

THE AMBIGUOUS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.

By the "ambiguous" I mean that which is essentially doubtful in meaning, so that it cannot be apprehended with any clearness or certainty as a matter of authoritative teaching. It is my object to point out that there is a very considerable element of ambiguity (in this sense) in the New Testament writings. It is a fact which, for reasons which lie upon the surface of Church history, has been disliked, avoided, and practically denied; but it is a fact which nevertheless exists.

It will be well to begin with an example of the simplest kind, which cannot arouse the suspicion or alarm of any, but yet serves to illustrate distinctly enough the assertion made above.

In 1 Corinthians vii. 20-24 St. Paul addresses himself particularly to the slaves who believed in Christ. His general principle is that earthly and temporal conditions are so comparatively unimportant, and have so little to do with our heavenly standing in Christ, that we may practically cease to trouble ourselves about them. We do well, he says, to dismiss the thought or desire of change, to accept our lot contentedly just as it has fallen for us, to find our solace, our ambition, our satisfaction in the heavenly calling. That is, of course, a thoroughly unpopular teaching nowadays; and, indeed, one may quite lawfully argue that it was never intended for times of unfettered political and social freedom like the present. But anyhow, it *was* the general principle commended to all conditions of Christian people by the Apostle, and particularly to slaves. They were not to vex themselves over the (to our minds) intolerable hardships and limitations of their lot; they were, as slaves, to "abide with God," and to find their freedom there. In verse 21 the Apostle touches

upon the possibility of a slave being offered his freedom, or being in a position to acquire it. Such cases must have frequently occurred—frequently enough to keep the hope of freedom alive in the breast of every slave. How was a Christian slave to act in such a case? The Apostle's answer is given in verse 21; but what that answer is no man will ever be able to say, because it is so strangely expressed that it may equally well be read in exactly opposite ways. In the text of the Revised Version the verse is translated, "Wast thou called being a bondservant? care not for it; but if thou canst become free, use it rather." This "use it rather" is, anyhow, an obscure and elliptical phrase: nevertheless the word "but" leaves it sufficiently clear that in this case the Apostle was making a certain concession to the demands of human nature; as though he said, "Do not trouble thyself because thou art a slave; but, of course, if thou hast a chance of becoming free, make the most of that chance." The good feeling and the good sense of every reader will go heartily along with the Apostle's counsel as thus understood. But we have no right to understand it thus. It is at least as likely that the translation given in the margin is the correct one: "Nay, even if thou canst become free, use it rather," i.e. "even if thy freedom be offered thee, stay rather in thy present condition"—a hard saying indeed, but quite in keeping with the whole tone and purport of the counsels given in this passage. If we look at the Greek, as St. Paul wrote it in the hurry of the moment, we see at once that it is hopeless to try and clear it up; it is (to speak quite frankly) so clumsily expressed that no reader now—and, in all probability, no reader then—could ever be sure what the writer meant. There is nothing petulant or irreverent in saying this, because it merely states the facts of the case. A reference to any painstaking and detailed commentary—such as Bishop Ellicott's, e.g.—will show that in point of

fact the precept always has been taken in diametrically opposite senses. If any commentator, after elaborate balancing of arguments and opinions, comes to one conclusion rather than another, it is only because he cannot afford to do otherwise. Were he quite frank and quite untrammelled, he would say, "What the Apostle really meant we have no means of deciding, and my own opinion on the matter (so far as I have one) is really valueless." For anything at all approaching to an authoritative rendering of this particular sentence, *the essential conditions do not exist, and never can.*

It is, then, as certain as anything in literature can be that, in this passage, St. Paul laid himself out to give advice to Christian slaves as to how they should act in a certain contingency; that this advice was, under the overruling providence of God, incorporated in the inspired Scriptures of the New Testament; that, all the same, the advice was so worded that none can ever know what it means.

From this fact—for fact it is, however unwelcome—certain conclusions have to be drawn, since nothing in Holy Scripture is without consequence or without bearing upon other Scriptures. It appears, then, (1) that the Holy Spirit permitted an inspired writer at times to express himself so badly (using the word, of course, in a purely literary sense) that it is impossible to know what he meant to say. This has an obvious bearing upon the true teaching concerning the inspiration of Scripture; it points to a limitation in one direction which ought never to have been ignored. It appears (2) that, from whatever cause, there are matters of real interest to Christian people as to which the teaching of the New Testament is *ambiguous*. Many a Christian slave must have found himself in the position referred to. Many a one must have earnestly desired to follow the apostolic counsel, however difficult, however unwelcome to the natural man. But there was

no guidance for him in the New Testament. Doubtless the Apostle's meaning was clear enough to himself, and because it was so, he vainly imagined that the sentence in which he sought to express it would be sufficiently clear to others. We often make the same mistake in writing. We have every reason to believe that what St. Paul wrote was always as ambiguous as it is now. It was always open to men equally well to read it in diametrically opposite senses. That is disappointing, perplexing; but it is the fact.

There is therefore an element of ambiguity in New Testament teaching which it would be sinful as well as foolish to refuse or to ignore, because the Divine Author of Scripture has scattered manifest proofs and undeniable instances of it up and down the pages of the New Testament. The only question is how far this element of ambiguity extends. Hitherto the tendency, the desire, has been to confine the ambiguous in the New Testament within the narrowest limits possible. It seemed so natural, so right to take for granted that the Christian revelation *must* have an answer—a direct and unhesitating answer—for every question which it behoved the devout believer to ask. One way or another, whatever seemed doubtful at first reading *must* be capable of decisive and authoritative explanation. We cannot sympathize too deeply with those who clung so fondly to this belief; we cannot treat the belief itself too tenderly. Nevertheless, if we take the New Testament as it is and read it frankly, read it in the light of Christian history and Christian faith, we are bound to find that the ambiguous plays a very large part indeed in its teaching.

Let us take, e.g., the answer (which every one naturally demands) to the question, "Are there few that be saved?" It is a question with which our Lord and His Apostles undoubtedly concern themselves, not directly, indeed, or (so to speak) arithmetically, but indirectly and by implication. When we read many of our Lord's sayings, when

we look to the essential elements of Christian character, of regenerate life as set forth in the New Testament, we inevitably say, "Few, indeed—alas! how few." And so it used to be generally understood throughout Christendom. If it is not so now, if the common answer be precisely the reverse, it is not because so many men have thrown aside the authority of the New Testament, it is because they have fastened their attention upon other passages and other lines of teaching therein. The ambiguity is indeed apparent, although in this case it arises, not from the uncertain meaning of a single passage, but from the fact that different passages tell in opposite directions. The effect, however, is just the same. Christian opinion on this subject is hopelessly baffled, and it is equally easy from the New Testament itself to maintain either of two judgments which are diametrically opposed. God has so willed it, and we must so accept it.

A most excellent specimen of the unexpectedly ambiguous may be found in St. Matthew xxv. 31-46. Nothing can seem at first sight more unambiguous than this portraiture of judgment to come. Commentators have, without exception (so far as I know), treated it as if it were perfectly plain and unmistakable. But they have themselves demonstrated how ambiguous it is, because they never can agree on the most crucial point of all—whether it refers to all men, to Christians only, or to heathens only. Every now and then we read an article by some devout and earnest writer who is quite sure that it concerns itself only with the heathen who have not known Christ and have not had the least notion that in showing kindness to the helpless and distressed they were ministering to the Son of God Himself. The arguments for this opinion need not be rehearsed; they are so obvious. But it will not be many weeks before we read another article on the other side, written with equal conviction and learning; and here,

too, the arguments are so obvious! How *can* we who are Christians give up that parable? How *can* we renounce the exhilaration, the inspiration of those words, "Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of these My brethren, ye did it unto *Me*"? There is, however, no getting rid of the hopeless conflict of opinion, because the reasons on either side are so strong; and because, even if one can persuade oneself that there really is a certain small balance of probability on one side or the other, such a persuasion carries with it little weight and small enthusiasm. May I not say that, in view of this one fact alone, the teaching of the parable ought not to be pressed in the way it has been? If I might, I would fain beseech every preacher and every commentator to consider frankly whether he has any right to treat this parable as a picture of the last judgment *when he cannot even say whether it applies to Christians or not!* For whatever opinion he may hold on this subject is simply his opinion, and is in fact quite valueless. No one will ever *know*, because the wording of the parable is thoroughly ambiguous. If any of my readers will grasp this one fact and what it implies, they may the more easily reconcile themselves to the "theological" difficulties of the parable—the difficulty, e.g., that it puts forward judgment by works alone without any place being found for faith, and by works of mercy alone without reference to any of the other Christian virtues. They may even come to a devout and blessed conviction that the parable was never intended to let us into any of the inscrutable secrets of the great day; that it is neither more nor less than our Lord's way of saying what St. Paul says in a totally different way in 1 Corinthians xiii. One is dramatic, the other rhetorical. In the one we listen to the Master, who uses that amazing boldness of speech and imagery which belongs to Him; in the other we listen to the disciple, who rises, indeed, above himself, but still remains far more conventional. But both

teach the same thing—the supremacy of love, if any one will please God—and neither teaches anything else. For whatever in the parable seems to portray the actual procedure of the great assize, and to be capable of theological explication in that direction, is hopelessly and intentionally ambiguous, neither has any man ever succeeded in doing anything with it. What our Lord designed to do therewith was (I doubt not) to *create an impression*, to awake a state of feeling, profound, permanent, effective; and this He has succeeded in doing, as only He (and He by His own chosen method) could succeed. He did not *mean* to tell us anything about the last judgment, save that love will somehow be the greatest thing there also; and He *has* not, in fact, told us anything else.

Herein the parable does indeed only conform to the general law of New Testament teaching about the judgment to come. It is a subject (one would have supposed) which, almost more than any other, concerns the child of man as an individual, as a seeker after God. When he shall appear before the judgment-seat of God, to give an account of himself, what will be the grounds upon which he will be acquitted or condemned? Surely the New Testament must tell us *that* at least, unequivocally, unambiguously! And indeed it seems to do so. It reiterates, many times over, that all men (ourselves included) will have to be judged according to their works—will have to receive, by way of a righteous recompense, the things done in the flesh, whether good or evil. This is affirmed blankly in almost all Christian confessions—nowhere more blankly than in the Athanasian Creed, which seems intended to enforce salvation by orthodox belief. No one will have the hardihood to assert that holy living and merciful dealing are co-extensive with orthodox belief; but “they that have done good shall go into life everlasting, and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.” Does not the New Testa-

ment say so plainly? Yes; but it is also impossible, according to the New Testament. Shall the penitent thief be judged according to his works? Shall the Magdalene receive the things done in the flesh?

Between the saddle and the ground
He mercy sought, and mercy found.

It was a vain and presumptuous epitaph, because no one could possibly know. But it expresses a commonplace of theology which the New Testament does not allow us to contradict. Where, then, are the works according to which such a man shall be judged? All the works he ever did were bad; and yet he himself shall be saved. He *would* have done good works if he had had time, and God, who searcheth the heart, will take account of that. Be it so; but that is not judgment by *works*, it is judgment by *character*—character, which includes faith and hope and love. There is a great deal to be said in favour of judgment by character. If our own tribunals were able to ascertain a man's character as it really and truly is, they would have to acquit or condemn him in many cases according to his character and not according to his works. If a man were convicted of theft, and yet it were shown that since then he had become an honest and upright man, the world would not tolerate his being punished: it would outrage its sense of justice—for the quondam thief who has become strictly honest is another man, and has cut himself off from his own past. Much more do we feel convinced that it is so with God. The truly converted man, even though he be converted in his last hour, being "in Christ" is a new creation: the evil past is blotted out, because it does not in fact stand in any vital connexion with his living self: he cannot possibly pass into the unseen only to be confronted with the crimes of his unregenerate days. In other words, God will judge him not according to his

old works, but according to the new character which the power of Christ has brought to life in him. We all believe that, because we accept the emphatic teaching of the New Testament about forgiveness and conversion; but then it is absolutely incompatible with judgment by works. The incompatibility is well illustrated by the vision of Revelation xx. 11-15. Here also it is asserted that the dead "were judged according to their works," and no exception or reservation is made. But alongside of the books in which the record of their works was written there appears "*another book, which is the book of life.*" This other book is *the Lamb's book of life*, in which He keeps the names of all that are really His. And these will all walk with Him in white, no matter what the record of their works may be, for He came to save sinners, and to receive them to His endless joy, even though their turning to Him in true repentance and faith be the last conscious act of their life on earth. Whereto then serve the books in which their works were written? No one can possibly say. So far as we are able to express our thoughts, judgment by character is what we really believe in and expect—understanding by "character" that inmost self, with its deepest springs of feeling and of will, which is capable of such complete and sometimes sudden transformation under the influence of the Divine Spirit; which does, in fact, determine in the long run the whole outward energy of a man's life and action, in whatever sphere. From whichever side, therefore, we approach the subject of the last judgment, we are driven to acknowledge that we know next to nothing about it. The New Testament seems on the face of it to tell us much. But as soon as ever we begin to examine its formulas—even such a simple and familiar one as judgment according to works—we perceive that they are thoroughly ambiguous, because in their literal and ordinary meaning they are absolutely incompatible with the most distinctive teachings of

the New Testament itself. We know that God *will* judge all men in righteousness, in love; we really know nothing more, and no amount of scrutiny will extract anything more from the inspired writings. It is comparatively easy to follow up a single line of teaching in these writings, and by isolating it to present it as something definite and decisive. But that is not really satisfactory. There are various lines of teaching in the New Testament concerning the judgment, and these various lines are not reconciled there, neither can they be reconciled by us.

From a very different portion of the same great field we may take an equally instructive example. What has the New Testament to teach us concerning the infants, the children, the young people, who die before they reach that age (in itself absolutely incapable of being fixed) at which they must be accounted responsible? Half the souls that pass into the unseen belong to this class. What has the Christian revelation to say to them, or of them? Strange as it may seem—strange as it really is—the Christian revelation does not seem to concern itself about them. It addresses itself to grown people, people who are capable of repentance, faith, discipleship, self-restraint and self-abnegation. It does indeed declare in a very touching way the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, towards little children. It asserts in so many words their close connexion with the kingdom of heaven. That is unspeakably consoling; it is infinitely valuable; it enables us to trust our children with an unhesitating confidence to the loving care of their heavenly Father. But beyond inspiring us with this happy confidence it tells us nothing at all. What becomes of all the children that die we have not the faintest notion; at least, not on any grounds of Holy Scripture. That they become (so to speak) baby-angels; that they remain for ever as immature immortals; that they are perfected through a discipline of unmixed joy and

love; all these are speculations which may be treated with kindly indulgence, but have no basis whatever in reason or revelation. Even the assumption which is (amongst ourselves) almost universal, that all young children, dying, are "saved," is entirely unsupported by Scripture. It is merely a deduction from what is taught us in the Gospels about the Fatherhood of God; just as the old belief, that half the children who died were eternally lost, was merely a deduction from what is taught us in the Epistles about the corruption of human nature and the inscrutability of God's predestination. It is not even consistent—this optimistic assurance concerning the eternal future of infants—with what we have tacitly agreed to believe (for the most part) concerning our own future. If we are to be judged according to *character*, it is certain that children come into the world with character—undeveloped, of course, but still character. The assumption that children's minds are all like blank tablets upon which experience, training, education, influence of others, are hereafter to trace the characters, is one of the most extraordinary blunders ever made. The imagination that what a child becomes is determined by its surroundings and advantages—or disadvantages—is absolutely false to the facts. One may get to know children who have grown up honest, pure, and gentle amidst thieves, harlots and ruffians. One has known, alas! not a few who, amidst the best surroundings, and under the gentlest management, have developed almost every evil passion at a very early age. The Psalmist only uses a pardonable exaggeration when he says of certain children that "as soon as they are born they go astray and speak lies." Much indeed in the formation of character depends (humanly speaking) upon surroundings and education; but even more upon predispositions to good or evil which the children bring with them into the world. But these predispositions are simply undeveloped character; and God,

who readeth the heart, may as much be expected to take account of undeveloped character in the infant as in the old man who is converted on his deathbed. Unless, indeed, we think of the righteous Judge as dealing arbitrarily with His children, we cannot conceive that these little ones, whose moral natures are really so diverse, should be received indiscriminately to the same blissful regions. Almost everything, therefore, which is popularly believed about the future destiny of such as die in childhood must be looked upon as entirely baseless. We know that God loves them; we know that Christ died for them; beyond that the teaching of Scripture is thoroughly ambiguous, because while it tells us nothing definite, it allows itself to be pressed on this side or on that to the most opposite conclusions.

A curious commentary on this ambiguity of the New Testament in the matter of children is the fact that the Church has never known for certain whether they ought to be baptized or not. In the absence of any directions, or even any allusions to the question, in the apostolic writings, Christian people were from the first thrown back upon inference and argument. Without attempting to enter upon the field of controversy, it may be said broadly that the Gospels have mostly influenced people in favour of infant baptism, the Epistles against it. The practice of the Church wavered during the whole of the primitive ages. It would seem probable that many children were baptized from the first; it is certain that after several centuries a large proportion were not; and in both cases the parents were (as far as we know) equally pious and had equally good reasons to urge. If the practice and the precept were finally settled in the one direction, this was done under the pressure of convictions which we have renounced as inconsistent with the general tenor of the Christian revelation. It is a question as to which people may really do

best to conform themselves to the practice which prevails around them. Otherwise it ought to be left frankly open, as it was in the primitive Church. For, when all is said and done, the New Testament teaching about it is entirely ambiguous, partly because it is so strangely meagre, partly because, so far as it speaks at all, it speaks in two opposite senses. I do not write thus to disparage the New Testament: God forbid. It is, no doubt, a part of its perfect adaptation to the highest purposes of religion that concerning so many matters, wherein we look eagerly for information and guidance, it is either quite silent, or else speaks so ambiguously that we are practically left to our own conclusions and our own devices. What we need to do first is honestly and frankly to recognize the limitations which it has pleased the Almighty to set upon His self-revelation in Scripture. When we have done this, we may go on to find out why these limitations are so wholesome and so necessary for us.

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SCIENTIFIC LIGHTS ON RELIGIOUS PROBLEMS.

X.

“SHOULD SCIENCE DIM THE HOPE OF IMMORTALITY?”

THE question I have put at the head of this study is typical of *all* these studies. I am not considering the absolute determination of *any* problem. My object has been to investigate whether the influx of the modern waters has effaced former evidences. I have now come to a department of natural religion which is supposed to have been specially damaged by the inroad of these waves; I allude to that tract of land which Man sees in *The Future*. The Immortality of the soul has been discussed for ages, and the fiercest stage of the battle has ever been in the heart of