

## Modern Man and Scripture: Protopresbyter Georges Florovsky



***Protopresbyter Georges Vasilievich Florovsky*** (AD 1893 – AD 1979), Russian Orthodox priest, educator, writer, Dean of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary, faculty member at Harvard and at Princeton University. He was one of the most important patristic orthodox theologians of the 20th century.

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### “Modern Man and Scripture”

by

Archpriest Georges Florovsky

Most of us have lost the integrity of the scriptural mind, even if some bits of biblical phraseology are retained. The modern man often complains that the truth of God is offered to him in an “archaic idiom” - i.e., in the

language of the Bible - which is no more his own and cannot be used spontaneously. It has recently been suggested that we should radically “demythologize” Scripture, meaning to replace the antiquated categories of the Holy Writ by something more modern.

We are in danger of losing the uniqueness of the Word of God in the process of continuous “reinterpretation.” But how can we interpret at all if we have forgotten the original language? Would it not be safer to bend our thought to the mental habits of the biblical language and to relearn the idiom of the Bible? No man can receive the Gospel unless he repents - “changes his mind.” For in the language of the Gospel “repentance” (*metanoite*) does not mean merely acknowledgment of and contrition for sins, but precisely a “change of mind” - a profound change of man’s mental and emotional attitude, an integral renewal of man’s self, which begins in his self-renunciation and is accomplished and sealed by the Spirit.

We are living now in an age of intellectual chaos and disintegration ... Probably the only luminous signpost we have to guide us through the mental fog of our desperate age is just the “faith which was once delivered unto the saints,” obsolete or archaic as the idiom of the early Church may seem to be, judged by our fleeting standards... “The Church is neither a museum of dead deposits nor a society of research;” the deposits are alive - *depositum junenescentis*, to use the phrase of St. Irenaeus.

When I read the ancient classics of Christian theology, the Fathers of the Church, I find them more relevant to the troubles and problems of my own time than the production of modern theologians. The Fathers were wrestling with existential problems, with those revelations of the eternal issues which were described and recorded in Holy Scripture. I would risk a suggestion that St. Athanasius and St. Augustine are much more up to date than many of our theological contemporaries. the reason is very simple: they were dealing with things and not with maps; they were concerned not so much with what man can believe as with what God had done for man.

We have, “in times such as this,” to enlarge our perspective, to acknowledge the masters of old, and to attempt for our own age an existential synthesis of Christian experience...

The Bible is by no means a *complete* collection of all historical, legislative and devotional writings available, but a *selection* of some, authorized and authenticated by the use (first of all liturgical) in the community, and finally by the formal authority of the Church. And there was some very definite purpose by which this “selection” was guided and checked. “And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written, that you might believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you might have life through His name” (Jn. 20:30-31). The same applies, more or less, to the whole Bible. Certain writings were selected, edited, and compiled, and brought together, and then commended to believers, to the people, as an authorized version of the divine message. The message is divine; it comes from God; it is the Word of God. But it is the faithful community that acknowledges the Word spoken and testifies to its truth. The sacred character of the Bible is ascertained by faith. The Bible as a book, was composed in the community and was meant primarily for its edification. The book and the Church cannot be separated. The book and the Covenant belong together, and the Covenant implies people. It was the People of the Covenant to whom the Word of God had been entrusted under the old dispensation (Rom. 3:2), and it is the Church of the Word Incarnate that keeps the message of the Kingdom. The Bible is the Word of God indeed, but the book stands by the testimony of the Church. The canon of the Bible is obviously established and authorized by the Church...

The Scriptures are indeed one Holy Scripture, one Holy Writ. There is one main theme and one main message through the whole story. For there is a story. Or, even more, the Bible itself is this story, the story of God’s dealing with His chosen people. The Bible records first of all God’s acts and mighty deeds. The process was initiated by God. There is a beginning and an end, which is also a goal. There is a starting point: the original

divine *fiat* - “in the beginning” (Gen 1:1). And there will be an end: “even so come” (Rev 22:20)... And this story is history. There is a process going on between these two terminal points. And this process has a definite direction. There is an ultimate goal, and ultimate consummation is expected. Every particular moment is correlated to both terms and has thereby its proper and unique place within the whole. No moment, therefore, can be understood except in the whole context and perspective.

God has spoken “at sundry times and in divers manners” (Heb 1:1). He has revealed Himself through ages, not once, but constantly, again and again. He has led His people from truth to truth. There are stages in His revelation: *per incrementa*.

The Bible is a book about God ... God is manifesting and revealing Himself. God intervenes in human life. And the Bible is not merely a human record of these divine interventions and deeds. It is a kind of divine intervention itself. It carries with itself a divine message. God’s deeds themselves constitute a message. No need therefore to escape time or history in order to meet God. For God meeting man in history, i.e., in the human element, in the midst of man’s daily history...

Revelation is the history of the Covenant. Recorded revelation, i.e., the Holy Scriptures, is therefore, above all, history. Law and prophets, psalms and prophecies, all are included and, as it were, woven into the living historical web. Revelation is not only a system of divine oracles. It is primarily the system of divine deeds; one might say, revelation was the path of God in history. And the climax was reached when God entered history Himself and for ever: when the Word of God was incarnate and “made man.” On the other hand, the Bible of revelation is also the book of human destiny. First of all, it is a book which narrates the creation, fall and salvation of man. It is the story of salvation, and therefore man organically belongs to the story. It shows us man in his obedience and in his obstinate rebellion, in his fall and in his restoration. And the whole human fate is condensed and exemplified in the destiny of Israel, old and

new, the chosen people of God, a people for God's own possession.

The fact of election is here of basic importance. One people has been elected, set apart from all other nations, constituted as a sacred oasis in the midst of human disorder. With one people on earth only did God establish His Covenant and grant His own sacred law. Here only a true priesthood has been created, even though but a provisional one. In this nation only true prophets were raised, who spoke words inspired by the Spirit of God. It was a sacred, though hidden center for the whole world, an oasis granted by God's mercy, in the midst of a fallen, sinful, lost and unredeemed world. All this is not the letter, but the very heart of the Biblical message. And all this came from God, there was no human merit or achievement. Yet, all this came for the sake of man, "for us men and for our salvation." All these privileges granted to the Israel of old were subordinate to the ultimate purpose, that of a universal salvation: "For salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). The redeeming purpose is ever universal indeed, but it is being accomplished always by means of separation, selection or setting apart. In the midst of human fall and ruin a sacred oasis is erected by God.

The Church is also an oasis still, set apart, though not taken out of the world. For again this oasis is not a refuge or shelter only, but rather a citadel, a vanguard of God.

There is a center in the Biblical story, or a crucial point on the line of the temporal events. There is a new beginning within the process, which does not, however, divide or cut it into parts, but rather gives to it an ultimate cohesion and unity. The distinction between the two Testaments belongs itself to the unity of the Biblical revelation. The two Testaments are to be carefully distinguished, never to be confused. Yet they are organically linked together, not as two systems only, but primarily in the person of the Christ. Jesus the Christ belongs to both. He is the fulfiller of the old dispensation and by the same act that He fulfills the old, "the Law and the prophets," he inaugurates the new, and thereby becomes the ultimate

fulfiller of both, i.e., of the whole. He is the very center of the Bible, just because He is the *arche* and the *telos* - the beginning and the end...

Revelation is preserved in the Church. Therefore, the Church is the proper and primary interpreter of revelation. It is protected and reinforced by written words; protected, but not exhausted. Human words are not more than signs. The testimony of the Spirit revives the written words. We do not mean now the occasional illumination of individuals by the Holy Spirit, but primarily the permanent assistance of the Spirit given to the Church, that is “the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (! Tim 3:15). The Scriptures need interpretation. Not the phrasing, but the message is the core. And the Church is the divinely appointed and permanent witness to the very truth and the full meaning of this message, simple because the Church belongs itself to the revelation, as the body of the Incarnate Lord. The proclamation of the Gospel, the preaching of the Word of God, obviously belongs to the *esse*, of the Church. The Church stands by its testimony and witness ... Moreover, this message is ever re-enacted in the life of the Church. Christ Himself is ever present in the Church, as the Redeemer and head of His Body, and continue His redeeming office in the Church, but precisely enacted. The sacred history is still continuing. The mighty deeds of God are still being performed...

The Scriptures are “inspired,” they are the Word of God. What is the inspiration can never be properly defined - there is a mystery therein. It is a mystery of the divine-human encounter. We cannot fully understand in what manner “God’s holy men” heard the Word of their Lord and even in their human transmission it was the voice of God. Therein lies the miracle and the mystery of the Bible, that it is the Word of God in human idiom...

The Word of God does not grow dim when it sounds on the tongue of man. For man is created in the image and likeness of God - the “analogical” man, the human word itself acquires new depth and strength and becomes transfigured...

The Church is “Apostolic” indeed. But the Church is also “Patristic.” She is intrinsically “the Church of the Fathers.” These two “notes” cannot be separated. Only by being “Patristic” is the Church truly “Apostolic” ... Indeed the teaching of the Fathers, and the dogma of the Church, are still the same “simple message” which has been once delivered and deposited, once for ever, by the Apostles. But not it is, as it were, properly, fully articulated. The Apostolic preaching is kept alive in the Church, not only merely preserved. In this sense, the teaching of the Fathers is a permanent category of Christian existence, a constant and ultimate measure and criterion of right faith. The Fathers are not only witnesses of the old faith. They are rather witnesses of the true faith. “The mind of the Fathers” is an intrinsic term of reference in Orthodox theology, no less than the world of Holy Scripture, and indeed never separated from it.

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