

“Fully Armed: The Theologian’s Defense against Enthusiasm”

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ST 2021

21 November 2005

A true theologian believes that truth exists. He also believes that he knows the truth. He makes these claims because he knows that there is only one source of truth, the inspired Word of God. Another Christian might place similar importance on God's Word. He might consider the Scriptures an important source of truth. However, whether intentionally or not, he seeks for truth in other places. Whether it is tradition, reason, experience, or anything else, he arrives at the truth using something other than God's Word. Therefore he naturally arrives at a different version of the truth. In such a case the task for the theologian is relatively simple. He can show the person that he is adding to God's Word. If the person already knows this, the theologian can show him that doing so is leading him to conclusions that contradict the clear statements of Scripture.

But what happens when the theologian meets someone who does not place quite the same emphasis on Scripture? What happens when he meets a man who claims that God speaks to him in other ways? The theologian might launch into a polished recitation of 1 Timothy 3:15-17. But before he can even get to "make you wise for salvation," the man interrupts. "I know what the Bible says. But God speaks to me directly. I don't need a book to find out what he says." The theologian's task suddenly is not so simple.

A claim of direct revelation from God is one of the most blatant forms enthusiasm takes. One might define enthusiasm as the desire to find divine truth in any place besides the Holy Scriptures. In a world where the different definitions of truth can hardly be counted, the sources of divine truth are just as numerous. It seems like just about everyone claims to have some direct connection to God. Such a claim seems almost irrefutable. After all, God certainly could speak to someone directly. He has in the past. The claim involves something that happens in the man's head. This is a place the theologian cannot go. He cannot say with certainty what this

man is or is not hearing. Finally, what the man claims he heard may very well agree with what Scripture says.

The theologian might think he is defenseless against such an attack. He might honestly fear that he has spent his life looking for truth in the wrong place. These fears need not trouble him. For the theologian is well-armed to defend against the attacks of enthusiasm. He knows that enthusiasm is nothing new. Rather, its history begins with the fall into sin. He also knows that in the past errors have accompanied every form of enthusiasm. Finally, he knows that God's revelation in Scripture is completely sufficient for his faith and life.

Enthusiasm is rarely as bold as a claim of direct revelation. It usually appears in subtler forms. In its various forms enthusiasm has plagued God's people since the beginning. In the garden Adam and Eve had the true Word of God. God had told them, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die."¹ Rather than clinging to this divine Word, Adam and Eve looked elsewhere. When the devil told them that they would be like God if they ate, they listened. They abandoned the revealed Word in exchange for another message. Luther wrote, "All this is the old devil and old serpent, who also converted Adam and Eve into enthusiasts, and led them from the outward Word of God to spiritualizing and self-conceit."²

If enthusiasm infected Adam, there is no reason to assume those born of Adam would be immune from it. Enthusiasm often puts on the mask of tradition. When something passed down within a religious organization receives the same authority as Scripture, tradition becomes enthusiasm. Leaders of the Jewish religion have often slipped into this form of enthusiasm. Moses recorded God's law in the books of the Pentateuch. However, these leaders added laws to

¹Genesis 2:16-17 (NIV)

² SA III, viii. *Concordia Triglotta* 495.

those recorded by Moses. Eventually they equated these laws with divine revelation. Chemnitz observed, “The Talmudists embellish their fictions by pretending that Moses on Mount Sinai received from God not only what he wrote but also a mystical and secret exposition of the Law, which he neither wrote nor wanted written but handed down only orally and recommended that it be delivered to posterity from hand to hand. And they say that both are the Word of God, to be received and respected with equal reverence and devotion.”³

The enthusiasm of tradition has afflicted the Roman Catholic Church to an even greater degree. Most religious bodies pass on tradition orally or in written form. However, the Roman Church passes tradition primarily through an individual. The Roman Church confesses that God’s revelation has continued since the age of the apostles through the Papacy. It places the pope’s decrees and his personal interpretation of Scripture on the same level as Scripture. Statements that illustrate this enthusiasm are not difficult to find. The Documents of Vatican II state, “The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the church.”⁴ And with whom does that trust primarily rest? The pope is “the supreme teacher of the universal Church...one in whom the charism of the infallibility of the Church herself is individually present.”⁵ For centuries men have elevated the ideas and writings of their past to the same level as Scripture.

Fallen man is just as prone to place his mental capacity on par with God’s Word. Therefore another common guise of enthusiasm is reason. Enthusiasts throughout the New Testament era have used reason as a tool for judging the words of Scripture. Reason has influenced those who try to explain the two natures of Christ. Reason has led to dozens of incorrect explanations of the mystery of the Trinity. Reason was one of the three tools John

³ Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, part 1 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971) 67.

⁴ *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild, 1966) 117-118.

⁵ *Ibid*, 49.

Wesley used to interpret Scripture. He wrote, “It is a fundamental principle with us that to renounce reason is to renounce religion, that religion and reason go hand in hand, that all irrational religion is false religion.”⁶

Closely related to reason is experience. The empirical enthusiast believes that God sends messages through the events he allows to happen. If God is happy with someone, the person will prosper. If God is upset with someone, the person will suffer. Therefore the empirical enthusiast is constantly looking for signs, either of God’s favor or displeasure. In his work on the history of enthusiasm, Knox wrote, “For that is the real character of the enthusiast; he expects more evident results from the grace of God than we others.”⁷

In recent centuries enthusiasm has become more blatant. Christians have sought to bring back the gifts of the Holy Spirit that were present in the early New Testament church. Pentecostals and charismatics believe that the Holy Spirit still reveals himself to his church through these gifts. Perhaps the most common form this revelation takes is the gift of tongues. In many Pentecostal circles, speaking in tongues is *the* sign of the Holy Spirit’s presence in an individual.

More blatant still is the enthusiasm of direct prophecy. Modern revivalists believe that the Holy Spirit is raising up a body of prophets as he did in the past. A revivalist said about one such a prophet, “He’s interacting in two dimensions continually. He’s not only seeing you and talking to you, but he’s hearing from God constantly. There’s a continual flow. I think it’s interrupted periodically, but a continual flow of information is coming to him about things.”⁸ Another self-proclaimed prophet was so bold as to make this claim, “No prophet or apostle who

⁶ John Wesley, *John Wesley’s Theology: A Collection from his Works*, ed. Robert Burtner and Robert Chiles (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982) 26.

⁷ R.A. Knox, *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1950) 2.

⁸ Hank Hanegraaf, *Counterfeit Revival* (Dallas: Word, 1997) 145.

ever lived equaled the power of these individuals in this great army of the Lord in these last days. No one ever had it, not even Elijah, or Peter, or Paul, or anyone else enjoyed the power that is going to rest upon this great army.”⁹

The history of enthusiasm blankets the history of the church. It is important for the theologian to remember that the individual who claims to hear directly from God does nothing new or innovative. He does not present an attack that the church has never faced. The cloud of witnesses that surrounds the theologian is an army that has defended against the attacks of enthusiasm in the past.

The theologian also is well-armed against the attacks of enthusiasm because of enthusiasm’s track record. Throughout history some error always has accompanied those who make claims of direct revelation. This does not necessarily mean that every potential claim must be accompanied by error. But in the past, whenever someone has boasted divine revelation outside of Scripture, error has followed close at hand. Therefore if a message that supposedly comes from God contradicts something God clearly says in Scripture, the theologian can be certain it is a fraud.

The first error common among enthusiasts might be named the error of induction. Enthusiasts assume that what has happened once in the past must happen again in the future. The rational/empirical enthusiast finds divine truth in things he has seen. He takes his limited experience, one individual’s short life, and elevates it to an authoritative level. Becker put it well when he wrote, “Reason, on the other hand, in its corruption and pride, always makes the mistake of exalting its very limited experience and equating it with omniscience...Reason in its

⁹ Ibid. 60.

sinful pride and presumption always tends to make wholes out of parts and to raise particulars to the level of universals.”¹⁰

The Pentecostal enthusiast fixates on the gifts possessed by the early New Testament church. He assumes that the same Holy Spirit will pour out the same gifts for his church today. He cites a passage like, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever,” as evidence that these gifts should continue. As Bruner wrote, “To the Pentecostal these texts mean that the spiritual gifts which God once instituted and to which the apostles gave testimony are irrevocable and constant, the changeless Christ himself being the chief guarantee.”¹¹ He also induces that because at one time some Christians filled with the Spirit spoke in tongues, every Christian at every time who is filled with the Spirit will speak in tongues.

The Roman Catholic enthusiast also commits the error of induction. He sees the fact that doctrine was once passed orally.¹² He assumes the same still occurs through the papacy. Chemnitz identified this error when he wrote, “Therefore as often as you read this argument in the writings of the papalists, remember that it is the extraordinary fallacy that something which is true under certain conditions is always true.”¹³

The second error common among different types of enthusiasm is an internal contradiction. All enthusiasts presuppose that God makes himself known in some direct way other than Scripture. Yet enthusiasts do not keep their direct revelation to themselves. They either write it down or tell others about it. They expect their followers to accept these revelations

¹⁰ Siegbert W. Becker, *The Foolishness of God: The Place of Reason in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1999) 101-102.

¹¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit: The Pentecostal Experience and the New Testament Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 131.

¹² Cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:15

¹³ Chemnitz 112.

as if they were from God. Therefore they try to do the very thing they claim Scripture cannot do.

Luther was well aware of this foolishness when he wrote,

Just as also our enthusiasts [at the present day] condemn the outward Word, and nevertheless they themselves are not silent, but they fill the world with their pratings and writings, as though, indeed, the Spirit could not come through the writings and spoken word of the apostles, but [first] through their writings and words he must come. Why [then] do not they also omit their own sermons and writings, until the Spirit Himself come to men, without their writings and before them, as they boast that He has come into them without the preaching of the Scriptures?¹⁴

A third error prevalent among Pentecostal and Revivalist enthusiasts might be called the blind faith error. This error encourages people to assume that something is from God. Believe now. Ask questions later. Revivalists encourage followers not to “even entertain the thought that [they] might get a counterfeit.”¹⁵ Skeptics point to the fact that these enthusiasts’ prophetic messages do not always come true. Their leaders assure them, “I believe the test of a prophet is not whether his word comes to pass, it’s his lifestyle. It’s the character of the individual. That is how you test a prophet...It’s not a matter of whether the word comes to pass or not, it’s the nature of that person’s life.”¹⁶ One self-proclaimed prophet even said, “I figure if I hit two-thirds, I’m doing pretty good.”¹⁷

This advice makes a mockery of Scripture’s repeated warning against false prophets. John wrote, “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”¹⁸ Jeremiah also warned, “From early times the prophets who preceded you and me have prophesied war, disaster and

¹⁴ SA III, viii, *Concordia Triglotta* 495.

¹⁵ Hanegraaf 8.

¹⁶ Ibid. 75.

¹⁷ Ibid. 75.

¹⁸ 1 John 4:1.

plague against many countries and great kingdoms. But the prophet who prophesies peace will be recognized as one truly sent by the LORD only if his prediction comes true.”¹⁹

Another most serious error accompanies nearly all forms of enthusiasm. Almost without fail, enthusiasts rob the gospel of its comfort. The rational enthusiast cannot understand how Jesus Christ can be both God and man. He must in some way diminish one of the two natures in order to satisfy his reason. Therefore he loses either a Savior born under law to redeem those under law or a Savior whose precious blood was a sacrifice that atoned for the sins of the world.

The Roman church is a sad example of how enthusiasm undermines the gospel. Through the decrees of the infallible pope, men are led to believe tragic statements like, “If anyone saith, that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which remits sins for Christ’s sake; or, that this confidence alone is that whereby we are justified; let him be anathema.”²⁰

Pentecostal enthusiasts also rob Christ of his glory. Rather than putting their trust in the objective promises of Scripture, they put their trust in evidence. A person cannot be certain he is saved unless he sees the gifts of the Spirit. Clement wrote,

Here is where the doctrine of justification by faith is endangered. If both forgiveness of sins and physical healing (and we could add tongues-speaking into the equation) are made into promises contingent on faith, they both rise and fall together. Some, because they are cured, may conclude that they also have forgiveness of sins, even though they remain unrepentant and engulfed in an ungodly way of life. Others, who have come to faith in Christ but have not been healed, may come to doubt whether they are truly Christians.”²¹

Just because every claim of direct revelation in the past has been tied to error does not mean that every potential claim of it must. However, the theologian can apply the same tests to

¹⁹ Jeremiah 28:8-9.

²⁰ *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans. Rev. J. Waterworth (Chicago: The Christian Symbolic Publication Society) 46.

²¹ Arthur Clement, *The Pentecostals and Charismatics* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2000) 208.

current claims of divine revelation. He can test for false prophets as Scripture encourages. If he finds error, he can be sure the revelation is not from God.

There is one final error characteristic of enthusiasm. In fact, it is the error that defines enthusiasm. It is this error that ultimately leads the theologian to reject most claims of divine revelation. Nearly every claim of direct revelation implies that Scripture is insufficient. The implication could be that Scripture does not tell us all we need to know about God. It could be that Scripture does not tell us all we need to know about how God wants us to live. In some way Scripture is insufficient. If the theologian identifies this attack, he knows well how he is to defend against it.

Scripture tells us all we need to know for salvation. Scripture is Christ from beginning to end. Speaking about that Christ, Peter said, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”²² Where is that saving name revealed to men? Does he make himself known through direct revelation, through reason, or through the Papacy? Indeed he comes to men in Scripture. Jesus himself said, “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me.”²³

Scripture not only tells us what we need to know for salvation. It also has the power to convince us that what it says is true. This is evident from the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man was an enthusiast. He wanted to see visible evidence that what God had said through his prophets was true. Since his time to believe had ended, he wanted that visible proof for his brothers. So this enthusiast asked Abraham that Lazarus be allowed to appear to them from the dead. Abraham’s response is good ammunition against any form of enthusiasm. “He

²² Acts 4:12.

²³ John 5:39.

said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”²⁴ Paul made the same point when he wrote, “I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.”²⁵

An enthusiast might concede the sufficiency of Scripture in the matter of salvation. However, he might want to look beyond Scripture for insight into God’s will for his life. After all, the Bible was written thousands of years ago. How could one possibly find what God wants today’s Christian to do in a book that old? This attitude toward Scripture is also one that Scripture itself condemns. Paul wrote to Timothy, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”²⁶ Through the inspired Scripture, the Christian becomes complete in his knowledge of how God wants him to live. Complete. Nothing is lacking. Chemnitz wrote, “When a man of God, that is, a minister of the Gospel, uses the divinely inspired Scripture for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction, then he is “exactly fitted” (□πτιος) for the ministry, that is sound, whole, sufficient, and equipped for every good work which is required for the ministry, instructed ... sufficiently, completely ready. That this is the emphasis of the words is certain.”²⁷

The theologian can be certain that everything he needs can be found in Scripture. Therefore he is well-armed against attacks of enthusiasm that assert something beyond Scripture is necessary.

Is the theologian then well-armed against every possible claim of divine revelation? He meets a man who says he has heard from God. After testing the message, the theologian finds

²⁴ Luke 16:31.

²⁵ Romans 1:16.

²⁶ 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

²⁷ Chemnitz 138.

nothing contrary to Scripture. The one who received the message does not assert that the message is something Scripture lacked. Perhaps it is an application of a Scriptural principle to present circumstances. The theologian is asked to believe that this message comes from God. What defense does the theologian have? He can cite two thousand years of church history during which revelation has been absent and claims of it have been fraudulent. But this does not close the case. Even though Scripture is sufficient, God never explicitly eliminated the possibility of further revelation. What defense is left?

The theologian might not be able to demonstrate that such a claim is false. However, he can say that this revelation is of no value to anyone but the individual who received it. For Scripture is not just information that comes from God. It is a book that points to itself as the source of revelation. It is a book that demands its own study: “These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”²⁸ It is a book that promises that what it says is true and powerful: “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword...”²⁹ No such demands or promises are attached to a message someone might hear in his head. Therefore the theologian does not need to fear that God might reveal himself to an individual in an immediate way. He only needs to concern himself with the sufficient revelation God has given to all men on the pages of Scripture. That revelation makes him well-armed against any attack.

²⁸ Deuteronomy 6:6-9.

²⁹ Hebrews 4:12.

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