A Quest to Know What It Means to Be Human

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Posted on January 25, 2010 by Fr. Ted

When I was a student at St. Vladimir’s Seminary in the mid-1970’s I had a great interest in understanding, “what does it mean to be human?” I had started my college career as a chemistry major (and considered myself an atheist) and then became more interested in anthropology, sociology and psychology. The more I became interested in the humanities as well as in humanity, the more I became open to theology. The fact that theology and science were antagonistically colliding and separating in academia was not much of a concern to me – I was trying to pull my realms of knowledge together even if some felt this an inconceivable impossibility. In the early 1970’s I wrote a paper in an anthropology class at Ohio State on Teilhard de Chardin, only to discover that teleology of any kind was not considered science, even though Teilhard was a well known and respected anthropologist. I was trying to pull together pieces of the intellectual world around me, while these same forces were pushing away from each other as forcefully as Newton’s Third Law of Motion suggests. I had come to believe that the scientific effort to understand the world while completely dismissing even remotely theological ideas was an incomplete way of comprehending the universe. Humans were in fact more than mere chemical reactions; even though we could precisely determine the chemical composition of a human, that in itself was inadequate for explaining what a human is or what it means to be human. And so I left my secular pursuit to look at humanity through the lens of theology.

At seminary I discovered there was not much interest in science – Orthodoxy was keeping a distance from heterodoxy and science wasn’t even on the radar. While the faculty was not promoting biblical literalism, there was an obvious tension when secular or heterodox biblical scholarship was brought to bear on various scripture passages. The faculty might be engaging the intellectual world all around as they traveled throughout the country representing Orthodoxy, but the seminary itself was preserved as a tiny Orthodox island in a vast sea of American, Western, modern, Enlightenment, heterodox thinking. Roman Catholic Teilhard de Chardin was no more welcomed here than in secular academia. I was struggling with how to bring together the knowledge I had from science and my secular education with the knowledge given through theology,
even while others were working hard to keep these realms of knowing separate from each other.

I had a question which I wanted to work on while I was at seminary, but the pursuit of that question was visibly discouraged. My question: Was John 1:32-34, John the Forerunner’s witness that the Spirit descended and REMAINED on Jesus the undoing of God’s removing the Spirit from humanity in Genesis 6:3? My proposal that this be my thesis project was rejected, though I wasn’t told why. I am guessing now that the reason the faculty was not willing for me to explore my question had to do with their own desire to quash any search that even remotely related to Fr. Sergius Bulgakov’s Sophiology. I knew nothing back then of the controversies swirling around Sophiology or Bulgakov. But having read some of his works more recently, it struck me that he was the reason I was not given encouragement back then to pursue my interest, for certainly had I pursued the study I would have soon come to Bulgakov’s writings as they were perhaps among the few directly related to my question. But having read (though not comprehended) Bulgakov now, I do not find the idea of Sophiology attractive nor of particular interest to my question about the relationship of Genesis 6:3 to John 1:32-34, nor to what I still find intriguing about the question, “what does it mean to be human?”

Fr. Georges Florovsky

There are a certain group of Russian Orthodox Christian intellectuals of the last 2 centuries whose writings are immensely attractive and persuasive to me. I thank them for having made it possible for me to find my way to Christ and the Holy Trinity. Their ideas certainly were quite active in St. Vladimir’s Seminary in the 1970’s as some of the faculty there were certainly steeped in this tradition. They were for me a lifeblood – for they did attempt to tie together the cosmos which we experience and attempt to comprehend through science with the knowledge offered through the social sciences and
theology. I am forever grateful to all of these people for their efforts. You can read about some of them in recent books like Michael Plekon’s TRADITION ALIVE: ON THE CHURCH AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IN OUR TIME, Nicholas Afanasiev’s THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, or THE TEACHINGS OF MODERN CHRISTIANITY ON LAW, POLITICS AND HUMAN NATURE.

I intend in this series of blogs to explore my questions about what it means to be human and the relationship of Genesis 6:3 and John 1:32-34. I will do so by especially concentrating on the writings of Fr. Georges Florovsky who certainly is in that Russian Orthodox Christian intellectual tradition which drew me to Christianity as I tried to understand what it is to be human. I will be focusing on two of Florovsky’s writings: BIBLE, CHURCH, TRADITION: AN EASTERN ORTHODOX VIEW (especially chapters 2-5), and on his article “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Revelation”, which appeared in THE CHRISTIAN EAST, Vol XIII, No. 2 (1932). [I want to give a special thanks to Eleana Silk, Librarian at St. Vladimir’s Seminary for her help in locating this article].

**Genesis 6:3 and John 1:32-34**

This is the 2nd blog in this series which began with A Quest to Know What It Means To Be Human. In this blog I will present an anthropological question which intrigued me early on in my Christian sojourn. In future blogs I will turn my attention to comments by Fr. Georges Florovsky concerning scripture, the Spirit, revelation and the Church. While most of the discussion of ancestral sin or original sin centers on Genesis 3 and the Fall of Eve and Adam, Genesis 6:3 offers a further word on the effects of the Fall on humanity.

Then the LORD said, “My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years.”
God’s decision to withdraw His breath/spirit (*ruah, pneuma*) from humanity and not allow it to abide in humans forever, but only temporarily, has implication for biblical anthropology. But what these implications are, and how they might differ from God’s decision that death is the end result of sin, or that humans cannot live in Paradise, is not spelled out. It is not a theme taken up explicitly by the Old or New Testament writers. St. Paul certainly acknowledges the sin of Eve and Adam in bringing mortality to all humanity, but he does not comment on Genesis 6:3. St. Paul according to modern biblical scholars is among the very first to focus on the sin of Adam and Eve and its theological implications; for the story of Adam and Eve prior to Paul played no great role in the Jewish Scriptures and Eve and Adam are rarely mentioned in the canonical writings of Israel outside of Genesis 2-4 (Eve is not mentioned by name outside of Genesis 2-4 in the canonical Jewish Scriptures, though is mentioned once in Tobit and twice by St. Paul. Adam plays no role in the canonical Jewish scriptures outside of Genesis 2-5, but is frequently mentioned in the Jewish Apocrypha – found in the Septuagint and thus the Christian scriptures - and is referenced 8 times in the New Testament, 6 by St. Paul). St. Paul clearly sees the death and resurrection of Christ as being God’s plan of salvation in dealing with human sin and mortality which entered into the world with Eve and Adam.

However, in the Gospel tradition there is this unusual story:

The next day he (John the Forerunner and Baptizer) saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who
sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”  

(John 1:29-34 NRSV)

The One who takes away the sins of the world turns out to be the very One upon whom the Spirit descends and REMAINS. What is the significance of the Spirit remaining on Christ – to what precedent does this event refer? The very sign by which John the Baptist is told he will recognize the Christ is that he will see the Spirit remaining on him. (The Greek word for “remain” in the Septuagint’s Genesis 6 is the same root word as “remain” in John 13:2-34). Does the evangelist John have in mind the undoing of the curse by God as stated in Genesis 6:3? The new creation ushered in by God’s Kingdom breaking into the world in Jesus begins with the restoration of humanity to its natural human state – in communion with and in possession of the Spirit of God. The Feast of Theophany not only reveals the Trinity to us, it also reveals what it is to be fully human – to have the breath/spirit of God remain in us as God intended for humanity from the beginning when He formed the first human being.

In Genesis 2:7, God breathes the breath of life (= His Spirit) into the face of the man which God had formed from the dust of the earth, and the man became a living soul, a living being. It is this soul which is the very locus of Divinity touching and interfacing with the created humanity. God’s breath/spirit (the Greek and Hebrew word can be translated either way) is divinity touching humanity. The soul is the interface between the created world and the Divine Life.

After the catastrophic rejection of God’s Lordship by Eve and Adam and their disobedience of his command not to eat of the fruit of the tree of life, God’s warning about death becoming part of the human condition comes true. But it is not physical death which first strikes Adam and humanity, but spiritual death. The humans become afraid of their Creator (Genesis 3:10 – would a little fear of God have been good for them a little earlier? God apparently didn’t intend for His humans to live in fear of Him). The humans are expelled from God’s Garden of Delight and from His presence. Then as Genesis 6:3 records God says, “My Spirit shall not remain with these people forever,
for they are flesh.” The human creatures, male and female made in the image and likeness of God no longer are to have God’s Spirit permanently dwelling in them. However we conceive and understand the Genesis narrative – as history, poetry, symbolism, typology or a prefiguring – we do know that something happened to humanity. The result of sin – the entrance of death into the human condition and the loss of the Spirit – changes the very relationship that humans have with their Creator. The Breath/Spirit of God no longer dwells permanently in humans.

**Prophets & Scriptures: The Continued Presence of God’s Spirit**

Posted on January 29, 2010 by Fr. Ted

This is the 3rd blog in this series which began with *A Quest to Know What It Means To Be Human*. The 2nd blog was *Genesis 6:3 and John 1:32-34*. The result of sin – the entrance of death into the human condition and the loss of the Spirit – changes the very relationship that humans have with their Creator. The Breath/Spirit of God no longer dwells permanently in humans. As Genesis 6:3 records God says, “My Spirit shall not remain with these people forever, for they are flesh.” Humanity loses its exclusive life in the presence of God in His Garden, and thus according to the Scriptures begins the history of humankind in our world. The story is laden with theology, and truthfully is more about us today than about history or archeology – for the story tells us about who we are and why we live as mortals subject to death if there is a good and loving Creator.

God does not give up completely on His human creatures, for He provides a continued means for them to have relationship to Him through His Spirit. God continues to speak to humanity through His prophets by the Holy Spirit. The word spoken to the prophets is recorded in Scripture. The Scriptures became for us a way to have a continued
relationship with God through the Spirit; though now the Spirit is mediated first through the prophets and then through the written record of the received Word. The prophets and then the Scriptures which record their word are inspired – God breathed into them. God’s people of the Old Covenant breathed in these Scriptures and were inspired by them. The Scriptures became the place where humanity could still breathe the breath of God which no longer abided permanently in humankind. Thus the Scriptures served as an intermediary, an inspired one, between us and God – they contain God’s revelation to us; in the incarnation of the Word, they become for us a restoration of our relationship with God. Our souls remain nurtured by God by the Spirit through the Scriptures and through the chosen people of God who authenticate the Scriptures, witnessing to their power and truthfulness. The human effort to experience God’s Spirit is also recorded in these same inspired Scriptures. Israel and then the Church were given the Scriptures so that we could exactly maintain the human relationship through the Spirit with the Creator.

In Christ, the Spirit, whom God had withdrawn from humanity and not permitted to reside permanently with us, is restored to humanity. In Christ the Spirit descends on the man Jesus, AND REMAINS! In this theandric event of incarnate salvation, the Scriptures – which served as the means through which we had continued relationship with God’s Spirit – are also revealed as a witness to Christ. Our relationship to God through the Spirit which was limited to the Scriptures – God’s Word – now is fully revealed and realized in the incarnation of the Word of God. The Jews were entrusted with these oracles (Romans 3:2) but erred in failing to understand the oracles were but a prefiguring and a witness to the incarnate Word of God. Because they thought the Scriptures were the final gift of God, they failed to see that the Scriptures witnessed to the Word incarnate (John 5:39-40). The Jews thought having the Scriptures gave them an eternal place in God’s plan, while the reality was the Scriptures were intended to prepare them for the incarnation of the Word.

“...our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry of death, chiseled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory so that the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses’ face because of the glory of his face, a glory now set aside, how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory?” (2 Corinthians 3:5-7)
Now, the Word becomes flesh (John 1:14) and humanity once again receives God’s Spirit and relates to God through the Spirit. The Word is incarnate both of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. The Theotokos accepted the role God intended for Israel – to become the people in whom His Word becomes flesh. The written Word was a prefiguring of the incarnation of the Word in the flesh, but it was not salvation – had it been, then Christ was unnecessary. As it is the incarnation of the Word of God restored to humanity the Spirit of God. Additionally, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the Son of God prepared humanity for the coming of God’s Spirit upon all flesh at Pentecost. The role of Scriptures in salvation is now revealed as well – it is not sola scriptura, for Scripture bears witness to Christ, and now in Christ we receive once again the breath of God as God created us to do. As Fr. Florovsky wrote (“The Work of the Holy Spirit in Revelation”, THE CHRISTIAN EAST, Vol XIII, No. 2 (1932):

“God speaks so that man should hear Him. God created man in His image and likeness that man should listen for His Voice and Word, should hear it, and, even more, that he should treasure it, remember it, and keep it.”

“The scriptures transmit and preserve for us the Divine Voice in the tongue of man. The scriptures transmit and preserve for us the Divine Word such as it had been heard, such as it sounded in the receptive soul of man. The mystery of Divine inspiration is not only that God spoke to man, but also that man was listening to God and heard Him.”

“... Therein lies the significance of the Old Testament Divine visions, of the Old Testament Revelations. In them there is a certain essential anthropomorphism and this not so much because of the weakness of human understanding, or from a sense of ‘adaptability,’ but as a foretaste of the coming incarnation. It is already in the Old Testament that the Divine Word becomes human,
is incarnated in the human tongue. ... What is human is not suppressed or swept away by Divine inspiration; it is only transfigured. The supernatural does not go counter to what is natural.”

God created humans precisely to receive/to hear His revelation. Not only could we hear God, but God gifted us to record this divine Word so that future generations as well could now experience the revelation! We are given by God the ability to experience the transcendent (that which is not human, but divine) and to abstract from it meaning. It wasn’t so much that God took His time to make His revelation known, but that we humans needed the time to mature in our understanding of the world and of God. One only has to think about the human understanding of mathematics such as reported in the book **UNKNOWN QUANTITY: A REAL AND IMAGINARY HISTORY OF ALGEBRA**. Humans have a unique ability to think in ever greater abstract terms and to derive meaning from the abstract. That God’s word could be heard by some, and then recorded for all to hear is a growing understanding of God. That these same written words – a concrete expression of God’s word (written in stone!) – could then be both our continued experience of God’s Spirit and a prefiguring of God’s plan takes humanity to the depth of God’s thought and the height of theology.

**Florovsky: Scripture and Revelation**

Posted on February 1, 2010 by Fr. Ted

This is the 4th blog in this series which began with A Quest to Know What It Means to be Human, 2nd was Genesis 6:3 and John 1:32-34, then Prophets & Scriptures: The Continued Presence of God’s Spirit.
In Genesis 6:3, God says that His Spirit will no longer permanently abide in His human creatures since they have rebelled against Him. In John 1:32-34, the Messiah comes and is recognized because the Spirit descends on Him and remains, thus undoing the curse which had fallen on humankind as a result of the Ancestral Sin. Prior to the Incarnation of God in Christ, God has allowed humans continued access to the Spirit through the Prophets by whom the Holy Spirit spoke and through the inspired Scriptures in which were recorded the words of the prophets, God’s revelation to humankind. Jesus, the Word of God become flesh, restores humanity to its proper relationship with God in the Spirit. The Scriptures, sacred to Jews and Christians are revealed as prefiguring the incarnation of the Word and of witnessing to the Christ. In this and the next 2 blogs, we will consider the words of Fr. Georges Florovsky on revelation, Scriptures, the Church and Tradition. The quotes from Fr. Florovsky come either from his book BIBLE, CHURCH, TRADITION: AN EASTERN ORTHODOX VIEW (from now on referred to as BCT:AOEV) or from his article “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Revelation”, THE CHRISTIAN EAST, Vol XIII, No. 2 (1932) (referred to as TWHSIR).

Fr. Florovsky considers “revelation” to be a specific experience of God – not learning something about God. Things about God might be manifest to us through nature or other people, but he says this is not revelation. “In Nature, visible and invisible, God is manifested, not revealed” (TWHSIR). Here Florovsky takes Romans 1:19 to mean that nature can tell us ABOUT God (manifest the existence of God to us), but this is not a direct experience of God (which is revelation proper). These traces of God we can see in creation, things that might make us think about a Creator, or things which make us conscious of His existence, don’t directly reveal God to us. They may be a witness to us about God’s existence and perhaps reveal things ABOUT God to us, however, this does
not give us a vision of God, a Theophany, though it might serve as reason for us to seek this God whose existence is manifested to us in “shadows.”

“In the ‘Religion of Nature’ man recognizes and divines God; seeks after Him and reaches out for Him, for ‘He be not far from every one of us.’ But this is only the path of man towards God. Revelation is the path of God towards man.” (TWHSIR)

Revelation proper occurs not in nature but in the supernatural, in the transcendent. God’s Word is supernatural & transcendent, but if we encounter it in Scriptures, in the written Word, that is a manifestation of God, which might lead to revelation. We seek out God because we hear of His existence from others or see traces of Him in the world around us, but in Scripture as well as in the people of God it is possible that God will come to us to reveal Himself.

“Revelation is not only a system of Divine words, but, above all, the system of Divine works.” (TWHSIR)

“Revelation ... 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 book of revelation is as well 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.” (BCT:AE0V, p 21)

John 15:16

“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. ... No need therefore to escape time or history in order to meet God. For God is meeting man in history, i.e. in the human element, in the midst of man’s daily existence. History belongs to God, and God enters human history. The Bible is intrinsically historical: it is a record of the divine acts, not so much a presentation of God’s eternal mysteries, and these mysteries themselves are available only by a historical mediation. ... There is no need to abstract revealed truth from the frame in which revelations took place. ... For the Truth is not an idea, but a person, even the Incarnate Lord.”

(BCT: AEOV, p 20)

The Bible reveals God, not dogma about God but God acting and God’s actions. This in turn reveals God in dogma – for dogma is the interpretation of what God is doing in history that reveals God (and God’s being) to us.

“It is the revelation of God, but what is actually revealed is God’s concern about man. God reveals himself to man, ‘appears’ before him, ‘speaks’ and converses with him so as to reveal to man the hidden meaning of his own existence and the ultimate purpose of his life. ... There are, as it were, two partners in the Covenant, God and man... Human response is integrated into the mystery of the Word of God. It is not a divine monologue, it is rather a dialogue, and both are speaking, God and man. But prayers and invocations of the worshipping psalmist are nevertheless ‘the Word of God.’ God wants, and expects, and demands this answer and response of man. It is for this that he reveals himself to man and speaks to him.” (BCT: AEOV, pp 20-21)

God chooses to reveal Himself – humanity is essential to this process. God creates us to have beings to whom He can reveal Himself. God makes our role essential to His will and desire! The facts that God calls light into existence from the beginning and that God is love are both signs that God is a God of revelation and He wants beings to whom He can reveal Himself. He in turn then invites us not only into a relationship with Him, but to share His very nature as God.

**Florovsky: Scripture and the Church**

*Posted on February 3, 2010 by Fr. Ted*

This is the 5th blog in this series which began with A Quest to Know What It Means to be Human, and the immediately preceding blog is Florovsky: Scripture and Tradition.
In this and the next 2 blogs, I am looking at the writings of Fr. Georges Florovsky on the meaning of revelation, Scriptures, the Church and Tradition, as well as the relationship of these terms to each other. The quotes from Fr. Florovsky come either from his book *BIBLE, CHURCH, TRADITION: AN EASTERN ORTHODOX VIEW* (from now on referred to as BCT:AEOV) or from his article “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Revelation”, *THE CHRISTIAN EAST*, Vol XIII, No. 2 (1932) (referred to as TWHSIR).

God creates beings capable of receiving and bearing His revelation – humans. God creates language as the means to convey revelation to these creatures. Language too is capable of bearing not only the divine intent but divinity itself.

Matthew 28:20

“The Scriptures transmit and preserve the Word of God precisely in the idiom of man. ... What is human is not swept away by divine inspiration, it is only transfigured. The ‘supernatural’ does not destroy what is ‘natural. ... Scripture itself is at once both the Word of God and the human response – the Word of God mediated through the faithful response of man. There is always some human interpretation in any Scriptural presentation of the divine Word.” (BCT:AEOV, pp 27-28)

When God spoke in Genesis 1, His Divine will created that which was capable of bearing divinity yet was not divinity. When God said, “let there be light”, there was light. His spoken word became empirical reality; and this created world was the original *theotokos: God bearer*. This is God’s plan: God speaks His Word which calls all things into being; and this creation is capable of bearing divinity. This creation is not God, yet not separated from God. The humans are created precisely to carry out God’s will, to bear His Word and to put it into action. “In Scripture we see not only God, but man as well.” Humanity is revealed in scripture by God’s revelation. For the human is exactly to whom God chooses to reveal Himself. The bodiless powers may to this day...
be in God’s presence continually, but humans rely on God’s revealing Himself to them, especially since the time of the Fall. The humans are the mediators of God’s word and will to the rest of creation, over which they were to have dominion.

“... God reveals Himself to man, appears before him, becomes visible to him, speaks with him, so as to reveal to man the hidden meaning of his existence, to show him the path and meaning of human life. In Scripture we see God coming to reveal Himself to man, and we see man meeting God and not only listening to His Words, but answering them. ... God wants, expects and demands this answer. It is for this that He speaks with man. He expects man to answer Him.” (TWHSIR)

“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. ... 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. ... 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.” (BCT: AEOV, p 18)

“It was not enough just to read and to quote Scriptural words—the true meaning, or intent, of Scripture, taken as an integrated whole, had to be elicited. ... it was the faith of
the Church, rooted in the apostolic message, or kerygma, and authenticated by it. ... With them (those outside the church) Scripture was just a dead letter, or an array of disconnected passages and stories, which they endeavored to arrange or re-arrange on their own pattern, derived from alien sources.” (BCT:AEOV, p 76)

Possessing the Scriptures (the written word) is not enough for holding the truth. It is in the meaning/understanding/interpretation of the text – wherein we encounter the mind of Christ. Literalism is not the key – the words by themselves are not sufficient to come to know truth (false interpretation is possible). Scriptures are used to proclaim the kerygma, but the kerygma is the interpretation of the Scriptures which is authoritative. You must have the correct scriptures, but that alone does not guarantee correct kerygma or understanding. Remember kerygma predates the Scriptures – the apostles proclaimed the Truth many years before they wrote it down. Thus God’s revelation is to a people, not to a book. It is the people who recorded and authenticated the written record of God’s revelation. It is to these people to whom God spoke that He also entrusted they would faithfully and correctly understand, interpret and proclaim the revelation. Scriptures were never envisioned to be a truth that stands alone apart from God’s people. The scriptures alone save no one for they must be read, encountered, engaged, interpreted and lived. Jesus chose disciples to follow Him; He did not write anything, nor did he indicate that simply following some written texts would make holiness or orthodoxy possible. The texts he said witness to Him (John 5:39-40) and it is to Him that we must go in order to understand the revelation of God. The written word kills as St. Paul says the Jews discovered, but the Spirit gives life (2 Corinthians 3:6).

Florovsky: The Church, the New Testament & Christ

Posted on February 6, 2010 by Fr. Ted

This is the 6th blog in this series which began with A Quest to Know What It Means to be Human, and the immediately preceding blog is Florovsky: Scripture and the Church. In this blog and the next, I am looking at the writings of Fr. Georges Florovsky on the meaning of revelation, Scriptures, the Church and Tradition, as well as the relationship of these terms to each other. The quotes from Fr. Florovsky come either from his book BIBLE, CHURCH, TRADITION: AN EASTERN ORTHODOX VIEW (from now on referred to as BCT:AEOV) or from his article “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Revelation”, THE CHRISTIAN EAST, Vol XIII, No. 2 (1932) (referred to as TWHSIR).
Prior to the coming of Christ – the **incarnation** of God the Word – the Scriptures had a particular role to play and were to be read and appreciated as the continued work of God’s Spirit/breath in the life of God’s people. With the arrival of the Messiah Jesus, the Scriptures have been fulfilled and they are shown to be a witness to Jesus, pointing Him out as God’s plan of salvation (see Simeon’s prayer in Luke 2:29-32 and also Christ’s own words in John 5:39-40).

“Jesus ... is the fuller 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 fuller of both, i.e. of the whole. He is the very centre of the Bible, just because he is the **arche** and the **telos**—the beginning and the end. ... the Old Testament as a whole has to be considered as a ‘book of the generations of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham (Matt 1:1). ... The whole story was prophetical or ‘typical,’ a prophetical sign hinting forward towards approaching consummation. Now, the time of expectation is over. The promise has been accomplished. ... the history of flesh and blood is closed. The history of the Spirit is disclosed. ... the books of the Hebrews...are to be read in the Church as a book of sacred history, not to be transformed into a collection of proof-texts or of theological instances..., nor into a book of parables.... In sacred history, ‘the past’ does not mean simply ‘passed’ or ‘what had been,’ but primarily that which had been accomplished and fulfilled. ‘Fulfilment’ is the basic category of revelation. ... it is precisely in the Old Testament that we apprehend revelation primarily as the Word: we witness to the Spirit that ‘spake through the prophets.’ For in
the New Testament God has spoken by his Son, and we are called upon not only to listen, but to look at.” *(BCT:AEOV, pp 22-24)*

“The New Testament is also, first of all, history—the Gospel history of the incarnated Word and of the beginning of the history of the Church. . . The basis of the New Testament is facts, events, realities; not only commandments, teaching, and words. Here the basis is Christ and the Church, His Body. . . . Therein lies the meaning and importance of apostolic preaching that it is a **narrative**, a narrative of what the Apostles themselves heard and saw, of what was fulfilled and accomplished. . . ‘Which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled’ (1 John 1:1).” *(TWHSIR)*

As the Old Testament bore witness to the coming of the Messiah, so the New Testament bears the witness of those who saw, spoke with and touched Christ. The importance of the text is by giving us the history which His witnesses and disciples recorded, it offers to us the revelation which God made known to the world in Jesus Christ.

“Divine Revelation is preserved in the Church. It is protected and strengthened by the words of Scripture; it is protected, but not exhausted. The words of Scripture do not exhaust the whole fullness of Revelation; do not exhaust the whole fullness of Christian experience and of the charismatic reminiscence of the Church.” *(TWHSIR)*

The Scriptures do not exists alone. They are not something which existed from all eternity and then suddenly God dictated to a few men to record. The Scriptures contain the human interaction with God as God revealed Himself and the Scriptures are the human co-operation with God in recording and understanding this revelation. The Scriptures thus exist in and are produced by and for the people of God. The preservation of God’s revelation is accomplished by the faithful. The Bible’s truthfulness is testified to by the people of God, and for any to know God’s revelation they need both
the Scriptures and the Church, the people to whom God entrusted His revelation. Christ did not leave a book behind for the world to read, rather He chose apostles to bear witness to Him as truth, and the apostles were inspired to write, edit and chose which books belong to the Scriptures of God’s people.

“And the Church is the divinely appointed and permanent witness to the very truth and the full meaning of this message, simply because the Church belongs itself to the revelation, as the Body of the Incarnate Lord. ... Salvation is not only announced or proclaimed in the Church, but precisely enacted. ... The Church is itself an integral part of the New Testament message. The Church itself is a part of revelation—the story of ‘the Whole Christ’...” (*BCT:AEOV, p 26*)

Christians (=the Church) bear witness to the truth of the Scriptures and testify to that truth as is manifested in the life of the Church.

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**Scripture is Not the Text, but the Reading by God’s People**

Posted on February 9, 2010 by Fr. Ted

This is the 7th blog in this series which began with *A Quest to Know What It Means to be Human*, and the immediately preceding blog is *Florovsky: The Church, the New Testament, & Christ*. In this blog and the next, I am looking at the writings of Fr. Georges Florovsky on the meaning of revelation, Scriptures, the Church and Tradition, as well as the relationship of these terms to each other. The quotes from Fr. Florovsky come either from his book *BIBLE, CHURCH, TRADITION: AN EASTERN ORTHODOX VIEW* (from now on referred to as BCT:AEOV) or from his article “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Revelation”, *THE CHRISTIAN EAST*, Vol XIII, No. 2 (1932) (referred to as TWHSIR).

The Christian and Jewish Scriptures are written within human history by humans and for humans.

“Scripture is a God-inspired scheme or image (eikon) of truth, but not truth itself.” (*BCT:AEOV, p 48*)
The Scriptures did not exist before God created humans; they were not written from all eternity before the world existed (that is what some claim of the Q’uran – there is an eternal copy somehow existing in the divine eternity with the earthly ones being merely copies of the eternal one). The history of mankind was not pre-written by God before anything existed – a divine script in which humans are mere automatons, reading their lines of the script and acting according to the direction already determined by the Author and Director, God. Christians clearly believe in human free will – the Scriptures record from a human point of view but inspired by God the interaction between God and His creatures.

“God speaks to man through His Spirit; and only in the measure in which man abides in the Spirit does he hear and understand this voice...” (*TWHSIR*)

The story of creation in Genesis 1-3 was written after the fact, not before. Only long after the creation came into existence was the narrative of the Creation story created and then written down. The story itself was conceived for humans, as revelation, so that humans could understand their origins, so humans could understand their role in creation, and to know their Creator. The creation accounts in Genesis were not written before the events happened, nor even as the events happened, but only much later when there were people to write them down and they were written for humanity, not for God. The only eternal Word is Jesus, Son of God, who became incarnate for the salvation of the world.

“At any rate the Scriptures demand that they should be expounded and explained. ... When the Church expounds Scripture it bears witness to that of which the Scriptures testify. ... man is called not only to receive Truth attentively, but also to witness to it. ... God’s Word must become evident in the reality of human thought.” (*TWHSIR*)

Humans are the apex of the creation story, its goal and crescendo. Scriptures were written after humans existed to record for posterity and to bring to all generations the revelation God. The Scriptures require not only humans inspired by God to record them, but also humans inspired by God’s Spirit to read and interpret them.
“St. Hilary put it emphatically... Scripture is not in the reading, but in the understanding...” (*BCT:AEOV, p 17*)

So what is necessary for all believers is not simply to possess the text of the Bible, but to hear the text with the community of believers and within the people of God in order to come to the proper understanding. The Bible was not written with individualism in mind, and the interpretation of Scripture is not done by any one person alone.

“First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (*2 Peter 1:20-21*)

For St. Irenaeus,

“' Tradition’ was...a living tradition... entrusted to the Church as a new breath of life, just as breath was bestowed upon the first man. .... Scripture without interpretation is not Scripture at all; the moment it is used and becomes alive it is always interpreted Scripture.” (*BCT:AEOV, p 80*)

Scripture alone is not sufficient for salvation because by itself it remains a text, consider the words of St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:2-8 (NRSV):

“You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. ... our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.  Now if the ministry of death, chiseled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory ... how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory?”

Note St. Paul’s downplaying of the written word/scriptures. It is the people of the church at Corinth who are really his scriptures, written not with ink but with the Spirit, not on tablets of stone but on human hearts. The real scriptures are a living personal witness. God has chosen disciples to be ministers of a new covenant, but again not of written letters/scripture, but of the spirit – the scripture kills! And finally the 10 Commandments written by God on stone are called the “ministry of death”! The written word alone is not sufficient for salvation in the mind of St. Paul the Apostle to the nations.
A Few Final Thoughts from Fr. Florovsky

This is the 8th blog in this series which began with A Quest to Know What It Means to be Human, and the immediately preceding blog is Scripture is Not the Text, but the Reading by God’s People. In this blog and the next, I am looking at the writings of Fr. Georges Florovsky on the meaning of revelation, Scriptures, the Church and Tradition, as well as the relationship of these terms to each other. The quotes from Fr. Florovsky come either from his book BIBLE, CHURCH, TRADITION: AN EASTERN ORTHODOX VIEW (from now on referred to as BCT:AEOV) or from his article “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Revelation”, THE CHRISTIAN EAST, Vol XIII, No. 2 (1932) (referred to as TWHSIR).

In Fr. Florovsky’s thinking, the Scriptures serve as a witness to Christ – they help us to see what the original disciples themselves saw: that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God (Mark 1:1).

“The Evangelists and the Apostles were no chroniclers. It was not their mission to keep the full record of all that Jesus had done, day by day, year by year. They describe his life and related his works, so as to give us his image: an historic, and yet a divine image. It is no portrait, but rather an ikon – but surely an historic ikon, an image of the Incarnate Lord.” (BCT:AEOV, p 25)

“Scripture is a God-inspired scheme or image (ikon) of truth, but not truth itself.” (BCT:AEOV, p 48)

The incarnation makes Christianity a visible faith – we are not based mostly in ideas or philosophy but in the reality of God in the flesh – both capable of being seen and touched (1 John 1:1). Christian Scriptures are not just commandments to be obeyed, for they are revelation: they reveal to us the Trinitarian God and the incarnation of the Word of God.

“The basis of the New Testament is facts, events, deeds – not only teaching, commandments or words.” (BCT:AEOV, p 24)

The Scriptures of the Jews and of the Christians are a witness to God’s own actions and God’s revelation. They however require a people prepared to receive the message and to interpret its meaning. The incarnation of the Word of God is the most explicit...
interpretation of the Scriptures that is possible. The Jewish Scriptures bore witness to God’s Word and were in a sense a pre-incarnation of the Word of God. The key to understanding their meaning, to unlocking their message and manifesting the previously hidden revelation of God is Jesus Christ. He is the meaning of the Scriptures, its full interpretation, its hermeneutic. In Christ the full revelation of God is made manifest, and the Scriptures are revealed as bearing witness to this revelation.

*St. Jerome wrote,* “We do not think that Gospel consists of the words of Scripture but in its meaning; not on the surface but in the marrow, not in the leaves of sermons but in the root of meaning.” *(BCT:AEOV, p 91)*

Jesus Christ, the Word become flesh, is the fulfillment and meaning of all the Scriptures – poetry, history, prophecy, typology, promise, allegory. The Word become flesh is the interpretation of all the Scriptures. The Scriptures thus bear witness to Christ with the Old Testament being for humanity the continued presence of God’s Spirit/breath AND prefiguring in anticipation the incarnation of the Word; and the New Testament giving us a visible icon of the incarnation. However, as Florovsky notes, the Bible is not the ultimate authority on every form of knowledge. For example,

“The Bible is no authority on social science, as it is no authority on astronomy.” *(BCT:AEOV, p 34)*

To try to use the Bible, as some literalists want to do, to be the source for our knowledge of archeology, biology, astronomy, geography, and every natural or social science is to miss the main purpose of the Scriptures (see John 5:39-40), which is to bring us to and to reveal to us the incarnate Christ. The task of the Church is to help us do what Jesus Christ Himself said the Scriptures are to do:

“You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life” *(John 5:39-40).*

The Church has the role of preserving the true interpretation of the Scriptures.

“Tertullian....’For only where the true Christian teaching and faith are evident will
the true Scriptures, the true interpretations, and all the true Christian traditions be found." (BCT:AEOV, p 77)

The Church as the Body of Christ finds the words and images to express the right interpretation of the Scriptures.

“Perhaps it may sound paradoxical, but it is still true to say that dogmas can arise, can be established and expressed, but they cannot be developed. A dogma once established is an eternal inviolable ‘rule of faith’ and the measure of it.” (TWHSIR)

Dogmas, the teachings of the Church which maintain faithfulness to the preaching of the apostles, can develop in order to clarify and preserve the unchanging revelation. They don’t develop because they are not offering something new that was never previously taught, but they arise from time to time to help new generations comprehend God’s revelation to the world.

“Tradition is not limited to Church archeology. . . . Tradition is not a principle striving to restore the past, using the past as a criterion for the present. ... Tradition is authority to teach, potestas magisterii, authority to bear witness to the truth. The Church bears witness to the truth not by reminiscence or from the words of others, but from its own living, unceasing experience, from its catholic fullness. ... Tradition is a charismatic, not a historical, principle.” (BCT:AEOV, pp 46-47)