

ARTICLE II.

DESTRUCTIVE ANALYSIS IN THEOLOGY.

BY PROF. LEMUEL S. POTWIN, WESTERN RESERVE COLLEGE, OHIO.

THE most perfect illustrations of analysis are found in the science of chemistry. You hold in your hand a piece of granite. What is it? It is a stone. That would be a sufficient answer for some minds. If you wish to throw it at a mark, it is only as a stone that you care for it. But if you wish to exercise the faculties of your mind upon it, you must answer very differently the question, What is it? Crushing the stone, you carefully separate the three kinds of material which, judging from color and hardness, appear to compose it. Applying the requisite tests, you discover that one part of this material — quartz, or silica — is chemically an acid, and is composed of silicon and oxygen. These two, resisting all efforts at analysis, are called elements. Analyzing the other two constituents, — feldspar and mica, both of which are chemically salts and silicates of alumina and potash, — you find that your piece of granite amounts to this: It is a certain combination of silicon, aluminum, potassium, iron, hydrogen, and oxygen.

You may carry on this analysis with such care as to determine the exact amount of each of these simple substances. When you have done all, however, if you want a piece of granite for use, you do not go to a laboratory and order these ingredients; for these things are not granite, though they compose it; and they cannot be made into granite by any human skill. You cannot think of them as granite. Ultimate analysis in chemistry is a destructive process. Its result does not even define the substance analyzed.

This is the more plain when you come to organic chemistry. Analyze all the organic compounds in an oak. The ultimate result is four simple elements — carbon, nitrogen, hydrogen,

and oxygen. Analyze animal tissue in the same manner, and you come at last to the same four. Not only does the infinite diversity of animal and vegetable organic composition come down to this humble monotony of carbon, nitrogen, hydrogen, and oxygen; but some organic substances, quite different in properties, contain the same elements *in the same proportions*. After you have finished your analysis, which is of great value for certain purposes, you do not go to it to find out what an oak is, or an apple, or an orange. Ultimate analysis goes too far for this. If you stop half way, content with ascertaining the distinguishing organic compounds of each, you learn more about them. And for many purposes the five senses are better than any scientific analysis.

Something like this destructive, disorganizing analysis seems to have befallen theology. If I am not mistaken, it has been applied with damaging effect to the atonement.

The atonement is a fact. Like a granite foundation-stone, it sustains a moral and historical structure. The church of God is built on it. Now, philosophers analyze this fact. They find in it a manifestation of love, self-sacrifice, and justice. But here comes the trouble. These same qualities they find in human actions, in far inferior ones. In the analysis they have lost the whole in getting the parts. Somehow they have let slip the distinguishing feature, the property, the formative law, the historic life, of the fact. They have levelled the greater to the less, just as physical analysis destroys the difference between the oak and the cabbage, the diamond and charcoal.

That I may not seem to be "beating the air," I will quote from a theologian whom I admire and honor, but whose theology seems to suffer because his mind is, if the paradox may be allowed, too profound and too analytic, as well as too poetic.

Opening Dr. Bushnell's "Vicarious Sacrifice," the reader meets the following titles: "Nothing superlative in vicarious sacrifice, or above the universal principles of right and duty"; "The eternal Father in vicarious sacrifice"; "The Holy

Spirit in vicarious sacrifice"; "The good angels in vicarious sacrifice"; "All souls redeemed to be in vicarious sacrifice." Under the latter heading occurs the following:

"In what is called his vicarious sacrifice, Christ simply fulfils what belongs universally to love; doing neither more nor less than what the common standard of holiness requires. And then, since there can be no other standard, and no perfect world or society can be constituted under a different or lower kind of excellence, it follows incontestably that the restoration of mankind, as a fallen race, must restore them to a love that works vicariously, and conforms in all respects to the work and passion of Christ himself. Vicarious sacrifice, then, will not be a point where he is distinguished from his followers, but the very life to which he restores them in restoring them to God. What we call his redemption of mankind must bring them to the common standard. Executed by vicarious sacrifice in himself, it must also be issued in vicarious sacrifice in them. The common impression, I am sorry to believe, is different" (p. 105).

Now, the whole argument, of which this specimen will be a sufficient reminder to those who have read it, is a splendid example of ultimate theological analysis. Christ's work is analyzed—to death. Its uniqueness is destroyed. The diamond, under the intense heat of the author's process, has been united with oxygen and found to be carbon; but the diamond itself is consumed. It may comfort some to know that every pile of charcoal is essentially the same as the diamond; it may lead to the production of diamonds from charcoal; but one who had never seen the dazzling gem would get a very faint idea of it by going into a coal-pit.

We may grant, for argument's sake, that this levelling of the atonement to the plane of human actions is literally and theoretically right; but it is not practically and in the impression which it makes on the world. And no one knows better than Dr. Bushnell that the power of a mental product lies often in this indirect impression, rather than in its literal statement. A jeweller, having a small supply of

diamonds and a large stock of inferior gems, might influence ignorant customers by saying that diamonds, though very clear stones, and very hard, were essentially the same as coal. This would be true in statement, and false in impression. It would base everything on chemical substance, and leave out the one important thing — the law of crystallization — which escapes analysis.

But let us come nearer to the subject, by taking an historical illustration. Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. We can find by analysis the qualities of his character which made this fact possible. They were love of country, love of right, love of man. He was doing, in his measure, "what belongs universally to love." On the part of his murderer, the qualities were the opposite. Given all these, what then? Not necessarily anything but the ordinary course of Mr. Lincoln's life. All these qualities might have existed without any tragical event, or any important consequences to the world from it. What was necessary to complete the fact, and give it power? It was necessary (1) that he should be in the position of President, (2) that he should have been identified for a considerable time with the cause for which he was slain, (3) that he should be greatly beloved by the loyal nation, and (4) that the hatred against him should, by the ordering of Providence, actually take form in the awful deed. All these elements being given, the pistol-shot that took away his life made millions of hearts bleed, and consecrated a nation anew to freedom and justice.

Such an illustration may show how little we do towards explaining the death of Christ when we analyze the qualities of character which he exhibited, and which, of course, are, in a degree, possessed by all good beings. Such an analysis does not give us even the fact of Christ's death, nor one fact in his life. It gives possibilities only, not actual history. Qualities of character are common to both God and man. Taking these for granted, we explain the atonement, if we can at all, by going beyond them, and searching out what is peculiar to Christ in position and nature, and in the circum-

stances and object of his life and death. Analysis, if pursued to the last point, yields only what is common. It therefore, if depended on chiefly, and emphasized, belittles the great, instead of magnifying the little. The diamond becomes coal ; the coal does not become diamonds.

Another example of destructive analysis in theology is found in the adjustment of the doctrines of divine providence and prayer. It is accepted by all Christians, as a law of events, that prayer brings blessings as truly and efficaciously as the rain brings fertility to the soil. The showers do not make every watered seed grow, and prayer does not further all the desires of praying hearts ; but the one law is as fixed as the other, and both are unchangeable.

Now, we cannot help analyzing this law somewhat, to find how prayer fits into the course of divine providence. We discover, on reflection that it is itself an essential part of the plan. Some of the links in the great chain are human prayers. God ordains the prayers, just as much as the answers. This makes everything straight, Calvinistically. But the trouble is, that it not only makes the matter straight, but stiff and stark as death. The adjustment is simple, logical, complete ; but after you have made it, you must forget about it in order to pray. It is a theological bludgeon, with which to bring down a man who denies the efficacy of prayer on the ground of God's immutable purposes. It is effectual. No opponent of this class, who knows what reasoning is, can stand against it. But when the weapon has done its work, it has to be laid aside. It will not do as a staff to constantly lean on. The reason is partly because a prayerful spirit is incompatible, for the time being, with philosophizing about prayer ; and partly, because we cannot act naturally in anything while we think of our actions as being foreordained, or even foreknown, by any one. It nowise affects the truth of anything because our minds are thrown into confusion by trying to carry it constantly side by side with something else ; but it is practical wisdom to avoid such confusions.

The solution of the trouble may not be easy to all. A "sanctified common sense" will accomplish it by letting theories alone, and trusting implicitly the covenant and promises of God. A few minds may find relief by penetrating beyond this mechanical view of providence, till they get at least a glimpse of a deeper analysis. One thing is certain, — the analysis which stops with saying that God ordains both the prayer and the answer is not ultimate. No one need fear being lost in metaphysical profundity, if this is the limit reached. Such an analysis is destructive to piety and doctrine, because it is shallow and frigid. Whether anything fully satisfactory can be reached is the same as whether the problem of divine and human agency can be solved.

A single example further may be found in the resolving of great truths into a multitude of frivolous details. This hardly deserves the name of analysis. It comes from the nursery, where the child, instructed in the doctrine of God's omniscience, asks: "Can he see in my pocket?" Yet the literature of theology contains specimens far inferior to this. I imagine that Rev. John Fletcher is here without a rival. Let the following testify:

In his "Remarks on the Rev. Mr. Toplady's 'Scheme of Christian and Philosophical Necessity,'" he says: "To imagine that before the foundation of the world the Almighty decreed that three idle boys should play the truant such an afternoon, in order to seek birds' nests; that they should find a sparrow's nest with five young ones; that they should torment one to death; that they should let another fly away; that they should starve the third, feed the fourth, and give the fifth to a cat, after having put its eyes out and plucked so many feathers out of its tender wings, — to suppose this, I say, is to undo all by overdoing" (Sec. iii.).

This mode of analyzing, or rather disintegrating, a doctrine would doubtless "undo all" in some minds; but it is very silly as an argument, nevertheless. Take the following parallel statement: "To imagine that the Rev. John Fletcher,

in writing the above paragraph, should take the trouble to form over four hundred distinct letters, crossing every t, and dotting every i, moving his pen in almost every conceivable direction; that he should voluntarily employ in this service the various muscles of the thumb and four fingers of his right hand, the muscles of his right arm, and many of the muscles of his body in bending over his paper; that he should turn both his eyes to follow the progress of his pen along each line, and its motion in the formation of the letters; to suppose, in addition, that the minute cells of his brain should grow warm with the operation of his mind, and his heart beat with a quicker pulse, and the blood flow stronger in every artery and vein, even to the tips of his little fingers; to suppose, also, that his mind should exert itself to choose to mention three boys, a sparrow's nest, five young ones, a cat, etc., instead of different things, — to suppose this, I say, is to undo all by overdoing. He did not do these particular things; he only wrote the paragraph."

There are various ways of meeting this peculiar argument by division. Properly employed, it needs no answer. When trifles mar our happiness, the truth of a minute providence is the hope of our lives. Then such a promise as "Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered," becomes our sheet-anchor. But when we are in no conscious need of this comfort, and dwell on these minutiae for speculative entertainment, or select those of them which are belittling for use in controversy, then it is time to consider the difference between the use and abuse of this subdivisive analysis.

Mr. Fletcher's paragraph may be answered, in a manner, by proving that what he supposes to be so absurd and "undoing," is nevertheless true; the proof being drawn from scripture and reason. The proofs from reason would be of this sort — that (1) God cannot have any providence worthy of him, unless it embraces everything, great and small; that (2) it is no more derogatory to God to decree these things than to know them, which he must do if he is omniscient; that (3) great consequences flow from apparently trivial

causes. For example, how could Mr. Fletcher have constructed this great argument, which he could not consider beneath God's providential notice, but for the very trivialities which he thinks God could not condescend to decree; that (4) since a man can know and determine a multitude of little things without diminishing his greatness, it is irrational to set any limit to God in this respect; and that (5) we are not obliged to suppose that God bestows equal thought on things both great and small — only sufficient thought to all.

There may be other arguments, equally convincing; but the only point I now insist on is, that this mode of reasoning by analyzing into frivolous details is unsound. It addresses the imagination, instead of the reason, and seeks to gain a point by confusing the mind instead of enlightening it. There is not a fact of history nor a truth of science that cannot be assailed in this way.

This Article is perhaps too heterogeneous to admit of any one general conclusion; the study of this topic certainly impresses one with the great need of common sense in theology. If the writer of this has violated it, then he must be content to have unwittingly strengthened the same conclusion, and to stand humbly at the foot of a very long and respectable class.