

A Theologico-Political Treatise, Part III

by

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Chapter 11

An Inquiry Whether The Apostles Wrote Their Epistles As Apostles And Prophets, Or Merely As Teachers; And An Explanation Of What Is Meant By An Apostle.

(1) No reader of the New Testament can doubt that the Apostles were prophets; but as a prophet does not always speak by revelation, but only, at rare intervals, as we showed at the end of Chap. I., we may fairly inquire whether the Apostles wrote their Epistles as prophets, by revelation and express mandate, as Moses, Jeremiah, and others did, or whether only as private individuals or teachers, especially as Paul, in Corinthians xiv:6, mentions two sorts of preaching.

(2) If we examine the style of the Epistles, we shall find it totally different from that employed by the prophets.

(3) The prophets are continually asserting that they speak by the command of God: "Thus saith the Lord," "The Lord of hosts saith," "The command of the Lord," &c.; and this was their habit not only in assemblies of the prophets, but also in their epistles containing revelations, as appears from the epistle of Elijah to Jehoram, 2 Chron. xxi:12, which begins, "Thus saith the Lord."

(4) In the Apostolic Epistles we find nothing of the sort. (5) Contrariwise, in I Cor. vii:40 Paul speaks according to his own opinion and in many passages we come across doubtful and perplexed phrase; such as, "We think, therefore," Rom. iii:28; "Now I think," [Endnote 24], Rom. viii:18, and so on. (6) Besides these, other expressions are met with very different from those used by the prophets. (7) For instance, 1 Cor. vii:6, "But I speak this by permission, not by commandment;" "I give my judgment as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful" (1 Cor. vii:25), and so on in many other passages. (8) We must also remark that in the aforesaid chapter the Apostle says that when he states that he has or has not the precept or commandment of God, he does not mean the precept or commandment of God revealed to himself, but only the words uttered by Christ in His Sermon on the Mount. (9) Furthermore, if we examine the manner in which the Apostles give out evangelical doctrine, we shall see that it differs materially from the method adopted by the prophets. (10) The Apostles everywhere reason as if they were arguing rather than prophesying; the prophecies, on the other hand, contain only dogmas and commands. (11) God is therein introduced not as speaking to reason, but as issuing decrees by His absolute fiat. (12) The authority of the prophets does not submit to discussion, for whosoever wishes to find rational ground for his arguments, by that very wish submits them to everyone's private judgment. (13) This Paul, inasmuch as he uses reason, appears to have done, for he says in 1 Cor. x:15, "I speak as to wise men, judge ye what I say." (14) The prophets, as we showed at the end of Chapter I., did not perceive what was revealed by virtue of their natural reason, and though there are certain passages in the Pentateuch which seem to be appeals to induction, they turn out, on nearer examination, to be nothing but peremptory commands. (15) For instance, when Moses

says, Deut. xxxi:27, "Behold, while I am yet alive with you, this day ye have been rebellious against the Lord; and how much more after my death," we must by no means conclude that Moses wished to convince the Israelites by reason that they would necessarily fall away from the worship of the Lord after his death; for the argument would have been false, as Scripture itself shows: the Israelites continued faithful during the lives of Joshua and the elders, and afterwards during the time of Samuel, David, and Solomon. (16) Therefore the words of Moses are merely a moral injunction, in which he predicts rhetorically the future backsliding of the people so as to impress it vividly on their imagination. (17) I say that Moses spoke of himself in order to lend likelihood to his prediction, and not as a prophet by revelation, because in verse 21 of the same chapter we are told that God revealed the same thing to Moses in different words, and there was no need to make Moses certain by argument of God's prediction and decree; it was only necessary that it should be vividly impressed on his imagination, and this could not be better accomplished than by imagining the existing contumacy of the people, of which he had had frequent experience, as likely to extend into the future.

(18) All the arguments employed by Moses in the five books are to be understood in a similar manner; they are not drawn from the armoury of reason, but are merely, modes of expression calculated to instil with efficacy, and present vividly to the imagination the commands of God. (19) However, I do not wish absolutely to deny that the prophets ever argued from revelation; I only maintain that the prophets made more legitimate use of argument in proportion as their knowledge approached more nearly to ordinary knowledge, and by this we know that they possessed a knowledge above the ordinary, inasmuch as they proclaimed absolute dogmas, decrees, or judgments. (20) Thus Moses, the chief of the prophets, never used legitimate argument, and, on the other hand, the long deductions and arguments of Paul, such as we find in the Epistle to the Romans, are in nowise written from supernatural revelation.

(21) The modes of expression and discourse adopted by the Apostles in the Epistles, show very clearly that the latter were not written by revelation and Divine command, but merely by the natural powers and judgment of the authors. (22) They consist in brotherly admonitions and courteous expressions such as would never be employed in prophecy, as for instance, Paul's excuse in Romans xv:15, "I have written the more boldly unto you in some sort, my brethren."

(23) We may arrive at the same conclusion from observing that we never read that the Apostles were commanded to write, but only that they went everywhere preaching, and confirmed their words with signs. (24) Their personal presence and signs were absolutely necessary for the conversion and establishment in religion of the Gentiles; as Paul himself expressly states in Rom. i:11, "But I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, to the end that ye may be established."

(25) It may be objected that we might prove in similar fashion that the Apostles did not preach as prophets, for they did not go to particular places, as the prophets did, by the command of God. (26) We read in the Old Testament that Jonah went to Nineveh to preach, and at the same time that he was expressly sent there, and told that he most

preach. (27) So also it is related, at great length, of Moses that he went to Egypt as the messenger of God, and was told at the same time what he should say to the children of Israel and to king Pharaoh, and what wonders he should work before them to give credit to his words. (28) Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel were expressly commanded to preach to the Israelites. Lastly, the prophets only preached what we are assured by Scripture they had received from God, whereas this is hardly ever said of the Apostles in the New Testament, when they went about to preach. (29) On the contrary, we find passages expressly implying that the Apostles chose the places where they should preach on their own responsibility, for there was a difference amounting to a quarrel between Paul and Barnabas on the subject (Acts xv:37, 38). (30) Often they wished to go to a place, but were prevented, as Paul writes, Rom. i:13, "Oftentimes I purposed to come to you, but was let hitherto;" and in I Cor. xvi:12, "As touching our brother Apollos, I greatly desired him to come unto you with the brethren, but his will was not at all to come at this time: but he will come when he shall have convenient time."

(31) From these expressions and differences of opinion among the Apostles, and also from the fact that Scripture nowhere testifies of them, as of the ancient prophets, that they went by the command of God, one might conclude that they preached as well as wrote in their capacity of teachers, and not as prophets: but the question is easily solved if we observe the difference between the mission of an Apostle and that of an Old Testament prophet. (32) The latter were not called to preach and prophesy to all nations, but to certain specified ones, and therefore an express and peculiar mandate was required for each of them; the Apostles, on the other hand, were called to preach to all men absolutely, and to turn all men to religion. (33) Therefore, whithersoever they went, they were fulfilling Christ's commandment; there was no need to reveal to them beforehand what they should preach, for they were the disciples of Christ to whom their Master Himself said (Matt. X:19, 20): "But, when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what ye shall speak, for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak." (34) We therefore conclude that the Apostles were only indebted to special revelation in what they orally preached and confirmed by signs (see the beginning of Chap. 11.); that which they taught in speaking or writing without any confirmatory signs and wonders they taught from their natural knowledge. (See I Cor. xiv:6.) (35) We need not be deterred by the fact that all the Epistles begin by citing the imprimatur of the Apostleship, for the Apostles, as I will shortly show, were granted, not only the faculty of prophecy, but also the authority to teach. (36) We may therefore admit that they wrote their Epistles as Apostles, and for this cause every one of them began by citing the Apostolic imprimatur, possibly with a view to the attention of the reader by asserting that they were the persons who had made such mark among the faithful by their preaching, and had shown by many marvelous works that they were teaching true religion and the way of salvation. (37) I observe that what is said in the Epistles with regard to the Apostolic vocation and the Holy Spirit of God which inspired them, has reference to their former preaching, except in those passages where the expressions of the Spirit of God and the Holy Spirit are used to signify a mind pure, upright, and devoted to God. (38) For instance, in 1 Cor. vii:40, Paul says: "But she is happier if she so abide, after my judgment, and I think also that I have the Spirit of God." (39) By the Spirit of God the Apostle here refers to his mind, as we may see from the context: his meaning is as follows: "I account blessed a widow who

does not wish to marry a second husband; such is my opinion, for I have settled to live unmarried, and I think that I am blessed." (40) There are other similar passages which I need not now quote.

(41) As we have seen that the Apostles wrote their Epistles solely by the light of natural reason, we must inquire how they were enabled to teach by natural knowledge matters outside its scope. (42) However, if we bear in mind what we said in Chap. VII. of this treatise our difficulty will vanish: for although the contents of the Bible entirely surpass our understanding, we may safely discourse of them, provided we assume nothing not told us in Scripture: by the same method the Apostles, from what they saw and heard, and from what was revealed to them, were enabled to form and elicit many conclusions which they would have been able to teach to men had it been permissible.

(43) Further, although religion, as preached by the Apostles, does not come within the sphere of reason, in so far as it consists in the narration of the life of Christ, yet its essence, which is chiefly moral, like the whole of Christ's doctrine, can readily, be apprehended by the natural faculties of all.

(44) Lastly, the Apostles had no lack of supernatural illumination for the purpose of adapting the religion they had attested by signs to the understanding of everyone so that it might be readily received; nor for exhortations on the subject: in fact, the object of the Epistles is to teach and exhort men to lead that manner of life which each of the Apostles judged best for confirming them in religion. (45) We may here repeat our former remark, that the Apostles had received not only the faculty of preaching the history, of Christ as prophets, and confirming it with signs, but also authority for teaching and exhorting according as each thought best. (46) Paul (2 Tim. i:11), "Whereunto I am appointed a preacher, and an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles;" and again (I Tim. ii:7), "Whereunto I am ordained a preacher and an apostle (I speak the truth in Christ and lie not), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and verity." (47) These passages, I say, show clearly the stamp both of the apostleship and the teachership: the authority for admonishing whomsoever and wheresoever he pleased is asserted by Paul in the Epistle to Philemon, v:8: "Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, yet," &c., where we may remark that if Paul had received from God as a prophet what he wished to enjoin Philemon, and had been bound to speak in his prophetic capacity, he would not have been able to change the command of God into entreaties. (48) We must therefore understand him to refer to the permission to admonish which he had received as a teacher, and not as a prophet. (49) We have not yet made it quite clear that the Apostles might each choose his own way of teaching, but only that by virtue of their Apostleship they were teachers as well as prophets; however, if we call reason to our aid we shall clearly see that an authority to teach implies authority to choose the method. (50) It will nevertheless be, perhaps, more satisfactory to draw all our proofs from Scripture; we are there plainly told that each Apostle chose his particular method (Rom. xv: 20): "Yea, so have I strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation." (51) If all the Apostles had adopted the same method of teaching, and had all built up the Christian religion on the same foundation, Paul would have had no reason to call the work of a fellow-Apostle

"another man's foundation," inasmuch as it would have been identical with his own: his calling it another man's proved that each Apostle built up his religious instruction on different foundations, thus resembling other teachers who have each their own method, and prefer instructing quite ignorant people who have never learnt under another master, whether the subject be science, languages, or even the indisputable truths of mathematics. (52) Furthermore, if we go through the Epistles at all attentively, we shall see that the Apostles, while agreeing about religion itself, are at variance as to the foundations it rests on. (53) Paul, in order to strengthen men's religion, and show them that salvation depends solely on the grace of God, teaches that no one can boast of works, but only of faith, and that no one can be justified by works (Rom. iii:27,28); in fact, he preaches the complete doctrine of predestination. (54) James, on the other hand, states that man is justified by works, and not by faith only (see his Epistle, ii:24), and omitting all the disputations of Paul, confines religion to a very few elements.

(55) Lastly, it is indisputable that from these different ground; for religion selected by the Apostles, many quarrels and schisms distracted the Church, even in the earliest times, and doubtless they will continue so to distract it for ever, or at least till religion is separated from philosophical speculations, and reduced to the few simple doctrines taught by Christ to His disciples; such a task was impossible for the Apostles, because the Gospel was then unknown to mankind, and lest its novelty should offend men's ears it had to be adapted to the disposition of contemporaries (2 Cor. ix:19, 20), and built up on the groundwork most familiar and accepted at the time. (56) Thus none of the Apostles philosophized more than did Paul, who was called to preach to the Gentiles; other Apostles preaching to the Jews, who despised philosophy, similarly, adapted themselves to the temper of their hearers (see Gal. ii. 11), and preached a religion free from all philosophical speculations. (57) How blest would our age be if it could witness a religion freed also from all the trammels of superstition!

Chapter 12

Of The True Original Of The Divine Law, And Wherefore Scripture Is Called Sacred, And The Word Of God. How That, In SO Far As It Contains The Word Of God, It Has Come Down To Us Uncorrupted.

(1) Those who look upon the Bible as a message sent down by God from Heaven to men, will doubtless cry out that I have committed the sin against the Holy Ghost because I have asserted that the Word of God is faulty, mutilated, tampered with, and inconsistent; that we possess it only in fragments, and that the original of the covenant which God made with the Jews has been lost. (2) However, I have no doubt that a little reflection will cause them to desist from their uproar: for not only reason but the expressed opinions of prophets and apostles openly proclaim that God's eternal Word and covenant, no less than true religion, is Divinely inscribed in human hearts, that is, in the human mind, and that this is the true original of God's covenant, stamped with His own seal, namely, the idea of Himself, as it were, with the image of His Godhood.

(3) Religion was imparted to the early Hebrews as a law written down, because they were at that time in the condition of children, but afterwards Moses (Deut. xxx:6) and Jeremiah (xxxi:33) predicted a time coming when the Lord should write His law in their hearts. (4) Thus only the Jews, and amongst them chiefly the Sadducees, struggled for the law written on tablets; least of all need those who bear it inscribed on their hearts join in the contest. (5) Those, therefore, who reflect, will find nothing in what I have written repugnant either to the Word of God or to true religion and faith, or calculated to weaken either one or the other: contrariwise, they will see that I have strengthened religion, as I showed at the end of Chapter X.; indeed, had it not been so, I should certainly have decided to hold my peace, nay, I would even have asserted as a way out of all difficulties that the Bible contains the most profound hidden mysteries; however, as this doctrine has given rise to gross superstition and other pernicious results spoken of at the beginning of Chapter V., I have thought such a course unnecessary, especially as religion stands in no need of superstitious adornments, but is, on the contrary, deprived by such trappings of some of her splendour.

(6) Still, it will be said, though the law of God is written in the heart, the Bible is none the less the Word of God, and it is no more lawful to say of Scripture than of God's Word that it is mutilated and corrupted. (7) I fear that such objectors are too anxious to be pious, and that they are in danger of turning religion into superstition, and worshipping paper and ink in place of God's Word.

(8) I am certified of thus much: I have said nothing unworthy of Scripture or God's Word, and I have made no assertions which I could not prove by most plain argument to be true. (9) I can, therefore, rest assured that I have advanced nothing which is impious or even savours of impiety.

(10) from what I have said, assume a licence to sin, and without any reason, at I confess that some profane men, to whom religion is a burden, may, the simple dictates of their lusts conclude that Scripture is everywhere faulty and falsified, and that therefore its authority is null; but such men are beyond the reach of help, for nothing, as the pro verb has it, can be said so rightly that it cannot be twisted into wrong. (11) Those who wish to give rein to their lusts are at no loss for an excuse, nor were those men of old who possessed the original Scriptures, the ark of the covenant, nay, the prophets and apostles in person among them, any better than the people of to-day. (12) Human nature, Jew as well as Gentile, has always been the same, and in every age virtue has been exceedingly rare.

(13) Nevertheless, to remove every scruple, I will here show in what sense the Bible or any inanimate thing should be called sacred and Divine; also wherein the law of God consists, and how it cannot be contained in a certain number of books; and, lastly, I will show that Scripture, in so far as it teaches what is necessary for obedience and salvation, cannot have been corrupted. (14) From these considerations everyone will be able to judge that I have neither said anything against the Word of God nor given any foothold to impiety.

(15) A thing is called sacred and Divine when it is designed for promoting piety, and continues sacred so long as it is religiously used: if the users cease to be pious, the thing ceases to be sacred: if it be turned to base uses, that which was formerly sacred becomes unclean and profane. (16) For instance, a certain spot was named by the patriarch Jacob the house of God, because he worshipped God there revealed to him: by the prophets the same spot was called the house of iniquity (see Amos v:5, and Hosea x:5), because the Israelites were wont, at the instigation of Jeroboam, to sacrifice there to idols. (17) Another example puts the matter in the plainest light. (18) Words gain their meaning solely from their usage, and if they are arranged according to their accepted signification so as to move those who read them to devotion, they will become sacred, and the book so written will be sacred also. (19) But if their usage afterwards dies out so that the words have no meaning, or the book becomes utterly neglected, whether from unworthy motives, or because it is no longer needed, then the words and the book will lose both their use and their sanctity: lastly, if these same words be otherwise arranged, or if their customary meaning becomes perverted into its opposite, then both the words and the book containing them become, instead of sacred, impure and profane.

(20) From this it follows that nothing is in itself absolutely sacred, or profane, and unclean, apart from the mind, but only relatively thereto. (21) Thus much is clear from many passages in the Bible. (22) Jeremiah (to select one case out of many) says (chap. vii:4), that the Jews of his time were wrong in calling Solomon's Temple, the Temple of God, for, as he goes on to say in the same chapter, God's name would only be given to the Temple so long as it was frequented by men who worshipped Him, and defended justice, but that, if it became the resort of murderers, thieves, idolaters, and other wicked persons, it would be turned into a den of malefactors.

(23) Scripture, curiously enough, nowhere tells us what became of the Ark of the Covenant, though there is no doubt that it was destroyed, or burnt together with the Temple; yet there was nothing which the Hebrews considered more sacred, or held in greater reverence. (24) Thus Scripture is sacred, and its words Divine so long as it stirs mankind to devotion towards God: but if it be utterly neglected, as it formerly was by the Jews, it becomes nothing but paper and ink, and is left to be desecrated or corrupted: still, though Scripture be thus corrupted or destroyed, we must not say that the Word of God has suffered in like manner, else we shall be like the Jews, who said that the Temple which would then be the Temple of God had perished in the flames. (25) Jeremiah tells us this in respect to the law, for he thus chides the ungodly of his time, "Wherefore, say you we are masters, and the law of the Lord is with us? (26) Surely it has been given in vain, it is in vain that the pen of the scribes " (has been made) - that is, you say falsely that the Scripture is in your power, and that you possess the law of God; for ye have made it of none effect.

(27) So also, when Moses broke the first tables of the law, he did not by any means cast the Word of God from his hands in anger and shatter it - such an action would be inconceivable, either of Moses or of God's Word - he only broke the tables of stone, which, though they had before been holy from containing the covenant wherewith the Jews had bound themselves in obedience to God, had entirely lost their sanctity when the covenant had been violated by the worship of the calf, and were, therefore, as liable to perish as the ark of the covenant. (28) It is thus scarcely to be wondered at, that the original documents of Moses are no longer extant, nor that the books we possess met with the fate we have described, when we consider that the true original of the Divine covenant, the most sacred object of all, has totally perished.

(29) Let them cease, therefore, who accuse us of impiety, inasmuch as we have said nothing against the Word of God, neither have we corrupted it, but let them keep their anger, if they would wreak it justly, for the ancients whose malice desecrated the Ark, the Temple, and the Law of God, and all that was held sacred, subjecting them to corruption. (30) Furthermore, if, according to the saying of the Apostle in 2 Cor. iii:3, they possessed "the Epistle of Christ, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not in tables of stone, but in the fleshy tables of the heart," let them cease to worship the letter, and be so anxious concerning it.

(31) I think I have now sufficiently shown in what respect Scripture should be accounted sacred and Divine; we may now see what should rightly be understood by the expression, the Word of the Lord; debar (the Hebrew original) signifies word, speech, command, and thing. (32) The causes for which a thing is in Hebrew said to be of God, or is referred to Him, have been already detailed in Chap. I., and we can therefrom easily gather what meaning Scripture attaches to the phrases, the word, the speech, the command, or the thing of God. (33) I need not, therefore, repeat what I there said, nor what was shown under the third head in the chapter on miracles. (34) It is enough to mention the repetition for the better understanding of what I am about to say - viz., that the Word of the Lord when it has reference to anyone but God Himself, signifies that Divine law treated of in Chap. IV.; in other words, religion, universal and catholic to the whole human race, as

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