

ARTICLE III.

WARP AND WOOF.

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MEN and women who were born in northern New England, as also in many other of the more rural sections of our land, a half-century ago, can hardly fail to carry in memory very vivid pictures of the old spinning-wheel and loom. The spinning-wheel was more common than the loom; but in every well-to-do and well-furnished farmhouse the loom was an essential part of the family belongings. It requires only small play of the imagination for the ear still to catch echoes of the whir of the busy wheel as the soft rolls were spun into yarn, and the thump of the loom as the nicely adjusted threads of prepared material were changed into cloth. Many a wife and mother put some of the most effective services of her life into these forms of wearying activity. Many a lad, full of the promise and potency of high achievement, grew from infancy to manhood with few suits, if indeed any, save those which were constructed out of these home-made fabrics.

It is a wonder more poets have not sung the song of the loom. Even our beloved Whittier, whose heart was so full of genuine sympathy with all forms of toil, and who transfigured cobblers and huskers and lumbermen and drovers and ship-builders and fishermen with the magic touch of his genius and invested their simple lives with an abiding glory, left the picturesque form of the dear, old domestic weaver, who for two centuries and more was such an important factor in the life of the home and of the nation, to

fade out and pass away like the rude machine whose loaded shuttle with deft hand she drove back and forth till her web and her work on earth were alike complete.

But, sung or unsung, the story of the loom has wrought its way into the sweet recollections of multitudes of old-time, country-bred folk.

Aside, however, from the high uses it was made to subserve, there was a lesson in that weaving, as there is in all weaving, on which it is worth while to lay stress. That old loom back there in the valleys and on the hillsides of New England in its aims and processes was typical of higher and more significant movements which are all the time going on under providence and in the unfoldings of history. That devoted woman, sitting there on her hard seat from morning till night and patiently struggling with her task, was doing in her small, human way just what God is all the time doing in his larger and diviner way.

Two constituents entered into the finished product of the loom—warp and woof. But observe how these constituents were arranged in order to secure the result of a woven web. The warp was the mass of threads which extended lengthwise and ran straight through from end to end of the whole. The threads with which the shuttles were laden, and which were sent from side to side across the strands of the warp, were the woof. The warp, once in, became the fixed element and gave permanence and continuity to the web; while to the woof there was a freer play, and the substance and form and color of it might be changed at will. The warp was the background and body of the work; and what it was at the beginning it was at the end. The woof afforded margin for experimenting, for indulging the whims and fancies of the hour, and gratifying the conceit of originality.

Strikingly analogous to this is the way in which the kingdom of God is carried forward in the earth. It is

largely after the fashion of the web in the loom. In working out the high and beneficent scheme of filling the world with light, and advancing humanity into the possession and habit of righteousness, there is the warp and the woof,—or the abiding and the changeable; the elements which are permanent and necessary and which condition progress, and the elements which grow out of current moods and suit themselves more readily in hue and structure to the temper of the hour or the age. In other words, there are certain truths which may be called warp truths, for the reason that they are large and vital and fundamental, and in the substance of them hold their own, and must hold their own, from the inception to the completing of God's redeeming purpose; while there are certain other truths, or rather it may be certain other forms of statement given to these same large and vital and fundamental truths, which are only the woof, and so are subject to any chance loading of the shuttle with the trend of feeling, or ruling exegesis, or the theological thought of the time.

This admits of simple illustration.

In the creed of any evangelical church which pretends to have any creed at all, there would be at least these articles: There would be an article concerning the Divine Being,—his existence and character and attributes; an article concerning man as a dependent and sinful and yet responsible and immortal creature; an article concerning the possibility and the method of communication between God and his earthly child; and an article on Christ,—his true nature and his mission to humanity.

It is easy to see how indispensable these truths must be, not only to a coherent theory of religious faith and life, but to the practical development of religious faith and life, and the setting up of a kingdom whose head is to be God, and whose law is to be righteousness, and whose end is to be the blessedness of all its subjects.

There must be an Infinite Personality behind all,—intelligent, self-directing, the Creator of the ends of the earth, the Sovereign of the Universe, the Father of all who bear his image, and the Moral Ruler of all rational creatures. There is no beginning, no headway, no end in view; no guiding thought, no eternal standard of right, no propelling motive, no source of inspiration,—nothing but guesswork and blind stumbling, if there be no God from whom and towards whom are all great movements. The fact of God is warp, and not woof.

There must be the fact of man just as he is,—man with his soul athrob with immortality, with his rare capacities and measureless possibilities, unspeakably precious in the estimation of heaven; but in a moral condition of alienation from the Father, and altogether incapable by any devices of his own—any self-will or self-denial or self-culture or virtuous behavior—of throwing off sin and the guilt and defilement and bondage of sin, and thus restoring the broken relations of peace with God which were destroyed in the transgressions of the law, or the whole idea of redemption counts for nothing and falls to pieces. If man is only a creature of a day,—a mere animal and nothing more,—or if he is not a guilty being and under condemnation, it is but the make-belief of children or the incoherent babblings of lunacy, to talk about a scheme of salvation for the lost and the regeneration of humanity through the interposition of divine energy and influence.

This view of man runs straight through from beginning to end of all that we know of divine interposition in behalf of the race. It is either asserted or implied in all efforts which are made by the loving Father to lift human souls out of corruption into purity, out of guilt into secure standing in righteousness, and out of alienation into a glad fellowship with all that is highest and best on earth and in heaven.

There are other views of man,—other views concerning his origin, character, condition, and destiny. There are other schemes than those which are conceived and operated on the basis of the gospel for meeting the needs of man and advancing him in knowledge and self-respect and happiness. But from the standpoint of the teaching of Christ, the fact of man just as he is, with his vast powers and incalculable worth, lost in sin and helpless without God, is warp, and not woof.

There must be the possibility of the communication of the divine thought to the human mind. Unless God can speak to men and make them know that he is speaking to them; and unless men can rise up into moods in which they can hold intercourse with God and God can catch the articulation of their wants, it is only a fine bit of deception practiced on ourselves when we make our declaration about knowing God and coming into conformity to his will. On the supposition of a God with whom no communication can be held there could be no such thing as knowledge of God and conformity to his will; and it would be time worse than wasted to stop to discuss the question of revelation and inspiration. Without this possibility of communication between the soul and God we are utterly at sea in all our speculations and trusts and hopes; and to entertain the notion that we can ever hear his voice or penetrate his ear with our speech is to become the dupes of our own fancy. All confidence that we can come into the mind of God whether as Father or Son or Holy Spirit rests on the assumption that there can be intelligible and genuine interchange of thought between the divine and the human. This is presupposition. This is bedrock.

It was in this faith and on this assumption that Abraham and Moses and Isaiah and Paul all acted. Without this deep and abiding conviction, or rather without this fact to be source of this conviction, the world would have

had no Abraham and Moses and Isaiah and Paul. Hence, again, the possibility of communication between the soul and God, or receiving knowledge from God in any of the various forms in which he may make his way and will clear to men, is not a cross-thread, but an invariable and continuous strand. It is warp, and not woof.

The same is true of Christ. Christ the manifestation of God in the flesh; Christ the Son of God; Christ the Atoning Sacrifice; Christ the Light of the World and the Hope of Glory,—Christ in all these vital aspects and relations is fundamental and unchangeable. From first hint to latest record, and on to what promises to be the final consummation of all things in him and through him in God, there is this sameness in the Christ. From beginning to end and all through, he must be what he is for substance, and the same for substance, or the whole plan of redemption as it is brought to light in the Scriptures and unfolded in the movements of history, comes to naught.

There are systems of religion in which Christ has no place. There are systems of religion in which he has a place only as a teacher and example—an eminent and worthy martyr, and not as a Crucified Saviour. Men may be atheists, or agnostics, or materialists, or pantheists, or deists; or they may be adherents of those organizations in which Jesus in his twofold claim of Son of man and Son of God has only feeble recognition; but they cannot be Christians, in the sense of embracing the system of Christian truth as it lies spread out on the face of the New Testament, without accepting Christ in his real divine sonship and in his vicarious and atoning sacrifice on the Cross, as a vital and central and continuous factor of the whole. Christ as God manifest in the flesh; Christ as given of God, that, whosoever believeth in him might not perish, but have eternal life; Christ who loved us and gave himself for us; Christ as the way and the truth and the life, is

now and evermore what the Apostle saw him to be—not a woof-fact, but a warp-fact.

These specifications might be multiplied; but enough are here brought forward to show what is meant, and the importance of what is meant, when speaking of warp-truths. They are the underlying and essential truths of the Christian system. They are lengthwise truths. They run from end to end. Wherever the system appears in its integrity, whether as a theory or a working force, these truths and others of a kindred significance will be found present and filling their place. Not one of them can be given up without in effect giving up the whole. Not one of them can be displaced by any other truth or half-truth without overturning and really destroying the whole conception of the religion of which it is a vital part. God is fundamental. Man in his needs through sin and in his possibilities through redemption is fundamental. Communication between the divine and the human is fundamental. Christ crucified, a vicarious and atoning Saviour, is fundamental. There are other truths which fall into the same category, like the truths of the Holy Spirit and his work, the free agency of man, the kingdom of God, and rewards and punishments according to deserts.

But when we turn from truths to definitions, from truths to statements of truth, we are on a different plane, and have in hand an altogether different task. We are no longer dealing with warp, but with woof. We have passed from the sphere of what is necessary and unchangeable to the sphere of that which has afforded freest play for learning and logic and ingenuity and fancy, or for all of these in one. It is one thing to assert and acknowledge God; especially God as he is conceived in the relations of the Trinity; it is quite another thing to define God in a way wholly to satisfy the mind. It is one thing to accept the inspiration of the Scriptures and to recognize the illu-

minating presence and guiding hand of the Spirit in the pages of the Old and New Testaments; it is something so unlike this to tell exactly what it is, that no generally accepted theory of inspiration has ever yet been formed. This is to-day the most unsettled of all the unsettled questions in the realm of theological discussion. It is one thing to know and freely admit that man is lost—is out of the way, alienated from God, under sin and the defilement and bondage and condemnation of sin, and that he can help himself and be helped only through the divine method of salvation; but to state the case of man's lost condition in a manner to meet the approval even of those who are most forward to acknowledge the fact, or at any rate the approval of a large number of these, has been found to be out of the question. Too many modifications and limitations are required. It is one thing to believe that Christ is the Redeemer of lost souls, the way to the Father, and that no man cometh unto the Father but by him: it is a widely different and more difficult thing to put all the Hows and Whys and Wherefores of the proceeding into satisfactory terms.

Thus it is in the sphere of statement and definition that the chief trouble arises, and controversies come to their sharpest edge. It is not the great, main fact; but the philosophy of the fact. Or it is not the great, main fact; but the form and import of the words in which the fact shall be set forth to the world. It is not the thought, but the phrasing of the thought, which engenders heat and stirs up strife. Or to throw it into the form of our figure once more, it is not over the warp, but the woof, that the loudest noise is made, and the passions of controversialists are most inflamed.

The late Dr. Schaff published three ponderous volumes on "The Creeds of Christendom." It is an invaluable contribution to the literature of the Christian church.

But one has only to glance through these pages to see how the chief contention of scholars and parties in Councils and Convocations and Assemblies, with rare exceptions, like that, for instance, in the fierce struggle over the nature of Christ, and through which the true divinity of Christ was established as a fundamental doctrine of Christendom for all time, has been concerning not the truths to be accepted, but the phraseology in which they should be announced. The questions up have been as to what the Scriptures teach, and what ought to be believed by disciples of our Lord; but the disagreements and splits have come largely over phrases too hotly insisted on by partisans who could not be made to see eye to eye.

It does not follow from this that clear views of religious truths and accurate definitions are of no consequence—far from it. Clear views and accurate definitions are of consequence everywhere. The multiplication table is a clear statement of the simple relations of numbers; and both its attractiveness and its value lie in its absolute accuracy. Unless correctly apprehended, it is of no service. Scientists are all the time seeking facts; and when the facts are found they go a step further and seek to find words which will exactly cover and express the facts. Everybody commends them for so doing. There are laws of chemistry, and laws of astronomy, and laws of electricity. The more thoroughly these laws can be mastered, and the more correctly and lucidly stated, the better. There are moral laws, and the more severely precise the formularies in which these laws can be announced to men the more favorable will be their chance of recognition. There are statute laws, and deeds and wills, and instruments of purchase and sale, and contracts of various sorts; and it is a matter both of common knowledge and universal experience how much accuracy and clearness in all these enactments and forms contribute to the mutual good

understanding of individuals and to the peace and harmony of society. Truth never has all the advantage which belongs to truth, and is never in condition to exert its full influence on thought and life, save when it is truly stated. It is bad to know anything in half when it can be known in whole. It is bad to have a confused idea of anything when it is possible to have a well-articulated and connected idea. To ascertain facts, and sift them and adjust them until they stand for exactly what they are in themselves, and hold their true place in the world's system of life and order, is in the highest degree commendable. Why be content to grope in the dark, if it is possible to get out into the sunlight? Why rest satisfied with a thing done awkwardly or only half done, when it can be done neatly and completely? To belittle clear notions and clear statements of notions, if such statements can be made, is to scout common sense and do vast mischief. Councils and Convocations have wrangled over forms of doctrines; and churches have divided and subdivided until we have sect upon sect even inside the same general fellowship; nevertheless some things are clearer to the common thought than they would have been without these efforts to define truth more accurately. Whatever may have been the losses in the struggle, this is certainly a gain.

It is sometimes claimed that the statements and definitions to be found in our creeds, especially in our more elaborate creeds, are so colored by the eccentricities of the periods in which they were evolved, and so biased by hot, partisan prejudices, that no confidence can be placed in them, as full and well-rounded utterances of the great truths of the Word of God.

This is true in part; but only in part. It is here as it is in other spheres of thought and activity. Progress everywhere has been secured by fierce conflicts, and all the great land-marks of the ages are battle-scarred.

Through the contentions of philosophers, light, not otherwise likely to have dawned, has broken in on questions of philosophy. It is by sharp assault and defense—chiefly among themselves—that the advocates of Evolution have scored such advances as they have made.

Not only the attainment, but the apprehension, of civil rights, has been the outcome of struggle upon struggle. *Magna Charta*, like the purer air which follows a deluging cloud-burst, was the child of storms; but its assertions of rights and privileges abide still in force, and are accepted by all liberty-loving people. Since the troubled days of William and Mary it has been one of the high and acknowledged prerogatives of the English Parliament to determine the succession to the throne; but no such conclusion would have been reached had it not been for the hand-to-hand and long-continued contest which the people were forced to wage against the blind wilfulness and grinding oppression of the Stuarts. Our American Independence is not the less precious and glorious—not the less a priceless inheritance—because it came to us through the smoke of battle and at the cost of patriot blood. The statements and definitions to be found in the Constitution under which we live, lose none of their measureless value from having been hammered out on the anvil of diverse opinions.

In some respects statements and definitions are likely to be better when wrought into shape in the white heat of jealous and contending factions. Men then are in dead earnest, and watchful, and sure to go to the bottom of things if they can. It took the great Arian Controversy to advance the Christ into his true place in his own church, and fitly magnify him to the world. It took the fermentation and fierce outbreak of the great Reformation suitably to reëmphasize the doctrine of salvation through faith in the Son of God, and to restore even a section of the com-

munion of believers to its right position, and to organize and set Protestantism on the way to the mighty conquests over opinions and movements which it has been able to achieve in these modern centuries.

It is to be admitted—admitted because it is a fact, and allows no denial—that statements of truth are sometimes issued and insisted on in a temper not altogether ingenuous and with ends in view which are open to grave suspicions. Men often deny the truth out and out. The merit of this position is that we know where the men are. There is no concealment and no deception. Men also—particularly men of an original cast of mind—state the truth in their own language because nobody else has ever done so in a fashion to win their assent. This is a universal right and must be recognized. Then again men in delicate positions, or in positions where their good standing with their associates or supporters, or their comfort and emoluments are at stake, make statements which are purposely equivocal. Their statements mean one thing to themselves and another thing to other people.

As is well known, the Presbyterian Church of England, which was brought to the front and made the Established Church, so far as possible, in the stormy times of Cromwell, drifted so far away that, while it was still Presbyterian in form and name, it was Unitarian in doctrine and spirit. But it is not so well known as it ought to be, that this movement went on in the face of protests, by some who were helping it forward, that they were still sound in the faith. The great historic and famous institution of learning which was founded in America at Cambridge, and which has made the name of Harvard forever memorable, was taken out of the fellowship of the descendants of the Pilgrims and Puritans whose gifts and toils and prayers had laid its corner-stone and reared its resplendent walls, and turned over to the direction of another body, while

representative members of board and faculty were trying to make all interested parties believe that the new formularies of doctrine, and the new turn and accent given to the presentations of truth, meant substantially what the old meant. These are marked and painful instances of departure from a conception of Christ which is central and fundamental to the Christian system under the guise of putting the old faith in a new light.

It would be possible to add to these instances; but two such conspicuous ones are enough. The utmost stretch of charity does not require that intelligent people shall permit themselves to be duped and hoodwinked. Neither statements of doctrine nor subscriptions to doctrine are always sincere. There are men with an ethical sense so keen that they can do nothing by indirection or in an underhanded way: they are always out in the open. There are other men whose motives will hardly bear the light, and whose movements it is always well to watch.

But, for all this, the wide distinction between truth and the statement or definition of truth exists, and is never to be dropped out of mind.

It is not the same thing for a man to say that he rejects God as it is for him to say that he rejects what this one or that one has to affirm of God,—his mode of being, his attributes, his nature and character, his method of coming into disclosure to rational beings, and his purposes. The two things are different. The fact of human sinfulness is evident to many minds and is freely confessed, as is also the fact that if a man is ever helped out of sin it must be by the divine hand; while the terms commonly used to define sin, and set forth its origin and nature and extent and consequences, may not be wholly satisfactory to them. Such cases are not uncommon. A man may hold tenaciously to the real inspiration of the Scriptures, and be as sure as he is of his own existence that somehow, in some

very positive way, God was behind the record of events and the revelations of truth which we find in the Bible, and yet not be satisfied with any explanation of the fact,—any theory of the manner and kind and degree of the influence exerted to bring about the fact,—which he can formulate in his own mind or that others can formulate for him. The two ideas or propositions again are entirely unlike. In deepest sincerity a man may trust his all to Christ for salvation, and look for salvation through no other way than the way of the Cross of Calvary, and at the same time and in the same sincerity be forced to confess his inability to accept any of the ordinary views of the atonement which are held and taught. The fact is one thing and the philosophy of the fact is another thing, and the two are by no means identical.

So it is with reference to all the fundamental truths of religion. The truths themselves, the truths in the substance of them, are to be held with all the tenacity of the law of gravitation; but the forms in which the truths are held, afford wide margin for charity and toleration, and men are to bear and forbear with each other in their statements and definitions. The one is the trunk; the other is the summer foliage of the tree.

This is a matter of grave, practical moment. We are living in a period when there is a great deal of smoke and fog in the atmosphere of the religious world. Searching questions are flying back and forth. Scholars on fire with enthusiasm are pushing their fresh investigations along all the lines of the past of the church of God. They are looking with keen eyes into the origin and composition of the Old Testament and the New, into the nature and extent of prophecy, into the successive stages in the development of the divine plan in history, into the relation of the Apostles to Christ and the authority of their writings, into the Gospels and what they do really say and mean, into

the way man has come into existence and his place and destiny in the universe, and into the whole conception and scope and outlook of the Kingdom of God. In view of the aim and results of these investigations, we have extreme radicals and extreme conservatives, with more or less of mutual crimination and bitterness.

So, as already suggested, the need is very great to distinguish very sharply between what is vital and essential and what lies on the surface and is only of incidental consequence. There are dissents and departures which go to the heart of things, and work wide and permanent mischief. These justify serious alarm and firm resistance. There are dissents and defections which have their ground in unsatisfactory presentations of truth. These, no matter how far the divergence may seem to go, call for the exercise of largest patience.

The questions to be determined, therefore, in each instance in which we may be called upon to sit in judgment on a man's attitude towards theology, or the moral condition of men, or the Scriptures, or last things, is whether it is the truth which has been surrendered, or merely some statement of truth against which protest has been uttered.

When a man who has believed in the personality and fatherhood of God gives up his belief, and falls back into a cold materialism, or a vague pantheism, or even agnosticism in most of its types, his defection involves everything, and dries up the fountains of spirituality. But when a man still holds to all that is essential in God, and looks to him for help, and clings to his great and precious promises, and maintains his fellowship with him, though on mature reflection he feels constrained to abandon some views of God which the majority of devout people hold, his change of front is in no wise vital, and people are not to rush into newspapers, and mount platforms, and exploit

pulpits with the charge that he is an atheist, and perhaps something worse.

When a man openly denies the sinfulness of the human soul, and maintains that what people who are evangelical in their faith and views call sin, and mourn over because it is a grievous offense to God, is after all only a mistake—a natural and easily excusable shortcoming, a blunder fallen into in the process of development, it is evident he is striking at a fact which is central, and one on which the whole scheme of redemption through the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ is pivoted. The Son of God was here to seek and to save that which was lost; and had men not been lost in sin, Christ would not have been here in the form and for the purpose set forth in the New Testament. If for substance, however, men accept this view of human nature as alienated from God and under condemnation, and yet do not care to employ language which seems to set this fact forth in hues unnecessarily dark, or language which does not seem to be altogether true, like that old and unfortunate phrase—"total depravity"—they are not to be denounced, nor mistrusted, nor to have their liberty of opinion abridged.

The same formula will cover the proper attitude to be assumed with regard to the Scriptures. Just now, as may be said again, there is endless confusion and discord in the mind of the religious public over the subject of inspiration. The question is how far, in the new light which Higher Criticism is alleged to have thrown upon the authorship of the various books of the Bible and the method in which they were constructed, it is possible to hold to the old-time and conventional opinions of the Spirit's agency in directing the movements of the minds of individuals in the productions of the Sacred Writings. Some appear to think that if a later date than the previously accepted one be given to Genesis, or a dual authorship ascribed to Isaiah,

or if Job be considered in the aspect of a drama, everything trustworthy and sacred about the books must be surrendered, and the whole remanded to the category of mere history and literature. But this does not follow. Unquestionably Job is a drama. What the ultimate conclusions may be with reference to the composition and time of the composition of the historical books of the Old Testament, or the structure and import of the prophets, major and minor, is not so clear now as it will be a number of years hence. Whatever the conclusion, however, the present discussion has to do with forms and methods, and not with the substance of things. If a man still finds the divine presence and feels the divine quickening in the Pentateuch; if he is still touched in his religious emotions and stirred through and through in his religious purposes by the book of Isaiah; if the Psalms are still wings on which his soul rises to the gates of heaven, why be over-anxious about the minor considerations of dates and scribes? God is behind the Book still, and he is in the Book still; and it bears testimony to him.

In certain forms and ways of apprehending Christ men differ. They differ, and differ widely, in their notions of the ground of the efficacy of his salvation. If a person who has once taken Christ to be his Saviour, and has held him forth to men as the sole foundation on which to build the hope of a blessed future, turns from him, and no longer trusts him, nor tries to persuade others to trust him, for redemption, but drops him down in the scale of being, and classes him with Confucius and Buddha and Socrates and Mohammed, and other eminent instructors and leaders, it is clear that he has no further right to be called a Christian. He has repudiated Christ in his most distinctive characteristic and function; and it is neither uncharitable nor intolerant to put him into the class in which he belongs. If, on the other hand, a person believes in Christ

with all his soul, and loves him with an enthusiastic devotion, and is seeking to serve him to the uttermost by winning unbelievers into belief and building up disciples in knowledge and holy character, and gaining every possible point he can for the kingdom, even though he may have fallen into doubt whether his old ideas of the nature of the atonement are quite correct, or quite adequate to the solution of the problem, he is yet within safe limits, and is justified in asking, not so much for the toleration of his attitude as for the recognition of his perfect right under the law of Christian liberty to take and hold this attitude. It is not through any theory of Christ, no matter how correct, but through faith in Christ himself, that we are saved. Men may avail themselves of the North Star to navigate the sea without much knowledge of astronomy. When they do, they must be accorded rank with sailors. Men who have faith in Christ, and who illustrate the spirit of Christ, and who, deriving their life from him, bring forth fruits which are to the glory of God and the good of men, must be allowed wide margin in the sphere of opinions and theories.

Having made this circuit of thought, we come around to our starting-point. In our apprehension of the truth, and in our judgment of our fellow-believers in the views they hold, we are to distinguish sharply between the vital and the incidental, the essential and the non-essential. There are warp strands which run through the entire web; and these are not to be changed or tampered with. But there are woof threads, and these may be varied according to circumstances. For it is, as Lowell has represented in words which he makes Cromwell say to Hampden:

“ Truth is eternal, but her effluence
With endless change is fitted to the hour.”