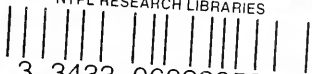


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Deism or Christianity?

FOUR DISCOURSES,

BY

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P R E F A C E .

IN publishing these Discourses, which were composed without such an intention and in the ordinary course of ministerial service, the author thinks to discharge a debt to the religious denomination with which he is connected, and to the cause of which he is set for the defence. At the same time, since subjects of this kind are by their nature incapable of exact demonstration, and therefore always open to debate, he will not feel called upon to enter into any controversy with those who may choose to assail his positions. Here are his thoughts. Let them pass for the value that each one on his conscience may assign to them.

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EVIDENCE.

For it pleased the Father, that in him should all fulness dwell.
— COLLOSS. i. 19.

THIS passage is supposed by some to refer to that plenitude of power and grace with which the Son of God was endowed. God gave not the spirit by measure unto him. Others explain it of the whole great body of believers, his church, which is elsewhere called his fulness. The first interpretation seems to be the most natural. Both convey a true and an important meaning. According to one, Christ is represented as possessing every possible excellence, that can appear in our nature or adorn the high office that he sustains towards our race. According to the other, the whole vast multitude of believing souls is brought up before the mind, — Jew and Gentile together, — united under one head, the

Saviour, and dwelling in him of whose fulness all receive and grace upon grace. But it is under neither of these forms that the present discourse proposes to find its subject. The text has been chosen for a different purpose. Its language suggests, even if it did not intend, the thought that the religion of the Son of God contains in itself the full wisdom of the ages that went before and of the ages that were to follow, and was to receive testimony from all the dispensations of heaven to the human family. This idea is as just as it is sublime. I regard the Gospel as an abounding source of sacred truth and holy influences for the whole world; receiving into itself whatever ancient experience could supply, and distributing from itself whatever the exigencies of the coming times can require. The lessons of earliest days looked forward to it to complete their instruction, and the inquiries of the latest will continue to look back upon it as a sufficient guidance and a divine supply. It is connected with the ways of Providence behind and onward, and they combine to bear witness to it. This is the idea, that I would offer a few considerations to establish, believing that it will lead us to some valuable practical conclusions.

We are apt to conceive of the evidences of Christianity as a subject standing apart from all others, and having little connexion with any general views of truth or life. We are apt to conceive of Christianity itself as a single, insulated object, confined within a certain circle of its own. We either view it as a short series of events, that took place under one or two high priests and Cæsars not far from two thousand years ago, or else as a system of doctrines and institutions which at that time was set up on the earth. When the question is asked, then, — Is it true? we either bring proof that those events actually transpired; thus showing that the peculiar agency of God was indeed manifested in the wondrous facts which the New Testament records; or else we examine the form of the faith itself, and show that it is worthy of such a marvellous interposition, and wears upon its front the evidences of a divine origin. This is well. It is deserving of all attention and all praise. Not in vain has learned research been employed so earnestly as it has on these important themes. If they have been occasionally treated with shallowness or too great an ingenuity, they have been treated also with convincing ability, to the

perfect satisfaction of the profoundest and most cultivated minds. In some quarters serious persons have allowed themselves to speak slightly of such investigations, but the slight is unwise. Let us give honor to those who in the minutest way have endeavored to strengthen the evidences, even where they did not need to be strengthened, of our blessed faith. But I would here take a wider survey, and present that evidence for it which is derived from an historical Providence; or Providence apparent in history. By this I mean that the courses of the heavenly administration over human affairs point from all sides towards this great centre of spiritual life; thus vindicating its claim to our reverence. The general annals of the world, and not the Scripture accounts only, — the general fortunes of the world, and not those only which lie within the scope of the Bible, — hold it forth as a word of command and of hope for humanity; reminding us that, in a further sense of the text than any usually assigned, it has pleased the Father that all fulness should dwell in him whom he sent.

Begin with the story of the old nations that preceded the Saviour's advent. The most

striking fact in the whole scene to the thoughtful eye is, that all permanent instruction seems to have been handed on from the beginning through one principal channel of communication. A single, continuous line of light traverses the obscure and confused waste of the centuries. Abraham and Israel and the posterity named after them, would appear, though they had been nowhere called so, the appointed race. What became of the other tribes and civilizations in the primitive East, the cradle of nations? What have they communicated to the treasury of religious improvement? The wisest have left no mark nor sign. Tyre, proverbial for its knowledge as for its prosperity, is as bare of useful memories as the rocks to which it is reduced are of the forts and palaces that once crowned them. Now, as the prophet predicted, it is scraped of its very dust, a place to spread nets on. Whatever monuments remain further towards the rising sun are the work of unknown people, and bear not even an inscription; while down at the South, in the land of Egypt, where so many colossal antiquities are covered over with strange characters, nothing is read from them for the encouragement of humanity. They are ruins, or

what no time seems able to ruin, standing up in the desert; melancholy with the past, and as void of promise for the future as the bandaged corpses are, that crowd there the pits of earth and rock in disgusting perpetuity. The only use they serve is to illustrate the live pages of the history and the psalm and the prophecy of that despised nation, which once leaned upon the Egyptian kings but to show how vain it was to make flesh its arm, and was overrun by Babylonish invaders but to point the moral of impious power overthrown.

But the Jews, you say, were a wretched generation of men, contracted in their views, belittled by their peculiarities, half barbarous, apostate from the very faith they made their boast of. To whatever extent this should be granted, so much the more wonderful is it that it pleased God, through such a feeble and humble instrument, to lead on the progress of his family below, and prepare the way for him who should come. Besides that their Scriptures are the universal text-book of sacred learning, — no language like theirs to kindle the devotions of the highest and most accomplished minds, — they constituted the preparation also, as has just been hinted, for the Gospel, which was to

explain and complete their whole purpose. And here let me frankly say what I understand by this preparation and completion, so as to put the subject on the broadest possible foundation, and leave nothing questionable. I do not allude to any successive covenants, as they are called, with ancient progenitors. There is something artificial in that, and savoring too much of the discourse of mere theologians. Neither have I the least reference to such things as types in the Old Testament, expecting their correspondences in a new dispensation. These are often fanciful; suppositions of human device rather than arrangements of the heavenly counsels. I have not in mind even the literal fulfilment of exact predictions. These have been pressed with an undue minuteness. They have been multiplied without reason. They may consist in accidental resemblances. Their proof will often involve a niceness of construction, on which no great truths can be expected to depend. A great deal of laborious learning has been unprofitably expended here, which the simple Christian is noway concerned with. And as for all the arithmetical calculations that are supposed to point out the dates of remote events, and even

to fix from a time long back the time of the consummation of all things, these are the mere results of an ingenious ignorance, that bewilders itself superstitiously with figures and numbers, but has no understanding of the wide method which Providence, in the Scriptures as everywhere else, takes with men. The manner in which I love best to contemplate prophecy, and which I believe to be the justest one, regards it as a broad current of thoughts uttered and events taking place, setting on towards a great and determinate fulfilment. What is incomplete anticipates a coming perfection. Obscure signs tend more and more clearly to a brightening future. Vague expectations converge to a remote point where they rest and are satisfied. Shadowy presentiments are on the move, and in the way to be justified. Customs, laws, institutions, at first of a doubtful or gloomy character, find their highest import further on. Slight intimations are growing into weighty consequences. Attention is roused. Hope is excited. The spirit of God in the minds of chosen servants breathes the words of a prospective wisdom, and a holy ecstasy catches them away into future times. The hand of God over passing events shapes

them into wondrous conformities with an object hereafter to be accomplished. The eyes of gifted men and the steps of an almighty Providence are bent in one direction, to meet in a consummation that shall be thoroughly comprehended only when it is arrived at. You will allow that there is nothing diminutive or perplexing in a representation like this. And this is just what happened in preparing the world for its Saviour. As it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell, it pleased Him also to guide the whole previous history of our race in such a manner as to give the utmost possible effect to that economy of his grace which was to be revealed in the fulness of time. Here is a sober literal meaning of that poetic declaration in the Epistle to the Hebrews: When He showed his Son to the world, it was said, Let all the messengers of his former dispensations, all the angels of God, pay homage to him.

For if we turn from the tribe of Judah and the prophetic line of descent to the other populations of the earth, we shall perceive that there too the path was making ready for the sacred advent. Mountains of obstruction were brought low, and the vallies of ignorance

and humiliation were lifted into the rays of the sun. The subtle Greek, wearied of his philosophies, had learned to sigh for a faith. Some of the acutest minds of his noble land seemed to labor towards a truth that was inaccessible to them. The writings of the Old Testament had been translated into his own speech, and found their way from the rolls of the synagogue and the Egyptian court into Athenian homes. The most distinguished of the first converts were those who had come from the schools of the Grecian sages. The lordly Roman, now everywhere the master, saw the literature of his countrymen already touched with an influence holier than its own, from the Jewish oracles. He saw sitting in the imperial palace, of Cæsar's household, those who believed in the name of Christ; and he found himself compelled, however unwilling, to give facilities for the spread of that name over all the globe. In the reign of Augustus, the public mind throughout the empire was shaken with mysterious expectations of some unheard of thing about to take place. How these expectations arose we may not be able very accurately to tell, but the fact is undeniable and most striking. It was evident, that some momentous

crisis in human fates, some vast moral revolution was at hand.

We have thus disposed of the ancient world ; for in the Saviour's day it seemed to be wholly embraced under the three titles that have been mentioned ; and so far as the culture of humanity was concerned it was so embraced. The inscription that was fastened to the cross, in Hebrew and Greek and Latin, was for the reading of the nations. Said I not well, then, that an historical Providence has set its seal to the mission of its chosen child ?

And if it was so from the beginning, as it led forward to him, how has it been since, as the years have gone on, taking their departure from him and dating the new era from his birth ? The same Providence has pursued a like course, now in favoring as then in providing. It has covered his name with a steady glory, and his church and his cause with a perpetual benediction, that in all things he might have the pre-eminence. With what a rapid and irresistible sweep did his Gospel fly through the earth, after having received its inauguration from heaven in wind and fire ! Not by the help of earthly force, but against all which that could do. Not by the help of

human devices, but against everything that was crafty as well as everything that was strong, it triumphed, and as it were at once. Nothing was ever beheld so wonderful. It could not be eluded. It could not be withstood. It rebuked princes, and tired down persecutors, and converted the world. Everywhere it raised up the oppressed form, and comforted the sick heart, of humanity. It set its stamp immediately upon the ages. And the work that was so quick done was so far from exhausting itself in the doing that ever since it has been achieving new and unimagined successes. Whatever of improvement has been brought about in our religious, civil and social condition, traces itself back, and owns that it does, to his epoch of light. Our institutions of mercy are as much his as his church is. Both in the ideal regions of sentiment and belief, and in the fixtures of visible establishments, what is there that excels, that does not confess its obligation to Christian principles? The freedom of man, the equality of woman, the sanctity of firesides and the hope of souls, — how much do they owe to that religion, which has always found protection from on high; — which has come down

to us through dark periods unshorn of its lustre, — through polluted ones with its garments white, — through ferocious ones without a lock of its bright hair singed! From this distance of eighteen hundred years, and with the records before us of what has been wrought, we turn back to him in whom all fulness dwelt, with fresh motives to thankfulness and with an unabated wonder. The Lord testifies to him still, now from the experience of his creatures as once from the parted skies, that in him He is well pleased. Who has arisen since like the beloved son? Or how can we conceive that another such should arise? The moral destinies of the world have hung upon him until now. What have the nations, not Christian, done for any permanent spiritual advantage? Answer the question as you survey them, from the scattered hordes of Africa to the crowded myriads of China and of the isles of Japan. Or what were the swarms from the North, who have really transmitted to us so much, who broke up a corrupted civilization to establish a purer one, — what were they till the Gospel took under its control their wild manners and their fierce hearts? Deny a Providence then, or

else bow to the Saviour whom its decrees, from the earliest to the latest, recognize as its anointed. How can you believe that the world's history is guided according to the counsels of Eternal Wisdom, — that it is the Divine Will set forth in action, — and yet with any consistency dispute his place, who is so set on high there, matchless and alone, a name above every name, whom the beginning pre-figured and the end reveres? Here we have an argument for our faith, of the most general kind, obvious to all, not dependent on any refined reasonings or curious learning, but existing among the facts that we daily read of or witness around us. Give to it its due weight in your thoughts.

Among the several conclusions that might be possibly drawn from the subject, the discourse as it closes will take notice of only two; and of these in the fewest words. The first is, that although Christ were not he that should come, it would be vain to look for another. In him dwells the fulness, even on the most common showing, that no other can supersede, or inherit, or share the fame of. He occupies the long tract of time, and is indirectly involved in all the great progresses which the

Lord of time has disclosed for the blessing of his children. To name any boasted leader of any new-started project or new-fangled philosophy, in rivalry or the most distant comparison with that Prince of life, is as foolish as it is impious. Men must accomplish beneficent things by becoming Christians, not by ceasing to be such. All the Messiahs of yesterday are empty and false. They have no commission to exist.

The second conclusion is, that no institution can stand, which, pretending philanthropy, or moral instruction, or social improvement for its object, at the same time casts away the sanctions of the Gospel, or even with indifference declines receiving into its bosom the element of Christian nurture. Call it a polity, or a Church, or a "cause," or a community; no matter for its title, — if it have set its plan above the order and law of our holy religion, if it have declared itself independent of him in whom it has pleased the Father that all fulness should dwell, — there is no abiding place for it; there is no genuine vitality in it. The earth will not feed it. The heavens will not protect it. It has the seed of its ruin in it. It may be noisy and showy for a while, but it is a

doomed enterprise. It is passing away into silence, to lie among the things which, but for the warning they give, were best forgotten. Set up your building, socialist, agitator, reformer,—whether it be most like a quiet farm-house or a boisterous hall. Without that Corner-stone, elect, precious, there is no stability. Without the principles and the spirit which gather under the tabernacle that God pitched and not man, there is no grace without and no benediction within. Your house is sand to the foundation, and hay and stubble to the top.

Let us, for our parts, accept the Gospel in all its evidences, and be content with it; in all its authority, and be obedient to it; in all its merciful condescension, and throw our affections round it. “Then,” says the Apostle, “when you know the love of Christ which passeth other knowledge, ye shall be filled with all the fulness of God.”

CREED.



God hath chosen you to salvation, through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth. — 2 THESS. ii. 13.

THE Apostle here sets forth the Christian salvation as composed of two principles or elements. The first is the “sanctification of the spirit.” By that we are to understand all those influences which make a man good, which enlighten his conscience, elevate his motives, purify his heart, fill him with devout and kind affections, and dispose him to walk uprightly before the world and humbly before God. The other is the “belief of the truth.” That is, a persuasion of the mind that the testimony of Christ, and concerning Christ, is true; that the revelation through him has a real foundation in fact; that certain articles of Christian religion, — not religion in general, but the Christian religion, — are accepted as articles of faith.

This representation of the subject must recommend itself to all candid minds. It takes in the whole ground, without prejudice or partiality. It is in no respect or degree exclusive. It does not say that one may not be virtuous, religious, accepted, without acknowledging any form of Christianity whatever. It does not say that the heathen and the heretic and the infidel may not find as much favor in the sight of heaven, as they who walk in the light of the fullest privileges and invoke the name of Jesus the loudest. If it did, the disciple who uttered it would have fallen far below the generous spirit of his Lord. But it does say, and with an evidence beyond controversy, that the redemption of the Gospel is composed of these two parts, moral dispositions and intellectual conclusions; character and belief; the inspirations of the soul within itself and the reception of truths that are established outside of that self. It is concerned with what we feel and experience, and with what we know also—or suppose we know. It recognizes both what is personal to us, and what should have some authority over us. It makes account of our own nature, as endowed by its Creator with faculties that spontaneously seek

and serve him, and as led by the general guidance of his grace to seek and serve him still further; and in like manner it makes account of "the word of the Lord" announced and arranged for our use, and of certain forms of sacred instruction. Thus it satisfies the spiritualist on the one side, and the scripturalist on the other; those who demand the freedom with which the inspiration of the Almighty makes us free, and those who love the inclosures of a defined faith, and something "written aforetime for our learning."

This discourse proposes to leave unconsidered the first and most interesting part of the subject, "the spirit;" and confine itself wholly to "the belief of the truth," or the creed. If the Apostle gives it the second place, he still gives it an important and essential one. The present age, especially in the most liberal quarters, seems inclined to devote chief attention to the other part of religion,—what is called its more spiritual and freer part,—to the neglect of that which is doctrinal. There is a strong reaction against the prescriptions and dogmas of preceding ages. There is a weariness of formularies, whether of language

or observances. The tendency is to cast into the lowest degree of esteem all articles of confession, all modes of describing what is to be believed. To define a faith, however largely, is imagined by many to imprison it, and to abridge unjustly the scope of thought. And to urge the importance of so defining it is looked upon with jealousy, as if one would thus turn dogmatist, and undertake to dictate to others' convictions. Now this feeling may easily be carried too far, and often is. It may take a mistaken direction, and often does. Can anything be more evident than that religion is a doctrine, as well as a sentiment, and must take some shape as such? Will any one deny that the Gospel is a belief, as well as an influence, and therefore presents some shape of what is to be believed? This shape, whether more or less comprehensive, whether of one or another outline, is precisely what we mean when we speak of a creed. It will be different to different minds. We cannot all see it in the same light or the same proportions. But there it must be, if we would profess anything, if we would discern anything. It is an intellectual necessity, and they who think the least of it cannot dispense with it. Just so far

as you depart from it you are in skepticism. The individual that has it not holds nothing that he can with any propriety call Christian truth; and the church or denomination that has it not may as well break up, for it has nothing to maintain, or to be maintained by.

This discourse stands, then, for the defence of creed, in the most generous signification of that term. If indeed it can be thought to need defence, or to require anything further for its justification than a simple understanding of what it is, and all that it is. For creed is nothing more than belief drawn out into expression, as has been already intimated. And if any belief at all belongs essentially to the Christian name, it certainly does not change its character by being expressed. But there is heard so much looseness of speech, as if religious opinions were matters of entire indifference; and as if to profess reverence for any conceivable thing that can be called sacred was to confess Christ; and as if to think as some old Grecian philosopher may be supposed to have thought, is to be Christian enough; and as if it were worth no one's care what doctrines prevail in a community, provided you and you are honest, and you and you are

“divine.” I say there is so much random and inconsiderate talk of this kind ; — and then on another hand there is such an air of pretension, spurning all the boundaries of former opinion, exalting every tumid fancy into a faith, and sometimes recommending an unbounded license of speculation under the abused title of Gospel liberty ; — that one may see special occasion in these days to recommend the claims of Christian doctrine, or creed, distinguishing this institution of religion from all others.

In urging the apostolic instruction, that we are chosen to salvation, not only “through sanctification of the Spirit” but “belief of the truth,” we shall be speaking a word, which, though always important, is peculiarly seasonable at the present time. A creed! I am afraid that the term may still have an unpleasant sound to the ears of many ; — innocent as the thing is, unavoidable as it is, essential as it is. How can we wonder that it should, when it has been so associated in our minds with ideas of bigotry, intolerance, spiritual pride and oppression? The denomination to which we belong, took its origin in resistance to confessions that it could not subscribe and

a dictation to which it would not submit. The evils of ecclesiastical positiveness and tyranny have so marked themselves upon the church, that everything which reminded of them became odious. Liberal religion had to employ its energy for a long time in that direction mainly; and seemed to take the attitude rather of vindicating its freedom, and protesting against what was false, than of insisting on what was vitally true. Hence occasion has been taken to say, that we cannot consistently with our own principles draw any lines of demarcation; that we have so opened the door to freedom as to have renounced the right of setting up any standard of the truth even for our own communion. All this is indiscreetly spoken; whether by those who are without our body or those who are within it. It supposes that every degree of freedom gives allowance to anarchy; that we cannot demand anything for ourselves, without conceding to others whatever they please to demand; that all reaction against error and encroachment on one side, leaves us without apology for defending ourselves against them on the opposite. But why so? By rejecting the precepts of our neighbors we do not resign

all precepts for ourselves. Because so much privilege is conceded, is there none left to be maintained? Because we draw such religious conclusions as the free judgment chooses, shall we therefore account all conclusions alike, or learn to draw none? We put our own interpretation upon the word of God. But what just liberality prevents us on that account from recording our most earnest dissent, both from those on one part who twist this word into a domineering terror, and from those on the other who renounce its authority and sneer at what it testifies? The Scriptures we hold to contain the recognized rule of faith and practice. If we admit anything that has the least right to call itself Christian, I suppose we admit this. Can it be all one, then, to us, whether this is allowed, or treated with open contempt? And what kind of rule is that, which contains no distinct sentence, and shrinks from all definition? If any complain of restraints on religious liberty, it will be well for them to remember that there are religious obligations also. This liberty is in no danger where we are, though many swelling vanities are uttered, and some artifices are practised, under that pretence. And if it is really so

great a good, let us have a portion of it too, as well as others. Surely there is a liberty of enclosure as well as of spread. We may claim to be by ourselves, so it be with a due consideration for those who differ from us. There is no harm in a simple wall of separation; and we neither commit persecution nor inflict martyrdom if we make it high enough to be seen from some distance. Men may call it exclusiveness, if they will. But every one that has a house over his head is in a sense exclusive. He does not build it that he may live out of doors; nor could he well call it a house if it took in all that is abroad.

Let us have a belief, therefore. How can we otherwise have any portion in the believer's rest or hope? Let us have a creed also. For how else can we tell or know what we believe? Only let it be held with humility, and seriousness, and charity. We need not ask too curiously how much there is of it, nor of what precise kind it is. We will not ask this of others at all, for it is their concern and not ours. But if their doctrine jostle or attack us, it may impose upon us an obligation to keep it aloof from our fellowship, and to be able to give to the world a reason for the different faith that

we are attached to. A creed! It has been unreasonable. It has been despotic. It has canonized error. It has prolonged abuses. Who doubts this? And certainly the fact is repeated often enough to bring it within every one's knowledge. But we are not so often reminded that it is not necessarily connected either with a superstition or a tyranny; — that it has its foundation in the human mind, and not in arbitrary impositions; and that it has great uses still to subserve among the uneasy movements of both thoughtless and reflecting minds. It need not be formally propounded, and it cannot be compelled, but it should be able to speak itself out to the private conscience, and even to the ears of others when suitable occasion comes. We know that it makes nothing the truer; but it may help to impress us the more with what we acknowledge to be true. We know that it cannot hold within the articles that are the most carefully prepared the faith of a single human being. But we do not want it for that. Its aid is called in, not to restrain but to express the thought. One may not admit it; and then it is for others and not for him. Or he may admit it but not honestly, evading it

by some subterfuge of interpretation; and then it is for those who are less ingenious and more sincere. According to the view we are now taking of it, there is nothing in it implying that it must be narrow, minute, rigorous; that it must be technical in its form, or abstruse and theological in its substance. It may leave all art to sectarian devisers, and all abstraction to the schools. Let it be as simple as it will, and as unincumbered, and as large in spirit. Only give it some existence. Allow it a place. Do not cast out its name as evil, on account of the mischiefs that have sprung up by the side of it and the hypocrisies to which it has been made to minister. Let it have a hand that can write. Let it have a tongue that can speak. Let it have something, however short, that it is willing to say and means to abide by.

The word creed takes its origin, as has been supposed, from the first one in that summary of doctrine which has been styled the Apostles' Creed; "Credo," I believe. Why should we be scrupulous about repeating it? "I believe" in the law that binds and the goodness that preserves me. "I believe" in the holy Providence of God that embraces me

with all. "I believe" in a Divine Spirit, breathing through and governing a material world. "I believe" in the Gospel of a Redeemer, with its wonderful story, its grace and authority, its revelations of mercy and its promises of life. "I believe." Help, Lord, mine unbelief. We may be doubtful about many things, and sore perplexed. We may have but dim views before us sometimes, and carry drooping thoughts in our breasts. Be it so. This is nature's weakness. I could never prize a man's faith any the more for his rigid precision or his boastful confidence. But one thing at least is as clear as the light,—that the Gospel can be of service only so far as it is accredited. If it have no sanction for us, it has no comforting trust for us. What it had no commission to teach, we need not thank it for telling. What it had no right to promise, we can have no reason to expect from it. Wherein it confers its salvation, it must do it through "belief of the truth." Let us define that truth, each one for himself. Not too sharply and noways ungraciously. But that we may see it with greater distinctness, and imprint it with deeper strength upon our minds. We will not cramp it with any of our

contractions. We will not affront so vast a principle by artificial distinctions and illiberal devices. But let us not be liberalized out of its pale and covenant. Let us mark where we stand, and stand there with a modest but firm persuasion, with a free yet a subject spirit. And may God bless to us his word, and make it a rule as well as a light, and include you and me among those who are "chosen to its salvation."

THE DIFFERENCE.



Whom do men say that I, the Son of man, am? — MATT. xvi. 13.

THEY said various things. They were not agreed. Some thought that John the Baptist had risen from the dead; as we are apt to connect a present wonder with some other that has recently agitated our minds. Others believed that Elijah had returned from the skies to which a chariot of fire was said to have translated him; for he was the most illustrious name among the Israelitish prophets, and a tradition ran that he was to be sent, “before the coming of the great day of the Lord.” Others fancied that some one of the old seers of Judah had taken the form of a youth, and was breaking the silence of more than half a thousand years. They acknowledged him as an extraordinary person; but

who he was they differed in telling. When Simon Peter was asked his opinion, he made the memorable confession: "thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God." To this the Son of man assented. He pronounced a blessing on him that uttered it, and declared that upon it his impregnable church should arise and stand.

One might suppose, then, that this question must be forever laid to rest among those who profess his religion. But this is very far from being the case. Voices are divided now as much as they were in the beginning, though in other ways and upon other accounts. If we look at the church two or three hundred years after its founder withdrew from it his visible presence, we shall perceive that there were several ways of answering the inquiry in the text, "who do men say that I, the Son of man, am?" Many affirmed that he was God himself in the likeness of a man, or one of three mysterious persons composing the Godhead. This doctrine prevailed, and still prevails; though we who can neither find it in the Scriptures nor reconcile it with them consider it an unauthorized hypothesis. Many contended that he was a super-angelic being, but inferior

to the Father both in nature and dignity, created himself and yet the instrument by which the world was created. These rival parties shook nations with their contention, each divided into numerous forms of verbal subtilty, and by turns persecuted and triumphant for a long time. But this latter theory has been gradually fading from the field of controversy, till its uncertain outlines can hardly be traced. Again there were others, who formed the third of the leading classes of opinion, into which the Christian world was distributed, in relation to the nature of Christ. These rested in that declaration of Peter: "Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God by miracles and wonders and signs which God did by him; whom God hath raised up after being crucified and slain; having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that he should be holden of it." They revered him as the special messenger of heaven, speaking with authority the words of eternal life, living and dying, and rising, and ascending, for the salvation of mankind. This is the belief that has recommended itself the most to us as a denomination. We account it perfectly scriptural,

and it seems to us to meet the wants of the humble and devout mind.

But let us now leave these points of dissent and those elder ages, and come down to the state of our own religious times, and to further diversities of judgment. — Christ still speaks through the generations that have intervened, and asks, “who do men say that I, the Son of man, am?” We must prepare for an altered tone of reply. It is true that whatever was reveringly said before is still repeated, but there are other voices that have come in and increased in boldness, and some of them will have to meet as they best can the warning that he spoke against those, who should deny him before men and be ashamed of his word. Various have been the degrees of departure in these modern days, and not in these only, from the truth written down for our learning. Some persons have taken the extreme of an irreligious hostility; while others, with a devout spirit and an unwilling incredulity, have tried and been almost persuaded to believe what evangelists and apostles have told; being drawn towards the Redeemer’s congregation from the dark verge of philosophic doubt by

the justness of their affections, and the needs and aspirations of their souls.

Begin with those who are the furthest off, who are wholly skeptics and renouncers. — “Who is this Son of man?” The hardihood of unbelief has ventured to respond, No one. No such person ever existed. He is but one of the names of the sun in the ancient solar worship, and his twelve disciples are only the signs of the Zodiac; — for to such a sublimity of folly has an ingenious speculation been carried. Or else he is an imaginary being, moulded out of the realm of ideas; for so have men been led to belie the whole moral history of their race. These are the lengths to which perverted science and learning have gone. But, leaving these, let us come to the consideration of other errors, that are not connected with either learning or science. And the first that encounters us is worse, far worse, than the one just mentioned. It does not deny the personal existence of the Son of man, but with a wicked audacity decries him as an impostor. In the face of all that benignant wisdom and spotless excellence, in the face of all the veneration and love and holy hope that have followed his name through the world, there are men

at this late time of day who repeat the charge that was brought against him in his life-time, "nay, but he deceiveth the people." The atheistic poet, Shelley, in some of his distempered writings, speaks of "the Galilean serpent," that "forth did creep," and cries :

"O that the free would stamp the impious name
Of Christ into the dust!"

We may find some explanation of such blasphemies in this, that the same man declaimed against religion itself, as a "prolific fiend, that tainted all it look'd on." And all this in the name of liberty and human progress; and with pompous phrases on "the beautiful idealisms of moral excellence";—phrases that have not yet quite lost their power of captivation. The meek and lowly Jesus was, in his eyes, "an ambitious man that aspired to the throne of Judæa." Happily, however, this insanity of unbelief is rare. The next class that comes forward is of those who regard the Saviour as a well-meaning enthusiast. They do not dispute the purity of his character, the elevation of his soul. But they suppose he was carried away by the fervor of his imagination to conceive himself to be some-

thing different from what he really was, and to be entrusted with a mission that was never assigned him. He who was so calm and noble only belonged, then, to a higher order of the visionaries and fanatics who have always abounded among men. He that declared like no other, and with such amazing results for humanity, the truth that he had received from God, spoke only the words that were suggested by an intense Jewish education on a too susceptible brain. He who compassed the whole of the earth and all time within the scope of his self-sacrificing love, was after all but the victim of a single, heated idea. But neither do views of this kind, it is likely, prevail to any considerable extent. The rejection of a Saviour does not usually assign such a reason, nor is unbelief apt to define its position with so much exactness.

I will call your attention to but one description more of persons, responding to that question of Jesus, "who do men say that I am?" They approach much nearer to us than those that have been named hitherto. They seldom detract from the personal excellence of the Redeemer in the slightest degree. On the contrary, they represent this as pre-

eminent. They love to lavish terms of admiration upon the great Jewish reformer, the sage of Nazareth. As if they would make amends for stripping him of the offices, which the New Testament ascribes to him and the gratitude of mankind has accepted, they take pains to spread a gaudy coloring of rhetorical applause over his life and character. But they deny that he was “approved of God by miracles and signs which God did by him;” or that anything out of the common course of nature accompanied his stay upon the earth. They deny that he knew any more than others, excepting as there was a brighter spirit in him, or that he could do more than ourselves except so far as he was better than we. They maintain all the general truths that Jesus taught, as truths of natural religion; and therefore sometimes do, though often they do not, claim the title of Christians. Whether they do or not, they may be devout and good persons. This must be conceded, for nothing is more obviously true; although for one I cannot look upon them as Christian believers; — Christian men, if you will, — but not believers. To them Jesus is an illustrious teacher, but no master. He possesses worth, but no special

authority. Although one of the Apostles says, “if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain, and we are found false witnesses,” they say that he either revived because he never really died, or that if he had actually expired he never rose. Now if his Gospel be a mistake, it is of no great consequence to me how beautiful they paint that error, nor with what empty parade of gilt language they may testify their respect for it. If he had no other credentials to speak from than might have belonged to one of the Scribes of that day, or one of the pretenders of this, I am not much concerned to know of his doctrine. If a virtuous and discerning spirit, however transcendent you make it, was his only distinction, — if the heavenly glory that has gathered about his history is but an afterthought and a superstition, — if he was not really the personage that he claimed to be if we can put the least reliance on any part of the record, — he is no Saviour to me. It is his promise that I want; his right to declare it, and his power to make it good. If no particular authority was given to him, and in this leading respect he also is “become weak as we, is become like unto us,” — I see no reason for setting up any more churches in

his name; I see no propriety in continuing to spread upon a worn-out pulpit the Scriptures that have received the lie.* I know what is right in conduct without him. I can see the beauty of religious sentiments without him. But I cannot feel the assurance of faith without him. Here is wanted the testimony that he brought from on high, — the covenant that he confirmed, — the pledge that he gave and redeemed. Nothing is gained for that assurance by freeing him from the reproach of being an enthusiast or a deceiver. Indeed, it is difficult to see how his character can be thus freed, on any supposition that makes him less than the Christ of the Gospels. If he is not allowed to be that, the objectors may as well go back at once to the position that was mentioned at first, and say, he is no one, — fabulous altogether. For how can they separate one part of his words from another, and one part of his actions and life from another? Or what do they know of him at all but from those very writings which they throw into discredit? However they may extol him in high-wrought phrases, it is but like weaving a robe of rhetoric to throw over an ideal being;

* 1 Cor. xv. 15.

if it does not resemble still more the homage of the knee to the Prince of life whom they depose.

The four classes of opinion that have now been brought under our brief review differ from each other in degrees of reverence, and in degrees of reasonableness also. Some of them may be held by men of the highest religious sensibility; men who are in love with truth; who have not only an earnest purpose of heart to walk uprightly among their brethren and before God, but who revere the precepts of the Gospel, and heartily strive for their more effectual spread in the world. One of them, the last, is consistent with great and venerating thoughts of that very Son of man, whose mission to mortals they seem to me so sadly to depress. All of them, even the most repugnant of them all, may gather under their banner good men;—for, thank God, the excellent in moral worth are not confined to any profession or climate under heaven. In every nation whether Christian or not, and in every Christian nation believer or not, “he that doeth righteousness is accepted;”—of whatever color or tribe or name, Jew, Mussulman, Deist, Pagan. Deliver me from the narrowness of thinking otherwise! Deliver us all

from it, as we would justify a holy God in his Providence, and as we would have any enlarged perception of his will, and as we would embrace with a true sympathy his whole family here below! At the same time, I think we must be aware that these several descriptions of thinkers, whether more or less open to religious impulses, whether more or less confirmed in moral intents, are agreed in this single respect, that they renounce what we consider to be the special revelation of the Father through his Son Jesus Christ. They fall back and rest on what is called natural religion; — that is, those great religious truths, which the mind of each one is supposed to seize by its own power, which are seen by the light of reason only, and neither admit nor require the aid of any extraordinary testimony. Now we must at once perceive that the purest and best of these are widely distant from the views that all Christian instruction has hitherto presented. The churches of Christendom were not built on such foundations. They would never have been heard of, if no other basis had been laid. And they would now come down, or stand unregarded, if this were all. The rock would vanish from underneath

them, and the oracle would be silent within, and the blessing would be stayed from above. While their service remained, how altered must be its speech, in order to match so strange a revolution! While the psalm and ascription were yet sung, how changed would be their tone!

We should open our eyes, I think, to the difference that has now been described. We should look at it with candor and good-will but with a steady decision. It is a great difference, exceeding great. It is wholly unlike every other that divides the Christian ranks. It never divided Christian ranks before, at least in this country. Not that it is new, for on the contrary it is extremely old. Its only singularity is found in the place where the doctrine I am opposing claims now to stand, — as a form of Christ's religion, and not, as it used to be accounted, its assailant. Other differences relate only to the interpretation of Scriptures which both parties receive as authoritative, but this involves the credibility of those Scriptures themselves. Who does not see what a vast remove it is? Here is a diversity of such importance that it ought not to exist, nor long can, under the title of the same denomination. It must sever that de-

nomination sooner or later, and had best produce such an effect at once. The sect that takes within its embrace such opposite conclusions is self-destroyed. Let there be every other kind of fellowship and sympathy that you please, all social feelings, all personal regards, but no community that we can help of that distinctive name by which we are shown to the world. If liberal Christianity means only an unbounded license of speculation, — recognizing nothing as fixed, — admitting any extremes of opinion as the fair results of its free principle, — my place is not there. Unto that assembly, O my soul, be not thou united !

In reading the passage from which the text is taken a little further on, we come to the more direct question which our Lord put to his disciples ; “but whom say ye that I am ?” Let us listen to it as if it were addressed to ourselves. The train of thought to which it leads will be different in some respects from that just pursued, but not, as I think, disagreeing with it at any point. Who say ye that he is, in whose name you were baptized, and under whose promise of mercy you hope to expire ? Each one must feel, that if he was sent for our whole kind the message is to him

individually. No one can believe for another. No one can redeem his nearest friend. Each mind stands by itself here. Who say ye? There are some who say nothing. They have thought nothing. Though they live among Christian institutions, and are in habitual compliance with them, Christ has come no nearer to them than as a sound and a custom. They hear and forget. They assent, perhaps, but reflect not. They have never set themselves with earnest deliberation, as they who must die and give account, to define the relation that the common Redeemer bears to them. This is a neglect that may be of heavier imputation than they are aware. To feel no concern for what has rocked and changed the globe, for what has been the defence and solace of humanity for many a hundred of years, to make up no judgment on so great a cause and not to care to make up any, to sit in the public assemblies that it has convened and under the church roofs that it has consecrated, and never trouble ourselves with the claims that it has upon our reverence, is an inconsiderateness that is surely unworthy of any persons of ordinary seriousness. I entreat any who are in such a state to come to an under-

standing with themselves, and that without delay. Frame some conclusion in your own thoughts, that shall justify you to your intelligence and consciences.

Who say ye that he is? While there are some, as has just been hinted, who may be startled at the question so personally pressed, and be bewildered with it, and not know how to reply; there are others who will make answer at once and with great confidence, but not, it is to be feared, aright. You may be able to repeat a great deal that you have been accustomed to hear, but which you have never verified or placed among your solid convictions. Or you may utter the last hasty conclusion to which you have arrived, without bringing it into any harmony with the conclusions that went before it. Or you may be thinking of the outward benefits of religion instead of its inward life; and fancy you are recognizing Christ, when you are only contemplating a becoming formality or a political advantage, something that has been established for the government of the multitude, or that otherwise serves the interests of the state. But his coming, whether the first or second, is not with observation, and his kingdom is not of this

world. His simple truth has nothing to do with your systems or surmises or earthly projects and prospects. His humble spirit has nothing to do with sectarian passions, on whatever side enlisted, but to bring them under subjection to the meekness of its law. You will understand him when he abides with you, and not when you point off to something distant, whether it be an institution or a theory, and say, "lo, here! or lo, there."

Who say ye that he is? No sooner is this subject proposed, than there will start up into the minds of a great number of Christians curious questions concerning what is called the metaphysical nature of their master. They will fancy that they are specially called on to decide points of that kind. One will say, I believe that he is by some ineffable mystery the Second of an undivided Three. Another, I believe that he was produced before all ages, and of an essence above that of the angels. Be it so, or be it not so, — either or neither, — I do not find anywhere except in the formularies of human device any commandment to entertain ideas like these; nor am I able to see any use that can come from the adoption of one hypothesis or the other. In regard to the

first we may say, that all we can need is the assurance that the word is indeed from God ; for nothing can make a divine authority more divine. And in regard to the second we may say, we know not what the precepts and testimonies of the Redeemer would gain by supposing a personal pre-existence to the generations he was appointed to save. To give ourselves to speculations of this kind, and to think that we are thus even preparing to answer his question, seems akin to the error of the Pharisees on a similar occasion, who were looking back to a remote ancestor of Jesus Christ "the son of David," when there he stood before their faces, the divine man himself, with his steps in their own streets, his lips dropping wisdom, his eyes radiant with visions of heaven and love for mankind, and his wonder-working hands stretched out to bless the most wretched outcasts that lay at his feet.

There are other persons, on the contrary, who with entirely different views on this point appear to fall into a similar defect. They begin with their Master at his birth in Bethlehem, and contemplate him in his actual life. They will speak of his sublime virtues, of his miracles, of his strange history, of his services

and sorrows, of the events that distinguished his ministry and tortured and glorified its close. But they dwell too exclusively on scenes, and outward incidents, and human respects. They enter with too nice a scrutiny into minute circumstances. They bend over the written account till their sight becomes shortened, and the impressions they receive are rather of a marvellous story than of a heavenly instruction. They are too literal. If they look under the letter, it is not for spiritual meanings but for more letters. They would conjecture what happened, where nothing is told. They will venture to predict what might have happened, had the transactions in the sacred narratives been in single instances otherwise ordered. They intend no irreverence by this. Quite the reverse. They often intend nothing so much as to elevate while they define the person of the Saviour. But we may well shrink from such processes of defining. I ask not to give the image of my Lord this familiar clearness. Let it be transfigured before me in raiment white as the light, or wrapped about with its vapory shroud, as it appeared to the chosen three upon the mount. Let it be partially concealed behind listening crowds, and

kneeling suppliants, and hands held up to bless him, as he stood by the dim shores of the Galilean lake. Give me more scope for my faith, and less enticement to my curiosity. It is still possible to know Christ, as the apostle phrases it, "after the flesh."

And now the discourse turns to us again, from those with whom we do not agree, from the indifferent, from the vaguely speculative, from the merely theoretic, from the meanly literal, and repeats its demand: Who say ye that he is? Will you not reply with me, that words would fail us fully to tell? But we can say a little, however inadequately. We say that he was one especially adopted of the Invisible Father, raised up and inspired and empowered and sent, that he might reveal a pure doctrine, and establish the faith of it in the heart of the world. We say that what he taught was true, and that what he promised shall be fulfilled. We say that his great work on earth was that of reconciliation to God; that his leading positions were the absolute sovereignty of the Good Father, and eternal life for the soul; and that his own animating principle was universal love. We say that his example was a faultless pattern for his followers

to walk by. We say that his title is complete to the allegiance and gratitude of mankind.

From this our reflections take another turn, and we add, that we regard Christ as an impersonation of truth, goodness, and a divine hope. We disembody him now that he has ascended. He has become a sentiment and a law and a trust. His name denotes whatever is most august in the contemplations, most earnest and firm in the good resolves, most beneficent in the deeds, and sweetest in the affections, of the children of men. Paul could speak, even so short time as he wrote after the exaltation of the Son of man, of Christ dwelling in the heart by faith, of "Christ formed in you, the hope of glory." And is it not time that we at this day should learn to discern spiritually a spiritual head? "Whose Son is he?" he demanded of the Scribes, as if in derision of their narrowing researches. They who sought to disparage him called him the son of a carpenter; while they who believed in him called him the son of a king. Of what consequence which, if he was all that has just been described, foremost in the line of illuminated beings? If he be "in you," so as to be your wisdom and righteousness, he is your

own and of heavenly parentage, though no man should guess whence he was. If you reject him or heed him not, if you quench his spirit, if you despise his precepts and refuse his consolations, then it can be nothing to you whence he was, since you are none of his.

And now, in taking leave of the subject, let me press one consideration, of which we should never lose sight amidst any divisions of judgment. It is this, — that no one should think these divisions, of whatever kind they may be or whatever part in them he espouses, so important to him as his own personal fidelity. As the natural life is more than meat, so the moral life is more than doctrine. That is a good faith enough for any particular man, that guides him well ; and that is but a poor way of faith that overthrows charity. “Who say ye that I am ?” asks the Son of man. The answer that we give is indeed of solemn consequence, and should seem indifferent to no one. But it is of far less moment what is believed on this point, than it is to receive the general truths that he inculcated and to do the things that he has said. He that has his spirit, in one sense and that a high one, has him. If obedience is more than whole burnt offerings, it is more

than the fullest professions also; though we must admit at the same time that it is better that a good profession should be maintained among men, than that you should live righteously and hopefully without one. We shall all be agreed at least in this, that he who does the will of the Father in heaven is not likely to be rejected by him whom that Father sent.

THE WARNING.



I am the door: by me if any one enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture. — JOHN x. 9.

HE who spoke these words founded his claim to be listened to and believed, not on being wiser than the rest of mankind and not on being better than they, but on the simple fact that he bore a special commission from God. It is not in one place, or a few places, that he speaks so. He always so speaks and appears. The Christ of the Scriptures, — and there is no other, for we have no right to invent one according to our own fancy, — uniformly declares himself to be the authorized revealer of the Divine truth and will; sent, and proved to be sent by attesting wonders and signs. And he either is all this, or we know not who Jesus was. He was nothing that we can steadfastly abide by, or with any consistency

define. "I am the way," he said. "I am the light of the world." "I am the truth." "I am the resurrection and the life." "No man cometh unto the Father but by me." And "the Father who dwelleth in me He doeth the works" that you see, and that "bear witness of me." "I am the door: by me if any one enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture." Now this was a very peculiar pretension. Nothing like it was ever heard of before. No sage or reformer undertook to speak so. No scribe or prophet undertook to speak so. It was either the height of audacity, or the very madness of fanaticism, to set forward such a claim, unless it were a true one. It must recoil fatally upon his reputation, or else be justified from heaven. Was it true then, or not? Was it so justified or not? Aye or no? It is a plain question, though a strange one to propose from a Christian pulpit. Are the things written concerning Christ, at least in their essential parts, truths or legends? Was he the Son of God with power; or was he at the most but the greatest of human instructors? They who answer in the affirmative place themselves among Christian believers, whatever construction they may put

on one or another passage of the holy Scriptures. They who answer with a denial have been denominated deists, in whatever degree of respect they may otherwise hold the record of the evangelists, and the character and services of the distinguished person of whom the record treats. That term, let me be careful to say, is not used here as a term of reproach. It is the appropriate one, that has been long in use to describe their class of opinion, who accept all the great doctrines of natural or universal religion, but without admitting the credibility of the Gospel narratives, or attaching any particular authority and mission to him whom we call the anointed of God. The word has a distinct meaning, and is as perfectly well understood as any word in our language that relates not to visible objects but to the conclusions of the mind. If it carry an opprobrious sound with it to any one, that is no insertion or intention of mine, and can only arise from the disrepute in which the opinions that it indicates have usually been held. In itself, it is as favorable and friendly a term as could be applied to them. Deism, or theism, in its strict philosophic sense means belief in God, and so stands opposed to atheism. In its popular

religious sense it denotes belief in the religion of nature, but in that only ; thus seeming by a delicate reserve to imply rather than express the rejection of all supernatural testimony.

Which shall we choose of these two opposite conclusions? Opposite we may well call them ; for though they may recognize possibly the same general doctrines, they do not see them in the same light, nor connect them with the same sentiments, nor rest them on the same foundation. Their tendencies also are wholly different. One is in the straight line of a recognized faith, and surrounded with early helps and guidances ; the other off in uncertain directions, and at the mercy of every speculative caprice. They are wide apart. Let us not then stand indifferent or undecided between them, but make manfully our choice. And which shall it be? Certainly, that which recommends itself to our most solemn judgment as the true one. Though it should deny the persuasions in which we were religiously brought up, though it should darken over the hope that we had delighted in, and though it should remove the strong confidence on which we had built, we ought to be ready to abide all consequences for the truth's sake. I

would not adhere to an error because it was a gratifying error, or because it seemed to be a useful one. Let the shock come, if it must, that shall break up the belief of Christendom, and disprove all its evidences. But that disaster is as distant now as it was fifteen hundred years ago and more, when "philosophy and vain deceit" strove to set up the fallen images of the old superstition, or to introduce the free range of new fancies, in the stead of Christ's Gospel. That divine instance of condescension to man's spiritual wants shines as steady and stands as strong as it did in the beginning.

This is not the fitting occasion to enter into the often fought field of the deistical controversy. It is no part of the design of the present discourse to argue upon that theme. The Christian minister has a right to take for granted the reality of the word that he is set to preach; to assume it as no fable, whether cunningly devised or accidentally brought together, but as the truth of God. And it will usually be his wisdom so to do. What is now intended to be urged on your reflection 'is the breadth of the difference between the two parts of the alternative that I have ventured to name. That difference impresses my own mind con-

tinually more and more. As I contemplate it, it grows into greater magnitude and more vital importance. It strikes out into further and weightier consequences in the general convictions of the mind on sacred subjects. The Scriptures and fixtures of our faith will be seen with the progress of our observation to gain a closer union with whatever is most precious in human persuasions.

One of the leading fallacies in the free religious speculation of the present day, is the endeavor to turn the solid structure of Christianity, which is built up alternately of facts and principles, of historic and spiritual truths, into mere abstractions; — a lofty sentiment, or a shapely system of ideas. Reasoners of this class pick out from its walls the cement of the actual, the traditional, the recorded, and think that the building will be as strong and good as ever. They put the precepts that Christ taught in the place of Christ himself; and this they call retaining the substance, — though it seems to me to be substance from which they have drawn away the breath of its life. “I am the truth,” he said, and not “I will try to tell you what you may find it reasonable to believe to be true.” The words that they gather up from

him, and which are of just the same value to them as if they fell from any one else, containing their own intrinsic worth and nothing more, — these are not he. These are not even his likeness. Such thinkers retain the name of the Saviour, but have let the Saviour go. Their object is to reduce his religion to those lowest terms, in which they maintain that all religions, when you analyze them into their primal elements, are agreed. But what a delusion is this, that by a vain experimenting would deprive the Gospel of its whole divine peculiarity, melting down its adamant, and quenching the spark of glory that God has lodged within it. It is as if you should take the diamond, with its flashing facets and regular beauty, and, when you had fused it through the action of intensest fire, point to its residue, and say, there is all that your jewel was ; — it was but carbon, — pure, simple coal.

There may easily be a time in the life of every inquiring man, especially if he reads largely, when he is dissatisfied with alleged proofs and shaken with objections ; when the revealing of one fallacy in what he had been taught implicitly to reverence may lead him to suspect that the whole is fallacious ; when he

reads the evangelists and cannot credit them ; when he looks towards the Saviour and there is a veil between as he looks ; when he is tempted to seek for the essential Christianity behind its documents and apart from them. Some continue in this skepticism, but others emerge from it. The learning that began with perplexing, ends in confirming them. Thought grows clearer as it goes deeper, and the clouded trust clears up. They feel with a livelier interest than ever the value of the traditional aids that they were ready either carelessly to part with or proudly to spurn. They see, when they faithfully interrogate themselves, that much which they call natural light and think to be independent of anything done or written, is after all but a reflection from what has been told them, — from the glory of revealed truth and the books of a Christian education ; and they have a wholesome fear of leaving the side of a heavenly conductor. They see also, when they look round upon others who have forsaken the doctrine of authority for what is called a freer thinking, that the history of that supposed freedom is full of warning. It shows how apt those rejecters have been to give up even the two leading tenets

of what they call the absolute religion. I allude to the moral perfections and compassionate notice of God as our Father in heaven, and to an immortal existence for his creature man. Let me not be misunderstood, as if implying that these tenets can never be firmly held by those who disclaim utterly any divine origin or miraculous witness for the Gospel. We may well suppose that they can, and doubtless they are so held by many. We will admit without hesitation that these are lessons of nature's religion, if you will only remember at the same time how much this is indebted to the Bible, with which it should never suppose that it can safely dispense, here in these Christian lands that have been trained by that Holy Word. Nevertheless the fact just mentioned is an extremely striking one; and I wish to call your earnest attention to it in both those great instances that have been mentioned, our filial relation to God and the good hope of immortality. I have said that they have been apt to be driven, or at least to fade, from the belief, where the Christ of the New Testament has ceased to be recognized. If this be true, it will not indeed prove the doctrine of supernaturalism. I say nothing about proving it. I

do not say that anything can prove it, as some persons account proof. But it will show how much depends upon that doctrine. It will show, as I am now chiefly endeavoring to do, the wide distinction that there is between that and any scheme of mere rationalism. It will show the peril, if not the fatuity, of passing lightly from the old camp of apostolic prescription to the tents of the stranger, as if it were a small exchange to make. "I am the door," says the Redeemer; "by me if any one enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out and find pasture."

And first of what should always be first in the thought, — the idea of God. How nigh and endearing this is made to us in the Holy Volume you need not be told. How pure is He in his perfections there! How abounding in his merciful regards towards his frail children on the earth! What gracious views of his works, his Providence, his will, are there presented! And added to every thing else is his love in the mission of his Son. All this is so familiar to us, that it appears almost to have sprung up spontaneously within us. But it was planted by Christian precepts. It grew under Christian institutions. It was nurtured

by such influences as drop and shine only where the Gospel has been. And who can think that he is in no danger of parting with it by unlearning his first faith, who contemplates soberly some of the results of such a swerving, which in modern times have been exhibited conspicuously to the world? When, not many years ago, a great number of the learned theologians of Germany were carried away as by a tide of innovation, and professed naturalism instead of "the faith once transmitted," one of the first signs to be discovered in connection with that apostacy, was the new way in which they fell to thinking and speaking of the Lord and Father of all. Pantheism came in like a flood. The theory of Spinoza became regnant in philosophic circles and divinity halls. It is terrible to consider how far away from the tender and affecting representations of Jesus the idea of God came to be over a large part of the Lutheran church. It either evaporated into a misty abstraction or sunk down into a cold and hollow dogma. The thought of a personal Deity was openly cast out, as if fit only for those who had made but the lower progresses in scientific thought. Many a studious spirit was plunged back into what was

nothing better than the old Grecian or Oriental speculation. A celebrated professor in one of the highest of the Universities, when asked by a young man concerning his views of God, replied that such a Being certainly existed "subjectively." By which he meant, that He existed to the contemplative soul; but whether there was anything without, or objective, corresponding to that idea could not so surely be asserted. In the last number of the London Quarterly Review, a principal article contains this incredible statement: "we have heard from the lips of a German of high station, that he had listened to sermons delivered from the pulpit, for the purpose of disproving the being of a God." This may properly be pronounced incredible; for allowance is always to be made for prejudice and exaggeration on such points, and we have a right to suspect that there may have been some misunderstanding. But what must have been the character of discourses, that could be so misunderstood? It is from the beautiful lessons of our faith that we have learned to discern so clearly the goodness of the Lord over his works, and to ally it with so many comforting and cheering assurances. Nature itself, when coldly and sharply interro-

gated, gives us back replies that for the most part inspire us with admiration and fear rather than with any more confiding sentiments. I shall never forget when one of the companions of my early studies fell away from his Christian belief and published a book against the faith that he had abjured. A few years afterwards, I asked him what was then his conception of the Creator, and he answered that it was chiefly that of a mighty Power, who could demolish at a blow the universe that he had formed.

It is well known to all who have turned their attention to this state of things,—and what thoughtful person will not feel a profound interest in it?—that where the strict pale of Christianity has been broken through and deserted, two kinds of pantheistic representation have disclosed themselves and found favor. One is spiritual in its nature. It resembles the dreamy idealism of the East. It pens high-sounding paragraphs, and paints glowing pictures, and utters vague oracles of the One and the All; and as it speaks it is applauded by the undiscerning as “the voice of a god and not of a man.” The other is of a material sort. It grovels and works downward. It investigates

the physical laws of the world, confining itself to such causes and consequences as it there perceives. A book has but recently appeared from our sober England, written with calmness and distinguished ability, and in a style of crystalline clearness, through the midst of which there runs a strain that plainly says, if we only suppose certain material substances distributed through space, the world might very well have created itself, and it can continue to maintain itself without any special supervision.

But it is more than time that we should come to the second doctrine, of which it was proposed to speak, — the continued existence of man after the close of this life. Precisely the same effect has been produced upon this, as upon the doctrine just named, with the development of deistical — or if a longer word is preferred — of rationalistic opinions. There has been in both the same dreary play with the term “personal.” As in the former instance the being of a personal Deity came to be denied, in this the truth of our personal immortality came to be denied also. An open controversy has arisen in Germany, with many writings on each side, on the point whether “the human individual” after he has once

died is likely to live again. And this among divines and teachers! I have read a considerable volume, that had for its object to show that Christ himself never taught the resurrection of the dead, except in a figurative and moral sense wholly confined to the present state of existence. But why need we go for illustration to any foreign country, when we may read in an essay lately published by an estimable man, of a most beautiful spirit, and who has won a high repute both at home and abroad, that "the popular doctrine of the immortality of the soul" is something "too outward and literal," by which philosophy and religion have been striving to express something else?

And what is it that is substituted for this ancient belief, this priceless hope of craving and sorrowing minds? What is our immortality, if there is nothing for us beyond the decay of the body, and the curtains of time, and the narrow house? Here again, very much as it did before, the reply divides itself and takes two exactly opposite directions. One is refined and subtile, choosing the region of abstract ideas; while the other is grosser and earthly, thinking of nothing but social improvements in the place where we at present dwell. The

first assumes that thoughts and principles are the only things that are eternal, and teaches therefore that it is vain, and even mean, to aspire after any other permanency than is gained by uniting ourselves with truth and goodness. This has a brave sound to many. There is a great show of spirituality in this. The other, on the contrary, has principal regard to material interests. Social progress is the object it keeps in view. It cares to have no other immortality thought of but that of the race to which we belong; which is no other than that of the tree or the lower creatures, of the snow-drop or the fly, except that the race of man is to be always improving its condition, while their generations are forever the same. It bids us be content each one to perish, as the species is to go on. This is the novel device, that has been put in the place of the promise of a hereafter by certain political visionaries in France, who have sent over hither their barbarous phrases and the taint of their pretended reformatations.

I cannot resist my solemn conviction, nor forbear to express it, that the fixed belief in a future life and a better world is closely bound up with a belief in the divine mission of Jesus

Christ. When we reject that authoritative Word, we are not a step in advance of those who doubted and died before its advent. Let the Gospels, as credible witnesses, be once preached out of the hearts of any community, and then there will need but few years to heathenize it, so far as this or any other speculative truth is concerned. Death has as disheartening a look now as it ever had, when we gaze on its natural appearances;—the vanished consciousness, the eye that will no more open, the eternal silence of the dumb lips, the marble rigor first and the dropping into ashes afterwards. The arguments, on which mere reason has predicted a redemption from it, have not gained an ounce in weight since the Grecian martyr pondered them, and the Jewish preacher exclaimed: “Who knoweth the spirit of man that it goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that it goeth downward to the earth?” The power of Christ, and no other, broke the dark seal. And if it was no real power, how should the effect remain? If he were indeed not raised, but the world has only fancied it, why should not that seal of the grave be fast again, and stamped as deep as ever with its characters of doubt and fear?

I have thus endeavored, Christian friends, in four discourses, to meet a new exigency in our religious denomination. The first argued the truth of our faith from the history of God's moral government in the earth, and endeavored to show, that in all consistency you must either deny a Providence or else accept that faith. The second maintained the wisdom and necessity of some foundation of belief for every church that professes to be a church, — some creed or shape of belief however largely drawn, some understood rule in which it should be united. The third described the different degrees of departure from the standard of the Scriptures; beginning with the most impious form of infidelity, and ending with the skepticism of noble and religious minds. And now we have taken up the ultimate question: Shall we have Deism or Christianity? Not as if with the slightest doubt; not as if fearing your reply; but under a profound feeling of responsibility in a momentous cause. You must forgive me if anything unadvised has been spoken. May God forgive me if anything inconsistent with justice and humility and the spirit of kindness has been spoken.

Come back with me to the text. "I am the door: by me if any one enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture." We acknowledge this to be the true gate. We know of no other. We look for no further and better one. While we exercise towards others a perfect candor and every friendly consideration, we should take to ourselves the salutary warning, that if we choose differently we shall fail of the full blessing at least, and may lose the whole blessing at last. We shall go in and find no peace, and shall go out and find no sustenance. Let us seek to enter into our life by the way that the Father has appointed.

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