

The Evolution of the Use of the Bible in Europe

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i.

Let me enter upon my subject by fixing your attention on the parallel lines which the general development of mankind and the influence of the Bible follow through history.

In the history of mankind we observe a gradual advance through three progressive changes. First we see, almost everywhere, a long period of rather slowly unfolding half-consciousness; mostly a period of tyrannic usurpation and oppression. Then comes a second period of growth in the organic, not yet ramified, national stem, as it is still going on in the *Mir* of Russia; this is the more conservative reign of the aristocratic element. And, finally, a third period of clearly conscious development comes in, and leads to the blossoming of a rich individualistic life, the indispensable requisite of a free and more democratic form of government. Of course, intermediate stages have often broken this threefold graduated line, but for the subject now under consideration these subordinate irregularities may be neglected. The regular rising of life, personal as well as national, always gives the threefold succession, starting first from a half-consciousness, then passing into a combined consciousness of the mass, and, thirdly, arriving at a personal consciousness of individualistic character.

Now parallel to this threefold graduated line of our human civilization, and in close correspondence with it, runs this other tripartite line. In the first period there is no Bible; in the second period the Bible exists, but is in use only in the aristocratic class of learned men and priests; and, finally, in the third period, the Bible becomes everybody's life-companion. From the standpoint we are occupying now, it might have been expected that the Holy Book would have been man's divine companion from his first beginning in Paradise; but quite in contradiction with this anticipation, two thousand five hundred years elapsed before the first page of the Bible was written. And even then the Old Testament did not come all at once, but rather by an incredibly slow succession, and it took not less than a thousand years for its

completion, so that not until Israel's return from exile, was the Old Testament ready for use. And as to the whole Bible, including the Old *and* the New Testament, its composition, in its definite form, was not completed until a hundred years after Christ.

This long course of development is not favorable to the idea of a literal dictation of the Bible. No doubt, a word-for-word dictation could have been given to man as well in the garden of Eden as at any subsequent time. The Holy Ghost knew exactly from eternity every fact of history that should come to pass. But divine Providence arranged it /4/ quite differently, because the Bible as such was not required in an absolute sense for salvation. Adam and Enos, Enoch and Noah died without ever having had the slightest idea of what our Bible is now. The patriarchs may have been in possession of some single leaves, now preserved in the first chapters of Genesis, but a Bible they had not, the Lord revealing himself to the patriarchs orally. So the fact remains that more than four thousand years had elapsed before the people of God came into possession of what is now our most precious treasure.

But not even then did our Bible come within the reach of everybody, or even, indeed, of a ten-thousandth part of mankind. In the Middle Ages a written copy of the Bible was, no doubt, as a rule, to be found in the consistories of most churches and in the libraries of the best monasteries. Meantime a private man in possession of a complete copy of the Holy Scriptures remained till late a very rare exception. A manuscript copy of the Bible was too expensive, and the clergy as a rule discouraged its reading. And so the situation remained till, in the middle of the fifteenth century, the Lord enriched mankind by the discovery of the art of printing.

This is a memorable fact that, coinciding almost with the rise of the Reformation, makes us feel, as by an immediate touch of our historical instinct, that the concurring of the two things had been ordained by a special Providential disposition, not only for the advancement of the Church, but also for the predestined development of our human race. It was especially the Calvinistic churches that understood how to give to this glorious coincidence its full effect. Of course, Luther's translation of the Bible remains an unparalleled masterpiece. But in the Lutheran churches it seems not a few pious people were quite satisfied if they could only get a New Testament, possibly combined with the Book of Psalms. To a certain degree the Old Testament has always been of secondary importance in the Lutheran churches, and they were somewhat slow in promoting the distribution of the Bible among the heathen. Even the great theologian, John Gerhard, opposed the translation of the Bible into pagan languages.

At the end of the eighteenth century, in Germany itself and in Scandinavia, there was such a scarcity of Bibles that only one copy was to be found among eighty church members. It was especially in western Europe that the printed Bible made its way among the lower classes of society: in Geneva, among the Huguenots in France, and among the Flemish people in Belgium, above all, however, in Holland. Not only did Holland distribute the Bible in the Seven Provinces, but also, in translation, among the heathen and Mohammedan people in her colonies. From Holland the mighty impulse for Bible distribution went over to Great Britain. There both the need of Bibles at home in England and /5/ Scotland and the splendid missionary undertakings encouraged not only the spreading of the Book, but also its translation. Finally, the movement passed over to America. Now, happily, we may say that the need not only of a copy of the Bible in every family, but even of an “everybody’s Bible” is felt in the whole of Protestant Europe and America.

So the time came when the spreading of the Bible could not be left to the private enterprise of printers and booksellers, who could neither give a sufficient guarantee of the accuracy of the text or the exactness of the version nor sell cheaply enough for the poor. So, under divine leading, the Bible societies, a century ago, became an undeniable need of the age, and in an incredibly short time they rose, one after another, both in Europe and America, as a quite new creation, to which we all are indebted for the surprising and abundant spreading of the Holy Scriptures which followed the Napoleonic period all over the world. In Europe the western churches took the lead, the central and northern followed, and America, though not involved itself in the Napoleonic overthrow of society, went on in the British line. The German “Enlightenment” had prepared the way for the French Revolution, and Napoleon completed this Revolution in subverting the whole continent. Out of this subversion a mighty Christian revival arose, and it was this revival that somewhat unexpectedly renewed and intensified the general demand for the Holy Scriptures. To this demand the institution everywhere of Bible societies was the surprising answer. So the revival gave the impulse to a never-before-heard-of distribution of the Bible, and on the other side the Bible distribution spread the revival.

ii.

It was the indispensable need of something *visible* or *perceptible* for obtaining the certainty and clearness of the *invisible*, that made itself felt. “The true worshipers,” Christ told us, “should worship the Father in *spirit* and *truth*.” But something *visible* always continued to be required by our human nature, and this visible support could

no longer be idols, nor images, nor the outward symbolical forms of Israel. The only thing that could give to man a clear communion with the Supreme Being was *the spoken word*, and this word should never cease to speak to us through all centuries in the Holy Scriptures. We are not a kind of ethereal spirits or souls; in our very nature the two elements of the visible form and the invisible essence are inseparably combined. Therefore our religious life cannot be satisfied by a merely spiritual feeling.

The soul always wants to join the visible with the invisible, and this joining of them, in its highest order, realizes itself in the sacred Book of the holy Revelation. It was in the *human voice* that God's invisible grace created the audible means for communication, and the perpetuating of this oral or spiritual revelation for mankind could only be guaranteed by a *written* and afterwards a *printed*, text. The Lord knew our need of the /6/ visible, or, to say it more clearly, he created us such that we could not be satisfied by an exclusively invisible communication with our Creator. Therefore, for instance, he ordained the Holy Sacraments as a *visible* support of our faith. So also our prayer shows us every day how we are in want of an *audible* expression of what moves us inwardly. If we kneel down, this expression is still more expressive. The same may be said our singing to the glory of God. A really pious man does not sing to the praise of the Lord because he feels it to be his duty, but because he *wants* to sing. He couldn't do without it. The merely inward feeling cannot satisfy us; we are no angels, we are men, and so for us an outwardly perceptible form is always needed in order to bring our inward feeling under the cognizance of our senses. In this same way now is also to be considered the need of a visible Word of God as we possess it our Bible.

The Roman Catholic Church felt the same need of the visible, but it tried to satisfy it in a quite different way; in the splendor of its buildings, in the exposition of sacred images, in brilliantly painted windows, in imposing altars, in enrapturing Gregorian songs, in attractive vestments, and touching and solemnly delivered services — all this an imitation of the symbolical and ceremonial service in the Temple of Sion. Protestants, on the contrary, always trying to hold the foremost rank among the worshippers in spirit and truth, aspired to a higher beauty than all this show could give; and sought and found it in the plain singing, not of a choir, but of all the people, in the spontaneous prayer of the pastors, and the inspired eloquence of a consoling preaching. But they did not therefore undervalue the *visible* revelation of God's presence in his Holy Scripture. When, going to bed, they see the Holy Book on the table, they feel a solemn feeling moving their hearts. When reading their evening

chapter they feel nearer to God, because they are listening to God in his Holy Word. And in their prayer that follows the reading, it is as their soul were giving the answer of devotion to their Father in heaven. When you are ill, the mere sight of the Bible in the hands of the nurse can give you a confident and consoling feeling. When you are quite alone in your cabin at sea, or in your hotel room, when traveling by land, and you take the Bible out of your traveling bag, it breaks your loneliness. An exuberant prodigality of spiritual feelings may be sweet, but in the long run it impoverishes you by one-sidedness.

We are no angels, we are no spirits, we are no naked and isolated souls; soul *and body* our God made us. We received from our Creator an *outward* form as well as an *inward* life, in order to belong at the same time both to the *visible* and to the *invisible* universe. The loss of this twofold being in death can only be the preparation for regaining it in the splendor of eternal life. We expect not only a new heaven, but also *a new earth*. Not only a sanctifying of our soul, but also a glorious renovation of our /7/ body. And, therefore, as long as we continue in this imperfect state our inward invisible being pants for such a *visible* revelation as the Lord has given us in the Book of the Holy Scriptures.

Man could do without the Scriptures as long as the *oral* revelation went on, while in that former period man's personal consciousness was still involved in the general consciousness of the mass, the nation, and the race. But the visible support of God's presence in the Holy Scriptures became the indispensable need of our human condition so soon as we had arrived at the individualistic stage of our human existence. It was therefore an unpardonable carelessness on the part of the Protestant churches, that they left for three centuries after the Reformation many of their members deprived of the visible symbol and pledge, which the Lord had entrusted to them in their Bible. It was this deprivation of the visible Bible that in the second half of the eighteenth century, when the great French Revolution approached, threw the poorer classes of our Protestant churches into a sadder despondence than their Roman Catholic fellowsufferers. While the Church of Rome exhibited the visible in her ceremonial services, to so many of the Protestant believers the visible presented itself merely in the two Sacraments. Therefore, while in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Rome preserved her revelation of the *visible* in her ceremonial services, but our Protestant churches lost their visible point of support, rationalism and criticism tearing in pieces the Holy Book, the dangerous Romantic period set in, and lost us so many eminent men to the old antagonists of the Reformation.

We may thank God that, this Romantic period having passed sooner than many had expected, the mysticism that as a natural reaction followed was in a quarter of a century obliged to retire to small private circles of no importance for the life of the Church. So the Holy Scriptures as the viable monument of God's revelation not only came back to the front, but now, by their immense distribution, even among the lowest classes of society, have become more and more the influential instrument, able to satisfy on an always broader line the inextinguishable longing of the believer for a visible, outwardly perceptible and transparent something, awaking in his senses the perception of the invisible presence and working of the Holy Ghost.

The two Sacraments embodied the believer's faith, only once for life in Baptism, and, let me say, monthly or tri-monthly in the Holy Supper. Not therefore, the two Sacraments, but the Holy Scriptures, were the believer's faithful companion through life. As a child, how many texts were committed to memory! All the knowledge he came to possess of eternal things he had borrowed from his Bible. With his Bible he rose every morning and often it had sanctified his dreams. Illustrated texts adorned the wall of his room. Not only texts, but whole portions of the Bible he often knew by heart. Every Sunday when he went to church it was from /8/ the Holy Scriptures that the divine breath came over him. In his private Bible he marked attractive text after text that it might appeal to his conscience and become to him a consolation in sorrow. Of an imperceptible nature were the feelings of the Divine Presence in his inner being, but in his visible life it was always the Holy Book that impressed him and brought to him the "good tidings" from heaven. Not as if his Bible became to him a magic talisman. Enchantment, sorcery and necromancy try to evoke by occult arts the hidden powers of nature from what in itself is but a stone or a piece of metal. As such an abuse the holy-water basin may be used. So it is with all magic chains, rings and coins, and all trifles of obscurantism. In our Holy Book, on the contrary, the visible text is the product not of magic and silent nature, but of the invisible Spirit.

In the same way in which the visible and invisible are joined and combined in our own blood and nerves, so in the Holy Scripture it is a divine revelation that, embodied in our human word, presents itself to our minds as a visible document, manifesting the invisible pledge of the Holy Ghost. So the Holy Scriptures are to us a visible fountain of invisible waters, and in these waters we imbibe the invisible strength of eternal life. It is just as in our watering places, where the sick are crowding together, longing to drink the visible water, knowing and believing that as they drink it, a hidden healing power is penetrating into their disturbed veins. Man in his very existence is a divine combination of the visible and invisible; so also are the Holy

Scriptures which the Lord gave to man, and hence arises the fact that the nature of the Bible for every true believer corresponds exactly with the character of his own entity.

iii.

The immense and unique benefit of the spreading of the Holy Book for our general human development becomes at once clear if you compare the Protestant and especially the western Protestant states of Europe with the Roman Catholic southern states. The three Scandinavian kingdoms hold, as everybody acknowledges, a higher rank than Spain; and so it is with Switzerland and Holland if compared with Portugal.

First of all the Bible favors in a wonderful degree the family life. It is true that also, in the Tyrol, for instance, though Roman Catholic, I found, at least among the peasantry, a kind of family prayer every morning; these prayers generally being read by the mistress of the house. But she did not pray spontaneously as we do; she read only, somewhat mechanically, the prescribed prayers from her prayer book. In four or five minutes it was all finished. Very little attention was paid to it. And I felt immediately that such a hurried home service could by no means be compared with the reading of the Bible at breakfast in our Protestant families. Our joint reading of the Bible every morning prevents the members of /9/ the family from coming down one after another, from taking their breakfast separately, and from leaving the house without having exchanged the morning greeting. Where there is a common morning prayer, all the members of the family are sitting together at the same table; they receive the same sanctifying impression; and every morning they renew the feeling that it was their Father in heaven who made them one flesh and one blood, and inspired them with the same warm feeling of family cohesion. This closer feeling of unity favors the home life, and can hardly understand what a precious gain, even in the social and moral aspect, it is that our young people do not become too soon accustomed to the often spoiling intercourse in the saloons, inns and amusement halls. A tender family life nourishes and fosters a deeper religious feeling. It leaves you unacquainted with many bad customs, and strengthens your conscience against many seductions. It balances our too egoistical inclinations. Even if we are obliged to pass the greater part of the day outside of the home, the breath of the family life, after morning prayers, follows us in our business-life and keeps us safe.

The second benefit we are indebted for to our Bible is that it enlarges our historical views and our world-feeling. Where no Bible reigns and no Christian school is opened to our youth, people really are acquainted only with their own folk, in their own land

and times. On the contrary, in the circles where the Bible prevails, the quite different life of the Orient is opened to us, and people become acquainted with the old life in Egypt, in Assyria, in Babylon, in Persia, and more especially in Israel, and the situation, the life and the past of these oriental countries is, among Sunday-school scholars, often better understood in its details than the past of their own village. This enlarges the general view.

The differences between Asia and Africa and between Africa and Europe are brought before every pupil in our Bible classes, and in these interesting differences God's providential leading is understood. We feel that we are in God's keeping and are preserved from that national self-adoration so common among people that know only their own country and their own century. Thus our understanding is wonderfully broadened, and the Bible teaches us how we belong, of course, to our *family* first, and in the second place to the *nation* in which we are born, but then, in the third place, also to the *world*, and in the world to *mankind*, inasmuch as both together are God's wide-spread architecture. This rich and detailed knowledge of oriental and occidental peoples, of a Jewish, Christian and pagan national life, the Bible presents to us, and opens at the same time a splendid view of the mission field. The Calvinistic Bible peoples, if I may call them so, became almost immediately the foremost colonial nations. The Bible told them that the kingdom of Christ should be extended to the end of the earth, and that the gospel was to be preached to every nation. So the missionary and the colonial interest united together, and the /10/ impulse to action which the Bible gave promoted both navigation and commerce.

More directly still, the larger distribution of the Bible has enriched the life of the Church. The style, the vocabulary, the heroic and pious examples, the memorable stories of the patriarchs and prophets, the detailed life of Christ and the brilliant struggle of his apostles deposited in the mind of the church-going people a mass of dates and facts and instances and expressions and sayings, allowing the preacher to give to what he had to say not an abstract, simple and general, but a vivid, varied and animated form. In the Roman Catholic village churches preaching never can be equivalent to the preaching in our churches, because this preparation of the mind of the hearers is missing. The hearers are not the well-prepared organ, on which the priest can play. Worse still is it, when modern theologians try to fill a half an hour with their far-fetched allegories in order, say, to undermine the truth of the glorious fact of Christ's resurrection.

Where the Bible dwells in the heart and lodges in the memory of the hearers, the hearer cannot be annoyed with abstract ideas and their allegoric contents, but the believers present feel inspired with a heavenly breath. In my country, at least, almost every sermon takes an hour or more, and, providing that it is a real Bible preaching, nobody complains.

The Bible, through its general distribution, has given rise in the same way to the Sunday school and its immense extension. Bible classes and young men's societies have had no other origin. The Bible has engendered, besides, such a rich popular literature and has in general cultivated such a taste for reading that one is struck everywhere in countries where the Bible is widely circulated by the many booksellers' shops, not only in the largest towns, but even in the smaller villages, compared to the rarity of such shops in the Roman Catholic countries. Enter a house where the Bible occupies the presidency and almost always you will find a smaller or greater family library. What is the study of the Bible, and you may say the higher study of science in a more general sense, in Spain compared with Germany? Technical, material knowledge prevails in every Italian university, but the problems of a higher order are left for investigation to the Protestant universities in the western and northern countries.

And now, if finally you ask for the effect of these differences on politics, do we not see the undeniable fact that the southern states of Europe do not stand and cannot stand on the same level with the Protestant states of the north, or with the United States of America? States where the Bible failed to obtain a lodgment are behind and backward in their democratic development and in the blessings of civil liberty. Already, in the seventeenth century, Holland was the refuge of the oppressed and persecuted. Great Britain shortly after enjoyed the same honor. The /11/ United States finally has become the asylum for all persecuted people. Of course, a new state of affairs is coming. Asia now looks forward to a new future, Russia has hazarded the first step beyond its childhood, and nobody can tell what an overwhelming power it will become when it arrives at its state of manhood. But looking at the political balance as it is now trembling before us, it is an undeniable fact that the powers actually in leadership are just the powers which owe their distinguished position to what the Bible has been for them, since the time of the Reformation.

I agree that there is a twofold drawback. The reliance of the people on the Bible, and the Bible only, has promoted, no doubt, some sectarian abuses. As the Bible calls every believer to read and to study the holy pages on his own responsibility, the

danger could not be avoided that as an overvaluing of every man's own understanding, combined with a lack of corporate feeling, has led to separation after separation, and finally even to an independentism by which at last all corporate Church idea has been annihilated. The higher privilege of individualism seems not to be attainable except at this dangerous risk. The single tree should remain part of the woodland to which it belongs, and the body of the woodland should draw its life power out of the earth, doing so by the roots that strike into the depth of the soil. Now these three factors should always combine, and so only can we remain in a sound state. The single tree here represents the individual, and the woodland is the body incorporate to which the single individual belongs, but the combination of both leads through their roots to the communion with God. The Church can only be well balanced if these three factors co-operate in the right way. It is the failure of the Church to unite these three requisites, which has always promoted sectarianism, and it has more than once happened that the Church has had to be corrected by the sects, when she neglected what the always one-sided sect was putting in a sharper light and bringing to the foreground.

The second drawback is the criticism that is always trying to place the Bible on its dissecting table and by its anatomizing is not only undermining the authority of the Holy Scriptures, but aims finally at its annihilation. This criticism had already gone, some years ago, so far that it contested every guarantee for the authenticity of every page of the Bible. Some have gone so far that the question has even been put, whether Christ were not himself a mere product of historical fancy. But still I say, do not judge them, but leave it to the Lord to condemn them and let them continue their anatomizing in full liberty, provided it be done on their own responsibility and not without your most earnest warning. The Lord will provide, and the all-evincing power of the Holy Ghost has now already infused, over against this tearing into pieces of the Holy Scriptures, such a confident conviction in the minds and the /12/ hearts of believers, that, for instance, in our Reformed Churches in Holland, served as they are by six hundred ministers, not one has lost his Bible and some who had lost it have regained it. I dare say, from Baur till to-day this all-overthrowing criticism has fortified more than shaken believers in their unchangeable faith. The Bible is and remains for the true believer the *visible* fountain of the *invisible*, life-giving waters of the almighty God.

Of course, I have left out America in my considerations. I have been invited to treat of Europe only, and in Europe the churches have gone through the three periods I have tried to describe, till finally they have arrived at their last or spiritual and

individualistic period, where they have found their pillar of support in the Holy Scriptures. The Pilgrim Fathers, on the contrary, did not finally *arrive* at this solution in America, as we did in Europe, but when coming to America they *started* from this very point. In the United States of America, from the very beginning, the faith of individual Christians has built on the Bible as on the Rock of Ages. So the Church in the new continent started from the point at which we did not arrive in Europe historically until the third and last period of our religious development.

Of course, what we have in common, in Europe and in America, is the danger, not of the indispensable criticism, in which also the believer has to engage, but of a delirious hypercriticism in its extravagant form. What incites to the first is our love of the Bible: what spurs on to the second is the deep-rooted and inveterate hatred which the self-sufficing intellect always has fostered against the very idea of a special Revelation. There are some university professors who, indulging in this hatred, cannot come to rest until the last page of the Bible shall be rent in pieces. Is it not as if we heard Christ flinging toward these learned men the cutting reproach: The divine flower which God presented to men in the Holy Book, under your overzealous criticism has withered and faded; and, finally, rent by your pen to tatters, has lost its unique life-renewing and invigorating fragrance. Here also there dominates an inevitable fate that brings its own doom; and all we can ask is, whether these learned men ever think of what it will be to them, when, in the day of resurrection, they also shall stand before their Supreme Judge, and will have to answer personally the heart-searching question: “What have you done with the Holy Scriptures, which God gave to mankind, and I entrusted to your care?”