

Aaron's Candlestick



"Now the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto Aaron, and say unto him, When thou lightest the lamps, the seven lamps shall give light over against the candlestick. And Aaron did so; he lighted the lamps thereof over against the candlestick, as the Lord commanded Moses. And this work of the candlestick was of beaten gold, unto the shaft thereof, unto the flowers thereof, was beaten work: according unto the pattern which the Lord had showed Moses, so he made the candlestick." --Numbers 8:1-4

The lampstand in question was not simply a human construct. In fact, the lampstand did not take its meaning from what was in the mind of Aaron--or even from the mind of Moses. But both Aaron and Moses were responsible for knowing which candlestick was meant. The candlestick was objective to both of their minds, and their mental images were but subjective images of the objective reality. But even the objective reality of the candlestick did not derive from itself; it did not exist in and of itself. There is no brute factuality here. Instead, the pattern for the candlestick had been given to Moses in the Holy Mount by God Himself. The objective reality was the invisible (in God's mind) made visible. If Moses made a mistake, or if Aaron made a mistake, it was possible to know that they had made a mistake, because the reality of the candlestick rested upon the thought of God, not on either of their thoughts.

The words of God were plain. Presumably, when God told Moses to tell "Aaron," the word "Aaron" meant at least as much to God that it did to Moses. "Aaron" at least meant the brother of Moses to both God and Moses. Moses was responsible to know which "Aaron" was meant, for there were probably many Aarons in Israel. It might very well be that God intended much more in the person of Aaron than Moses could understand at that time--typical things concerning Christ, the Atonement, etc., but God certainly at least meant that individual that went by the name of Aaron, clearly identifiable to Moses, Miriam, and the host of Israel. If Moses had taken the message to Miriam, we would expect God to be displeased with him. We know that God was very displeased with Moses when he struck a rock, when God had specifically told

him to speak to it. God did not speak with ambiguity to Moses, but neither did He bypass Moses' mental responsibility.

Of course, it was impossible for Moses to "get into" the mind of God. But neither could Aaron "get into" the mind of Moses. All Moses or Aaron could know of the mind of God was what God revealed to Moses, but the words must convey real meaning, for Moses knew that it was impossible for God to lie. Therefore, when God said "Aaron," Moses knew that God did not mean "Miriam." If God did not convey real information to Moses, then Moses could not convey real information to Aaron. That's why preachers must see the Bible as God's word, conveying real ideas in words, or they will never be able to speak with authority or meaning to their congregations.

If God did not speak clearly to Moses, then Moses cannot speak with clarity to Aaron. To say that "candlestick" (or lampstand) does not mean the same to God, Moses, and Aaron, is to destroy forever any possibility of any real and meaningful revelation: either from God to man, or from man to man. Everyone is locked up in his own thoughts, trying to figure out what "it means to me." Of course, there is much more to God's thought than to man's, qualitative differences because of His Incommunicable Attributes. But "candlestick" conveyed real meaning to Moses, meaning that originated in God, for He gave the pattern in Mt. Sinai. Moses did not have to be deified to know what the candlestick was. And neither did Aaron. Neither of them imposed their own meaning on the word "candlestick."

In this Moses would have been operating on the principle he expressed in another place, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law." (Deut. 29:29) There are things that God has not revealed. It is sinful even to seek to intrude into them, as David says, "Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty: neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me" (Ps. 131:1)

God does not give us information about things that are too high for us. He tells us that there are such things, and forbids us to speculate. But if God has told us things, then we have the capacity to understand them. We are bound only by our sin and slothfulness. It would have been sinful for Moses to hesitate and say, "God's thoughts are above my thoughts. I wonder what He meant by "candlestick"? It would have been equally sinful for Aaron to have said, "I know that Moses thinks that God said 'candlestick,' but God's thoughts are

higher than ours. Who knows what God means?" It would have been sinful, for when Moses said "candlestick" it was truly the word of God, the same as if God has spoken directly to Aaron.

This writer has taught school all his life, from kindergartners to seminary graduate students. One of the most difficult tasks facing the educator is to convince some students that they are capable of understanding the subject matter, or that it is worth the effort. "I can't learn that," is often another way of saying, "I refuse to learn that."

People do not learn because of three basic sinful responses: they do not think they are capable, they do not want to learn because they reject the subject matter, or they refuse to spend the effort it takes to learn. The first response charges God with folly; the other two are open rebellion.

In Romans 1:19ff, it is evident that men do not want to retain God in their knowledge, because of their bondage to sin. They do not seek the Lord, not because they cannot find Him, but because they do not want to find Him. He is not far from any of us, Paul declares in Acts 17. In fact, "in Him we live, and move, and have our being." Sinful man is like a man standing in his front yard with his eyelids tightly clenched together: "You cannot convince me the sun is shining." Even a small boy can see the solution, "Open your eyes, you fool." The bondage is moral and ethical, not metaphysical.

But sinful man is also like the school boy who takes one look at the math problem, slams the book closed, and declares, "I can't do math." His "can't" is really a "won't." He cannot succeed, because he will not take the effort to succeed. He may feel very distressed about it: "The desire of the slothful killeth him, for his hands refuse to labor." (Prov. 21:25) He worries about it, and wishes he could do it, and frets about it, and feels very victimized. But the reason he cannot do it is because he refuses to put forth the effort to do it. It is equally sinful for the average man to stomp out of church, "I don't want doctrine. I want something I can understand. I want something to make me feel good."

There are things in the Bible that are very difficult. But things that even the ancient church did not understand, we understand today because of the labor and efforts of two centuries of Bible study. It is sinful for me to read the Bible and reject its teachings as contradictory, when I do not take the time and the effort to try to understand. If God has said it, then it is for me and for my

children. Am I to hide my talent under a rock and pretend that God's word is too hard for me? The sin of the man who hid his talent was sloth, but he pretended that the master was cruel and unreasonable.

"If thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; if thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding." (Prov. 2:3-6) The Lord gives wisdom by His words, and we seek for it from His mouth.

If Prov. 2:6 doesn't mean that God speaks to men in words, then nothing in the Bible is comprehensible, and we should retire to the top of some mountain and contemplate our navels. We certainly do not have anything to say to each other, and the words of the sluggard have equal weight with the words of the diligent and wise. "One man, one vote," will have cosmic significance, not just for the radical democrat. Aaron could say, "I know that God's word means candlestick to you, Moses, and I know that you are sincere, but I have problems with wasting gold in meaningless ritual, when there are so many homeless in the world. I think I will make one of tin, and make only one branch to it, for numbers are all one in the infinite God. Seven, one: what's the difference? And I will have Miriam light them, for she is our sister, Moses, and God speaks to her also. Maybe she will feel better about putting the image of the serpent on the tin candlestick, instead of the flowers, for it symbolizes wisdom, and we certainly want to be wise, now don't we? Aren't flowers a bit frivolous and touchy-feely? Aren't all the people holy, and doesn't God speak to all of us? You take too much upon you if you expect all of us to see it your way." (See Numbers 16:3 and following).

Finally. God did not speak to Aaron directly, but through Moses. It is sinful arrogance for a man to expect to receive personal instructions from God. God has chosen to speak through a Mediator, His Son, and through those appointed by Him. (Ephesians 4) The apostles and the prophets have given us the Bible, and ordained the word to be preached by the ministry of the Word. It humbles us to receive the word of God from human agency, but that is God's will for us, plainly stated by God Himself. This requires us to be diligent, to exercise discernment, to seek out who are the true servants of God, to bear with their infirmities and weaknesses, to pray for them, and to hold up their hands.