

Figures & Metaphors of Scripture

by J.C. Philpot

God's method of communication in the Scriptures is primarily through divine revelation and experience, rather than direct logical argument.

Scripture: Ephesians 1:18

Topics: "Biblical Interpretation", "Spiritual Insight"

Description

J.C. Philpot emphasizes the use of figures and metaphors in Scripture as powerful tools to convey truth, highlighting how God's language in the Bible addresses different faculties of the mind such as reasoning, imagination, conscience, and affections. Philpot explains how figures like 'I am the good Shepherd' or 'I am the vine, you are the branches' are not comprehended through reasoning but through the sanctified imagination, leading to a deeper understanding and application of spiritual truths. He warns against desecrating sacred figures in Scripture and emphasizes the need for spiritual insight and sobriety of judgment when interpreting these rich metaphors.

Transcript

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It is, at first sight, perhaps, somewhat remarkable how little use God has made of argument, that is, direct logical argument, in the Scriptures of truth. To say that he never employs positive, direct argument, would be incorrect, as Paul, in his epistles to the Romans and to the Hebrews, has brought forward argument after argument to prove the grand truths which he there so clearly and powerfully lays down. It is true that his arguments are so clothed with divine life and power, and so imbued with the rich stream of vital experience which flow from his heart and pen, that their strict, logical reasoning is not immediately seen, and by most readers is almost wholly unobserved; but if grace and experience give flesh and form, solid argument gives bone and sinew to his weighty statements.

But as a general rule, God does not argue in the Scriptures. To do so, would be unbecoming the exalted majesty and dignity of so great and glorious a Sovereign. He did not argue light into being, nor was the sun fixed in the sky by any reasoning process as to its nature or necessity. He spoke but the word, "Let there be light," and light burst forth at his Almighty fiat. He willed there should be a sun to rule the day, and that glorious orb stood at once in the skies of heaven.

So in the Scriptures, which are a pure revelation of his mind and will, and more especially of his grace, mercy, and truth in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, God does not 'argue' or prove--but 'speaks'. Being a divine revelation, a spiritual unfolding of salvation by the atoning blood and meritorious obedience of the Son of God in flesh, the Gospel, though not against reason--is above it. It is altogether divine and supernatural, and as such is above the province and out of the scope and reach of logical argument. The Gospel of the grace of God is not a thing to be proved, but a truth to be believed; it is not submitted to our reasoning powers as a subject for critical examination, but is a message from God addressed to our conscience, feelings, and affections. For this reason among others, men, fond of argument, and proving everything by strict logical deduction, generally make very poor preachers. They argue and argue, and prove and prove this and that doctrine, or this and that point, delightfully to their own satisfaction, but for the most part to empty seats and yawning hearers; and while a preacher like Whitefield will, with a striking figure, or a warm appeal to the conscience, make a thrill run through thousands--a Cambridge senior wrangler will have scarce anybody but himself to appreciate his sound convincing argument that certainly there is a God, and that there is a strong probability that the Scriptures were written by divine inspiration.

When the Lord condescends to reason with man, it is on another footing, and with a different language. "Come now, and let us reason together," are his own tender words. But in so speaking, he does not present any logical argument to our mental faculties, but at once addresses the conscience, and the conscience loaded with sin and guilt--"Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be white as wool." And this just meets our case; for it is not by any reasoning process that we come to know that our sins are as scarlet; nor is it by any exercise of our mental powers upon the truth of God that we come to know that, washed in the blood of the Lamb, they are as white as snow. When Christ reveals himself to our soul, then only do we see him and know him; and when he hides himself, we cannot behold him, however sound our judgment, correct our creed, or clear our experience.

And yet, though it is not by reasoning or argument, that we are either convinced of sin, or blessed with peace, yet our enlightened understanding, as the Lord the Spirit shines upon the word, and through the word into our heart, sees admirable beauty and glory in the way of salvation by Jesus Christ, and in all the grand leading truths of the Gospel. If salvation through the incarnation, sufferings, blood shedding, and death of his own co-equal and co-eternal Son be, as the Scriptures declare, the greatest depth and height of the wisdom of God, (Rom. 11:33, Eph. 3:9--11, Col. 1:26, 27) we must, if we have "the mind of Christ," and are taught of God, see and admire the wisdom thus displayed.

But this we see by "the eyes of our understanding being enlightened," (Eph. 1:18,) to which divinely illuminated understanding the mystery of the cross becomes "the wisdom of God." (1 Cor. 1:24.) We are not fools and dolts; we do not believe wild visionary dreams and fancies; we do not credit tales, legends, and lying miracles; nor are we led blindfolded by priests or monks, or juggled and deluded by that strange mixture of superstition, servile fear, formality, and enthusiasm by which Satan has climbed into the high places of the earth, and by a false religion, with a million diversities to suit his many-hued worshipers, has barred out Christ and his Gospel. The truth of God, which shines, as with a ray of divine light, in the Scriptures, has been brought with a divine power into our conscience, or, to speak more scripturally, "God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, has shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

It is in grace as in nature. Why does a man believe there is a sun? Because he sees it up there above, shining gloriously in the mid-day sky. He needs no logical argument, no reasoning process to convince him of the existence of the sun when he sees the light and feels the heat of his glorious beams. And how does he know there is a glorious Christ, at the right hand of the Father, a blessed Sun of righteousness in the spiritual skies? Because he has beheld him by the eye of faith as revealed to his soul by the power of God; because he has seen light, and felt warmed, cheered, and blessed by his soul-dissolving beams.

But as the Lord necessarily makes use of human language in the Scriptures, and all human language is of necessity based on the very constitution of the mind of man, it almost inevitably follows that the Lord, in speaking to us as men, addresses himself to the different faculties of our mind. Without professing to lay down a strict and accurate analysis of the human mind, we may say at least thus much, that men can trace in themselves four apparently distinct faculties--reasoning, imagination, conscience, and affections. We can all, in some measure, reason, imagine, feel, and love. To these four different faculties of our mind is all language addressed; and so it is in the language of God to man, as he speaks in the Scripture. To speak generally,

argument is for reason,

figures for imagination,

admonitions for conscience, and

a precious Christ and his glorious gospel for the affections.

We just now said that figures are addressed to the imagination, as distinct from the reasoning faculty; but only so that the words of truth may reach our conscience and affections. Let us see this by an example or two. God says to his people, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." He here uses a figure comparing our sins to scarlet. Now by what faculty of our spiritual mind do we realize the striking comparison of our sins to scarlet? The idea of scarlet comes before us as of blood-red dye. We have seen blood; we have seen scarlet; and at once our sins are represented to our view as of a blood-red hue, as deserving death, of which blood is a standing emblem. But it does not rest here. It comes, through this representation, to our conscience, which feels and owns the sentence true; and then the promise comes--"Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow"; that is, all their bloody stain shall be washed away, and the soul made as white as the purest snow that stands untrodden by the foot of man upon the mountain top. The conscience being thus purged from guilt, the affections flow out to a sin-pardoning God.

Again, when Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches," we do not apprehend the meaning of his words by any process of reasoning; but we picture to ourselves a vine such as we have often seen against the walls of a house. Our imagination gives a substance to this figure, as representing the union of Christ and his members. We do not need to see a vine actually with our bodily eyes, when we read John 15. The vine has been engraved previously on our mind, through the medium of our eye; and the impression having been once made there, our imagination at once, as if instinctively, recalls the picture thus already made, and gives it a present reality and force. But it does not rest here. As applied by the Spirit, it passes on to the conscience, and, through the conscience, reaches the affections, which, embracing the truth thus revealed, give it a firm dwelling-place in the heart.

This is all that we mean when we speak of figures being addressed to the imagination. We do not mean thereby a wild, visionary, roving, unhallowed fancy, such as poets and artists indulge in. We mean no such carnal fancy or poetical imagination as that; but we are speaking of that sanctified faculty of the mind which, under the influences and teaching of the Holy Spirit, receives the vivid, living impression made upon the heart and conscience by Scriptural figures.

If you doubt or deny our explanation, will you tell us how you are made to feel the power and truth of such a figure as "I am the good Shepherd." You say, "I know nothing about your imagination and all that; I receive it by faith." Of course you do, or you do not receive it at all. But it is faith acting through what is vividly and powerfully impressed on your imagination. Put it in this light. You feel sin, or you feel pardon and peace. How do you feel the guilt and burden of sin? And how do you feel the sweetness and blessedness of peace through the blood of Jesus? "By faith," you answer. Yes, but by faith acting through the conscience; for it is in the conscience that guilt is felt; and it is in the conscience that peace is enjoyed.

So with the affections. You love Jesus and his truth. How did you come to love him? By faith; because "to you that believe he is precious." But where do you love him? In your heart of hearts, your warm, living, heavenly affections. Here, then, is faith working by love, and purifying the heart; that is, as it here means, the conscience. Now, if faith works by the spiritual understanding in receiving and acknowledging the truth; if it works by the conscience in feeling guilt and pardon; if it works by the affections when it makes Christ precious, may it not work by the imagination, that is, a pure, holy, and sanctified faculty, for which we lack the appropriate word, but which is engaged in receiving the truth, through a scriptural figure.

How much the "Pilgrim's Progress" has been owned and blessed! And what is it all addressed to but our imagination? How do we realize the Slough of Despond, and the Wicket-gate, and Giant Despair, and the dark river with the pilgrims passing through, and the glorious city opening its gates to receive them, but by our imagination acting upon these striking figures, and thus giving them a substance and a power to our hearts? If, then, a man says, "Imagination has nothing to do with religion," we answer, "My good friend, you are confusing yourself with words without understanding their meaning. Put your 'Pilgrim's Progress' on the fireback, and the 'Holy War,' and the 'History of Little Faith,' 'Quarles's Emblems,' and many other precious books of a similar stamp; for if you discard the faculty of picturing objects as these spiritual writers have represented them, you need not keep these works as useless lumber on your shelves."

We have entered into this perhaps somewhat dry and uninteresting explanation, because it may seem, at first sight, rather startling to say that there was such a thing as imagination in a Christian heart. But as the Lord has given us imagination, as well as reasoning, conscience, affections, etc., in the work of grace and the teaching of the Spirit, he illuminates, sanctifies, and employs this faculty, to apprehend his mode of instruction by type and figure.

Whether our explanation be correct or not, this one thing is certain, that there is something in figures eminently adapted to convey instruction, and to present truth with peculiar power and force to the mind. For one person who can comprehend an argument, there are hundreds who can understand an illustration; and a figure will be stamped on the memory for life, when a proof will be forgotten in ten minutes after it has been clearly laid down. We need not wonder, therefore, that the Lord the Spirit has so filled the Holy Scriptures with figure and illustration; and that the Blessed Lord himself, who spoke as never man spoke, so opened his mouth in parables, which are, in fact, but extended figures.

"I have used similitudes," says the Lord, "by the ministry of the prophets;" (Hosea 12:10;) and we need hardly say how striking and appropriate these similitudes are. Look, for instance, at the Song of Solomon. Bridegroom and bride, seem to vie with each other in running through all the range of natural objects conspicuous for beauty and loveliness, to celebrate each other's beauty, and to mingle their mutual loves. Gold, silver, ivory, jewels, beryls, and sapphires as articles of cost and beauty; spikenard, calamus, cinnamon, frankincense, myrrh, and aloes as the chief spices; the rose, the lily, the pomegranate, as the sweetest and purest of scents; the palm, the cedar, the vine, the fig, the apple tree as the choicest of trees; the horse, the roe, the young fawn, as the most beautiful of animals; the dove, and especially the turtle-dove, as the most fond and affectionate of birds; honey, wine, milk, as the sweetest of food; purple and scarlet as the most resplendent of colors--how the Holy Spirit glances, as it were, through all creation, from the sun walking in his brightness to the dove cooing in the shade, to set forth the beauty and glory, the love and loveliness of Christ and the Church.

Whence this rich and bounteous profusion, his almost lavish prodigality of figure, as if the Holy Spirit, in writing this book by the pen of Solomon, strewed, as it were, beauty in every verse from his finger tips, unless figure and emblem were the choicest and most suitable means of conveying a sense of Christ's beauty and blessedness, as seen by the eye of faith in union with his bride? Strip the Song of Solomon of its figures and comparisons, and you make it a mere dead and dry disquisition on the love of Christ and his Church, as much like the exquisite and beautiful Song of Songs as a gate-post resembles a palm or a cedar.

And not only would the Song of Solomon bleed at every pore were its figures stripped away, but the Bible generally, the blessed Bible, on which the Holy Spirit, by figure and comparison, has shed his richest unction, his sweetest and softest dew, would be almost as dead and dry as an Act of Parliament. Where would be Isaiah's glowing imagery, the beautiful figures and comparisons through which the Lord has comforted thousands of sorrowful hearts? Where Jeremiah's terrible denunciations and withering rebukes? Where Ezekiel's emblematic representations--his barber's razor, his food by weight and water by measure, his digging through the wall, his pot with the seething bones and filthy scum? In a word, not only where would all the life and power of the Bible, but where would the Bible itself be, were the figures gone? In fact, the Bible would not be the Bible were the figures removed or tamed down to dry declarations.

God knew best how to write his own book; and he has filled it with comparisons. Look at the figures which he uses to mark out and distinguish his own chosen people. They are his sheep, his wheat, his jewels, his vessels of mercy and honor, his trees of righteousness, his virgin bride, his house and dwelling-place, his kings and priests, the lot of his inheritance, the members of his body, flesh, and bones; the crown of his head, and the spouse of his heart. The wicked in the same manner are stamped and branded by emblem and figure. They are designated as goats, chaff, tares, vessels of wrath, reprobate silver, dross, swine, wolves, a stench in God's nostrils, a generation of vipers, hatching cockatrice' eggs, and weaving the spider's web; trees twice dead, clouds without water, wandering stars to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever.

Take the figures on both sides as descriptive of the righteous and the wicked, of which we have given but a faint specimen, and then ask yourself if it be in the power of human language or human thought, except by emblem and figure, to give such force and weight to describe the friends and foes of God. Certainly not. It is God's own language, therefore the fittest, weightiest, truest, best.

When figures are scattered in such rich profusion in the sacred pages, and where a man undertakes to explain all of them in a spiritual and experimental manner, we may well conclude that it is no common or easy undertaking, and that to have the mind of the Spirit in all his exposition, needs no ordinary spiritual man. A great depth of vital experience and a clear insight into the meaning of the Holy Spirit must be given to a man from above who undertakes to lay open figure after figure, and metaphor after metaphor; and not only so, but a great and unusual sobriety of judgment, and a conscience made and kept very tender in the fear of God, to preserve him from running wild amid Scripture imagery. How many light and trifling men have disgusted the saints of God by desecrating the holy figures of the Scripture by their carnal explanations and bold presumptuous intrusion into sacred mysteries, the power of which they had never known or felt; and even good men have sometimes made themselves ridiculous by attempting to open a figure, and have done it so awkwardly and confusedly as not only to destroy the meaning of the figure itself, but to make one part of their explanation contradict the other, or, what is worse, some grand Bible truth.

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