

ARTICLE VI.

CRITIQUE OF PROFESSOR AMBROSE W. VERNON'S PAPER, "THE MESSAGE OF THE MODERN MINISTER."¹

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THE paper aforesaid deserves careful consideration. It was written by a Professor in Yale University, read before the great representative assemblage of the Congregational Churches of the United States, and is given place in the public record of its proceedings. It is thus put in prominent position before the minds of thoughtful Congregational Christians. I have read the paper many times. I have a decided conviction adverse to its main drift. I find it the product of misunderstanding, misconstruction, and consequent misrepresentation. There is in Professor Vernon's paper an expression of enthusiasm for the spirit of a certain man named Jesus. But *what* Jesus? Whose Jesus?

Not the Jesus of the whole New Testament; not the Jesus of the Four Gospels, for all reference to the Gospel according to John is ostentatiously omitted, and attention expressly confined to the Synoptics; not even the Jesus of the Gospel of Mark, for the Professor says that in a certain case "Mark has not reported Jesus correctly," and then he adds, "But if he be manifestly incorrectly reported once, no one can say how often." The author of the paper says Matthew has not "preserved the connection of the words of Jesus." Who said he

¹This paper was read before the National Congregational Council, Cleveland, Ohio, October 11, 1907.

did? But the Professor adds, "Luke's occasional attempts are not always to be trusted." When John is gone and the Synoptics discredited, again I ask, What Jesus? Whose Jesus am I to take a message from to mankind?

The answer of Professor Vernon's paper is, Such Jesus as Professor Vernon and his brethren in criticism will allow me out of the profundity of their several subjectivisms. But who are these critical brethren? They appear to be an asteroidal belt of divers and diverse rocks, floating along in space, having nothing in common except a general drift toward the position that there have been, through the ages, revisions of the Scriptures — in some cases amounting to re-compilations. This in a general way can be granted; as we have seen something of it in our own revisions. As to any particular rearrangements or modifications of text, let each instance alleged make its own case. Inferences in each case are another matter still. I would rather trust to the correctness of the definition of Jesus that comes to me from the whole New Testament than to what is left to me after such an unorganized board of critics, at their pleasure, have made therefrom their rejections. Here I want to suggest that when a minister discards the Gospel of John as unhistoric, he ought to do his conscience the honor not to repeat at the head of a funeral procession, "I am the resurrection and the life." He ought to spare himself the sin of mockery.

At the outset I make the plain statement that nothing has been brought to light on the horizon of history for the last fifty years that makes against the commonly accepted standing in history of the books of the New Testament. We have had no new documents discrediting those books or the facts set forth in them. The New Testament stands before us just as it stood before men for eighteen centuries. The only cloud upon the

historicity of the four Gospels springs from subjective considerations in the minds of self-constituted critics. Certain men have concluded that they will not accept certain statements and certain kinds of facts in the New Testament set forth, and then they presume to eliminate such statements and such facts and their implications from its history.

It is easy enough to turn anybody out of court, if, to borrow phraseology from James Martineau, you "non-suit by pre-supposition" — refuse to hear testimony. It is easier to rule out evidence than it is to fit it in system. Professor Vernon seems to stand in the same relation to religion that Rob Roy occupied to society —

"Of old things all are over old,
Of good things none are good enough,
We'll show that we can help to frame
A world of other stuff."

But Rob Roy did not do it. A wholesome civilization outlaws all attempts in the direction of his action and philosophy. Marauding — foray — will not be found to be more tolerable in religion than in society.

Now there is nothing new about this method. It has been practised all along through the centuries. Professor Vernon *et id omne genus* have their fathers as well as the church its fathers. Their line begins with Celsus, taking in Arius and Socinus by the way, and coming down to Voltaire and Hume, and then to a time within the memory of men still living is represented by Strauss, Bauer, Comte, Renan. In this country the most distinguished representatives of the line are Thomas Paine and Robert Ingersoll. Something of the bitterness of satire may be wanting in the modern representatives of this skeptical line, but the underlying assumptions are the same. It would be grossly wrong to put in this line such New England Unitarians as Channing, Sears, and A. P. Peabody.

If there is anything that the piety and scholarship of the Christian church has tried to do during the last century, it is to confute the ideas propagated along this line of fathers in skepticism. And the work has been successfully done. The department of Evidences of Christianity is one of the most massive, comprehensive, and satisfactory monuments of human learning. I am surprised that appeals have not been made more prominently to it in the discussions with New Theology and New Thought — so called. The radical issues involved in the controversy now going on respecting the historic standing of the books of the New Testament, and of the facts in them set forth, have been luminously treated in works on Christian evidences for the last hundred years. I would like to ask if this department is still in existence in our theological seminaries and colleges? I fear it is not or that proper attention is not paid to it. If the evidences are properly taught and comprehended I cannot conceive how such a paper as that of Professor Vernon should be presented to a representative Congregational National Assembly.

I think a course in Lightfoot, Ezra Abbot, and George P. Fisher would make the result shown in Professor Vernon's paper impossible to the mind of any Christian scholar. Not that every special conclusion of such authors is to be accepted, but there is strength and wisdom in their general judgments. The dark age, in the knowledge by the church of its history, begins when the curtain falls on the book of the Revelation. All ignorance is perilous, and this ignorance is bearing its fruit in "Apples of Sodom"—the skepticism developed by the subjective methods of the New Theology. Again, I fear the evidences of Christianity are neglected along the whole church front. How many ministers treat thereof from the pulpit or even in the lecture-room? We do a great deal of biblical study

and exposition ; but when we reach the end of the New Testament we are before an unfathomable and impassable chasm for two to three hundred years. On this uncharted sea — this no man's land — in this unilluminated night the subjective visionary critics can work their will. Here they can put their "faery tales" in all the mouths of these centuries, and no one says them, Nay.

Now this ignorance is not necessary, and the neglect by ministers of the teaching function here is inexcusable. The topics of the day have their value, but they ought not to crowd out of notice topics relating to Christian authors and actors of the first and second centuries, who had a distinguished part in handing along to subsequent centuries the gospel of Christ. A man by knowledge of and wisdom in handling the letter of Irenæus to Florinus in its historic connection, or that of Pliny to Trajan respecting the Christians of Bithynia, might make it fairly impossible for his young people to become victims to the historic skepticism taught by the subjective critics of this day.

But we are oracularly told that the influence of science has destroyed the possibility of belief in the element called miraculous in the New Testament. But Professor Huxley says it is only a question of evidence whether there have been or may be miracles. And Simon Greenleaf, who is an expert judge of human testimony, says there is sufficient testimony to establish the miracles of the New Testament as verified facts. It is worth our while to ask here whether this regard professed for science is not volunteered for a purpose. Whether it is not a make-believe — a Chinese paper fort behind which to retire for self-protection. The fact that Science is skeptical, or agnostic, or at variance with the church in its attitude to the New Testament, can be flatly denied. I cannot stop to file proof in the matter. I make the plain assertion, and leave it

to the knowledge especially of clergymen as to where the truth lies. Let any minister take the range of his acquaintance among men of rank in science, and tabulate the number of those who reject from the New Testament the miracles of or pertaining to Christ, and he will find that number, as compared with the total, negligible. The surrender of the New Testament miracle is an unmasked give-away on the part of those who thus capitulate. There is no enemy in front demanding the lowering of the flag. There may be a mischief-maker here and there — perhaps a half humorist — who lets fly an arrow to see what confusion he can make. It is weakness and stupidity to surrender to such guerrillas.

But it may be well, before we go further in the discussion, to define what we are talking about when we use the word "miracle." That is a word that came to us out of the Vulgate, and as used there we cannot object to it. *Miraculum* meant "a wonderful event." I doubt if a skeptic wants to deny that there have been and are wonderful events in nature, in history, and in experience — things done once and once only. Evolution proceeds by increments or leaps of newness — what was not, becomes. But words unlade their meaning and take in new cargoes in the course of use. What the word "miracle" now carries in its hold it is hard to say. We are under no obligation to take a signification which Professor Willett of the Chicago University seems to have had in mind the other day when he treated a miracle as "a violation of a law or laws of nature." We need not be frightened even at such a definition, for man's whole demonstration on the face of nature seems to be in violation of what her laws would be without him; and God's method of action seems to be playing off one set of forces against another, and so rendering nugatory the action of the latter. But we can do better if we dismiss the

word altogether — charged as it may be with many misconceptions. If we are dealing with New Testament matters, why is it not best to speak and think in its terms? The things which have been regarded as miracles in the New Testament are therein called “wonders,” “powers,” “signs.”

Nicodemus seems to have been a hard-headed, clear-thoughted, practical man, and he said, looking at the demonstration of Jesus, “No one can do these *signs* that thou doest, except *God* be with him”; that is, a *theistic* element is involved in them. Do we want to assert no wonders in nature, no signs and potencies theistic? Then why reluct at their exhibition in history as recorded in the New Testament? Perhaps Nicodemus was right — perhaps there were about Jesus signs and potencies theistic. It is simply a question of fact in his case as elsewhere. The very persons who cast out the theistic elements from the life of Jesus are voluble in exhortations to see God in nature — “See God in clouds or hear him in the wind.” If that exhortation has any truth in it, does it not suggest that a much plainer and higher exhibition of God might be made on and in the human plane? Then it becomes simply a question of fact as to where, when, and how it has been done. When the matter is looked at in this light, there starts up an antecedent probability of mighty force that something like what is in the New Testament recorded might be expected. We might expect that there would be “longings, yearnings,” “searchings,” “groanings that could not be uttered,” for the sight of such an exhibition in the comprehensible terms of a human life, and we might account for the satisfaction the New Testament portrayal of theistic signs and dynamism has given the souls of men through the centuries.

I hope I appreciate to the full the signs of theism revealed in nature. But it must be remembered that nature in its com-

plexity is confusing — that it conceals rather than reveals God. The poet Young said, —

“An undevout astronomer is mad.”

But how many astronomers are there? How many have there been through the ages? If the world were to wait for theistic conviction from astronomical study, it would wait —

“Till the sun grows cold,
And the stars grow old,
And the leaves of the judgment book unfold.”

Meantime what of the plodding earth-bound myriads of millions? $H_2O + SiO_2$ = more than three-fourths of the earth. To me, $H_2O + SiO_2$ = a guaranty of theism. But it has taken a lifetime of thought in chemistry to bring out that theistic conviction. I should expect men in the large to come to conviction of the presence and potency of God in the resurrection of Lazarus sooner than they would from a chemical formula.

It is evident enough, on the face of the New Testament, that the “sign” theistic had value in the minds of the people of that day. If the face of the New Testament is good for anything as history, it is also evident that Jesus was not sparing in the use of the sign. True he held it subsidiary to spiritual and moral intents and purposes. Wonders were used by him not for the sake of wonders, but they were wonders still. I think it an ill attitude to decry the sign theistic in the life of Jesus or underestimate its value for that and for all time. It is expressly said that, at the resurrection of Lazarus, many, who “beheld that which he did, believed on him.” The act carried theistic conviction with it, out of which came a moral result. The processes of thought of the Jews who believed were correct in reason and experience. Mastery in one department is likely to be accompanied by the potency of mastery in another.

The theistic signs in the department of nature, in the New

Testament set forth, have ever compelled attention to moral truth — not that the truth rests for its moral force on the sign, but the sign compels attention to the truth. What kept such moral order, as was observed in the middle ages, was a conviction embodied in a clause of the Apostles' Creed, "From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead." That derived its force from the clauses immediately preceding — "Was crucified, dead and buried. The third day he rose from the dead, He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father." "*From thence* he shall come to judge the quick and the dead." The thought of the judgment was the moral police of the middle ages. That police power would have been non-existent, had it not rested back upon the conviction of the resurrection of Christ from the dead. We are not out of a condition yet where we do not need belief in a judgment of "the quick and the dead" by one who is proved, by the resurrection from the dead, to sit at the sources of all dynamism — physical as well as spiritual.

The judgment by Christ will pass out of thought when belief in his resurrection is gone. We are not yet out of the range of the usefulness, for moral ends, of the signs and powers theistic exhibited by Christ. I confess that nothing in the Bible has influenced me more than the story of "the barren fig-tree" — miracle and moral combined. It has said to me, Fruit or rejection — no evasion.

This brings us to a very apparent limitation in the scheme of the gospel set out by Professor Vernon and his school of thinkers, and that is its

UNRELATEDNESS.

The scheme seems to be practically to drop by the way everything but the proclamation of the love of God. Accord-

ing to that scheme the genius of Jesus Christ was in his unexampled mastery of that idea, and in its mastery over him. Now the love of God may be the zenith principle in the Christian gospel, but it is not an unrelated, unconditioned truth. We live in a universe of matter and force, and the question comes, What is the setting of this principle — the love of God — in the universe? How is it deployed therein? What are the signs and potencies undoubtedly theistic there?

We have a very complex relation to the system of nature. We are physical as well as spiritual beings, and we want to understand this compound and complex relation. Necessity is laid upon us to try to get adjustment for body and soul in this great realm. We are set hard and fast in this physical system: what is the relation of the moral government we find to the physical? Is the same management over both? Is it true, as Dr. Watts has said, —

“ His very word of grace is strong
As that which built the skies;
The voice that rolls the stars along
Speaks all the promises ”?

Is that true? When Christ comes on the stage and proclaims the love of God over saints and sinners, what does he know about it? From what plane does he speak? from the plane of the management? or is he only a subaltern, like the rest of us under the government, only perhaps more enthusiastic? We plain people, working in our solemn struggle for existence, are apt to be shy of enthusiasts. When Jesus speaks “ the promises,” does he also speak out from the voice that “ rolls the stars along ”? We are in both realms and we want a voice out of both realms, and we are right in that desire too.

Here comes in the value of the “ sign ” theistic in the demonstration Christ made. We want it as much as it has ever been

wanted in human history — need it as much as it was needed in the middle ages, or as much as it was needed in Judea when Christ began to preach his gospel. Are there two governments — one over the moral world, and the other over the physical? If not, what is the relation between them? Are they in communication? Can a wireless be flung from the headland of one department over to a headland of the other? It certainly does not take away from the credibility of the voice that proclaims the love of God to men to know that it said to the winds and the waves, “Peace, be still,” and calm came.

What has no standing in history will not influence men. James Martineau says, “Religion, in ceasing to be historical, loses its best hope of becoming social.” A New Testament that retains only what each man allows for himself will soon come to have no power with himself. A Christ shorn of all signs of physical potency is likely to be sent by scientists to take care of his own morals for himself, while they attend to their own personal concerns. In fact, *this* phenomenon is not unknown — for a scientist to throw away the connection of Christ with the physical realm, and then attack his moral soundness. Witness the case of F. W. Newman. You will placate nobody by giving up the sign theistic in the domain of physics. A whole-minded science, in earnestness of soul, will ask for a sign in its own domain, and will not be put off with the reply that there can be no answer except in the moral realm. A man is larger even than the inspiration for righteousness, or the aspiration to proclaim the willingness of God to forgive sin. There is such a thing as an objective realm, over which God presides, as well as one subjective, and religion must find theistic action in both, and harmony between them. Can science fail to see a satisfactory sign of unity moving through the total management, in the demonstration of Christ?

You cannot get a following for Christ when you have taken the theistic element from him. No man wants to be tied up in the retinue of a man. If Jesus was a man both good and great, yet we can look beyond him even to the source whence he derived his goodness and greatness. The times are not infrequent when we want our communication with God ourselves. In the darkness we want to

“Touch God’s right hand in that darkness.”

We do not want the hand of man. Even if the man is the clearest and most impassioned ethical dialectician among the sons of men, he is an impertinence. We can do better with the Holy Ghost than with him. If we find the theism we want in Christ, it is because we find his identification of himself with the Holy Ghost true in experience.

I call attention to the fact that in Dr. Vernon’s elaboration of his topic, “The Message of the Modern Minister,” there is not an allusion to the hope of immortality as a basic principle in Christ’s religion. I think it is becoming a fashion, with the school of thought to which Dr. Vernon belongs, to satirize that doctrine as though it were an unworthy intrusion into morals. While it cannot be said that the moral quality of an act primarily or theoretically depends on the duration of its consequences, practically duration of consequences will have effect upon the decision whether to do the act or not.

A man cannot be held sane who would not take such matter into consideration. We are creatures of time, and time elements wisely may make us pause in our determinations. However enthusiastic a “modern minister” may be in matters of mere mundane time and interest, if his message never includes immortality and eternity it will have a hollow sound to hearers — will have the tone of threne, requiem, moaning of the wind.

It will be vain to conjure with the word service, unless it hold in view limitlessness of consequences.

"The sooner it's over, the sooner to sleep,
And good-by to the bar and its moaning."

But here is a condition — the race of man has been and always will be confronted with the order to cease activity in this physical system. The question comes to every soul, Does death end all?

Now Christianity has always had an answer to that in the vacant tomb behind Jerusalem and in influences that have come upon the world therefrom. Paul put the answer in this way, "If Christ hath not been raised, your faith is vain: ye are yet in your sins. Then they also that have fallen asleep in Christ have perished." The love of God in the forgiveness of sins and the hope of immortality are all grouped by Paul around the theistic sign of that open and vacant tomb. Given that theistic sign, and the rest will follow. The love of God! — *how long* will men proclaim it, unless they are infused with the *hope of immortality*! Look at fathers and mothers, with their children in their arms, burned from square mile after square mile where they had their homes! The love of God! — Where is it? Look at cities toppling to ruins and burying in their debris their inhabitants! — The love of God! — Where is it? You will cease to proclaim the love of God to men unless you have the conviction that such experiences of suffering are but brief moments of introduction to an infinite existence beyond. When you attempt to deal with such experiences you will find that "the bed is shorter than that a man can stretch himself on it, and the covering narrower than that he can wrap himself in it," unless you can find within you, and make good confession of, the hope of immortality.

Or take a quieter experience, and one that is so common in family life, —

“There is no flock, however watched and tended,
But one dead lamb is there.
There is no fireside, howsoe'er defended,
But has one vacant chair.”

On a Sabbath evening recently a Chicago business man, clear of thought and pure of heart, called on me and said: “I have spent hours to-day in the cemetery, by the grave of my boy. Tell me, do you think it true — what we have always been taught — that Christ arose from the dead? If that is true, I can believe that my boy lives and I shall see him again.”

While I was writing the above sentence, there fell on the table before me the words, “Annie gone!” A life in the midst of its fruition and forcefulness terminated! A relative, with amazement stricken, said, “It makes the ground rock under the feet.”

The whole race of man stands in front of such kind of experience and exigency. We have to deal with “The God of things as they are.” “The town grows.” So does the cemetery.

“Never morning wore to evening
But some heart did break.”

And the “Message of a Modern Minister” cannot have in it, “I am the Resurrection and the Life.” There is no more of the sign theistic about Jesus, the Christ, than *we* need in *our* day for *our* trials and *our* problems.