

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE II.

EVOLUTION AND THE EVANGELICAL SYSTEM
OF DOCTRINE.

AN INAUGURAL DISCOURSE AS PROFESSOR OF BIBLICAL AND SYSTEMATIC
THEOLOGY IN THE PACIFIC THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, OAK-
LAND, CALIFORNIA, BY FRANK HUGH FOSTER,
DELIVERED FEBRUARY 24th, 1893.

IN certain quarters systematic theology is at the present day depreciated. The marvellous development of our civilization in the secular sphere has been attended by surprising discoveries in the religious, by the detection of many historical illusions, by the perfection of various methods of theological research, and by the erection of a vast edifice of exact theological scholarship such as no previous age has seen. The very richness of material, good and bad, which has been thus brought before the theological public has embarrassed thinkers. Some out of timidity have feared it could never be digested, and that the problem of systematic theology was a hopeless one. Others have believed that this or that new fact had overthrown essential portions of the existing systems, and have feared that farther investigation would overthrow others; and hence they have thought any effort in systematizing theology at present premature. Others have had other difficulties which I need not detail. Enough that to many, and some of them the most acute and industrious minds of the present age, the time for the discipline to the cultivation of which I have just been set apart, seems either to have forever passed away, or not yet to have dawned.

In more profound minds a still more profound objection to systematic theology has arisen. The deepest speculations

of the present century in the realms of pure metaphysics and of the philosophy of the natural sciences have combined to give us a widely ramified and almost all-embracing theory of evolution. Things have "evolved," it is said, and are still evolving. The future lies in the lap of the present as the present did in that of the past; but what will be, it is as impossible for man fully to understand, as it would have been ages ago to predict the life and thought of this closing decade of the nineteenth century. In the last analysis, there is no such thing as absolute truth attainable by man, and the systematic method is to be once for all relinquished in behalf of the historical. Thus falls, as is thought, the whole legitimacy of systematic theology before the better knowledge of the age, though it be but a knowledge of our own limitations.

Doubtless the proposal and legitimization of the idea of evolution, or development, in the thinking of our time has been one of the achievements of this century. An eminent and Christian professor of natural science in a well-known college, when recently asked whether he taught evolution, replied, with considerable hesitation, "No, I think not;" and then he added, with a sudden smile, "but it teaches itself." He indicated thus wittily the position which the theory has come to take in the study of natural science. It is the accepted hypothesis of the day. Not all regard it as completely proved as do some: not all give it the same application as others, or embrace within its scope the origin of man, whom many evolutionists still regard as a separate creation; but with this limitation or that, most candid students of natural history have settled the question for us that at present the theory shall be employed in the actual investigation of nature. Nor is it limited to this. There is a development in human affairs, in laws, in institutions, in customs. The modern histories could not have been written, and cannot

be understood or enjoyed, without an idea of development. New sciences, even new theological sciences, like the History of Christian Doctrine, and that important branch which is associated with systematic theology in the instruction of the chair which I assume this evening, Biblical Theology, have sprung into being at the beck of theories of development embracing in their scope the course of human ideas and the operation of divine forces in history. And thus, if it be true that evolution is the deadly enemy of the idea of absolute truth, and that every science which, like systematic theology, aims at the attainment of the truth, is destined to fall before it, then, in the general prevalence of some conception of development in every branch of the present thinking, the case for our discipline seems, indeed, desperate enough.

But I do not view it as desperate. The multiplication of materials does not disturb me, for I see therein the possibility of new checks and safeguards against premature generalization and consequent error. The explosions of old delusions do not frighten me; let there be more! The method of theology, it is true, needs modification to correspond more closely with that fruitful induction which has given us the astonishing triumphs of scientific research; and here the constructive theologian must remodel and improve with unflinching hand. If it has been too much a deductive science, too *a priori*, too abstract, it must become inductive, must conform to facts, and ally itself with concrete human interests. But with all the shakings and overturnings of the times, there remain things which not only *are* not, but *cannot* be shaken. However the duty of modesty in respect to our knowledge of divine things is emphasized by the nature of the inductive method which we adopt, there still is a realm for certainty. The puzzling intricacies of the present thought are so many golden opportunities presented to systematic theology; and in all the bewilderment into which many Christian minds have consequently fallen, this is a time when

the sifting of truth from error, the separation of the essential and the non-essential, and the exhibition and proof of the eternal, divine verities of our faith, are needed as never before, and are more promising than ever of rich reward in the edification of saints and the conversion of the world.

These are strong statements which I cannot demand that all shall at once accept, and which the drift of thought and sentiment in many quarters, as I have already myself stated, decidedly opposes. The obligation rests upon me to attempt to substantiate them, and I will therefore invite your attention for a time to the discussion of the following theme:

The effect of modern thought, and particularly of the theory of evolution, upon the system of doctrine held by the Reformed churches.

I propose to discuss it under the guidance of the general conviction that there is, amid all the turbulent seas of modern thought, an unshaken and immovable rock of divine truth.

1. I begin with the theory of evolution itself. It has many forms, and is held with large modifications and differences by different naturalists. While the derivation of species may be considered well made out, the number of those who go to the length of holding that the mental and even the moral nature of man are derived from successive members of a series indefinitely extending backward to the earliest living forms, is not great. Certainly, systematic theology, which is the harmonization of well-established and authenticated facts, need not incorporate into its structure any unsettled and disputed theories. But even if the application of evolution to the explanation of the origin of man in his twofold nature should finally obtain the consent of all competent judges, even in that stormy and threatening sea, as it would seem to many, I still seem to perceive the immovable rock of Christian truth lifting its undiminished head.

The realm of Christian truth lies, in fact, far above the

region in which evolutionary theories of the origin of man have their place. Not what is the origin of the peculiarities of human nature, but what their character now that they have originated, and how far they conform to the actual relations of the universe in which we stand, is the interesting question. The conscience may possibly have slowly developed out of primal instincts which were all resolvable into that of self-preservation; but does conscience now assert the universal obligation of benevolence, and does it there speak with the authority of the Author of nature? The case is not different from that of a question as to the validity of human sight. The eye may have slowly developed from the first sensitive spot upon the skin of a blind fish or what-not, in which pulsations of light called forth peculiar sensations; but what I want to know now is, whether the world which, in all the perfection to which it has attained in the human species, it finally sees, is in actual fact such as it perceives. This question evolution can never answer. Whatever answer is made to it can never be disputed by evolution. It lies entirely above evolution, in the realm where no shadows cast thereby can darken the heart of man.

The same is true with questions which gather about the personality of man. How he developed into what he is, how and when a sense of freedom and responsibility dawned upon him, is a question for the answer of which evolution may be interrogated; but that he is a person, with a free will, and with its attendant powers and consequences, stands as indisputable after evolution has finished its work as before it began it.

But I approach a deeper topic when I ask the question: Does not evolution attack, and with its own triumph would it not finally destroy, the possibility of the supernatural? So it appears to many; but here, again, I am compelled to dissent. It may at first seem that if evolution is a true theory of the universe, God has confined himself in his dealings with the

world to the most absolutely natural forces in distinction from the supernatural. He has wrapped up the potentiality of all organic beings in the first particle of living matter, and that new force, having once begun its course, has under the influence of its environment generated the entire series without his interference. But let us again leap over all the intervening steps to the end. We will not stop to discuss, with the evolutionists themselves, whether there are not at various crises of history new and distinct divine impulses imparted to the developing series, as, for example, the impartation to a man of a soul. But at the end, when all has been done, what is the man evolved? He is a person. Now, if anything is essential to the idea of evolution, it is that the product should be exactly suited to its environment, for if we were to affirm any lack of correspondence between them, our theory would meet us with the assertion that a different product must then have been evolved. And hence it follows, as a higher generalization from the theory of evolution, that if a *person* has finally been evolved, he will be treated as a person, put under moral government, and, if he falls into sin, be the object of influences adapted to his spiritual restoration. But this is the supernatural, which for our present purposes may be defined as the divine activity adapted to redemption.

I might thus multiply instances; but enough has already been said to open to us the suggestion that the tendency of the present day towards evolutionary modes of thought has not attacked the great underlying ideas of Christianity, and is not likely to do so. Evolution is, thus, not the irreconcilable foe to the fundamental truths of the Christian system it has often been supposed to be. But the truth demands that I should make a still more favorable statement than this. The theory of evolution has been already of essential service to theology. It has prepared the way for larger views of the government of God, of his provi-

dence, and of his methods, The divine plan for the world and for man has received new illumination. But particularly, evolution has banished a conception of God which was prevalent in our thinking, an inheritance from the period of the controversy with the deists, by which God was separated by an unpassed gulf from his creation, and the creature brought into all but complete independence of him. Evolution speaks of development by "resident forces"; and theology now speaks of an immanent God, whose is all the activity which appears in the world, who, in the words of the apostle, "is not far from every one of us," in whom "we live, and move, and have our being."

2. From this general view of evolution I pass now to one of its results within the ideal realm which is attracting at the present moment a large degree of attention. Systematic theology, as I conceive it, is the effort by the consistent and thorough application of the inductive method, to furnish an orderly arrangement and sufficient explanation of the great facts pertaining to God and man in their mutual relations. With this conception, since induction proceeds from ascertained facts to general principles, evidently the question of supreme importance to theology is: What are the facts upon which the system is built? What are they with all exactness and minuteness? And thus the preliminary investigation of the facts, which has in natural science wrought so great wonders in correcting errors and in bringing in the successes which that department of study has achieved, has become in theology also, of the first importance.

Now, the examination of facts is criticism, and hence the modern spirit has brought criticism into the realm of theology.

To some forms of criticism no one has any objection. When Luther stood up in conflict with Eck at Leipzig, the Catholic champion had him at advantage, and fairly drove him off from the ground of the Latin Church upon that of

the Greek, because the pseudo-Isidorian decretals, which Eck quoted and which Luther accepted, being the production of an hierarchic age, favored the papacy. It was the critical work of the Magdeburg centuriators, those earliest church historians of Protestantism, forerunners of a goodly host, which demonstrated the forgery of the decretals, and wrested a powerful argument out of the hands of Rome. For them none have anything but thanks. Since their time the critical method has been constantly employed, but doubtless has reached its perfection in our own day. Not to dwell upon other and less interesting forms in which it displays itself, it is now applied to the text of the Bible, and is at present attracting the greatest attention by its application even to the age, authorship, and integrity of the sacred books. Has it a legitimate application here?

Amid the echoes of the loud contests of the present day, it is the privilege of this Congregational seminary, under its characteristic liberty, and in its historical place in the development of Christian thought, to reply with serenity and composure: Yes; biblical criticism is a legitimate branch of inquiry, and right criticism has a right to be!

It may be well to pause long enough to remark, that biblical criticism is as old as the Christian church, if not older. Whatever may be true of the formation of the Old Testament canon, it is certainly true that the New Testament canon was formed by critical processes, with all the light which the wisdom of the times could shed. The Gnostics rejected certain books for *a priori* reasons, and the church defended them by historical arguments: the church itself long questioned others which it ultimately accepted, like Second Peter, and accepted others which it subsequently rejected, like the Epistle of Barnabas. Both Luther and Calvin raised the question again in the period of the Protestant Reformation; and when it is raised in our own day, with fuller knowledge of the past, and with sounder general methods of his-

torical research, it is as legitimate as it ever was. Just so long as the criticism is an effort upon the basis of sound methods to arrive at the actual facts as to the age and composition of the books of the Bible, that we may formulate by the employment of ascertained and actual facts, our theories as to the nature, extent, and significance of revelation and inspiration, so long it is doing indispensable work, and it is not only the privilege but the duty of constructive theology to recognize its legitimacy and to employ its assured results.

But when thoroughly understood, biblical criticism, as it appears in the work even of some of our evangelical critics, involves the most fundamental questions. It is no mere linguistic process. It deals also with ideas, with the religious ideas of the Hebrew nation, and it views them as developing under the same great laws as have governed the development of the doctrines of the Christian church since the apostolic era, except that the idea of positive revelation, of distinct and repeated separate divine impacts upon the Jewish mind, is retained. The sacred books, in particular, would seem then to have been committed to the stream of events as other books, of no such lofty pretensions, have been committed. And thus we are brought again into that turbulent sea in which some fear that all Christian truth is to disappear, but from which I, for one, seem to see the immoveable rock still raising its head aloft.

Now, while upon the one hand we maintain the right, nay, the necessity of biblical criticism, on the other we view its work as yet very incomplete. It is not the place of systematic theology to incorporate within itself the immature, and it will be long before the criticism will be mature. More than one evangelical scholar, and more than one school of theologians will have to labor upon the problem before results which deserve to be employed as if they were permanent, are attained. Still, when all has been done that can be done, what will be the necessary limitations of the criti-

cism? What the height upon the solid rock beyond which the sea will never be able to toss its waves?

I reply that the single idea of the sacred record which we need to retain, and which from the nature of the case no criticism can ever impair, is the idea of revelation. That idea is, in essence, the idea of the supernatural, which, as we have already seen, the theory of evolution in other forms cannot touch, and which it cannot touch in this. This idea rests upon historical fact, upon the marvel of the idea of monotheism in that single people of Israel while all the rest of the world rolled in the filth of polytheistic worship; and it rests, even more entirely, upon the witness of the Spirit of God in the heart of the believer. It can never be shaken by removing the time when the Pentateuch was written from the desert pilgrimage to the age of David or to that of the Exile. Evolutionary theories about the growth of the ritual system of Israel, about temples and priests and sacrifices, can never touch it. And when it is once given, since, upon any theory of the documents, monotheism is found in the earliest of the Jewish records, this idea of revelation dominates all the development and gives the two important associated ideas, that God was in the history of Israel, and that he planned redemption through Jesus Christ from the beginning of the apostacy of man. That is the "rock," and what can criticism do with that?

It is my good fortune, as a theological teacher, to stand in a succession where large and luminous teaching has made it easy for me thus to put myself in complete sympathy with the demands of the day. My predecessor, the first professor of systematic theology in this seminary and its present honored and beloved head, shared with myself the privilege of instruction by him who still deserves and will long hold the title *par excellence* of the theologian of Andover. I shall violate no confidence when I quote Professor Park's definition of inspiration as I heard it in his class-room, since published by

him. This is it: "The inspiration of the Bible denotes such a divine influence on the minds of the sacred writers as caused them to teach in the best possible manner whatever they intended to teach and especially to communicate religious truth without any error either in the religious doctrine or the religious impression." The emphasis is here, as it should be in a spiritual theology, upon the religious element of the Bible; and whatever may be true of other elements as sound criticism may reveal it, is already provided for in the broad scope of that which is unessential to the great purpose of the book. In this hospitable attitude to investigation and to the results thereof, this seminary has stood now these twenty years and more. And in this attitude it will abide.

3. It is already evident, no doubt, that the things which I believe are not shaken and cannot be, belong chiefly to the innermost circle of spiritual truths. I am not particularly concerned whether this theological theory or that suffers loss. Theories are in fact made to serve the day in which they are set forth, and it is their natural fate in time to be found defective or false. Our enlarging knowledge of facts ought to bring modifications of our theories. I am not concerned particularly about even the theory of inspiration, important as I conceive it to be, when I know that divine revelation is vouched for by considerations that can never be invalidated.

But how do Christians arrive at these innermost truths of their religion? They derive them from the Bible—true, but by what process? They are taught them by their spiritual parents, by the previous Christian generations—true, but with what authority? They find them attested by reason—true, but how does reason impart her decisions? In what way are faiths opened to the mind of the church which to the eye of the common mind often remain completely invisible? It is through the new eye which the Christian has, through his illuminated spirit; and he acquires the rock-like

certainty which he attains because he studies the truth with a divine sympathy, because he approaches it not from the outside as something with which he has no vital connection, but from within, as the native studies the institutions of his mother country.

Within strictly Christian circles of our own day, one of the most striking and encouraging things is the tendency to lay more stress upon the divine character of that progressive teaching which the church has received, and to study the truth more sympathetically, and more from within the circle of belief and common Christian life. If I may so speak, the church is beginning to respect itself, and to think that it has a vast mass of genuine knowledge which it is not called upon to hold or let fall at the nod of speculative metaphysics. Theologians are beginning to say a good deal about the "Christian consciousness," or, as I prefer to call it, Christian experience. The evident promise of this tendency is to produce a more living theology, one less scholastic and more immediately in contact with the heart of the church.

But when we begin to deal with Christian experience, we find ourselves somewhat at a loss. The matter of our investigation seems likely to evaporate under our hands. And then we find ourselves in the region, and in fact at the fountain-head, of all the fanaticism which has from time immemorial plagued the church. The voice of genuine Christian experience may be valuable, if we can only get at it, but how are we to effect this desirable object?

For the answer to this question we are referred, in actual fact, to that new phase of thought which has wrought so much alarm among many undiscerning Christians. The theory of evolution, in the broadest sense of that word, has created for us a new interpreter of the experience of the church, the science of the history of Christian doctrine. The various opinions held in the Christian church have been so many and apparently so conflicting, that the impression has

been left upon the careless observer that all is chaos, everything in dispute, and nothing known. But evolution has brought order out of confusion, marked out the historic course of development, distinguished between the essential and the non-essential, the nascent and the mature, the voice of the individual and the voice of the church, and has thus enabled us to employ the history of doctrine as one of our most efficient allies in the defence, and one of our most instructive teachers in the unfolding, of Christian truth.

Historically, it is true, the earliest of the great modern historians of doctrine got their leading conceptions of method from the transcendental evolutionist, Hegel. Thomasius, who remains to the present day one of the most instructive, if not the most instructive, of masters of this discipline, bristles with such phrases as "immediate unity," "antithesis," "contradiction," "adjustment," and often sacrifices something of objectivity to his categories. The latest and most brilliant, Harnack, goes to the other extreme, and applies to Christian doctrine the ultra-physical method, reducing it thereby to the same condition into which Spencer brings the conscience, and with as little promise of general credence. But in the hands of these masters, even in its worst form, the discipline has "evolved" the edifice of Christian doctrine, which I like to compare to a great cathedral, rising through the centuries from one original plan, a perfect unit, a poem in stone, binding the ages into community of labor, sympathy, and achievement.

History tests doctrines by their power of survival. A doctrine is evolved in the heat of a great controversy. Has it anything more in it than the adaptation which it exhibits to a passing phase of thought? The *a priori* dogmatician, of course, *knows*, for *he* tests things by their essences. But the historian waits to see. And when the doctrine appears again under dissimilar circumstances, when it emerges as the result of another conflict of another kind, or when it succes-

sively re-appears as the one persistent answer to the same kind of question in various ages, then the historian begins to see in it the divine teaching. Equally instructive is history as to that which does not survive; for when the historian finds a doctrine rejected, as Arianism was, for example, because it did not harmonize with those elements of doctrine which have entered into the rising cathedral of doctrine as indispensable elements of its structure, he knows that it is never likely to find any subsequent time when it is more readily assimilable. The history has grown forever away from it.

But history renders its chief service to constructive theology in performing the office already hinted at, of interpreting Christian experience. The voice of the individual thinker in any age of the church it is not difficult to disentangle from the babel of surrounding tumult, but what has it of instruction? The question may receive but a doubtful answer. What the individual thinks, depends upon a great variety of considerations, many of them quite personal and some of them erratic. But what says the church? What the great body of believers who have come to any question under so many diversities of age and race and epoch and geographical location and environment and education and providential position? Surely in the multitude of such voices wisdom will be heard. It is the function of history to answer this inquiry. The church has now and then met in solemn council for the common determination of the elements of the common faith, as at Nice and Chalcedon. Separate bodies under different circumstances have met to give each for itself a comprehensive statement of the things which were commonly believed by communions large and diverse enough to have a representative authority, as the French in Paris in 1559, the Protestants at Augsburg in 1530, the English divines at Westminster in 1643. Certain great writers have obtained general currency in the church because they

happily voiced her common judgment. Thus the church has spoken, and by a marvellous and unconscious movement through the ages she has been building up thus before the eyes of the whole world a consistent body of divine teaching which has in this common consent an argument, an important argument, though not an infallible or final one, for its truth.

But have we not here again a field where the development method is destined to undermine the entire edifice of Christian theology, and leave the theologian at last nothing to do, since it leaves him nothing on which to operate? Will not the system of Christian doctrine, if it has "developed," be shown to be, like other systems of human thought, the monstrous result of conglomerations of truth and error? Will it not mingle the traditions of the teaching of Jesus with the philosophies of men? And will it not be seen that the Christian creeds bear the marks of the ignorance of their framers, who mistook the imaginations of their uninstructed times for the meaning of the divine teacher?

History has been so used, but it is already evident, I think, that the effort is like that to reduce the human conscience to a form of the instinct of self-preservation. It fails and it always will fail because it is destitute of the organ of vision by which the spiritual unity and essential agreement of the Christian ages is evident. To the true Christian believer there is a kinship of spirit between himself and the fathers of the Christian church even in the earliest generations, by which he is able to interpret them with confidence that he reaches their real meaning. And as he passes down through the centuries, he finds a great body of thought developing with which he is still in accord; till the consensus of the church in the acceptance of certain great fundamental truths, such as the trinity, the perfect humanity and perfect deity of Christ, who possessed two natures in the unity of one person, the fall and lost condition of man, the atonement, the regeneration of believers by the Holy Spirit, justi-

fication by faith, sanctification, and the final judgment, constitutes an argument for them, which, far from being overthrown by a naturalistic evolution, rests upon and is confirmed by that evolution which is seen actually to have brought about this harmony. Again the rock, the rock of God in the midst of the seas of whirling human opinions, the rock which is God, the incarnate God, abides to be the refuge of every sinner and the hiding-place from every tempest.

4. We have thus followed modern thought through some of its applications to the problems of the science of systematic theology, and have discovered two things,—first, that it has no power to destroy the fundamental Christian doctrines, and secondly, that even suspected evolution is the source whence some of the most instructive forms of modern theological study have sprung. It has given to the church the new discipline of the history of doctrine, the uses of which have been briefly reviewed. But it has also given us the discipline of biblical theology, to which a few words must be devoted ere I close.

Biblical theology attempts to trace in the sacred canon of the Old and New Testaments the ever more clearly unfolding conception of divine truth. It groups these writings according to their affinities of thought, and it finds from group to group a progress of idea quite similar to, and at the same time quite different from, that perceived in the progress of doctrine in the subsequent history of the church. Like every other department of theological study, it has been seized upon by the advocates of materialistic and naturalistic schemes of the universe. They would make it display, by supposed exhibitions of the innermost mental processes by which the principal Christian doctrines took their present biblical forms, their gradual and illegitimate construction. The battle between the rationalists and evangelicals in this discipline is just at this point, and the issue again is the possibility and the actuality of the supernatural. It is a battle

in which sober common sense and objective interpretation are irresistibly carrying the day for the supernatural and the Christian.

But when all such questions have been settled and when it is clear that the progress in the New Testament is one of understanding of revelation, which itself is progressive because it must be conformable to the capacity of man, the new discipline, as a legitimate department of theological inquiry, has much to offer us, and much help in particular for the constructive theologian. The great difficulty of theology, as already illustrated sufficiently, is to protect the facts upon which it is built from misconception under the influence of dominating ideas. In particular, when the theologian comes to the Bible, he is in danger of seizing upon verbal and apparent resemblances to his ideas in isolated texts of Scripture to the neglect of the real meaning they convey. It was a great step in advance when the general course of thought of a whole passage was seen to be the frame into which the individual verse fitted and by which it was to be understood. A writer's thought at a given instant is to be determined by the course which his mind is then known to be taking. This gave us the law that interpretation is to be according to the context. And now biblical theology enlarges the field of inquiry by studying minutely and separately the system of thought lying in the mind of each writer. Not alone what he is thinking of at the moment when he writes a given verse, but what his habitual methods of thought, points of outlook, and great aims are, shall decide for me his meaning in the case under examination. Does he view Christ predominantly as the ascended king, or as the teacher of Galilee, or as the incarnation of the word through whose robe of flesh there are constantly shining forth the manifestations of the divine nature? Such questions are to be asked; and it is evident that their answer will greatly assist the investigator in his interpretation of the divine word.

In the higher ranges of the work of constructive theology, when now not the meaning of texts, but the significance and weight of doctrines are considered, and when the problem is to gain the general form in which the truth is to be borne to the thinking of our age, here pre-eminently biblical theology is to be of value. The office which church history renders for the confused mass of conflicting views which the Christian ages present, biblical theology renders where all is unmingled truth, and every change of form not the token of possible error but the signal of new and fruitful forms of the one imperishable and unalterable truth. We see the doctrines in different forms, but all alike true. We study them in the simplicity in which they are presented in the accounts given by the synoptists of the preaching of our Lord, and they have the naturalness and purity of the sunlight. We see them as they glow under the fervor of apostolic exhortation, or as they take upon them the azure of Heaven's own depths in the reminiscences of the beloved disciple. But this surpassing brilliance is from the refraction which truth has undergone when passing through the *media* of special individualities under special circumstances; and these rays of diamond hue unite again in perfect harmony in the general impression of the Scriptures as the unchanged white light of truth. Our minds have been enriched by the spectacle of diversity in harmony, the essential has been distinguished for us from the unessential, the more formal from the intuitive, and as we gain greater knowledge by sitting at the feet of many later teachers of the church rather than at feet of any one however learned, so Matthew, James, Paul, and John lead us more perfectly to Christ than any one of them alone could do.

Doubtless there is a danger here, and biblical theologians, especially in the employment which has been made of ideas to further the higher criticism, have sometimes

seemed to assume that one writer could have but one conception of a given truth, even when the other was supplementary to it and logically involved in it. Narrow views may get into the broadest sciences. But when all necessary precautions have been taken, biblical theology promises the most fruitful results for constructive theology, and deserves to be ranked highest among the sciences which furnish the materials for the final and noblest work of the theologian, the determination what finally is the truth, in the form of universally valid statement and closest adaptation to the needs of the day. To the five canons of interpretation, lexical, grammatical, contextual, historical, and analogical, she has added another, to be inserted in the series after "contextual," that of the personal, or the systematic, the element derived from the personal system or mental horizon of the writer studied. To the safeguards against error afforded by the interchange of views in the universal church and by the historical elimination of erroneous elements, she has added that afforded by the comparison of harmonious differences, of equally valid forms of one unmodified truth, and by the contemplation of a field where there is nothing to do but to learn.

Such, then, are some of the reasons why I do not, for my part, despair of systematic theology. There is a great ferment of thought in our own day, but it is a ferment which calls for the clarifying work of the systematic thinker. A new style of thinking has come in, which is as yet immature; but the world will always have new forms of thought, and it will never attain on this side of the great river final and settled conviction upon those subjects which are the proper object of the investigation of abstract philosophy. In all these respects our day differs from no other that has been or shall be in the history of the world. Confusion of mind alone is no threat to the truth. If there is such a threat in our day it is conveyed by the supposed tendency of modern thought

to disprove the supernatural, the idea upon which the Christian religion rests. Into this subject we have therefore felt called upon to go with as great thoroughness as the present occasion would permit; and we have seen, with some clearness, I hope, that the truth is still unaffected at its vital centres after all that evolution has to offer is granted.

But is there not much more than this to say? The noblest occupation of man is the pursuit of truth. Even if it is a hopeless pursuit, it is noble in its effects upon the soul of him who performs it. But when man pursues to gain, it is no longer a mere gymnastic, it is the reception of nutriment which by assimilation with the soul will give it growth and health. No truth is without this effect. The boundless scope of the powers of man take in the microscopic animalcule and the dazzling and the tremendous orb of day. Every fact appealing to the intellect is nutrition for the intellect. But there are higher realms there than those to which such branches as natural history or mathematics appeal. The moral faculties are higher than the merely logical, and the knowledge of duty and of God is loftier and more full of spiritual food than that of the material universe except as this is also the handiwork and the revelation of God. To this loftiest knowledge, as after the most essential food it can seek, the mind irresistibly tends. Impelled by such a tendency, even the savage worships, though ignorantly. The philosopher and the sage worship with loftier and at the same time with profounder feeling, as they stand higher in the scale of being. Thus the first intellectual activity of thinking man is directed to these themes, and when his mind has outrun the utmost stretch of the imagination of the savage, when he has surrounded himself with the wonders of material science, with the literary monuments of ages, when he has gone through with countless detailed investigations in nature and in history, he still finds himself contemplating with fresh interest the meaning of the mate-

rial universe, the eternal elements of the changing thought of man, the ultimate basis of mind and matter in God, and the question of personal relation to him. No supposition of a force which shall account though unintelligibly for the facts of the universe, satisfies him. He may call it the unknowable, but he will begin immediately to define it in one way or another. And driven by an uncontrollable tendency of his mind he presses on unsatisfied till at last he finds in the conviction of a personal God and in the belief and the experience of personal relations to him, that truth, lofty and yet his own, which brings intellectual and moral satisfaction to his deepest necessities.

It is to this pursuit that systematic theology is dedicated. Its problem is to find the truth as to these highest things—not partial truth, not truth of a relative or doubtful validity, not truth abstract and with no personal reference to the undying needs of throbbing human souls, but ultimate truth, complete truth, unchangeable and certain truth, which shall enter into the moral nature of man and by which he shall himself become a partaker of the divine nature. It can never become superfluous, for then the heart and vital centre of man must pause and expire in a burst of unutterable pain: it can never utterly fail, and it shall with the progress of the ages become ever more successful, for it proceeds forth from the divinest elements in the soul of man and it finds its counterpart in the going forth of the very essence of the Godhead, in his active love for man, which shall enter into man and shall at last fill him with all the fulness of God.