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ARTICLE III.

PROGRESS OF RELIGIOUS THOUGHT.

BY THE REV. JAMES H. FAIRCHILD, D. D., EX-PRESIDENT OF OBERLIN COLLEGE.

GROWTH is the law of life. Growth in knowledge is the law of human life. Especially it is the law of the Christian life. The Christian is one who honestly and faithfully employs his faculties, and improves his opportunities. It is inevitable that he should become wiser in experience, in the knowledge of the world, of himself, and of God. To the honest soul, even apart from illumination from above, there must come increase of religious knowledge; that is, of the knowledge of God, and of duty, and of himself as related to God. But such a faithful soul is God's chosen dwelling-place, and the heavenly fellowship brings exaltation of thought and character and life; thus it comes that the path of the just is a shining light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day. The Christian community, composed of such docile and progressive souls, must present an aggregate of advancement in religious knowledge which is beyond the attainment of the individual believer. Each member of such a community contributes somewhat to the common possession, and the result is surer and more satisfactory than any personal thought or experience. Personal opinion is sure to be more or less distorted and colored by the limitations and idiosyncracies of the individual, while in the common result these tend to balance and correct each other. No man can perfectly trust his own experience or thought, until he has had

opportunity to compare his own with his neighbor's. Thus any company of believers, in the aggregate of its religious thought and opinion, is wiser than its wisest member; and an adequate statement of that thought in the form of a creed or confession comes nearer to the ultimate truth than any expression of individual belief. We are not to suppose that every such expression prepared for any church or Christian body is an adequate embodiment of the general belief. In general such statements are elaborated by a single mind, and obtain acceptance from his influence or authority. His opinions have doubtless in every case been more or less modified by the opinions of others, his predecessors and contemporaries, but the result will always exhibit, to a greater or less extent, what astronomers call the personal equation. On such statements of Christian truth theological systems, bearing the names of the strong thinkers who have impressed their thought upon them, have been built up, and upon special tenets or opinions embodied in these systems, Christian denominations have been founded. Such a statement when once framed and accepted, especially when it becomes the organizing principle of a church or denomination, will hold its place, and for a time direct, and sometimes limit, the progress of thought. Every new idea must submit to the test of the old statement, with the result either of failing in the presence of the accepted standard of opinion, or of securing a more or less extended acceptance. In the course of time the old statement may fall before it, and thus a new standard become established.

The same conditions essentially obtain whether this statement of opinion be a written document, formally adopted and widely published, or merely traditional and oral, controlling the general expression of thought and experience. The creeds of the churches whether written or unwritten, hold their place with about equal persistency. A change in the unwritten creed may probably take place with a less distinct

recognition of the fact on the part of its adherents. On the other hand the written creed, in the very fact of its distinctness and definiteness, arouses uneasiness on the part of those who find themselves differing from it, and thus concentrates the forces which at length compel a modification.

We sometimes meet with the idea that the truths of revealed religion, being contained in divinely inspired Scriptures, afford a basis for statements of faith which should be regarded as unchangeable, but the idea is not sustained by the experience of men. The church has always based its faith upon these divine records, but its pathway in history is strewn with outgrown creeds and obsolete decrees of councils. The reason is natural and obvious. The Scriptures present God in his works and ways to the apprehension of men, and the principles of human life and action as these have been developed in God's dealing with men. They are vital and glowing with these truths in living and practical form, but the Bible is not a treatise on systematic theology. It contains no summary of Christian doctrine—not a creed as long as the so-called Apostles' Creed, from the beginning to the end. Yet men take naturally and inevitably to dogmatic thinking, and systematic theology meets a real and universal human need. Men are theologians by the same necessity by which they are philosophers. And their theology contains not simply the vital and practical truths pertaining to God and to man in his relation to God, but these truths in their relations, and with their underlying principles. The Bible contains theology somewhat as the starry heavens present astronomy, or the crust of the earth geology. In our natural, earthly life we find materials which the geologic ages have wrought out, available to us without any study of the processes which have produced them. We build our houses of the material scattered abundantly around us, we sow our seed upon the soil which the forces of nature have spread over the earth's surface, we lay our railroad tracks, and

launch our steamers and traverse the earth for business or pleasure, with little knowledge of the structure or the history of land or sea, or of their accumulated stores upon which we draw so freely. Yet under our very feet there is a record which fairly interpreted makes a science which broadens our thought, and enriches human life. So the Scriptures studied with an honest mind, bring within reach of the simplest soul the great principles of righteousness and salvation. Taking these as the light to his feet, and the lamp to his path, he makes his way to heaven as safely and surely as if an angel had been sent to lead him at every step. So much at least we may claim, without dispute, as involved in the infallibility of the Scriptures. They are a sure guide to salvation for every honest soul. But besides these great facts essential to life and godliness, the Scriptures cover a vast body of truth pertaining to God and to man, which carefully studied and systematized, becomes profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto every good work. This is the science of religion, the science of theology, a study worthy the attention of every soul that God has made. Such study as this is the privilege of every man according to his opportunity. It is not the study of a lifetime merely, it is the study of the ages; and each age makes its contribution to the stores received from preceding ages. The work does not belong to this world alone, but we are told that it is the divine purpose "that unto principalities and powers in the heavenly places might be made known through the church the manifold wisdom of God." We can never reach the limit in this study until we are able to apprehend, "with all the saints, what is the length and breadth and depth and height, and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge." We know not whether God may have other communications and revelations to make to his creatures; but what we have in hand, in the book of

nature and the book of grace, is sufficient to occupy our thought until the heavens themselves grow old. It is occasion for satisfaction, and not for anxiety, when we find that statements of our apprehension of the truth which once seemed adequate and final are now growing old and ready to vanish away. This has been in past ages the experience of the church; such it must continue to be. We are not to assume that every new suggestion in biblical interpretation, is of course a contribution to our knowledge; but it is reasonable that all honest suggestions should be hospitably entertained, because the presumption is in favor of progress. We are instructed not to believe every spirit, but to "try the spirits whether they be of God." We can only pass our ideas out into the Christian community, and leave them to such acceptance as they may prove themselves worthy of. This is the privilege of every man who has an honest, earnest, thought; and his Christian neighbors may reasonably be asked to try the worth of the new idea. His unchristian neighbors, too, may in general be depended upon to lend a hand. We have no mechanical device of pope or synod or council or assembly to do this work for us, and we are only required to do the best we can without. This consensus, more or less extended, of Christian opinion, is the best guarantee we can have of the value of any view or doctrine we may have to propose. It is not an absolute result which we thus attain. We never can say that nothing better can ever be reached. We may be reasonably sure that the new view which meets a hearty response and acceptance in the Christian community, is an improvement upon the old; that it is a nearer approximation to absolute truth, more in accordance with the truths of Scripture, and with sound thinking and experience. But this improved conception will probably in its turn have to yield to other improvements, and thus by repeated approximations we approach the absolute truth.

But here we need to guard against a misapprehension. We are not to think of the whole body of religious truth as subject to this condition of fluctuation. There are great facts pertaining to God and duty which are forever the same, and always within reach of the honest soul who feels after God to find him. Enoch and Noah and Abraham, and all the old saints who walked with God in their generation, had the same conception, in all essential features, of God and righteousness and salvation, as Peter and Paul and John, and all the Christian souls that have followed in their train. The ancient psalms in which Moses and David and Isaiah breathed out their faith and hope and gratitude to God, are still the delight of the believer, and are read and sung in our assemblies every Sabbath day. The truths which they embody are unchanged and unchanging. Every system of Christian doctrine is built upon these eternal foundations. Abel, in his first offering to the Father of spirits, exercised the same faith, and received the same salvation, as the last needy soul who offered the prayer, "God be merciful to me the sinner." All these derived and related doctrines which characterize our various theological systems, however important they may seem to us, or may be in fact, are wholly secondary to the great facts of essential religion. It is in the range of these secondary ideas that all change and fluctuation and improvement must be found. We may cheerfully accept the idea of change and improvement in these lines of thought, and of that free and full discussion which is essential to such improvement, because whatever may befall our cherished conceptions the foundations of God stand sure. We have no means of protecting our favorite ideas from such examination and criticism as shall test their truthfulness and value. We may secure their embodiment in the most exact statements in creeds and confessions, we may organize a church around this creed which every member shall accept without dissent, a church which no one shall be invited to enter with-

out full and hearty acceptance of the creed; it will soon appear that different interpretations of our favorite dogmas are possible and prevalent, and that new ideas of which we had never thought, have found place in the belief of the church—a sort of unwritten creed which without any formal adoption has crept in as supplementary and explanatory of the original confession. A formal revision and restatement may be brought about or may not; an actual revision has taken place, and the belief of the church, in some of the subordinate doctrines of religion, has changed. It is in vain that the church disclaims the idea of freedom of interpretation, and repudiates the right of accepting the creed “for substance of doctrine.” No creed can ever be held by more than one person without such freedom of interpretation and substitution or addition; and this one person, if he has a teachable spirit, must be indulged in the privilege of being wiser to-morrow than he is to-day. Such a privilege is the birthright of every Christian soul.

These simple and obvious facts suggest the answer to the inquiry, What are the forces which are working out these changes, and where are the evidences that the movement is in progress? As to the forces involved, they are found wherever there is any thinking upon religious truth, wherever there is any attempt at an expression of such thought, and especially where there is contact of mind with mind, in the comparison or criticism of thought. The work goes forward without any definite intention, on the part of those concerned, to aid in such progress or to produce such changes. The anxious conservative, whose chief concern is to hold to the old landmarks, sets forth the wholesome doctrine received from the fathers; but instead of promoting the satisfaction and quietness which he desires, he stirs up some restless soul to think and talk and write in favor of a new idea which seems to him the better. The result is that things never settle again exactly at the old mark; but who is responsible

for the change, it is difficult to determine. To defend an error in doctrine or practice is almost as likely to result in a correction of the error, as to assail it with a definite purpose of its correction. This may not be simply the result of the natural interaction of forces in the moral world. There is an overruling Providence which sets these forces one over against the other, and serves his own divine purpose in the resultant of their joint action. It is not the prerogative simply of the few recognized thinkers and teachers, who sit in Moses' seat, to guide the current of thought and belief. They have their part to bear, but the forces which lift the continent are not in their keeping. They may take observation of the progress of the movement, and warn their neighbors of a coming danger if the movement is not arrested; and such warnings have their place and value, and modify, according to their measure, the ultimate result. But the general movement of Christian thought will continue, and the lapse of a generation will demonstrate in what direction there has been advancement. It is not often that any one man, or any limited group or school of men, can embody in definite statements the results attained. They are themselves involved in the movement, and may live and die without being fully aware of what has taken place. The younger Edwards left a record of "improvements in theology" which seemed to him to have resulted from his father's studies and labors. But of the ten points which he presents, most would to-day be regarded as of doubtful significance, and the only one which would be generally esteemed as important is the doctrine that all virtue or holiness, whether in God or man, reduces finally to benevolence, or the willing of good. That this has been accepted as an improvement in theology, even after the lapse of a century since the record was made, with all the impulse which has been contributed during the last fifty years by the Oberlin preaching and teaching, would still be questioned by many. There can be no doubt that prac-

tical teaching and preaching have, to a very wide extent, become conformed to this idea; but it would be difficult to show that the doctrine has found place in the systems of ethics which most prominently claim the attention of the world. The continent is rising, but it rises slowly. More than sixty years ago, in a "four days' meeting" held in a grove near the Lake shore in this county, I heard John J. Shipherd, then pastor at Elyria, announce, as the topic of his sermon for the next morning, the proposition that the everlasting punishment of the incorrigible sinner proceeds from the love of God. To the great body of the people it seemed a paradox. They had been taught that the justice, or rather the just wrath, of God pronounced such a doom upon the sinner. To-day the proposition would occasion no surprise in any intelligent congregation. Practically the doctrine is accepted that all God's moral excellence is comprehended in love; but as an element of theological philosophy it stands chiefly as a special speculation. The name of Edwards has very generally passed out of view, in connection with the introduction of this luminous principle, which during the last hundred years has been slowly permeating theological thought in this country. Yet of all the points of doctrine to which he directed his strong thinking and his keen analysis, this is the only one which to-day could maintain the claim to be an improvement in theology. And even this claim would have to be sustained, not by an appeal to theological authorities in the form of schools, or published systems of theology, but to the general trend of religious thought as disclosed in practical teaching and preaching.

As matters stand to-day, it is probably true that more is effected, in the extension and progress of religious thought, by means of the regular preaching of the gospel in the established Sabbath service, than by any other instrumentality. The great themes of gospel truth are constantly presented in their vital forms as the material out of which the Christian

life is to be wrought. The preacher, if a genuine man, as he must be to maintain himself in the work, brings out of his treasure things new and old, ranging the whole field of Scripture teaching, of religious thought and Christian experience, as it lies open to him. He brings these truths to his hearers in a form to impress their thought and feeling, and to direct their lives. These hearers are in a frame of mind to be instructed; they are receptive and appreciative. They are not uncritical. The truth is what they need, and in general what they desire. They have met together in the name of the Master, and according to his promise he is with such assemblies of his servants through all the ages. Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty—liberty in the preacher to utter the truth which seems to him the gospel which he is commissioned to preach, liberty in the people to test the word in their own thought and experience. The preacher is not alone concerned in the work of determining what is true, and profitable for reproof, for correction and instruction in righteousness. This is a common prerogative, a common responsibility. There will be no formal consultation as to the doctrines that shall be set forth. The preacher brings what he finds to bring, the Christian souls before him afford the good ground in which the seed germinates if it has life, and in which it produces at length the fruits of righteousness. In this manner the truth presented is constantly tested in the result. If some unusual view of doctrine or truth meets with acceptance, and proves the power of God unto salvation, that form of truth will grow in the appreciation of preacher and hearer. It enters into their faith, and forms a part of their essential creed, even if unwritten. This new treasure will be extended to neighboring churches, with little attention to denominational limits, and thus the prevailing theology becomes improved. If the new phase of truth ceases soon to interest and profit, it will cease to be presented, and thus unprofitable teachings and views will be

set aside and forgotten. We have thus a permanent arrangement for the revision of church creeds and confessions. The test of what is believed is to be found in what is preached—what is depended on for the practical work of turning men to righteousness, and of building up Christian character. A distinction is sometimes made between practical preaching and doctrinal preaching—the one employed in the every-day work of the church, in promoting the kingdom of God among men, the other with the idea that some truth that has been lost sight of, although embraced in the creed, must be presented as a matter of doctrinal instruction. The better conception undoubtedly is, to work into the preaching all essential truth in such forms and proportions as to edify and instruct and establish Christian character. This will make room for all truth which should appear or be made prominent in the confessions. When a doctrine would be forgotten if it were not brought in by itself and enforced in a course of so-called doctrinal preaching, it is an indication that it has already done its work. The truth that is preachable is the truth that will hold its place. Those who listened to the preaching in Oberlin fifty years ago, can recall the fact that the doctrine of special sanctification by an immediate act of faith was urged upon us by our leading preachers, with effective earnestness and power. This preaching carried with it a large body of almost forgotten truth, involving the immediate obligation of righteousness, the inexcusableness of sin, and the abounding riches of the gospel as the power of God unto salvation to every one that believes. It impressed the people almost like a revelation, and many souls were lifted up into a life of service and consecration such as they had never before attained. To those who looked on from a distance, the new doctrine seemed like a pernicious heresy, and warnings against the error resounded throughout the land. The young men trained here for the ministry were regarded with suspicion and apprehension as

they went out into the churches; they had little welcome from councils or conferences or presbyteries. They were spoken of with respect as earnest and self-denying men, and gradually they found quiet and inconspicuous places where in a humble way they could feed a portion of the flock. Some of them, doubtless, as they went forth, felt that they had some new message to carry with the old gospel; but when they stood face to face with needy souls they felt called upon to prophesy according to the proportion of the faith; and the doctrine of instantaneous sanctification, as a special experience to be sought and attained, was left in the background. A similar modification of the preaching in the Oberlin pulpit appeared about the same time. There was no conscious change of thought in the mind of the great preacher, upon this special doctrine, to the day of his death; but it did not seem to him to be the truth needed by his congregation; and one might attend upon his ministration for years without knowing that his views of sanctification were in any respect peculiar. To the preacher himself it seemed that the people were not in a frame of mind to call for the special doctrine. If the people had been inquired of they would probably have said that they were ready to hear and embrace the truth, and they were not aware that they had in any degree refused to receive what was necessary to their spiritual edification. But the result was that the doctrine of sanctification, as a special and instantaneous experience, ceased to be preached at Oberlin. I present this experience as an illustration of the manner in which earnest gospel preaching addressed to believing souls, tends to clarify the apprehension of the truth, and to eliminate special fancies and errors. "Wisdom is justified of her children." An experience in the opposite direction is sometimes indicated. False teachers may appear in the church, and draw away disciples after them. Or the hearers themselves "refuse to receive sound doctrine, and, having itching ears, heap to

themselves teachers after their own lusts, and thus turn away their ears from the truth, and turn aside unto fables." An apostate church is no strange thing in the world, or a shipwrecked faith. And all this may come whether the creed of the church be the Nicene or the Athanasian, the Thirty-nine Articles or the Westminster Confession, and whether its organization be Papacy or Episcopacy or Independency. Yet our only hope of the preservation and progress of the truth is in the living church, kept alive by the presence of the living God. From time to time the cry will come, lo here, or lo there, a new light has sprung up. A new turn of the gospel kaleidoscope has been made, and a few delighted souls are favored with the heavenly vision. A careful examination will quite likely show that all the elements which the new picture presents were in the old gospel once delivered to the saints; but the new view is attractive, and becomes a centre of the organization of religious forces, and perhaps the watchword of a new denomination. A higher wisdom both within and without the narrow circle would have provided for the probation of the new doctrine without the establishment of new walls of division in the churches. Standing on its own merits the new doctrine will prove its value, and obtain acceptance, or it will show itself a passing fancy, and take its place among forgotten dreams. A new organization to support and propagate the new view brings to it factitious forces which will be very likely to secure to the doctrine an overestimate of its importance even if it is worthy of living, and a longer lease of life if it is not. Some still living will remember the time when it was a question whether the standard of a new denomination should not be raised at Oberlin. There was some pressure in that direction from without and within—chiefly from without, on the part of those who were anxious to relieve themselves from all responsibility for the new ideas. The young men who applied for approbation from presbyteries were told that they proba-

bly ought to preach, but "they should go where they belonged" to find endorsement. But wisdom and patience finally prevailed, and thus we have to-day no denomination of Oberlinians, and no narrow creed about which the Oberlin ideas have crystalized.

The public service of song in our Sabbath worship, as well as the preaching, is among the forces which are determining the direction and expression of our religious thought. It is a common impression that all theologies meet in this element of worship, and also in the service of prayer. All Christians, it is said, sing the same hymns. The author of the hymn "Rock of Ages," might just as well have been Wesley as Toplady; yet Toplady never ceased to speak disparagingly of Wesley and the Methodists until the strains of the "Song of Moses and the Lamb" fell upon his ear. This general harmony in Christian song is a most interesting fact, and it suggests the thought that the harmony may continue and increase until all the discord of the sects shall blend in anticipation of the grand harmony above. The hymn has the advantage of the sermon in that it presents the thought in poetic form and figure, thus affording opportunity for a breadth of interpretation like that which we employ in the interpretation of the poetic utterances of the Scriptures. The intensely realistic figures of the hymn "There is a fountain filled with blood," are sufficiently broad to cover all the dogmatic conceptions of the atonement which have ever entered the hearts of men. The hymn is an attempt to expand the more restrained but impressive utterance of the prophet in reference to the "fountain opened to the house of David, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for uncleanness." Neither the hymn nor the prophetic utterance was intended to be dogmatic, and both are to be interpreted with due regard to their poetic character. But many of our hymns have added to the scriptural figure a dogmatic form and coloring derived from the creeds and from theolog-

ical theories, thus formally setting forth the theology of the times in which they were written. Some of these hymns have outlived the theories from which they sprung, and are still doing service in our churches. Others have fallen out of use for want of correspondence with the movement of Christian thought. In its original form the hymn is the utterance of an individual soul under the pressure of special thought or feeling pertaining to God, or to man in his relations to God. It may be the expression of a countless host, but a single heart must frame the utterance. Others adopt it because it meets their experience. Compilers of hymnal collections discover the treasure, and present it for general use, thus giving their endorsement to its teaching. The leader of the service selects the hymn, and offers it for general acceptance. The people express their approval by the satisfaction with which they receive it, and continue to employ it. Thus the hymn passes essentially through the same tests as the preaching, and the collections of hymns in common use will, like the preaching, be an index of the prevalent Christian thought. If a single stanza in a hymn diverges somewhat violently from the prevailing thought, the pastor will take the liberty to pass over this in his reading, and the choir will omit it in the singing. Or, as sometimes occurs, the chorister will exercise the prerogative of omitting the offensive stanza. The next compiler will omit the unfortunate hymn or stanza from his collection. Thus a comparative study of the hymns of the ages would give us an epitome of the history of Christian doctrine.

This work is continually in progress, not waiting for the action of synods or councils, or for the revision of creeds or confessions. A few of these changes which have occurred under our own observation, will serve for illustration.

It is not many years since the doctrine of absolute decrees, of unconditional election and preterition, was frequently heard in the average Congregational or Presbyterian

pulpit, followed by a hymn which expressed the same doctrine,—

“ May not the sovereign Lord on high
Dispense his favors as he will,
Choose some to life while others die,
And yet be just and gracious still ?

Shall man reply against the Lord,
And call his Maker’s ways unjust,
The thunder of whose awful word
Can crush a thousand worlds to dust ? ”

From this forbidding exhibition of arbitrary sovereignty and power, we pass to a suggestion more wise, even if the argument of the hymn affords little motive to the duty.

“ But O my soul, if truth so bright
Should dazzle and confound thy sight,
Yet still his written will obey,
And wait the great decisive day. ”

It is probably many years since any of us have heard this doctrine preached, and at the same time the hymn is disappearing from our popular collections.

The doctrine of the sin of our first parents as involving, by necessity of heredity, the whole human family in sin and corruption, has left its traces in our hymns:—

“ Lord, I am vile, conceived in sin,
And born unholy and unclean;
Sprung from the man whose guilty fall
Corrupts the race and taints us all. ”

This is supposed to be a paraphrase of that wonderful utterance of the psalmist in which he confesses his own great iniquity. We have mostly ceased to sing it, and our ministers have in general ceased to preach the doctrine. The people do not seem to need it.

Similar to these are the hymns which overstate the helplessness and impotence of men in their fallen state, and the necessity of the same omnipotence in their regeneration as in the raising of the dead.

“ Look down, O Lord, with pitying eye:
 See Adam's race in ruin lie;
 Sin spreads its trophies o'er the ground,
 And scatters slaughtered heaps around.

And can these mouldering corpses live?
 And can these perished bones revive?
 That, mighty God, to thee is known;
 That wondrous work is all thine own.

Thy ministers are sent in vain
 To prophesy upon the slain;
 In vain they call, in vain they cry,
 Till thine almighty aid is nigh.

But if thy Spirit deigns to breathe,
 Life spreads through all the realms of death;
 Dry bones obey thy powerful voice;
 They move, they waken, they rejoice.”

This hymn has to a great extent been dropped from our books, and how much more true and more inspiring is the gospel as we sing it to-day:—

“ Just as I am without one plea,
 But that thy blood was shed for me,
 And that thou bidst me come to thee,
 O Lamb of God, I come.

And how different is the sound of the Scripture, “ Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him and will sup with him, and he with me.”

Some of our hymns have been made to utter offensive and unscriptural theories of the atonement; as, that the Saviour hung upon the cross to placate the wrath of God toward sinners:—

“ Rich were the drops of Jesus' blood
 That calmed his frowning face,
 That sprinkled o'er the burning throne,
 And changed that wrath to grace.”

Or that the value of Christ's death is limited by the sovereign will of God:—

“ My soul looks back to see
The burden thou didst bear
When hanging on the cursed tree,
And hopes her guilt was there.”

This stanza may possibly express the experience of some doubting soul, but why should we mar a hymn with it when we read in the Gospel, “ God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life ” ?

Thus it is that forces mightier than any assembly, or ecumenical council even, are constantly moulding and modifying our theoretical beliefs, and the expression of them; and a retrospect of fifty years leaves no room for question that the general movement is in the direction of a more reasonable theology, better adapted to impress the hearts of men, and turn them to righteousness. There are doubtless limited movements here and there, sometimes wide-spread and long-continued, in which religious thought is misdirected, and the faith of the church suffers detriment, resulting it may be in a great apostacy. Such a liability lays upon us the duty of great circumspection and caution that we may be prepared to detect and withstand error as well as to promote the truth. There is time only for a single suggestion in the way of caution. If we compare the preaching of our own time, on the question of the future of lost souls, with that of fifty years ago, we cannot doubt that a change is indicated. I do not refer to any new theories of continued probation or conditional immortality which have been proposed in some quarters, but to the generally observed fact that the practice of definite preaching on the subject has almost disappeared; and that a corresponding change has taken place in the use of hymns which accompanied such preaching. In the Oberlin hymn-book, and in some others, I observe that an accommodation to the general practice has been made by dropping from one of the hymns the solemn stanza,—

“ In that lone land of deep despair
No Sabbath's heavenly light shall rise;
No God regard your bitter prayer,
Nor Saviour call you to the skies.”

And from another hymn this stanza,—

“ There are no acts of pardon passed,
In the cold grave to which we haste,
But darkness, death, and long despair
Reign in eternal silence there.”

The question naturally arises, Is this change in our preaching and our hymns due to a proper deference to a more sensitive human feeling, or is it an undue yielding to human weakness? Our Confessions still present the doctrine, “The endless happiness of the righteous, and the endless misery of the wicked;” and the solemn words of the Saviour still abide, “These shall go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” When it shall have been generally apprehended that all God's moral excellence is embraced in his benevolence, that there is not even an apparent conflict between his justice and his love, we shall probably find an ethical basis for the Scripture teaching as to the future of the lost which will make the doctrine available to the earnest preacher, and profitable to the hearer. While the idea prevails that God's manifested glory must exhibit a justice which is different from love, the doctrine will not only be repugnant to human feeling, but it will lack the support of human reason.