

Joseph H. Smith and His View of Scripture

DELBERT R. ROSE

Usually students of revivalism have not associated "the study" with the camp meeting, nor scholarly aptitude with the soul-winning art. These two emphasis, however, seem to have met, merged, and remained inseparable in the ministry of the Reverend Mr. Joseph H. Smith, 1855-1946.

Mr. Smith, for sixty years a member of the Philadelphia Conference of the Methodist Church, has been esteemed by some a foremost expositor-evangelist of the Wesleyan movement in America. After a period of pastoral service within his home conference, Smith became identified with the Methodistic movement known as the National Campmeeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness. He rapidly rose to a place of spiritual leadership within that movement which was dedicated to the task of propagating interdenominationally the Wesleyan interpretation of the doctrine of holiness.

Smith's life touched both the original leaders of the National Campmeeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness (now called the National Holiness Association), organized in 1867, under whom he was schooled in thought and methods, and the majority of the younger, present-day leaders of this movement. No other man in the movement has shared with Smith this distinction. He gave more years of consecutive service than any other one leader to the specific purpose of promoting "Scriptural holiness" through the various channels of this interdenominational organization.

Dean of Holiness Expositors

Smith excelled in the exposition of the Scriptures. This was evidenced by the way he was repeatedly called to the same camp grounds year after year, a record unparalleled by any other teacher in the Holiness Movement.

THE SCRIPTURAL DOCTRINE OF SCRIPTURE

Since for Smith the seat of authority for the Christian faith was the Bible, the Scriptures' teaching concerning themselves was of utmost importance. He could not allow the Scriptures' testimony to themselves to be questioned and still retain as valid what they had said about God, man, sin, Christ and salvation.¹

Citing Jesus's and the apostles' attitude toward the Old Testament—which Scriptures alone were extant in Jesus's time—Smith felt Scripturally bound to hold "the written Word" and the "spoken Word of God" as inseparable. He found a basis in Christ's and the apostles' teachings for esteeming the New Testament as sacred, inviolable and authoritative as they had regarded the Old Testament.² Of the whole Bible he affirmed: "We need *no other authority or proof* for what we declare, than that it is plainly taught in the Bible. It it is there, God hath spoken it."³

Two passages clearly voiced for him the basic doctrine of Scripture: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect . . ." ". . . no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost."⁴

REVELATION AND INSPIRATION

In Smith's view, the divine will and plan for all time have been supernaturally revealed, objectively recorded, and providentially preserved in the Holy Bible for the salvation of all mankind. In that sense revelation has ceased and is final.

But the appropriation and application of that revealed salvation in each individual's life and service is unrevealed and unrecorded until personally received by faith in each believer's life. In that

¹ Smith, "The Spirit's Light," *The Pentecostal Herald*, September 22, 1937, p. 4.

² John 14:36; 16:13-15; 2 Pet. 3:15, 16. See Smith, *Things Of The Spirit*, pp. 69f.

³ Smith, "God Hath Spoken," *God's Revivalist*, June 3, 1926, p. 11.

⁴ 2 Tim. 3:16, 17.

⁵ II Pet. 1:20, 21.

sense "revelation" may be said to be continuous through the Holy Spirit's illuminating and teaching ministry to each individual.

. . . revelation is for the *whole* Christian world and deals with the things of the kingdom *in general*, while illumination is for the individual Christian, in the interpretation and application of revelation and in the discovery of one's own place and the direction of his own path in the way and in the work of the kingdom here.⁹

While there was repeated and progressive revelation within the Old Testament Scriptures for Israel, yet for both Israel and the Church revelation reached its perfection in Christ and the apostles, and then ceased (with the death of the last apostle) for this Gospel era or dispensation. *Continuous* revelation was not known even in Israel, for there were periods, such as the inter-testamental era, when no *new* revelation was given.

In all the progress of the Christian centuries, Smith maintained, neither theologians, philosophers, nor scientists have either added or changed a single doctrine of Biblical theology as the apostles knew it. The apostles and prophets had scaled, by supernatural assistance, the mountain peaks of spiritual truth and what they saw they set forth in the Scriptures. The history of Christianity is evidence that the recovery of lost truth, rather than "revelation" or the "discovery" of any new truth, has produced and marked the revivalistic and fruitful periods within the Church.

Smith *cautiously* distinguished between the Word of God and the Scriptures. The Word of God existed prior to and in some instances apart from the Scripture for centuries, and even Jesus's words—the very Words of Life—were not in written form at first. Even many Israelites, not understanding the meaning and application of their own written Scriptures, were still without "the Word of God." The same principle obtains in this New Testament era, for "many persons have Bibles and have Biblical scholarship that do not know what God has said." Nevertheless, Christians this side of the primitive Church have not had "the Word of God against or apart from the Scriptures," even though many may have had the Scriptures without having "the Word of God." Having the *body of* Scripture, without the Spirit who inspired them, is to be without the "Word of God." To have the "Word of God" one must have

⁹ Smith, "Light On Our Pathway," *God's Revivalist*, October 28, 1929, p. 2.

both the letter of Scripture and the living Spirit illuminating that letter to the believing mind.⁷

“Special” or “supernatural revelation” brings to man what God has not revealed or is undiscoverable by man elsewhere. “In the Bible is revealed everything that is necessary to salvation, and *what God has revealed elsewhere is not enough to save men’s souls.*”⁸ Revelation itself, however, is not salvation, although necessary for it. For without this revelation to man’s faith, he is left at Mar’s hill with a “forestry of interrogation points as to deity and eternity,” and in Athens before the altar to the unknown god.⁹

Smith rejected any mechanical theory of inspiration by which special revelation was brought to men. He held a more “dynamic view” by which the Holy Spirit so supernaturally supplemented the limitations and frailties of the prophets and apostles, without destroying their individuality, as to produce an accurate record of precisely what God wanted permanently preserved in Scriptures.¹⁰

Inspiration is that movement of God’s Spirit upon the memory, perception and imagination of men’s mind, whereby His revealed Truth is communicated to man, and that movement upon his language by tongue whereby it is transmitted from His chosen agents to the people to whom it is addressed. This is the Word. And when this transmission was by His wisdom, carried from direct speech and from tradition to writing under divine guidance, help and control, this gave us the Scriptures. And again, God’s message to men, thus in Scripture is the Word of God.¹¹

At least six things were sufficient proof for Smith of the inspiration, and therefore of the reliability and divine authority, of the Scriptures: (1) their enduring universality;¹² (2) their inherent, superhuman content; (3) the “unlettered” authors, such as Peter and John, who wrote such epistles as the Epistles of John

⁷ Smith, “The Scriptures and the Word of God,” *Heart and Life*, August 1923, pp. 18, 19.

⁸ Smith, “The Inspiration and Interpretation of the Scripture,” *op. cit.*, December 1919, pp. 13, 14, 16.

⁹ Smith, *Things Of The Spirit*, pp. 33, 34.

¹⁰ Smith, “Spiritual Life Suggestions,” *The Christian Witness*, March 18, 1937, p. 10.

¹¹ Smith, “Private Interpretations”; “The Holy Scriptures”; “The Word of Christ,” *Heart and Life*, February 1924, p. 7.

¹² Smith, “Spiritual Life Suggestions,” *The Christian Witness*, December 17, 1936, pp. 12, 13.

and the Epistles of Peter;¹³ (4) the effects of the Scriptures upon the morals and spirits of men; (5) the testimony of such enduring, superhuman, and effective writings to their own origin and nature;¹⁴ and (6) the literal fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures concerning the Birth, Life, Ministry, Death and Resurrection of Christ.¹⁵

INSPIRATION AND ILLUMINATION

The Holy Spirit is the one source of both divine inspiration and of spiritual illumination, whose objective in each is to produce salvation. The illumination, which the Spirit imparts, differs mainly *in degree* from the inspiration given to the prophets and apostles. There is no new revelation (either in germ or norm) given, but only the assistance necessary to understand and apply that which has been revealed for salvation in this dispensation.

We fully believe that God's mind was revealed to the writers of the Bible, so that the internal revelation might be handed down to us, but we further believe that God will so quicken our spiritual and mental powers by His blessed Holy Spirit that we will first appropriate the same, and then in turn, reproduce these ideas and transmit them to the minds of others. This may be termed either "direct illumination," or rather, the revelation of God.

. . . while the Holy Ghost does neither substitute nor supersede Scripture by His direct illuminations, He does open the secrets of the same, apply the principles thereof, and inspire and authorize timely and personal applications of the same in living messages of faith. The Bible is not a casket in which the Spirit of revelation is buried; it is a jewel box from the gems of which the living Spirit of Light radiates.¹⁶

Just as "inspiration," reserved alone for the prophets and apostles, brought them knowledge which neither genius nor progress in learning could attain, so "illumination," falling upon that which has been revealed through uniquely inspired men, brings the Christian knowledge unattainable by the highest intellectual reach of unilluminated minds. As it required "inspiration" for the prophets to receive and show these things to others, so it requires "illumination" for men to receive and understand these "revealed truths"

¹³ Smith, "Be Ye Holy," *Heart and Life*, November 1928, pp. 6, 9.

¹⁴ Smith, "The Inspiration and Interpretation of the Scriptures," *Heart and Life*, December 1919, pp. 13, 14, 16.

¹⁵ Smith, "Question Box," *The Christian Witness*, January 20, 1938, p. 6.

¹⁶ Smith, "Inspiration and Illumination," *Heart and Life*, December 1926, p. 10.

today. "Both are divine. But they are not equal." Yet both are necessary, if God is to be known.¹⁷ Since "the world by wisdom knew not God," that which brings the knowledge of God to man, namely, divine inspiration and illumination, correspondingly transcend human intelligence as the latter transcends animal instinct.¹⁸

ILLUMINATION AND INTERPRETATION

The Spirit's illumination of the human mind is requisite to grasping the "Word of God." While Biblical scholarship brings to light interesting facts *about* the Scriptures, only by spiritual discernment, immediately given by the Holy Spirit, can men apprehend that "saving truth" as it is in Jesus which alone brings eternal life. Nor is this illumination securable to any but penitent souls who are seeking the light.¹⁹

. . . as Inspiration was needed to give us a correct and completed Revelation of God, so Illumination is necessary to give us a correct and complete understanding of the will and way of God and also of God Himself. And Jesus has come to give us such an understanding. In nature man was in darkness, and in ignorance of God . . . By Grace we are made capable of knowing God. And by the Spirit's Illumination "we behold as in a glass the glory of the Lord" . . .²⁰

While following the Protestant principle in stressing individual study of the Scriptures, Smith warned against "private interpretations" which violated any plain teaching of the Bible or substituted one's own opinions or supposed "illuminations" for the best light of sanctified, scholarly study of the Bible.²¹ Remembering that considerable of the Biblical message is presented in the form of sign and symbol, Smith cautioned against personal fancy, or hasty, superficial treatment governing the reader in his interpretation of the Scriptures. "The diligence of a student and the devotion of a worshipper is required to decipher God's sign language aright."²²

¹⁷ Smith, "Education! Inspiration! Illumination!" *op. cit.*, May 1925, p. 8.

¹⁸ Smith, *Things Of The Spirit*, pp. 27f.

¹⁹ Smith, "The Spirit's Light," *The Pentecostal Herald*, September 22, 1937, p. 4.

²⁰ Smith, "Education! Inspiration! Illumination!" *Heart and Life*, May 1925, p. 9.

²¹ Smith, "Question Box," *op. cit.*, December 1920, p. 19; Smith, "The Scriptures and the Word of God," *op. cit.*, August 1923, pp. 18, 19.

²² Smith, "Expository Suggestion," *Heart and Life*, July 1924, pp. 8f.

For Smith one of the plainest and most valid of all rules of interpretation—of Scripture or any other book—was that literature should be “understood as bearing its plain and primary literal sense, unless a good reason can be given why it should be understood otherwise.”²³ His “qualified literalism” displayed itself in his treatment of the book of Revelation, “the most pictorial in the whole Bible.”

And as in other instances of Scriptural rhetoric—as the description of the holy city on the one hand, and the fiery torments of hell upon the other, we must penetrate into their higher and deeper significance than of anything merely material and physical, so must we pray for anointed eyes to see through the angel’s “signs” for that which is infinitely more glorious or even more terrible that may be signified thereby.²⁴

Believing that all the truths, principles and laws underlying *all* Scripture are applicable to every day and age, Smith held that “the *application* of them under the differences of the Spirit’s administration (see I Cor. 12:5) will vary . . . with the differences in the days and the times.”²⁵ For example, “the harlotry stigma of a woman’s shaven or *shorn* head in Paul’s day” may pass away with the “change in society or in women” which causes it to mean less in this day.²⁶ Consequently Smith enjoined Bible students thus: “Study the customs of the times in the light of what is written and see what abiding principle is in the midst of that particular custom.”²⁷

He laid down five rules which he himself had followed in interpreting the English Bible: first, the right understanding and use of the English language; second, the rule of a holy purpose in studying the Scriptures; third, the right key to unlock its treasures, both in the Old and New Testaments, which is Christ; fourth, the proper aim of finding out the things God has not revealed elsewhere; and fifth, the rule of dependence upon the Holy Spirit, who inspired the Word, to bring illumination to the reader’s heart

²³ Smith, unpublished articles in F. S. Teed collection, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

²⁴ Smith, “Expository Suggestion,” *op. cit.*, pp. 8, 9.

²⁵ Smith, “Question Lecture Drawer,” *Heart and Life*, March 1918, p. 13.

²⁶ Smith, unpublished articles in F. S. Teed collection, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

²⁷ Smith, “Question Lecture Drawer,” *op. cit.*, March 1918, p. 13.

and mind.²⁸ Following those rules Smith found an inner unity of theme and harmony of objective and progression of movement within the Scriptures which led him to believe there were no contradictions within the Bible, but that if seeming contradictions appeared they existed in the Bible reader, due to lack of scholarly information or spiritual illumination, rather than in the Bible itself.

CHRIST IN THE SCRIPTURES

All revelation for Smith was Christocentric and all illumination rested upon what had been revealed of Christ in the Scriptures. At no time, he affirmed, is the personal Christ lost sight of when believers are under the "illumination of the Spirit."²⁹

Christ is the *all absorbing* doctrine of truth of the Scriptures. All other truths end in or emanate from Him. He is the Truth. And inspired writers are so imbued with this truth that they refer all preaching and prophesying found in the Bible to Christ . . . So that the doctrine of not a part but of the whole Bible is the doctrine of Christ.³⁰

But the Christocentricity of Smith's theology was not without its inseparable anthropological reference. For it was not Christ in creation, or in providence, or in incarnation, or in suffering, or in regal honor or in judgment alone, but *Christ indwelling His people* that Smith found His supreme glory manifested. "*Christ in you*, the hope of glory," whether in time or in eternity, was to him the crowning glory of the gospel.³¹

In thus understanding the Christ of the Scriptures Smith the Methodist was one with his older contemporary, the noted Baptist theologian, Augustus Hopkins Strong, who, addressing some theological students, said: ". . . I believe that the doctrine of union with Christ is the central truth of all theology and of all religion."³²

²⁸ Smith, "The Inspiration and Interpretation of the Scripture," *Heart and Life*, December 1919, pp. 13, 14, 16.

²⁹ Smith, "Education! Inspiration! Illumination!" *Heart and Life*, May 1925, pp. 8, 9.

³⁰ Smith, "Cardinal Doctrines of the Bible," *Heart and Life*, March 1921, pp. 6f.

³¹ Smith, *Pauline Perfection*, pp. 106, 107; Smith, "What Christ Plans For His Own," *God's Revivalist*, November 2, 1933, pp. 4, 13.

³² Augustus Hopkins Strong, *One Hundred Chapel Talks to Theological Students*, p. 24.