

by day, as to make us feel with the surest conviction that they could have walked to the scaffold or the stake.

This is not a thing to promise for ourselves, but no man shall stop me of this boasting on behalf of men and women I have known. We may not be able on our own part to realize God's grace as so powerful in us that we could meet, here and now, the martyr's death. But one thing we can seek to do. We can let Christ's life rise in us as a life of humble obedience to the will of God. We can say in the sorest trial, "I would not have it otherwise when it is He who puts the cup into my hand; I would not choose to live if He has seen the time fit for me to die." And, even if we cannot yet advance to this, we can let our life be a following of God's will day by day; we can learn what it is daily to die to sin and self, being made conformable unto the death of Christ. And then, when the crisis comes, we shall be ready for it. The martyr's spirit descends on him when the fire is kindled, and the Christian's willingness to depart comes when his Master calls. There is the same grace for both, and the same triumph. "Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

JOHN KER.

*THE AIM, IMPORTANCE, DIFFICULTIES, AND
BEST METHOD OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY.*

SECOND PAPER.

WE have already seen that the aim of Systematic Theology is to discover, and to arrange in order, whatever can be known about God and about the mutual relations of God and man. And we have seen that this is the noblest aim ever proposed for human research.

The grandeur of this aim prepares us to find it surrounded by difficulties proportionately great, to find our pursuit of it beset by special hindrances. These difficulties and hindrances are so serious, that we must at once consider them, before going on to discuss the best method of research.

It is at once evident that the sublimity of the object-matter of Theology is itself a difficulty, inasmuch as the finite can at best only imperfectly comprehend the Infinite. But we are very apt to forget that imperfect knowledge is closely akin to error; and is almost inseparable from it. We are, therefore, ever in danger of falling into actual error touching the profound object-matter of theology. This danger we must always keep in mind. Not a few earnest Christians, who are ready to receive additional knowledge, provided it be in harmony with what they already believe, are very reluctant to accept correction. But, unless we are eager to be corrected, even in our most cherished beliefs, the error which clings to imperfect knowledge will seriously hinder our progress in knowledge of eternal truth.

Again, as in all branches of human research, but in immeasurably greater degree, we can comprehend theological truth only so far as we have an inward fitness for it; in other words, only so far as our hearts approve and appropriate the mind and thought of God. In Christian phrase, we can know the Father and the Son only so far as we are ourselves like Christ, and only so far as the Spirit of Christ reveals Him to us. Consequently, our attainments in Systematic Theology are limited by our moral and spiritual stature.

Other more specific difficulties beset our path. No foe to the attainment of truth is more to be feared than mental bias. Yet, to the study of theology, not one of us comes with unbiassed mind. Certain doctrines have, for each of us, vested interests which cannot be ignored, and which mould to a great degree our religious thought. For

the Gospel of Christ touches every department of human life, and therefore our conception of it is influenced by every kind of human motive. These disturbing influences demand now our careful attention.

Around us on every side theology has assumed visible form in various Churches and schools of thought, each holding its own opinions about things Divine. Heavenly truth is reflected from earthly mirrors. And the variety of the reflections betrays the imperfection of the mirrors.

With one or more of these Churches or schools of thought, every student of theology stands in special and very close relation. Through one or more of these mirrors, which while reflecting eternal truth, yet in some measure distort it, each of us obtained his first conception of Christianity, and gained his earliest view of the face of Jesus Christ. We learnt the Gospel, not from the writings of the Apostles, but from the lips of living teachers. And, for this early vision of Christ and this early teaching, the only form of teaching of which we were then capable, we have never ceased to be grateful, For it exerted on our early thought and life an influence, and wrought in us spiritual results, so salutary that they prove it to be, in the main, eternal truth. We are therefore justly bound, by ties most sacred, to the mirror in which we have seen the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ.

Now we find that the type of teaching which, to some of us, has been the saving power of God, differs from, and in some details contradicts, other types of teaching which to others have been of equal benefit. The difference proves that with saving, and therefore Divine, truth error has been associated. And our reverence for the truth which has saved us, is very apt to embrace also this associated error. There is danger lest, while as we think defending the Gospel of our salvation, we be fighting for an incrustation of base matter which hides and defaces the Gospel. To this cause

must be attributed very much of the earnestness of theological contention.

Other influences less honourable than the above tend to warp our judgment. Not only did we receive our early religious impressions from the living Christianity around us, but we are now members, and not a few of us pastors, of Christian Churches. And with these Churches and their various organizations are indissolubly linked a multitude of interests, spiritual, social and material. A radical change of opinion would bring to us consequences most serious. On the other hand, strenuous loyalty to the opinions of one's Church has often been a passport to popularity and power. Consequently, we are predisposed to see and to over-estimate every argument in favour of these opinions, and to overlook or under-rate everything against them. Amid all these conflicting influences the wonder is, not that there are differences and that these are firmly held, but that the differences between Christians are comparatively so few and small.

We are also exposed to other influences of an altogether different kind, influences more dangerous than the above, because more likely to pass unobserved. If it is easy to accept without due investigation the judgment of a powerful majority, it is equally easy to accept without any investigation whatever, the judgment of what is reputed to be an intellectual minority. To share their views, seems to imply that we belong to their number, that we are raised above the vulgar ignorance of the common crowd. And this temptation is the greater, because we may hope that the mass of those around are unable to detect the shallowness of our knowledge of the matter in question. There is a hollow heterodoxy as worthless as, and more disgusting than, the most hollow orthodoxy. Certainly, opinions which during centuries have moulded human thought, and have secured the approval of multitudes of good men, have

better *primâ facie* claims upon us than opinions, even of the most learned, which have not yet survived a generation. Against the subtle seductiveness of dissent from opinions commonly held, we have need to be ever on our guard.

Yet one more class of influences, infinitely more noble than this last, but still dangerous, demands notice. Whenever, after careful research, a man has formed an independent opinion, and especially when he has boldly expressed it regardless of consequences, or at personal cost, he has in that opinion a sort of vested interest. For upon the truth of it he has ventured much. If his judgment be mistaken, his toilsome investigation, his boldness and his self-sacrifice are, or seem to be, wasted. If it be correct and important, all these are amply rewarded. He is therefore in great danger of over-estimating the importance of the whole matter, and over-rating the evidence which supports his own view. From this very subtle kind of prejudice have arisen not a few strange vagaries held tenaciously by learned and good men.

The above influences tending to warp theological opinion are the greater because very many of the facts of theology are found, or are verified, in our own inner life, where subjective considerations are omnipotent. To a large extent our investigations take place in that inner sanctuary where no eye watches us and where light from without comes only so far as we permit it. So dim sometimes is the light there that even the greatest flaws of argument escape detection.

The variety of theological opinion will now no longer surprise us. And a measure of excuse, even for dissensions we are compelled to deplore, is found in the greatness of the interests involved. The felt importance of theological truth has often aroused eager advocacy. Many have strenuously defended the teaching of their own Church because it has been to them the word of life. Theological prejudice may

claim some indulgence because of its frequent good associations. And even theological partisanship has often done good by bringing to light evidence which otherwise might have lain unobserved. All theological debate should be prefaced by an earnest attempt to discover all the truth held by our opponents. And theological discussion may well evoke gratitude that, amid innumerable difficulties about secondary points, there is among the followers of Christ, and especially among the most earnest of them, so wide an agreement on the matters which all acknowledge to be most important.

The dangers noted above, I shall keep in view throughout these papers; and the method of research which I shall advocate is one calculated to reduce them to a minimum. This will appear as I proceed. But before going further I may now mention two general safeguards against these disturbing influences.

One valuable safeguard is consciousness of our danger, and recognition of the points, *e.g.* those noted above, where it is greatest. Our liability to look with undue favour on our own opinions should prompt a very careful scrutiny of the evidence for doctrines peculiar to our own Church or school of thought, or for any doctrine which we feel ourselves called upon specially to advocate. Such scrutiny does not imply, and will not necessarily create, doubt. It will reveal, if our opinions be true, additional and more conclusive evidence for them; and thus evoke firmer confidence in them. It may show us that in some details we have misunderstood or misrepresented the doctrines we love; and thus remove errors in detail which have hindered others from receiving them. Or, on the other hand, our research may save us from serious error which has vitiated our entire thought.

We shall also do well to examine very carefully all religious opinions held during long ages by large bodies of

Christian men, but not held by ourselves, and all opinions of men of acknowledged scholarship and ability. We may do this the more readily because wide-spread beliefs contain almost always a valuable element of truth, underlying, it may be, a mass of superstition. For error is seldom influential or permanent unless associated with truth. We may thus discover a field of knowledge hitherto unsuspected by us.

A safeguard against deflection of view, in matters theological, by material interests, is a deep consciousness of the infinite value of Gospel truth, even in its details. To see, in the Gospel mirror, the face of Christ as He is, is our highest gain and joy. Now all theological error dims or distorts that beatific vision. It is a spot on the mirror, hiding from us some line of the sacred features of the Son of God; and is, therefore, to him who admits it, a loss incalculable. The truth of the Gospel claims, and is able to reward, absolute devotion. For it multitudes have sacrificed all earthly good; and have been repaid a thousandfold even on earth. And the same truth is able to repay now any loss sustained in our search for it. Recognising this, and therefore like men seeking for pearls of infinite value, we should come to the study of theology eager to learn the truth at any cost, and even to surrender our most cherished convictions in exchange for a more correct, and fuller conception of the Gospel.

We will now, keeping in view the aim and the worth of Systematic Theology, as set forth in my First Paper, and the difficulties surrounding it, go on to consider the best method of theological research.

Our method must accord with the correct principles of human certainty and with the constitution of the human mind; that is to say, it must be such as will create in us an assurance, touching the matters in question, which will be

strengthened by each further examination of the foundation on which it rests.

It is the purpose of these papers to set forth, not the results of theological research, but its best method. At the same time, since each further step in our research is determined by results already gained, it will be impossible to expound the method fully without assuming some earlier results attained by it. These results must, however, be looked upon merely as illustrations of the method, not as an essential part of it. Those who reject the results as incorrect may yet approve, and as it seems to me cannot fail to approve, the general method of research here adopted.

Our search for the unseen, we must begin by gathering together indisputable facts¹ bearing upon it: of these facts we must seek the immediate causes, by comparing them with others in which we can trace the sequence which we call cause and effect; and these immediate causes we must endeavour to trace step by step to their First Cause. Whatever results we thus attain will be a solid foundation for our belief.

Theology is an attempt to extend human knowledge beyond the bounds of the universe visible to the eye of man. It is a search for a world beyond and above that in which we live; a search which when successful reveals the hand of God guiding the seeker even in his earliest steps.

The first phenomenon which meets us in this search is the essential and unique distinction between right and wrong, We find it written indelibly on the language and literature of every nation, Christian and non-Christian, ancient and modern, and in the social and civil life around us. We find it also in the constitution of our nature, graven upon

¹ The word *fact* I am compelled, by the poverty of our language, to use in the sense of something having real existence, whether it have come into existence or have existed for ever.

our inmost consciousness. It colours and moulds our entire thought about men and actions. Those who reject not only Christianity but belief in a personal God, are eager to say that they hold firmly the great principles of morality. Indeed, not otherwise could they gain a hearing from their fellows. For upon moral distinctions rests the whole fabric of human society. All these are indisputable facts, revealing, interwoven in human nature, the great distinction of right and wrong. This distinction, thus revealed, demands explanation. So remarkable an effect must have a sufficient cause.

Again, around us is the material world, living and lifeless, an organized and harmonious whole consisting of innumerable and most various elements and bearing everywhere marks of intelligent design. Moreover, the rocks beneath us proclaim, in words we cannot doubt, that the world was not always as it is now, that human life is recent compared with the age of the globe, and that even life itself, in its recognised forms, is later than the planet on which it is now found. The material world as it now is, and as the stony records under our feet compel us to believe that it once was, demands explanation. For so remarkable a result we must seek a sufficient cause.

It is an indisputable historical fact that these two phenomena, moral distinctions and the material universe, have been traced by the mass of mankind to one cause, viz. to an Eternal and Personal First Cause. All nations have traced the essential principles of right and wrong to Divine sanction, and have looked upon the world as the handiwork of God. This wide-spread belief is itself a mental fact worthy of study: for it reveals the effect upon the mind of man, in all ages and nations, of moral distinctions and of the material universe.

Other closely related phenomena also demand explanation. With the distinction of right and wrong has always

been associated the idea of reward and punishment. Men have ever believed that right or wrong doing will inevitably be followed by good or bad results, that actions come back to the actor in appropriate consequences. How deeply inwoven into the mind of man is this idea, we read in unmistakable characters in the literature of the ancient world.

Yet, strange to say, these consequences, which we instinctively feel to be inevitable, do not always follow in the present life. Again and again men have lost all apparently, and have lost their lives, by doing right; while others have saved their lives and gained wealth by doing wrong. For such persons, posthumous honour or dishonour are a poor recompense: and even these are not always awarded. This imperfection of recompense in the present life is another phenomenon which demands explanation; and which has in all ages engaged the most serious thought of man. An explanation of it given in all ages is that the present life is not the whole of man's moral course, that in a life beyond death there is a recompense absolutely exact. In other words, just as the astronomers Adams and Leverrier, by observing perturbations in the orbit of Uranus which could not be accounted for by any force known to operate within its immense orbit, surmised and then discovered a force outside it hitherto unknown, viz. the planet Neptune, so in all ages men have seen, in the imperfection of moral retribution on earth, proof of a life beyond the present life and a world above that we see around us.

Whether we accept or reject the explanations noted above, all must admit that the phenomena demand explanation. They who reject the explanations approved by the mass of mankind in all ages must propose a better. Thus these phenomena, like all others as yet unexplained, are windows through which we look out into the undiscovered realms beyond.

Other facts altogether different from the above, yet bearing most closely upon them, now demand attention. Christianity itself is an indisputable and all important fact, both in the world around us now and on the page of history. It has been and it is an immense factor of human life. The literature of past ages proclaims in words which no one can contradict or doubt that the Christian era was the turning point of our race, that in the first century there was exerted a moral force which changed the entire course of human thought and life. This mighty moral impulse calls for investigation. A result so pervasive and stupendous is evidence of a cause proportionately great. To discover and investigate this cause, is the task of the theologian.

We notice also that Christianity lends its authority to the explanations proposed before Christ came of the distinction of right and wrong, of the material universe, and of the imperfection of retribution in the present life. For it traces the material world and moral distinctions to a personal Creator and Ruler, and points forward to infinite rewards in a life beyond death.

Lastly, Christianity traces its own origin to one Person, whom it places on a solitary pedestal of honour infinitely above the entire human race, JESUS OF NAZARETH. We therefore eagerly inquire who He was, what He taught, and what He did. Since He was an historical Person, our research must accord with the principles of historical criticism. We must seek for witnesses who can give evidence about Him. We must examine their credentials and sift their testimony, in order to reach the facts of His life. In these facts we must seek for a cause sufficient to produce the Christianity we find on the page of history and everywhere around us; for the force which turned the tide of human life and raised, out of the moral and social ruin into which mankind was at the Christian era sinking, the solid

and rising fabric—rising I cannot doubt not only materially but morally and spiritually—of modern society.

Throughout this historical investigation we must keep in view, as matters still needing full and assured explanation, the distinction of right and wrong, the material universe, and the imperfection of moral recompense in the present life.

The best method of research in this further and historical stage of our inquiry, will be the subject of my next paper.

JOSEPH AGAR BEET.

THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS.

III.

THE PRAYER.

“For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray and to make request for you, that ye may be filled with the knowledge of His will, in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to walk worthily of the Lord unto all pleasing, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to the might of His glory, unto all patience and longsuffering with joy; giving thanks unto the Father.”—COL. i. 9-12 (Rev. Ver.).

WE have here to deal with one of Paul's prayers for his brethren. In some respects these are the very topmost pinnacle of his letters. Nowhere else does his spirit move so freely, in no other parts are the fervour of his piety and the beautiful simplicity and depth of his love more touchingly shown. The freedom and heartiness of our prayers for others are a very sharp test of both our piety to God and our love to men. Plenty of people can talk and vow who would find it hard to pray. Paul's intercessory prayers are at high-water mark of the Epistles in which they occur. He must have been a good man and a true friend of whom so much can be said.