

*SCRIPTURE AND THE THEORY OF DEVELOPMENT.*

“THE Bible, and the Bible only, is the religion of Protestants.” If this aphorism of Chillingworth’s is true, it may be doubted whether a true Protestant ever existed. In other words, it is very doubtful whether there ever was a Christian who had drawn his theology absolutely and wholly from the Scriptures, without any aid from tradition, or from the *Zeitgeist*, or from the pulpit, or from any of those Idols of the Den or of the Market or of the Theatre which so powerfully influence even minds which fancy themselves altogether independent.

The question which I propose to myself to discuss in this paper is, The Relation of the Bible, on the one hand, to Theology and the Creeds; on the other, to the Theory of Development. It is a question which, like most other questions of like kind, has of late years increased both in importance and in complexity. Half a century ago the answer would have been very short: “Scripture is the only ground of faith; Theology is the deductive science which formulates the teaching of Scripture; the Creeds are the summary expression of the results of theology.” But then half a century ago little was known of the history and growth of the Canon; little was thought of the fact that there were organized Churches, and therefore presumably a rudimentary theology, before the existence of the New Testament Scriptures; and the history of doctrines was unknown as a science. Nor is there even now any general appreciation of the great though silent

revolution which this science involves. Partly from timidity, partly from indifference, most persons wish to regard all theological questions as long ago settled; and they dislike the idea that in the nineteenth century there can still be room for inquiry, for induction, for reconsideration, or for growth. But still, the very fact that a history of doctrine is possible, shews that theology is not a stationary science; that confessions of faith cannot be regarded as final; and that, whatever we may think of the way in which he applied it, Dr. Newman's principle in his *Essay on Development* is one which cannot be overthrown.

The fact just mentioned, that the Church, and even probably some simple form of creed, existed before the completion of the Canon, is a very pregnant one. For if a Christian theology existed when the books of the New Covenant were in process of writing, it is clear that this modifies considerably our conception of the writers' object and point of view. Had they been writing, as is commonly assumed, to impart the facts and doctrines of Christianity to persons hitherto ignorant of them, we might expect their writings to contain a complete and even systematic theology; but writing as they did for Churches or individuals already initiated into the Christian Covenant, we should rather expect that they would write in an unsystematic way, and with reference rather to the special circumstances and shortcomings of those to whom they wrote, than to any ideal body of doctrine which they were to impart. They would assume a certain acquaintance with Christian truth, and would occupy themselves more with what might seem defective, than with *a priori* theories of doctrinal proportion and completeness. In other words, they would

recognize Christian tradition as an element running parallel with the Christian Scriptures. And this is in truth the only hypothesis consistent with the admitted facts of the case. For the sacred writings of the New Covenant do not present us with any approach to a systematic handbook of religious belief and practice. They appeal to the knowledge already in possession of the readers; their professed object is that Christians may know the certainty of those things wherein they had been instructed; they exhort the people to keep in memory what had been already preached to them; they bid them to hold the traditions (*παραδόσεις*) which they had been taught, whether by word or letter; everywhere they presuppose a knowledge such as a Christian preacher of the present day reasonably assumes his hearers to possess; and if ever they have to go back to first principles, and to lay again the foundations, they do so in an apologetic tone, reminding people that whereas for the time that they had believed they ought to be teachers, they need still to be learners.

It is hardly too much to say that this view of the New Testament Scriptures, obvious as it seems to us, has been in abeyance ever since the Reformation. The very name of Tradition had been so discredited by the use which had been made of it by the unreformed Church, the authority of the Church had been stretched to cover so many and such glaring corruptions, that an unanimous instinct led men to seek for some fixed, stable, unvarying basis of authority for Christian doctrine, which basis they rightly found in the supremacy of Scripture. For in Scripture they found, not indeed a systematic digest of Christian faith, but an authorita-

tive utterance of the first preachers of Christianity, and a record of the teaching of the Master Himself. And so, finding in Scripture sufficiently clear indications of what Christianity was in its origin and first principles, it was easy for them to say, looking at the mediæval Church, This at least is not the Christianity of the New Testament Scriptures. But from thus appealing to Scripture as a sufficient witness against the rank growth of corruptions and perversions which had smothered the Church, it was a short step to acknowledging it as a complete, comprehensive, scientifically exact handbook of dogmatic theology. Thus the Westminster Confession lays down that "It pleased the Lord, at sundry times and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to declare his will unto his Church; and afterwards . . . *to commit the same wholly unto writing.*" Again: "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture; unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men." A complete rule of faith and life, which should give, not merely wide general principles, to be developed and applied by the enlightened intellect and conscience, but full and ample details to guide them infallibly in every difficult question and every doubtful case—this was the ideal which men strove hard to find in Scripture. A high ideal, doubtless; yet not the highest. For slowly and gradually it became apparent that a revelation of God once for all, stereotyped in an infallible book, fitted in no better with the facts of the world's progress than did

a progressive revelation of Him through an infallible Church. New phases of society, new forms of thought, new discoveries of science, new religious and intellectual needs, stretched the old bottles well nigh to bursting. And so it is coming now to be acknowledged that when the pen of the latest Apostle or Evangelist ceased to trace the characters of the last word of the Canon, God did not then at once and for ever cease to reveal Himself; that He, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in times past to the fathers, speaks also to us still; that history—political, ecclesiastical, social, mental, theological—is a continuous revelation of God and his ways; and that, taken in its true sense, the “Development of Christian Doctrine” is not an afterthought, to cover corruptions and innovations, but a patent fact, nay, a proof of the vitality and universality of the Christian faith.

It may perhaps tend to make the matter clearer if we take one or two instances of what is meant. Let us take, first, the ordinance of Christian baptism. That baptism is of Divine appointment and of perpetual obligation is admitted by all Christians except the Society of Friends. But here the agreement ceases. Who are the right subjects of baptism—infants or adults? what is the right method of administration—by immersion or by affusion? what are the essentials of baptism—whether simply water and the words of institution, or whether it must also be administered by a lawful minister?—these and other questions at once arise. Had Scripture been written as we should have written it, all such questions would have been settled speedily and finally by an appeal to Scriptural authority. There we should have found ample, minute, unmistakable

directions which would have secured uniformity of practice on a point so important. The appeal to Scripture has indeed been made for centuries. The analogy of the initiatory rite under the Old Covenant, the probability of infants having formed part of the family of the Philippian jailer, the command of the Lord to suffer little children to come to Him—these and other proofs, equally convincing to all who were ready to be convinced, have been urged as conclusive in favour of infant baptism. Yet a large body of Christians still appeal to Scripture in support of their belief that baptism should be offered to none but actual and conscious believers, and that vicarious vows, made by parents or godfathers and godmothers, are an unwarrantable corruption of human invention. What conclusion can we draw from this but that the age and mode of admission to the Christian Covenant are to be regulated, not by more or less probable inferences from a few texts of Scripture, but by a "Development of Christian Doctrine," by the inspiration of the Divine Spirit penetrating the Church, guiding the religious instincts of men, leading them gradually, and sometimes through devious ways, into all the truth? Or take again such a question as that of prayers for the departed. Nineteen Protestants out of twenty will settle such a question summarily by some such argument as this: "What is the use of praying for the dead? Their state for ever is settled at the very moment of death; and if it were not, can we suppose that our prayers would make any difference in the Divine judgment? There is no command in Scripture to pray for the dead, therefore it is unwarranted." On the other hand, it is certain that in the earliest post-apostolic

days of which we have any record it was, to use the words of Bingham (xv. 3, § 16), "the general practice of the Church to pray for all without exception." The Reformers indeed, in view of the gross corruptions and abuses connected with the practice, felt themselves obliged to cut out all such prayers from the public worship of the Church; yet in the Church of England at least the practice is nowhere forbidden, and so orthodox a Protestant as Dr. Johnson both practised and recommended it. The Scriptural argument in its favour, which is confined to the probability that Onesiphorus was dead at the time when St. Paul wrote of him, "The Lord grant that he may obtain mercy of the Lord in that day" (*cf.* 2 Tim. i. 16 with Verse 18), is hardly worth insisting on, and the question therefore resolves itself into a matter of religious sentiment. If it is pressed home as a question of hard logic, "How are the dead likely to be benefited by your prayers?" we must admit that no serious case can be made out for it; but if there is a Christian instinct stronger than logic which says, "My wife's or my child's name has never been omitted from my prayers in the morning and in the evening and at noonday, for twenty, thirty, fifty years, and must I drop it now because we are

divided by the stream,  
The narrow stream of death?"

—if the heart refuses to be silenced for want of "Scripture proof," and demands to pray, in the words of St. Ambrose, "Give perfect rest to thy servant, even the rest which thou hast prepared for thy saints;" or if the parent, with his heart bleeding for a loved child taken from him, when he prays, "Bless, Lord, the children whom Thou hast given me," refuses to exclude

the one whom he believes to be with his Lord in Paradise ; then many a devout soul will believe that what God has not revealed in his Word He has whispered to the heart of the mourner, and that to pray for "the whole family in heaven and earth" is but a carrying out of our belief in the communion of saints. Or yet again, take the now much-debated subject of everlasting punishments. It is hardly too much to say that, till less than a century ago, the whole Church had accepted this doctrine on the strength of two or three passages of the New Testament which, on a superficial view, seem strongly to declare it. In the present day there is a widespread and spreading revolt against this doctrine. It has been shewn by eminent scholars and divines that the word usually translated eternal or everlasting (*αἰώνιος*) really denotes, not unceasing time, but a sphere above time, and that the unquenchable fire and undying worm signify God's unceasing wrath against sin, not the unceasing punishment of the sinner. It is quite true that in this case men have read into Scripture their own fierce theology ; but has the revolt against the doctrine sprung primarily from an investigation of Scripture texts ? No ; rather the spirit of the New Testament has worked into and leavened the religious thought of the age, until men have said, "This cannot be the meaning of these texts : let us consider them again in the light of modern thought." And so they have found in the New Testament, not indeed any absolute assurance of the final salvation of all men, still less any comfortable scheme of universal remission of punishment, but a lively hope that, somehow and somewhere, the love of God will be too strong for sin, and the cross of Christ will at last draw all men

unto Him, and God be all in all. Here again then we have a "Development of Christian Doctrine," a drawing out, partly from the Christian consciousness, partly from Scripture, of a doctrine which men of old "could not receive," and which is being taught to us in these later days by the light of God's Holy Spirit.

It is then a question which urgently demands, not indeed an immediate settlement, but a calm and temperate and thoughtful discussion, What is the precise relation in which Scripture stands to the light and the truth which we believe God is bringing forth, and has yet to bring forth, for his people? The old theory, carried to its extreme form in the Westminster Confession and the Larger and Shorter Catechism, in which for each statement of theological definition a verse or two of Scripture, shorn from its context, was quoted as a direct testimony from God—a theory which made the letter everything and the spirit nothing, which banished all consideration of Old or New Covenant, of Gospels or Epistles, of poetical or argumentative books, of context and occasion of writing—is evidently a thing of the past. Scripture can no longer be used like the definitions and axioms of Euclid, as a collection of scientific data for deductive reasoning: it has come to be recognized as a sacred literature, a record of revelations made *πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως*, *i. e.*, in many portions and in many manners, passing through various media, to be interpreted with reference to the circumstances and degrees of knowledge of the writers. In fact, the Reformation, when it established Scripture as the sole and all-sufficient rule of faith, although it was in one sense a protest of the spirit against the letter, did yet in another sense rivet for a time upon the

Church the chains of the letter. When decisions of popes and decrees of councils and opinions of doctors were set aside for the unchanging authority of Scripture, a great step was taken in the direction of liberty; but for the time the principle of growth, of doctrinal development, of widening revelation, was laid aside, and the Reformers, weary of false developments, fell back upon a doctrine of finality which rendered even true and legitimate developments impossible. May it not be that amid the clouds of darkness which seem for a time to overshadow us, a new day is dawning upon the Church, in which, the letter having done its work, the spirit of truth shall lead us onward, if not yet into all the truth, at least into a higher truth than we have as yet attained?

The bearing of these thoughts upon the proper subject of this publication—the Exegesis of Holy Scripture—is not difficult to discern. The work of *THE EXPOSITOR* will be not so much to hammer out texts into doctrines as to bring all lights to bear upon the mind and meaning of the writer. To take an instance not unfamiliar to the readers of these pages. In the exposition of the Book of Job, Pope Gregory the Great expended vast ingenuity, great labour, and great eloquence, but he did not even approach to a consideration of the question, What does the book mean? Out of this text he got this doctrine, in that text he found that type or sacrament; in the seven sons of Job he found the clergy (seven being the number of perfection); in the three daughters the faithful laity; and in his friends—not quite unreasonably—he recognizes the heretics. Nor has this tendency to find in texts what we bring to them, not what the writer

meant to put in them, become wholly extinct in more recent days. The heading of Chapter xix. 25-27, "Job believeth the resurrection," is an instance of the way in which Protestants, severing passages from their context, have discovered direct statements of New Testament doctrines in poetical or figurative writings of the Old Covenant. On the other hand, since the principle has been recognized that the sacred books have a definite and ascertainable meaning, few books have been so fruitfully treated, few have yielded such abundant matter of edification, as this same Book of Job. On the former principle, it presents us with a theological kaleidoscope; on the latter, with the discussion of a great moral and religious problem. Or take again the prophetic books. As long as the value of the prophecies was held to consist in the mechanical fitting-in of some passage in the Prophets with an event in the New Testament, it mattered little what were the prophet's surroundings, who he was, whether he prophesied in Judæa or at Babylon; but as soon as we learn to seek in prophecy not primarily a miraculous foretelling of the future, but a revelation of God's moral law, then the prophets stand out in their several individuality, and speak to us not with the "hideous hum" of mysterious oracles, but with the human voice of inspired preachers of righteousness, who know

*Τά τ' ἔόντα τά τ' ἐσσόμενα πρό τ' ἔόντα,*

not by a mere supernatural power of soothsaying, but by a moral insight given them by the Father of lights.

It is often said that because Christianity is perfect there can be no growth or progress in it. Rather because it is perfect, it implies growth. Dr. Newman

says, quite truly, "In such an idea as Christianity, developments cannot but be, and these surely divine, because it is divine." <sup>1</sup> The point on which we are at issue with him is that, whereas he says these developments are found "in the historic seats of apostolical teaching and in the authoritative home of immemorial tradition," we should look for them in the less definite, but no less real, form of those great movements of Christian thought of which it is impossible to tell whence they come and whither they go, but which leave their traces upon the tradition of Christian doctrine for all after time. And from this would seem to follow the important result, that all dogmatic definitions and confessions of faith are to be regarded as provisional, as denoting and recording whereto men have already attained, rather than as fixing for ever the form of Christian belief. Doubtless those who drew up the Confession of Augsburg, or the Thirty-nine Articles, or the Westminster Confession, were fully persuaded that they had finally and for all time defined the Christian faith: yet how large a portion of each of these venerable documents now lies wholly outside the sphere of modern theology! The history of doctrines, a branch of ecclesiastical history which we owe to Germany, is in itself a protest against dogmatic finality. Doctrines, like institutions, forms of government, ritual observances, can be traced in their origin, their development, sometimes in their decline and decay. The controversies of the last generation are meaningless to the present. The theological standpoint of the nineteenth century, whatever theologians may say, is not that of the Reformers, nor of the Schoolmen, nor of the Fathers. Is it that of the Apostles?

<sup>1</sup> Chap. iii. sect. 2, § 11.

To this last question we answer Yes—and No. Yes, for the apostles had for their only standpoint and foundation, Jesus Christ; No, for God has for eighteen centuries been teaching the hearts of his people, by sending to them the light of his Holy Spirit, and we cannot believe that teaching to have been wholly barren and unfruitful. Yes, for the apostles desired to know nothing save Jesus Christ and Him crucified; No, for even the chief of the apostles confessed that at one time he had known Christ *κατὰ σάρκα*, after a carnal imperfect sort, and that as yet he saw *δι' ἐσόπτρου ἐν ἀνύγματι*, by means of a mirror, in a dark similitude. Yes, for we cannot go beyond St. John's teaching, God is love; No, for wider knowledge of man and of the material universe has widened in a thousand directions our conception of the diffusiveness of his love. The same sun that shone on the apostles shines on us, but it lights up a far more extended view.

Theology, like other sciences, is progressive. It is ever developing new truths, or new aspects of old truths. The scribe instructed unto the kingdom of heaven must bring forth out of his treasure things new and old. The expositor of the sacred text, if he would touch men's hearts, must find in Scripture not hewn stone for building up dogmatic systems, but a teeming principle of life, which can quicken new systems of thought, and aid in the solution of new social problems. He must avoid the opposite dangers of clinging to the old because it is old, and snatching at the new because it is new. Scripture, if we read it rightly, is the most comprehensive of all books, for it reaches from the remotest antiquity to the most distant future, and in both it reveals to us the same God, de-

veloping and moulding all things into conformity with his perfect design. Far from excluding developments, it presupposes them ; for it speaks of treasures of wisdom and knowledge still laid up in Christ ; it tells us of a Comforter who shall take of the things of Christ and shew them to us ; and it distinctly speaks of revelation as progressive. "As many as are perfect, all we who have maintained our manhood in Christ, let us have this mind ; let us forget the past, and press ever forward ; and then, if only you hold this fundamental principle, if progress is indeed your rule, though you are at fault on any subject, God will reveal this also to you." False developments no doubt there may be, and have been, as well as true ; but we may believe that in the long run Dr. Newman's favourite principle will hold good (*Securus judicat orbis terrarum*), and the universal voice of Christian humanity will be found the surest interpreter of the Christian Scriptures. Meanwhile for us, whose lot God has cast in an age of transition and unsettlement, the true motto is Patience. If for a time Moses tarries on the Mount, let us not be in too great a hurry to make a golden calf, so as to settle our difficulties provisionally.

The clouded hill attend thou still,  
And him that went within ;  
He yet shall bring some worthy thing  
For waiting souls to see ;  
Some sacred word that he hath heard  
Their light and life shall be ;  
Some lofty part, than which the heart  
Adopt no nobler can,  
Thou shalt receive, thou shalt believe,  
And then shalt do, O man !

R. E. BARTLETT.