

ARTICLE III.

THE BOOK OF ACTS AND THE HISTORICAL
METHOD OF INTERPRETATION.

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WHEN Peter visited Cornelius at Cæsarea, a great step was taken in the historical development of Christian doctrine. The apostle himself received such an enlargement of his ideas of the character of God and the scope of Christianity as made him a different man for the rest of his life. Possibly he never had really thought God was a "respector of persons," but it is one thing to know a truth theoretically and quite another to experience that truth in real life, or to apply it in a case where it conflicts with all our preconceived notions of society. Peter's mind was evidently tremendously impressed with his new view of the divine plan and the world-wide reach of the gospel. And that great discovery through the vision of the sheet, and the visit to Cæsarea, naturally put the apostle, and ought to put all men in every age, into an attitude of readiness to welcome new truth. He learned that the gospel, as applied to human life, is full of *surprises*; that we are constantly to expect new developments of truth, new and larger and truer interpretations of truth, and new applications of truth to life, as the history of the world unrolls. Such scriptures, therefore, are a standing rebuke to the narrow idea that no new light is for us beyond that of our fathers. There is such a thing as the *progress of doctrine*. Not that the Bible changes, not that we read more, merely between the lines, not that we put into the Bible what was not there before; but, as taught by God's ever-new providential events, we dis-

cover a larger meaning. The apostles themselves, from their first acquaintance with Jesus till the last one of them had suffered martyrdom, were constantly enlarging their views and modifying their interpretations of Scripture. It has been so with the church ever since, and will be to the end. While the great cardinal truths of revelation have remained clear and settled, the views of scholars and commentators have been changing and enlarging in regard to many principles and applications of Scripture. In other words, God interprets his own word by his providences. Therefore the *historical method* of interpretation is the only true one. We need to stand, as Peter did, with mind ever open, and expectant of new views and larger meanings of the Bible, as time goes on.

Now, in accordance with, and in illustration of, this historical development of truth, we may find some marked changes and enlargements of idea, in the treatment of revelation.

In the *first* place, Christian men in their interpretation of Scripture now appeal to reason, more than in former ages. We do not mean to imply that clear thinkers did not always use reason in their interpretation and defence of the Bible. But in past generations a statement found in the Bible was accepted literally, chiefly because it was in the Bible; whereas to-day the same doctrines are received more generally, because they commend themselves to enlightened reason and the moral sense of man. This does not mean that human reason is co-ordinate with Scripture as a source of religious truth, as Dr. Briggs at first seemed to imply. The Bible, when once established as a revelation from God, is the final and sufficient authority. But in the interpretation and application of it to society, and even in the defence of the fact of a supernatural revelation as against rationalism, reason has now, rightly, a larger place. Slavish literalism, which has so often been the bane of biblical interpretation, and the mere massing of texts, often of doubtful relevancy, is no longer a chief reliance. Texts and doctrines are alike subjected to criticism,

and the Bible as a whole is defended because it is reasonable. This perhaps has some perils, but yet it is a great gain. The critical judgment, enlightened by the Spirit of God, and broadened by scholarly investigation, and the unfolding of history, has now a supreme place in the work of interpretation. This is no disparagement of the mission of the Holy Spirit in leading men "into all truth." For the Spirit's field of operation is not words, but *minds*. His holy work is not superficial, but fundamental. His mission is not to interpret the meaning of Greek or Hebrew verbs or particles, and thus supersede the necessity of reason. He acts rather on the hearts and characters of men, leading them into "all truth" by bringing them into a right attitude toward God, so that reason and judgment may act wisely and without prejudice. Thus, with the progress of knowledge, the unfolding of history, and the enlargement of the experience of the church, we inevitably come to new and larger apprehensions of the Bible.

For example, Paul's language as to the silence of woman in the churches, and indeed in all public assemblies, has, till within a few years, been taken literally, as applying to woman in all places, and all time, and all degrees of intellectual and moral development. Nearly every commentary yet to be found takes that view, without the slightest regard to the improvement of society under the gospel of Christ; and in utter defiance of the progress of Christian experience. In this way the Bible itself has been made to appear to fall behind its own results and to fail to keep pace with the best progress of civilization. Now, it is morally certain that, in view of the vast change in the position and condition of woman, the commentaries which are to be written in the next twenty-five or forty years will reverse that state of things, by showing, according to the historical method, that Paul's language was intended to apply only to such a state of society as existed in the church to which he wrote. If this new principle of interpretation had been applied fifty years ago, it would have

prevented slave-holders and their pastors from claiming the Bible as supporting chattel slavery in the South. The principle, however, is now prevailing, and thus all men will come to see that we have a Bible that not only keeps pace with its own intellectual and spiritual results, but a Bible that is to be eternally in the lead of the highest development of mankind, and adapted to every age and clime.

In the *second* place, under this principle we are getting rid of the old excitement about the relation of religion to science which has tormented the church for fifteen hundred years. Although Christianity has doubtless helped science as truly as science has helped Christianity, yet it is humiliating to find that theologians have, for a time at least, fought nearly every great, new discovery in scientific research as if it were an enemy of religion. Under the old principle of literalism, geographers and astronomers have been, at first, branded as subverters of truth. Discoverers in the laws of physics have been charged with being in league with the Devil. The science and art of medicine have been condemned with a force which has hardly yet lost its sting. Geology has been called an attack upon the Word of God. Political economy has been said to be anti-Christian. The taking of interest, for money loaned, was anathematized for a thousand years as a sin. Even Luther said that every usurer was "a thief worthy of the gibbet." This warfare of Christians upon scientific progress has been waged, no doubt, in part, because of the hasty, and often unfounded, and pugnacious assumptions of some scientific men, but chiefly in obedience to that short-sighted literalism which has led so many interpreters astray. All this would have been impossible if a broader principle of interpretation had been applied. We believe, with Ex-President Andrew D. White, that "In all modern history interference with science, in the supposed interest of religion, no matter how conscientious, has resulted in evil to both science and religion. And all untrammelled scientific investigation, no matter how dan-

gerous to religion some of its stages may have seemed for a time to be, has invariably resulted in the highest good of religion and science."

If President White had added to this true statement, that, on the other hand, all unscientific attacks of scientific men upon religion as such, had invariably resulted in evil to both science and religion, his reasoning would have escaped the merited criticism of being *one-sided*. The unseemly fight between science and religion has been fought with equal zeal on both sides: neither can complain of the other. It is now, however, perfectly manifest that Christianity and science are divinely intended to live and develop together. They help each other. They stimulate and interpret each other. The idea of a conflict between them when each is rightly understood is utterly passing away. This is because we are all learning to interpret according to the historical development of the race and age in which we live. The Bible cannot hold its place on any other principle. In learning this lesson, there is no better book to study than the book of Acts. We find that it is not only the record of the acts of the apostles, but pre-eminently the record of the growth of apostolical conceptions of divine truth—the book of the enlargement of the apostles' ideas, the broadening of their thought, the gradual correction of their false conceptions of the Christian scheme. Peter had been for some years a devoted follower of Jesus before he went to Cornelius, but he had never grasped, till then, the breadth of God's plan of grace. Both he and the six men of the circumcision who went with him were surprised and astonished that the gospel was for the Gentiles, on precisely the same conditions as for them. It was a great, new, discovery. The Holy Spirit had prepared the way for it in the fulness of time, both with regard to Peter's mind and that of Cornelius. Peter accepted the larger view with gladness of heart. When he went back, however, to the brethren in Jerusalem, he was taken to task by them for having gone

beyond the old Jewish conception of the gospel. And he had to proceed in his own defence by the recital of the facts in his own experience, in order to correct their narrow views, and convince them that there was a broader and diviner plan. They had all, doubtless, known in a general way of Christ's command to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature," but the full meaning of that, in its application to social relations, had not dawned upon them till now. In the same way, we ourselves, of *this* generation, are learning, as no generation before us ever did or could, the larger meaning of that great second command, to love our neighbors as ourselves. The events of history and the sufferings of men are crowding its meaning upon us. That command is illuminated to-day, and its application made imperative, by the lurid logic of nihilism, by the struggle between capital and labor, by the satanic spirit of caste, North as well as South, by the perils and losses of strikes, and by the accumulating woes of men and women in their crushing, grinding poverty, as contrasted with the selfish luxury of many a self-indulgent church. And just as, in the case of the early disciples, when they learned their new lesson, so we, when we have learned ours, shall surely stand on a higher plane.

Some fifteen years later in apostolic history, when a good beginning had been made in the conversion of the Gentiles, we see that still another advance step had to be taken in the broadening of Christian ideas. Many in the church at Jerusalem still held that the heathen converts could be saved only by entering the church through the Jewish law of circumcision, according to the law of Moses. This raised another contest, which resulted in the great debate in the Council at Jerusalem on the subject of religious liberty. Paul and Barnabas were appointed delegates, and came on from Antioch, bringing with them Titus, a heathen convert, as a sort of argument made to order; and there they met the men of the narrower view, and the battle was joined. After much dis-

puting, Peter, whose ideas had been enlarged before, rose and took a manly position, with Paul and Barnabas, in favor of breaking down the old wall of prejudice between Jew and Gentile, and recognizing the divine largeness of the gospel. His first point was to relate his own experience with Cornelius, fifteen years before. He told how the Holy Spirit had fallen on heathen converts as on the Jews, how God made no conditions but the purifying of their hearts, how they must put no yoke on their brethren from heathen communities, and that they must all stand by the great principle that all men are saved by grace alone through Jesus Christ. Then followed Paul and Barnabas, giving their missionary experience; and finally, James the Just, the chairman of the council, arose and outlined what ought to be done. The "decrees" were then formulated, granting liberty and equality to all Christians for all time. This was another forward step in the conception of the gospel brought about in God's own time and way, according to the historical method. These steps could hardly have been taken any sooner than they were. The enlargement of view had to come in connection with the development of the events. So it must be through all time. Men's conception of the comprehensiveness of the gospel must constantly expand till every need, and every condition of society, in every age and nation, shall be met. And thus the world will have a gospel of love that can never be outgrown or left behind.

This historical interpretation of Scripture may be looked upon, is looked upon by some, as only a dangerous tendency toward the liberalism of a shallow age, or as the Athenian passion for "some new thing." But surely such a position is both unnecessary and unjust. Such fear is groundless, *provided* always that the new ideas are not only broader, but also higher. Of course there is nothing gained by broadening our view at the expense of thinning it. Gold-foil may be the right metal, but it is not fit for crown jewels. What the

objectionable liberalism of to-day needs, is, on the one hand, to look *up* and *down*, as well as abroad—a little perpendicular expansion, as well as lateral, a profounder idea of the plan and the attributes of God, of the government of God, and of the guilt and doom of sin. On the other hand, narrowness is not necessarily deep. There is no value in narrowness except the advantage of being easily upset. There is no help for humanity in mere orthodox conservatism, unless it has also the element of breadth and progress in its application to the expanding wants of the world. There is never any danger from broad, liberal views if they are only deep and high as well as broad. But this was precisely what the apostles gained in the historical development of the book of Acts. It was not simply a broadening of views, but a real *enlargement* of their conception of God and his gospel. And if they had lived a thousand years longer, they would doubtless still have gone on enlarging.

Peter's opening words to Cornelius have sometimes been explained as meaning that all religions are equally valuable—that the "light of Asia" is as good as the "Light of the World," and that it makes no great difference what a man believes if he is only sincere. Close examination will show that Peter meant no such thing. He did not say that one religion is as good as another. As Bengel has suggested, "It is not indifferentism to religions, but indifference as to nations" that Peter discovers. God does not regard the external or accidental relations of persons. He makes no difference between Jews and Gentiles with respect to his grace in Christ. In every nation he who has the true Christ-spirit will be accepted of God, *through the atonement of Christ*. And so Peter at once set to work to preach Christ to that very Cornelius, whose temper of mind was already such as to gladly accept him. All this is in perfect accord with the declaration of this same apostle in another place, that "there is

none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved."

In conclusion, then, it would seem, that—

1. We all need to study the Bible according to the progressive and historical method. We need to stand, as the apostle did, with open mind, ready to correct or enlarge our views as the advancement of Christ's kingdom may demand. We, too, must expect the Bible to be full of *surprises*, full of unlooked-for greatness of capacity of adaptation to the ever growing and changing conditions of mankind. And thus the church will clear itself from the charge of having no fitness to meet the needs of to-day. Thus, too, we shall refute the argument of the rationalists, that Christianity has reached its climax, and is being left behind, eclipsed by "the more unclouded light." We must still study the book of Acts, for it contains not only the summary of gospel principles, but a continuation of the history of Christ and "the issue of his predictions." It contains a specimen of the method and spread of the gospel. It contains the victory of the gospel in the temples and palaces of the rich and in the hovels of the poor. And that history is a fair specimen, a kind of prophecy, of the history of Christ's kingdom throughout all time.

2. We may also find by this method of interpretation the true conception of our *duty to the heathen*. Let it be freely granted, as Dr. Bushnell has claimed, that in every nation, even the darkest and lowest, there may be some saved, accepted of God through the atonement of Christ without having the gospel actually preached to them; let us hope and pray, nay, let us *believe*, that this may be the case; but surely such a bare possibility does not remove the need of the Bible and the preaching of the living Christ. It seems to have been God's own thought that even the candid, truth-seeking soul of Cornelius needed the gospel, or he would not have been directed to send for Peter. The case of Cornelius simply shows that there are souls in pagan lands struggling for

the light of God, yearning for the peace and the pardon of God, listening to hear just such words as Christ uttered to sinners, and ready to accept Christ himself when presented to their minds. But surely this, instead of being an argument against the need, is rather a tremendous plea for the prosecution of missionary work. Indeed it is the most potent encouragement for us all to give, and to go. And if it be said that God is all-merciful; that the Holy Spirit is working always in society, striving with guilty hearts in all ages and nations, warning them against evil, prompting to good, secretly pleading with the darkest minds, even in the heart of Africa, under all the weight of their disgusting superstitions and crimes and woes,—as it were in advance of the proclamation of Christ,—if this be claimed, let us accept that, too, with adoring gratitude. It is just like God. And if he succeeds in saving one here, and another there, before we, tardy ones, get to them with the story of the cross, let us still say, Blessed be the God of our salvation. He *is* near to every one of us. We are *all*, even in Africa and India and China and America, “his offspring.” But that is the very reason why we should make haste to co-operate with the Spirit, and to run to the starving millions of our brethren with the glad tidings of great joy.

3. This historical method of interpreting the Bible, which keeps it always in touch with Christian experience, and makes it the leader of Christian thought in every age and stage of culture, ought to remove all anxiety as to the result of historical criticism of the Bible itself. Honest historical criticism has again and again proved itself a friend to the Bible, and has already done much for the progress of the faith. For example, it would be difficult to overestimate its value, in establishing, as it has, the authority and divine mission of the Gospel of John, which has been so long under debate. Indeed, every book of the Bible may be said to stand as it does in the sacred canon by having first passed

through the crucial test of historical criticism. The critical tests being applied to some parts of the Bible in our own day—some of them by friends and some of them by enemies, some of them just and some of them unjust, some of them destined to modify our views, and some of them to be simply blown away—are only another step in the historical development and enlargement of Christian ideas with regard to the gospel of salvation. The more criticism the better. The more criticism the more light. The more study of the Bible from every quarter, the more God's own plan is being carried out, and the more invincible will be the confidence that "the Word of our God shall stand forever."

4. This gradual historical unfolding of the riches of the gospel is one of the dearest facts in Christian experience. It protects the soul against needless forebodings. The apostles were not prepared for martyrdom when first converted. They were only told that, as their day, so would their strength be. They were to act up to the light they had at any given time, and take no anxious thought for the morrow. Circumstances might be very different the next morning, but God would be on the morrow just as he is to-day. So now, God is on hand not *before*, but *when*, our emergencies arise. We look at certain untoward events, bad government, tardy justice, false leaders, rash reasoners and critics, and say, Morality and religion are going to the wall. We look at certain possible disappointments, certain crosses, certain bereavements, by anticipation, and it seems clear that we never could endure them. But when they come, God comes with them, and all is right. We look forward to old age and death, and cannot see how we shall endure the one or face the other; but when old age comes, it brings its own compensations. When death comes, the sting is taken away. The face of the Christ shines into the darkening room, and we learn to say, "O death, where is thy sting! O grave, where is thy victory! The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is

the law. But thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." The historical method of Christianity for the world, for the nation, for the individual, is all folded up in that sublime promise in Deuteronomy—"As thy days, so shall thy strength be." Therefore, do not fret about to-morrow.