

ARTICLE VI.

THE TRUE PRINCIPLE OF THEOLOGICAL PROGRESS.¹

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THEOLOGY is the science of religion. Religion has a two-fold bearing; it looks toward God as the object, and toward man as the subject, of religious regard. Theology, then, involves a knowledge of God, and of man in his relations to God. As a science, it is an orderly and systematic statement of our knowledge; and as our knowledge of God and of man extends, and must forever enlarge, so our theology must attain constantly a clearer and more satisfactory statement. We shall probably never, either in this world or in any other, reach a point where it will not be preposterous to say that our theology is complete, and can never be improved. The truth pertaining to God is absolutely inexhaustible, and that pertaining to man is practically so. What is known of God and of man is the accumulation of generations and of ages, and the work of accumulation must still go on.

A confusion has sometimes prevailed in regard to this matter. It has been said that the truth pertaining to God is forever the same; and also that the facts of human nature are essentially the same from age to age. Therefore theology, which is a statement or expression of those truths and facts, must be the same and unchangeable. The difficulty here is a failure to distinguish between the facts themselves and the *knowledge* we have of the facts. Theology is not the exact statement of the absolute facts, but of what we suppose we know or apprehend of the facts. The heavens and the system of the universe have not changed since men began the systematic study of them three thousand years ago; but

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the science of *astronomy* has made vast progress, and has received material additions within the memory of men now living. The truths and principles of *mathematics*, as facts, must be forever the same, without a shadow of change; but the science of mathematics is enlarging and extending with every generation. Yet this science lies wholly in the sphere of rational or speculative truth, the principles of which are accessible to every man.

Another misapprehension arises from the fact that much of our knowledge of God, and of man in his relations to God, comes to us by revelation. We are not left to gather these facts from reason and nature and experience, but have, in the Sacred Scriptures, a divinely authoritative guide to all the great truths of theology. Hence theology is distinguished from all other sciences in being independent of human thought and investigation. There is a basis of reality in this claim, but it does not cover the ground. We have a revelation containing the great elementary facts of religion; but the revelation itself was a movement continuing through a period of nearly two thousand years, and during this period, at least, theology must have been progressive. Paul had more theology than Abraham or Moses. Since the closing of the sacred canon men have been occupied with the study of the Scriptures. The highest mental activity of the world has been concentrated upon them. Whole libraries have been written to set forth their truth and their treasures, and there is not the slightest indication that this interest will ever be exhausted. There is more of thought and study and inquiry directed upon the Scriptures to-day than ever before; and of all this inquiry there must be some outcome bearing upon the theology of our age and time.

Every advance in general philology reacts sooner or later upon the interpretation of the Scriptures. Every attainment in science brings its contribution. Astronomy and geology, each in its turn, have modified our views of the scriptural account of creation, and we are waiting with more or less of equanimity to learn whether the Mosaic record gives us

the *literal* facts of the origin of the human race. The speculations of palaeontologists and evolutionists may be to us but idle fancies, but, all the same, we begin to talk, hypothetically, in harmony with the facts which they seem to accumulate upon us. We should have learned by this time that the Scriptures are not to lose their authority or their value to us by any new light which material science can bring to bear.

Even more fruitful of results in the field of scriptural theology is the progress that is made in the philosophy of mind and in speculative thought. We inevitably interpret the Scriptures in harmony with our conceptions of personality — the relation of motive to volition, the nature of moral action and moral character. These principles once accepted and clearly apprehended make a part of our common sense. We can no more neglect them or escape their controlling influence in our study of the Scriptures than we can part with any other element of our common intelligence. We carry these principles with us, like the common light of heaven, and we cannot think or understand in any other light. A mechanical theology which places sin in the nature and makes holiness the direct result of creative power must inevitably fail before this clearer conception of personality or character. It will scarcely be necessary to refute such a theology; it fails from want of adjustment to our common apprehension; it “waxes old, and is ready to vanish away.” In this better light it is seen that the Scriptures are not adjusted to a mechanical philosophy or theology. In our want of apprehension we loaded the scriptural phrases with our own mechanical ideas, as in earlier ages men carried into the Scriptures the Ptolemaic conception of astronomy, and could not be persuaded that they did not find it there. A correction of our common thought relieves the Scriptures of all such incumbrances, and we are amazed that men ever found them there. A divine wisdom has so shaped the Scriptures that they are forever in harmony with all progress in science and in philosophy. Hence the Scriptures can never become antiquated, nor does a theology which is anchored to

the Scriptures thereby lose its progressive character. The Scriptures, as an authority, guide its progress, but do not hamper it.

But it is not enough that we are entrusted with the responsibility of interpreting the Scriptures in all the light which can be brought to bear upon them ; we are compelled, in the use of our own judgment and reason to decide what place to give to the Scriptures — in what sense and to what extent they become an authority to us. It is difficult to see that any revelation could have been given that did not lay upon us this necessity. The Saviour himself, speaking directly to men, in words such as never man spake, still submitted his claims to human judgment. “The works which I do,” he says, “bear witness of me.” Men looked upon him as he walked among them, and “beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” The evidence was sufficient, but it was still evidence addressed to human judgment. So when the prophets brought the message of Jehovah to the people, they submitted their claims, and the people were left to decide upon them. The original revelation was given under such conditions and limitations. To the honest soul there seems to have been no difficulty in the case. But the caution given by the apostle John suggests the need of care even in the days of immediate revelation : “Beloved, believe not every spirit ; but try the spirits whether they be of God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” If there was need of care and judgment in the presence of the revelation itself, how reasonable the care when the revelation comes to us in a record made by human hands and transmitted through the ages. That there should be continued search for ancient manuscripts, and revisions of the text, and comparison of versions, and inquiry about the canon is inevitable, until what was once the quiet work of scholars becomes the concern of the universal church ; but in all this there is safety rather than danger. A broad intelligence as to the evidences in the case of the Scriptures, is the condition of satisfac-

tion and confidence. We have passed the period in which these questions were confined to the cloister and rest was found in ignorance. Henceforth the church must find its assurance in regard to the authority of the Scriptures — their integrity and their inspiration — in a full discussion and understanding of the situation. In the course of this inquiry we shall doubtless be annoyed by many partial and inadequate presentations. We shall be shocked with the audacity of the “higher criticism,” and vexed with the stupidity of the “smaller criticism”; but the resultant of all this activity will inevitably be a more intelligent assurance of faith. There will be individual cases of an “eclipse of faith.” Here and there an observer may be so occupied with the study of the spots on the sun that it shall seem to him to be made up of spots; but the mass of men can never be thus blinded to its everlasting radiance.

The more exact definition of the place which the Scriptures shall hold in our regard is a necessary problem which we meet in our theological progress, and it is vain to regret the necessity of its discussion, or to be disturbed with the apprehension that the sacred word which has been the life of the church for two thousand years is about to lose its place or its power.

Such considerations as these indicate the necessity of changes in theological conceptions and statements, and these changes must involve progress, if there is progress in our conceptions of human nature, and of the great principles of moral action and character — the nature and extent of obligation. The essential idea of man’s relation to the divine purpose and government, the nature and scope of free-will, has much to do in giving shape to our theology, and there can be no doubt that these ideas and their relations are becoming more distinct in human thought. About these ideas the two great systems which have divided human thought between them, Arminianism and Calvinism, have arranged themselves, each partial and inadequate as originally conceived and presented, yet sure to come into harmony

with each other, because truth is harmonious in itself, and advancing thought must at length take in and perceive the harmony of these different sides of the same truth.

There can be no doubt that there has been a great advance toward the reconciliation of the two systems during the last hundred years, and the latest creed which has appeared in connection with the Congregational churches is a token of this tendency to reconciliation. The distinctive features or expressions of the older Calvinism are not there; and they are wanting not simply because it was thought wiser to omit them in the interests of peace, but because to a great extent they have lost their hold upon the thought and life of our churches. The essential facts of the divine plan and purpose are found in the new creed, as they are found in the Scriptures, and as every earnest and successful preacher presents them, whether he be of Calvinistic or Arminian tendencies. The creed, in this respect, follows in the line of the practical Christian thinking of the age. Mr. Spurgeon is often referred to as an example of a successful preacher who still presents these truths in their rugged Calvinistic forms; but if you listen to his preaching or read his discourses, you will see that the old idea of predestination or decrees comes in from time to time in the form of a nugget or boulder, with no vital connection with the drift of his thought or argument — an example of imperfect comminution of the material. You may drop these stumbling-blocks from the discourse, as a farmer gathers the boulders, and dumps them in a corner of his field. If he utilizes them some day in building a wall, his chief object is to get them out of the way. The creed commission probably did not conceive that their work was to build a wall, hence they had no use for the boulders.

There would seem to be room for still further progress in the reconciliation of these two conflicting systems of thought, and the progress is not all to be on the Calvinistic side. There are doctors, at home and abroad, who either deny or hesitate to affirm that the foreknowledge of God extends to the free acts of moral agents; because freedom breaks the chain

of cause and effect along which, it is assumed, foreknowledge must run. In their anxiety to provide for human freedom they trench upon divine sovereignty. It is not reasonable to deny foreknowledge because we cannot explain it.

Again, there has been progress in our conception of the nature of sin and its origin in our race. We are learning to distinguish between nature and character—between defects and infirmities and infelicities of constitution for which we *cannot* be responsible, and failures and aberrations in our voluntary activity for which we *are* responsible. We do not so often hear of inherited sin and transmitted depravity; while we still recognize the law of heredity and the fact of inherited tendencies and propensities. But we have very generally learned to distinguish between temptation and sin, between natural characteristics and moral character. We are not as sure as our fathers were that the explanation of the sinfulness of our race is all found in the sin of our first parents. They were weak and temptable, and sinned; their children inherit their weakness, and follow them in sin. We hesitate, as our fathers did *not*, to connect these two facts in the relation of cause and effect; and hence, probably, it comes that our latest confession places the sin of our first parents and the sin of their posterity side by side as co-ordinate facts in the history of the race, instead of making one the cause and the other the consequence. It is not clear that reason or Scripture requires us to go farther.

The theological conception of the nature of *regeneration* has changed in accordance with this change in the apprehension of the nature of sin. The theologian of the last generation would define regeneration as a change of *nature*; the theologian of the present, as a change of *character*. It is no defect of nature which separates a soul from the favor of God and from heaven. It is the responsible and voluntary attitude of the man himself—the character which he has formed in the exercise of his moral agency.

In the same direction, the work of the Spirit in regeneration has come to be regarded as spiritual, in the form of the

application of motive and truth to the understanding and the will, rather than creative, transforming the nature, imparting tastes and susceptibilities which did not before exist; and the work of the preacher is no longer a fulfilment of an arbitrary condition, an appeal to ears that cannot hear and to hearts that cannot understand; but it is a presentation of truth and motive adapted to the work to be accomplished, brought to bear upon the soul in the form of inducement and persuasion, arousing the man to renounce the ways of sin and enter at once upon a life of obedience.

I was about to add that the church has advanced to the idea of a probation for every man — a period or condition in which he forms his own character, and determines for himself, under the divine arrangement, his own destiny. Upon further consideration, I am inclined to the idea that the thought of probation was never practically wanting in the church, but we are just awaking to the fact that such a probation is not provided for in our most elaborate systems of theology, which maintain that “mankind had a fair probation in Adam,” and that since the fall the destiny of every man is determined by a sovereign election, and a regeneration effected by the direct power of God. Life and death are not offered to men to be accepted or rejected by their own choice, but are apportioned to men by the sovereign will of God, and the idea of personal probation for every man is but a dream. Let us be thankful to Bishop Butler and his wonderful Analogy for preserving the idea of probation to the church against the mechanical adjustments of an inadequate theology. Let us be more thankful to the great Teacher, who taught Bishop Butler and the universal church that the kingdom of heaven is like unto a householder, who after a long time returns and reckons with his servants to whom he delivered the talents.

In connection with these improved ideas of personal character and responsibility, we have come to believe that the sinner has power to fulfil the conditions of salvation — indeed, that he is able to keep the commandments of God.

because his commandments are not grievous. It may not be difficult to find the old idea of absolute inability in volumes of theology compiled in our own day. Thus Dr. Hodge says, in his *Systematic Theology* (Vol. ii. p. 271): Every man "knows two things as clearly and surely as he knows his own existence: first, that he is bound to be morally perfect, to keep all God's commands, to have all right feelings in constant exercise as the occasion calls for them, and to avoid all sin in feeling as well as in act; and secondly, that he can no more do this than he can raise the dead." Is it a mistake to assume that this is not the theology of the church? that it is not preached, and is not preachable? The church has drifted away from these ideas of a sin which cannot be put away and an obligation which transcends ability.

Such facts as these are indications that there is real and practical progress in theology—a progress which can be marked within a single generation. It may not be easy to determine to whom we are indebted for these improvements, nor how or when they were made. They seem to be the product of the common thought and life of the church, and will soon take their place in our theological systems.

Nor can we suppose that we have reached, or are to reach, a limit to this progress. Undoubtedly there are other particulars in which our theology is marred by our imperfect apprehensions. Pardon me, if I suggest one of which we are beginning to be conscious. It is an overstatement or exaggeration of the doctrine of the Trinity. Said an intelligent young lady to me, not many months ago,—a lady trained up in a Christian family and in an intelligent Christian community,—“My idea of the Trinity is that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three distinct beings, but so perfectly in harmony in their thought and purpose and character, that they act together as one being.” Does not our doctrine of the Trinity need reconstructing, when practically it thus overrides and thrusts out of sight the great scriptural and rational fact of the divine Unity? I suspect that a general inquiry would disclose a general bewilderment on this ques-

tion — a confusion which has arisen greatly from a misapplication of the facts connected with the incarnation. But it is presumptuous to attempt to forecast the direction which theological progress shall take. The most that we can know is, that such progress is before us; and the most that we can do is to welcome the light and the truth, only using all possible precaution that the light which we follow is the light of truth, and not an *ignis fatuus*.

It is a natural inquiry, whether there is any ascertainable limit to these changes in theology? Are we liable to have our entire theological foundation slip out from under us, and new material take its place? It is satisfactory to observe that the grand characteristic elements of our faith are the same to us as they were to Abraham; that his view of a faithful God, "keeping covenant and mercy," "nigh unto all them that call upon him," was as distinct to him as to any generation of believers since his time; that he accepted his privileges as a child of God, a "friend of God," so that he appears in history as the father or great leader of all that believe. These are facts which should allay all anxiety as to any practical changes in the essential teachings of theology. Paul could doubtless have told Abraham many things in reference to the more complete revelation of God and of his ways, but Abraham and Moses could have discoursed to Paul of the eternal God who is our refuge, and whose everlasting arms are underneath his children. The great facts of God and his revelation, of Jesus Christ and his salvation, are the same yesterday, to-day, and forever, whatever changes may take place in our theological thinking — our speculative adjustment of these truths and facts to each other. Amid all these fluctuations the foundation of God standeth sure.

These simple, practical, elementary facts of religion maintain their hold upon the soul of every man who is ready to do the will of God, and in the presence of these facts the minuter theological speculations to a great extent disappear. The believer who finds his faith best expressed in the Westminster Confession, and he who rejoices in our newest creed

may be safely sent out together into the dark places of the earth as missionaries. They will alike teach the dark minded that they have a Father in heaven in whom they live and move and have their being; that they are sinners, and need salvation, and that Jesus Christ has come into the world to save sinners. One of them may hold the satisfaction theory of the atonement, and the other the governmental or even the moral influence theory, they will alike present the Lord Jesus as the Saviour, "the only name given under heaven among men whereby we must be saved." The gospel is the sole dependence of both, whatever their differences may be as to the theory of the atonement. If they fall upon a starving man they will feed him with the same bread, however they may differ in their views of physiological chemistry, one holding that it is the gluten, the other the starch that furnishes the nutriment.

These considerations do not show that our theological differences are unimportant in themselves; they do show that in comparison with the great facts of God and sin and salvation they sink into insignificance; and as long as our varying speculations leave untouched the grand facts of religion we may go on our way in patience and confidence.

It is not to be expected that our theological progress will be well balanced and symmetrical. The discoverer of a new truth is almost sure to overestimate its relative value; it fills his vision, and other truths quite as important drop out of sight. Such exaggeration is perhaps inseparable from human progress in any department of thought or life. The world is very busy with its own affairs, and he who will present his commodity in the market must cry aloud and lift up his voice like a trumpet. This he cannot do unless he believes he has something to offer worthy of attention. There will be plenty about him to question the new comer, and to depreciate his wares, so that in the end the supposed discovery will take its proper place. If a hard and mechanical view of the atonement has possessed the church until they have almost ceased to "look upon him whom they have

pierced," who was lifted up to draw all men unto himself, and a Bushnell comes forward with a new vision of the Redeemer of men, it is to be expected that he will somewhat rudely thrust aside the machinery which seemed to hide him from our view. He will forget that there is any divine government but that which beams from the face of Jesus Christ, that there is any law but the eternal righteousness, and any penalty but the immediate pressure of sin upon the sinner's soul. It will be the work of others to adjust the new vision to the old facts; but let us not reject the light because he who brings it is himself somewhat dazzled, or even bewildered. Every new view requires to be tested and adjusted, and it is rare that the man who presents it is capable of doing the double work. One speaks with a new tongue, and another must interpret. Thus the teachers and prophets of the church are divided into two classes, the conservatives and the progressives; and wholesome progress involves the co-operation, actual if not intentional, of both. The *ideal* method would seem to be that each man should be able for himself to present his new idea in its proper relations, to make the needed adjustment before he disturbs the quiet of others with his discovery. But the ideal is never realized in our human life. The next most desirable adjustment would seem to be that the progressives and the conservatives should both apprehend their proper work, each appreciating the work of the other, while admitting his own limitations. Thus a harmonious co-operation would be provided for, and conflicts and divisions would be to a great extent averted. But even this orderly proceeding has not been realized, and is scarcely to be expected. Human limitations are too pressing and radical to admit of these broader views, unless we may at length attain them after ages of tribulation and discipline. We may at least expect such a condition in heaven, where the suspicion of heresy on one side, and of intolerance on the other, shall no longer exist. The best that can now be done is for every man to tell his vision or his dream, and for the rest to apply such tests of its truthfulness as they can bring to bear. The supposed superior light of the seer, or his

“ethico-religious consciousness,” if that is a better name, cannot be taken as our guide. The only ethico-religious consciousness which can ultimately be relied upon is the common judgment of believers, which is only the common sense of mankind informed by the word of God and directed by his Spirit.

Finally, there is a somewhat prevalent view that the faith of the church is endangered by progressive views and tendencies, and that there is special security in clinging to the old. This idea must be a delusion. The thought of the world moves on, and no conservatism can arrest it. We may anchor to the Westminster Confession or to any other ancient symbol; the tide will at length rise so high as to break us from our moorings and drift us toward rocks or sandbars, — a catastrophe for which there was no preparation. The greater the resistance to the movement, the greater will be the calamity. The drifting and floundering of material science in our day afford an illustration. The traditional view of the fixed relations of species to each other, sustained, especially in our own country, by the commanding personal authority of one eminent naturalist, suddenly gave way before the facts, real or apparent, which had accumulated under the hand of a single distinguished observer, and the speculations by which he interpreted the facts. Almost every man of science was suddenly swept from his feet, and Darwinism took the scientific world by storm. It will be the task of a generation of careful scientific work to gather up the scattered fragments, and reconstruct the theories that shall abide. Similar collapses have been experienced, and may still be expected, in our theological systems; and a movement thus precipitated is never safe. The true wisdom must lie in receiving with hospitality every new idea which can properly modify our system, giving it its proper force and place, and thus we are ready for the next new light which may appear. Thus we attain a wholesome, orderly movement, with a true sense of our bearings, and due attention to what is behind and what is before, — the backsight and the foresight, — which is the safe method of advancement.