropriate to, and casting such a light on our subject—No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"—but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us." (1 Cor. 2:9-12.)

The things which "God has prepared for those who love him" are the things which his people are called to know and enjoy; and that not merely as regards the future state of glory but the present state of grace—the things to be known on earth as well as the things to be enjoyed in heaven. This is plain from the words, "But God *has revealed* them unto us by his Spirit,"—not will hereafter reveal and make them known in heaven above, but has already revealed them on earth below. And where, but in the heart of his people? For it is there that they receive "the Spirit which is of God," and this "that they might know the things that are freely given to them of God."

Knowledge, then, is clearly and evidently the first effect of that divine light of which we have spoken; and this corresponds with what the gracious Lord said in his intercessory prayer—"And this is life eternal, that they might **know** you the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." (John 17:3.) The knowledge of the only true God must precede any fear of him, or any faith in him. While I am in nature's darkness and death, I do not know God, and, therefore, I neither can nor do fear him.

Some of our spiritual readers may feel surprised at our putting the knowledge of God as the first effect of the power of the word upon the heart; and some may tell us that we should put conviction of sin, and others might insist that we should place the fear of God first. But if they will bear with us for a few moments, we think we can show them that a true spiritual knowledge of the only true God must go before both right conviction of sin and before the right fear of the Lord.

1. First, then, what is conviction of sin but a conviction in our conscience of having sinned against and before a pure, holy, and just God? But where can be my conviction of having sinned against him, if I have no knowledge of him? In

nature's darkness and death, I felt no conviction of sin, not only because my conscience was not awakened or divinely wrought upon, but because I knew nothing of him against whom I had sinned—nothing of his justice, nothing of his holiness, nothing of his power.

2. What is the fear of God but a trembling apprehension of his glorious majesty? But how can I have this apprehension of his glorious majesty if I am ignorant of his very existence, which I am—until he makes it known by a ray of light out of his own eternal fullness? Where do we see the fear of God more in exercise or more beautifully expressed than in Psalm 139? But how the whole of it is laid in the knowledge of the heart-searching presence of the Almighty—"O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord. You hem me in—behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me." (Ps. 139:1-5.)

We can sometimes read past experience best in the light of present experience, as a traveler emerging from a dark and tangled forest sees from the hill-top the way by which he came far more clearly and better than when he was struggling among the thickets.

When, then, *now* do we seem most to see and feel the evil of **sin**? When do we *now* seem most to fear that Lord in whose presence we stand? Is it not in proportion to our knowledge of him, to our present realization of his majesty, power, and presence, and to that spiritual experimental acquaintance which we have gained of his dread perfections by the teaching, as we trust, of the Holy Spirit through the written word? And take the converse. When are our views and feelings of the evil of sin comparatively dim and cold, so that we do not seem to see and realize what a dreadful thing it is? Is it not when there is no sensible view nor present apprehension of the majesty, holiness, and presence of God?

Similarly with respect to **godly fear**. When does this fountain of life to depart from the snares of death run shallow and low, so as to be diminished, as by a summer drought, almost to a thin thread? When our present vital, experimental sight and sense, knowledge and apprehension of the majesty of the Lord are become dim and feeble, when the old veil seems to flap back over the heart, and like a half-closed shutter shuts out the light of day. If we read the early chapters of the book of Proverbs, we shall see how much is spoken in them of wisdom, instruction, knowledge, understanding, and the like, and how closely there the fear of the Lord is connected with the knowledge of the Lord—"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; but fools despise wisdom and instruction." (Prov. 1:7.) And, again—"My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will

understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding." (Prov. 2:1-6.)

And, again—"When wisdom enters into your heart, and knowledge is pleasant unto your soul; discretion shall preserve you, understanding shall keep you." (Prov. 2:10, 11.) So those that perish, perish from lack of this knowledge and of this fear as its fruit—"For that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord; they would none of my counsel; they despised all my reproof. Therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices." (Prov. 1:29-31.) And more plainly and emphatically—"Fools die for lack of wisdom." (Prov. 10:21.) Indeed, there is such a connection between true wisdom, which is "a knowledge of the holy," (Prov. 30:3,) and the fear of the Lord, and such a connection between ignorance of the Lord and sin, that saved saints are called "wise," and lost sinners are called "fools," not only in the Old Testament, as continually in the Proverbs, but in the New.

Many of the Lord's people look with suspicion upon knowledge, from not seeing clearly the vast distinction between the spiritual, experimental knowledge for which we are now contending, and what is called "head knowledge." They see that a man may have a well-furnished head and a graceless heart, that he may understand "all mysteries" and all "knowledge" and yet be "nothing;" (1 Cor. 13:2.) And as some of these all-knowing professors are the basest characters that can infest the churches, those who really fear the Lord stand not only in doubt of them, but of all the knowledge possessed by them. But put it in a different form; ask the people of God whether there is not such a divine reality, such a heavenly blessing, as being "taught of God;" (John 6:45;) having "an unction from above whereby we know all things;" (1 John 2:20;) knowing the truth for oneself and finding it makes free; (John 8:32;) whether there is not a "counting of all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord," and a stretching forth of the desires of the soul to "know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings;" whether there is not "a knowledge of salvation by the remission of sins;" (Luke 1:77;) "a knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ;" (2 Cor. 4:6;) a being "filled with the knowledge of his will," (Col. 1:9,) an "increasing in the knowledge of God;" (Col. 1:10;) "a growing in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," (2 Pet. 3:18,)—ask the living family of God whether there be not such a knowledge as this, and if this knowledge is not the very pith and marrow, the very sum and substance of vital godliness? and they will with one voice say, "It is!"

By putting knowledge therefore, as the first effect of the word of truth upon the heart, we are not setting up, God forbid, that vain, empty, useless, deceptive thing, that delusion of the devil, "head knowledge"—but that divine, spiritual, gracious, and saving knowledge which is communicated to the soul and wrought into its very substance by the teaching and testimony of the Holy Spirit. This

knowledge embraces every truth which we learn by divine teaching in living experience, from the first sigh to the last song, from the earliest conviction to the last consolation, from the cry of despair to the shout of triumph, from the agonies of hell to the joys of heaven. Need any one wonder, therefore, that we put first what stands first, that we lay down the first stone which is the foundation stone, and draw the first line where the Holy Spirit makes his first impression?

If, then, this knowledge is communicated by the Holy Spirit to the heart through the written word, two things follow, and we believe that the experience of every child of God will bear testimony to what we now advance concerning them—

1. That the word of God comes into the heart and conscience in and by regeneration, with a new and hitherto unfelt power. How carelessly, how ignorantly, how formally, if we read it at all, did we read the word of God in the days of our unregeneracy. What little heed we paid to the word preached, if we heard it at all. What thorough darkness and death wrapped us up, so that nothing of a spiritual, eternal nature touched, moved, or stirred us either with hope or fear. But at a certain, never-to-be-forgotten time, a power, we could not tell how or why, was put into the word and it fell upon our hearts, as a sound from heaven—as the very voice of God to our conscience. The word of God laid hold of us as the word of God; it was no longer the word of man, a dry, uninteresting, almost if not wholly hated book; but it got, we could not explain how, so into the very inside of us—armed with authority and power as a message from God.

But here let us guard ourselves. It is not always the exact *words*, or indeed any word of Scripture which lays hold of the conscience; but it is in every case the *truth contained* in the Scriptures. Eternity, judgment to come, the justice of God, his all-searching eye, his almighty hand, his universal presence, from which there is no escape—these, and other similar truths which fall with such weight upon the quickened sinner's conscience, are all revealed in and only known by the Scripture. The *truth* of God is, therefore, the *word* of God, as the word of God is the truth of God. If, then, no particular *word* or words are applied to the conscience by the quickening power of the Holy Spirit, the *truth*, which is the word, is applied to the heart, and it is this entrance of the truth as the word of God, which gives light.

As a proof of this, no sooner do we receive the solemn truths of which we have spoken, into our conscience and feel their power, than we run to the Scriptures and find a light in and upon them hitherto unseen and unknown. The light, life, and power, which attended the truth as it fell upon the conscience gave the word a place in our hearts. And we shall always find that the place which the word has in the heart is in proportion to the light and power which attended its first entrance. Let us seek to explain this a little more fully and clearly.

The heart by nature is closed, shut, barred against the entrance of light. The light may, so to speak, play around the heart, but does not enter, for there is a thick

veil over it. Thus our Lord said of himself, "While I am in the world I am the light of the world." (John 9:5.) The light shone upon the world, but did not enter, for the "light shines in darkness and the darkness comprehended (that is apprehended or embraced) it not." (John 1:5.) "My word," said the Lord, "has no place in you." (John 8:37.) But when the word comes with power, it seizes hold of the heart and conscience. They give way before it and leave a place for it, where it sets up its throne and becomes their Lord and Master.

Here, then, we shall for the present pause, leaving the word of truth in possession of the heart.

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