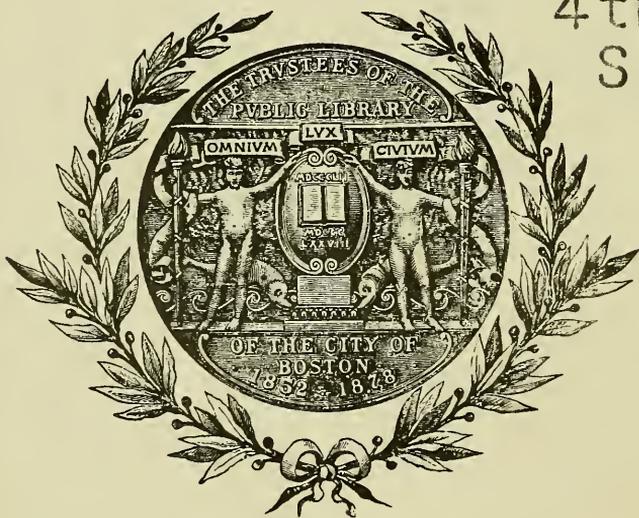


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FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT.

BY

REV. HOWARD N. BROWN.



AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION,
BOSTON.

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“The object of the American Unitarian Association shall be to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity ; and all Unitarian Christians shall be invited to unite and co-operate with it for that purpose.” — ARTICLE I. *of the By-Laws of the American Unitarian Association.*

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FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT.

Baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. — *MATT.* xxviii. 19.

It is scarcely possible to consider these words as a summing up of Christian faith without some reference to the dogmatic use that has been made of them. At the present time, however, that branch of the subject may be dealt with very briefly, and with no design to revive useless controversies; in order that we may go on to see, if possible, something more in this triune symbol than dogma alone has thus far made of it.

All Christendom is perfectly agreed on one doctrine, that of the unity of the Godhead. There are not many gods, or several gods; there is but one true God, maker of heaven and earth. All the creeds of the Church state this with an emphasis that marks their sense of its importance. But it has come to be the generally accepted belief of the Church that, in this One, there are three persons, or three "eternal distinctions," as it is sometimes expressed, and that recognition of these three persons, corresponding to the terms of the ancient baptismal formula, is essential to any true thought of God.

Of late years many people have come to question whether this belief made any part of the first preaching of Christianity; to doubt whether it has, in reason or revelation, a basis adequate to support the claims that are made for it; to deny that, be it true or untrue, it is of

sufficient importance to be made the test of Christian fellowship. This last is the only point which there is now much need to debate.

The heat of an old battle having much subsided, no one any longer considers it necessary to work for the entire destruction of a belief that has so woven itself into the history of the Church. The question still remains to be answered, however, whether or not they who, for one reason or another, cannot hold that belief are to be generally regarded as belonging to the Christian fold. Let it be, if you please, their misfortune, or their defect, that they are unable to believe with their fellows on this point; is their failure of so much consequence that they should be denied the Christian name?

Even very broad and liberal men either do not answer this question at all, or seem to say that without acceptance of the trinitarian belief no one can have the root of the matter in him. Let the real point at issue be clearly and unmistakably stated. Their own right to hold the dogma goes entirely unchallenged. But we deny that others who fail to see the force of arguments by which their minds are convinced are therefore less true followers of Christ; and we make this denial, not in the name of any foolish independence of thought, but in the interest of Christianity itself, which suffers from such rigidity of speculative belief.

The Church still has the power to punish terribly those whom it regards as heretics, — to visit upon them a contempt and suspicion, and to compel them to a separation from the vast currents of its sympathy, from which they sometimes suffer as keenly and disastrously in spirit, as ever the victims of the Inquisition suffered in body under the thumbscrew and the rack. The Church has, moreover, the same tendency that it has manifested all along to delude itself by thinking that the weakness and the pain,

which are the fruit of its own injustice, are the very proofs of iniquity in the heresy it chooses to condemn. As the Jews said to Jesus, "If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross," so the Church seems to say to those whom its own intolerance has crippled, "If you have the divine truth in your possession, triumph over this persecution;" and when the persecution leads many to lose heart, it interprets the defection as a vindication of its course.

That all this is cruel is the least to be said of it. In the end it is as fatal a policy as that which led France to crush the Huguenots, or Spain to exclude the Moors. The Church in this fashion is alienating and excluding some of the best elements of modern life. That its doors are still closed against a small band openly bearing a heretical name, is not in itself a great matter. But let one look about him and see what classes are now totally estranged from the Church! This scornful intolerance which says to the world, "Think as I think, or claim no part of a common Christian inheritance," is not only false to the spirit of Christ, but is working a serious damage to Christ's cause, which must be one day bitterly repented.

The time has gone by in this free land of ours for an enlightened man to feel justified in attempting much criticism of his neighbor's creed so long as that other shows a due regard for the rights of his fellow-Christians; but when the claim is made on behalf of a dogma that there can be no Christianity without it, they to whom it seems less than essential truth are bound to state somewhat carefully the grounds of their objection.

We say, then, that the expression "three persons in one" has to-day become most unfortunate. Whatever the word may have signified in other times, a "person" means to us a distinct and separate individual being; and it is only by constant, ceaseless explanation that the Church

can prevent such language as the Nicene Creed employs from degenerating into tri-theism. We can see no gain to be won commensurate with the power that must be expended in maintaining this apologetic attitude.

It is somewhat a question of strategy. A good general will not needlessly waste any of the forces under his command in defending a post that is no vital part of his line of fortifications. If, as we affirm, this dogma is not essential to the Christian life and the Christian hope, then it were far more wise to place it among questions concerning which the followers of Christ have perfect liberty to disagree.

We say, again, that if any have been so fully informed of the nature of infinite mind as to be able to declare that there are so many and no more "eternal distinctions" involved in the being of God, we are ignorant of the sources of their wisdom. What they tell us may or may not be true; we know not how the question can be determined. The whole speculation seems to us to lie so far beyond the range of finite intelligence, that we would rather not try to be sure on so profound a theme.

Moreover, when we are asked if God is to be our Father only, and if we are to find nothing in Deity answering or corresponding to the filial and social relationships of life, we ask in reply what any of these relationships can be, other than an expression and outgrowth of God's eternal love. We do not see that any of our structures are left hanging in the air without divine basis and support while we conceive that both the home and society at large are held together by the indwelling divine love which is the life and strength of every bond by which heart is joined to heart. We think there might as well be three kinds of gravitation — one for the man, one for the child, and one for the multitude — as three distinctions in that eternal power which is essentially the same, whether it be the love

of parent for child, of a son for his father, or of friend for friend.

If, to any, these distinctions do seem to open up the mysterious deeps of being, how can we object? Our only plea is that, as Saint Paul has spoken of God "dwelling in a light which no man can approach unto," they who simply realize how little they know of the wonders which that light hides, are not to be ranked with the heathen on that account. We make this plea, not on personal grounds, but out of our solemn conviction that the Church is only heaping up obstacles in its own pathway by erecting barricades at a point where no vital question is at issue.

And now, to leave this somewhat unpleasant and ungracious task of criticism, for the more inspiring endeavor after positive statements, what, from our point of view, do we find in the command to baptize all nations in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost? These words were first spoken long before the theology of the Church had crystallized into dogmatic form. They provide a kind of summing up in a single phrase of the great truths which Christ had taught, — the fatherhood of God, the divine sonship of man, and the close presence of a divine life, or spirit, pervading and enfold-ing every human soul. Used in this way, these words will forever be glorious in Christian memory and dear to Christian thought. Indeed, we have abundant reason to believe that long after the schoolmen of the Middle Ages and all their works have faded out of sight, these words will live upon the lips of men, the treasured symbol of mighty truths whose height and depth we have scarcely begun to measure.

The Fatherhood of God! Have we, as yet, more than explored the narrow coast of that great truth, as it was taught and lived by Christ? It stretches before us still, a whole new world, containing boundless possibilities of

spiritual wealth ; and we dwell only on its outmost borders, mere pioneers of the city of God that is to be.

“Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him,” was all that the devout Psalmist could find courage to say. Human life then, for the most part, cowered and trembled before that King of heaven, whose ways were past its finding out. The Jews were indeed sons, but sons of whom? Of Abraham, and of Isaac, and they dared to link themselves with no holier source. They had not yet come to consciousness of something within them which established a bond between their souls and the supreme majesty of the skies, and none had told them to claim as their father him who held their lives in the hollow of his hand.

But when their last great teacher came to them, his word was no timid comparison between God’s mercy and an earthly father’s pity ; he taught his disciples to say boldly, “Our Father who art in heaven.” We use the words so often, that perhaps it is a little difficult to realize how they have changed the whole spiritual attitude of mankind, and what far-reaching thoughts are contained in them. God the Father of men ! giving to them his nature ; surrounding them with his spirit ; leading them by his almighty hand ; not only ruling and judging them, but loving them with an infinite desire to lift them up and direct their paths toward good ! Do we imagine that such a conception could be widely taught to men, and received into their hearts, without producing profound changes in their life? If we have the least idea what deliverance it wrought from terrors that had long hung upon the footsteps of the race, like iron fetters upon a prisoner, the wonder is not that Saint Paul found much occasion to rebuke the liberty that degenerated into license ; it is that Christianity itself was not lost in a very delirium and intoxication of joy over the escape that had been effected.

Yet so great is the task, to plant a new truth in the mind of man, and to bring it to bear its fruit in the life; and so slow is the work of following out such a sublime thought in its meanings and bearings upon the conduct of practical affairs,—that those early Christians no more saw the whole truth involved in Christ's teaching of the Fatherhood of God, than our slaves, a few years since, realized the whole meaning of civil liberty, when their bonds were suddenly stricken from their limbs.

As they felt in some dim way that their life had been raised to a nobler plane, but there were long years of toil to be endured before they could really know much of the grandeur of free manhood, so the first Christians celebrated a triumph that signified almost infinitely more than they could comprehend; and we, even now, have but the most shadowy idea what life on earth may be like when men live here, fully and consistently, as under a Heavenly Father's care.

We are sometimes asked if we do not consider this a poor and cold idea of God; if we do not need to make distinctions that will show God to the world, not only as Father, but as Redeemer and Friend. To which we can only reply that he is indeed a poor kind of father who is not both redeemer and friend to his children; who does not with great gladness of heart assist them to find deliverance from evil, and attend them with loving solicitude in all their ways. We have really said it all in that one word, "Father," if we will give to the word the significance which our best human life enables us to put into it; for that love of God, which is the very life of our life, is fountain of all light, and purity, and strength.

The second word of the old baptismal formula is but the other side of this same great truth: the Fatherhood of God means the Sonship of Man. "The Spirit itself beareth witness," writes Saint Paul, "that we are children

of God: and if children, then heirs; joint-heirs with Christ." The belief that the Christian Apostle who framed that sentence recognized but one Son of God, is too preposterous to be seriously debated.

God incarnate in Christ, reproduced in him, as the likeness of the Father's mind and spirit may be reproduced in a son; and this one supreme incarnation the type and symbol of God's work in the hearts of all his children, when that work can be made complete, — such, as nearly as we can state it in the language of to-day, we may assume to have been the thought with which Christianity began.

Let us frankly confess a difficulty which the religious life encounters in trying to reach up to the stature of this thought. So far do our hopes, and dreams, and anticipations outrun our power to realize the divine things set before us, that, when we say we are children of God, there is a certain tendency to think and speak as if we had already reached the mark of our high calling. The mischief which this works is in some loss of sense of the transcendent difference between the life of Christ and the common life of the world; so that people who ought to be looking in humblest adoration upon an image of divine perfection which is perhaps ages in advance of anything that they can boast, become disposed to question whether that glorious pattern of divine manhood has not been already equalled or surpassed.

The hard, frozen buds of winter might as well assume equality with midsummer's open and resplendent flower, as for us to think that we have come near the moral and spiritual attributes of the mind of Christ. Powers and capacities still latent in our hearts have yet to be awakened, and disciplined by many a hard experience, before we can be sons of God on the same level with that wondrous teacher of mankind.

Unless the life of Christ retains its supreme significance before the mind, it seems that, being no longer fed from the glory of his nature, the light is apt to fade from the conception of a divine humanity. We confess this difficulty which has to be met in preaching the gospel that all men are sons of God.

But, on the other hand, what can it mean to you and me more than the narrowest kind of salvation, into a stale and profitless heaven, if only once have God and man come together in the same tabernacle of flesh? Unless we also bear a divine life in our souls, there can be no example for us in him who, confessedly, did what no man can do except God be with him; and that in our place, though we are far removed from the Father's house, we have the Father's spirit to direct us home, is our one reasonable ground of hope for forgiveness, for welcome, and for everlasting life.

And so we come to the third great word of this time-honoured compendium of Christian faith, the Holy Spirit, — a term which under dogmatic treatment has sunk to so low estate that apparently nobody cares, or thinks much about it, from that point of view, save as it sonorously rounds out the phrase; but which in a more vital thought and experience still lives, with all its ancient thrill of joy and hope.

The world is full of a wondrous presence of which we try to make no exact image in our thought, — a presence which so besets us behind and before that if we ascend up into heaven it is there, and if we make our bed in the grave, behold, it is there. We do not think of this formless spirit as being the whole of God. It is, as it were, the hand of God especially reached out to us; it is the power of God put forth to enlighten and cleanse our souls; it is the living bond between that mysterious One who sums up all being and that other equally mysterious unit of existence which each one calls himself.

We cannot separate or distinguish between this spirit and the eternal love ; but none the less the word answers to something in our own experience ; it serves to bring nearer to our consciousness a divine might which has for us its special meaning, and its particular work to do in our hearts. What impression the energy of the sun would make upon us if we could stand midway in the celestial space above us, we do not know ; but there is much reason to think that it would neither illuminate us, nor give us warmth. Yet, reaching our atmosphere, that energy is light to our eyes and vital heat to all that live. So the Holy Spirit is God in our present human world, — God round about us in these shadowed ways, the healer, the comforter, the inspirer of this earthly life. Would that the time sufficed to show at length how large a part this idea is coming to play in the best religious life of our time ; and how many, to whom God and Christ are not now very near, are being fed from day to day, as the lonely Prophet of Israel is said to have been ministered to by birds of the air, through the instinctive reliance of their souls upon an ever present Holy Spirit !

But though the emphasis may thus shift from age to age, from one to another of these three great words, so that now it is God the Father, and now it is he who holds such pre-eminence as might belong to God's first-born son, and now it is a more vague and cloud-like presence called the Holy Spirit, in which some portion of the Church chiefly believes and trusts ; yet Christianity has need of all these words which have so much shaped its history, and it is a wise tradition that holds fast to them, as they stand joined in one of the most ancient expressions of our faith.

They will live long after present doubts as to the realities for which they stand have drifted away, like shadows of clouds passing across the sky ; for the long past is too sure a warrant of future continuance to permit us to lose

heart among the changes of our time. Because, in close study of the methods of life, men have for a little while lost something of their grasp upon the higher philosophy of existence, that does not imply that the mind will never again ask questions as to the source and meaning of it all. And when men do ask these questions, with intent to find an answer, they are certain to come back at last from all their wanderings to that profoundest teaching which the world has ever received, given by him who bade his disciples go among all nations, teaching and baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

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