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## ARTICLE V.

## DIVINE LIMITATION.

BY THE REV. JOHN MILTON WILLIAMS, A. M., CHICAGO, ILLINOIS.

WHILE we all recognize omnipotence, or infinite power, as one of the essential attributes of the divine nature, no one, probably, includes in the meaning of the word ability to do any and every thing that may be named or imagined. All sensible men admit that whatever involves absurdity, or self-contradiction, is not an object of power, comes not within the scope of this attribute; consequently non-ability to effect such results involves no limitation of power. We do not, therefore, disparage this divine perfection in saying, though the language may seem irreverent, that God cannot make the part greater than the whole, make a crooked line the shortest distance between two points, make the diameter of a sphere greater than the circumference, or add to the age of a living organism a century in an hour; for the reason that physical power has no tendency to accomplish such fanciful results, more than it has to understand a syllogism, or solve a problem in mathematics. It is, therefore, no contradiction of terms, and involves no derogation of infinite perfection, to say, the Infinite One is environed by myriads of limitations.

The fact that God is a moral being, subject, like ourselves, to the restraints of obligation, is a divine limitation. The moral law revealed in the human reason, and in the Sacred Scriptures, is an intuition of the infinite reason, and a part of the divine nature. It is coexistent with God, and is as uncreated and changeless as God, and imposes its obligation upon him, precisely as upon other

moral beings. God acts under immeasurable responsibility. His moral character is the golden chain which binds the moral universe to himself. "The Judge of all the earth will do right," and render himself worthy the highest acclaim angels ever utter. "Just and righteous are thy ways, thou King of saints." This is a *natural* as well as moral limitation, inasmuch as God cannot swerve from the line of perfect rectitude, without involving consequences we shudder to contemplate.

The objection that the divine will creates law, makes right, is *per se* the ultimate right, and therefore it is absurd to say, God can do wrong, not only antagonizes an intuitive truth, but environs him in still greater limitations, as it renders him incapable both of merit and moral action. Necessary action is not moral action. He who cannot do both right and wrong is not a responsible being.

It is also evident that God has limited himself by the *freedom* with which he has invested moral beings. The best definition of freedom is, "*power of contrary choice*," or ability, in any circumstances, under any pressure, human or divine, in which it is possible to choose at all, to choose in either of two directions. He who cannot do this, as choice in its very nature implies an alternative, cannot choose at all. His actions are merely mechanical, and he ceases to be a moral agent. It therefore follows that any being in possession of freedom can resist the Holy Ghost, and choose in opposition to the will of God; for any influence beyond that which he can resist, defeats its own end, and precludes both choice and moral action. Compelling a man to do right involves the double absurdity of compelling him to act uncompelled, and making him meritorious for what he cannot avoid. In the nature of things God cannot make a man sinful or holy. This awful prerogative is limited to the subject himself. Man only can determine his own character, for the sufficient reason that he cannot be praiseworthy or blameworthy for what another does.

God's natural ability, it must be admitted, is, in the very structure of mind, limited. Is his moral ability? Can he not, through the influence of truth, reclaim any fallen being, and accomplish in the moral world whatever he desires accomplished? Yearning over lost men, as no mother ever yearned over her children, he does not save all. Though he "willeth that all men should be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth," uncounted multitudes live and die unrepentant and unforgiven. That this results from obstacles, in the way of saving all, *absolutely insuperable*, the character of God, the obligations of the divine law, and the whole trend of revelation place beyond rational doubt.

There are two conceivable ways of accomplishing results; as, for example, building a house. One is by directly willing it into being, without the intervention of means. The other is through natural law and legitimate instrumentality. It is certainly admissible to inquire whether God, in the accomplishment of ends, is not limited to the latter, and whether here is not another divine limitation.

There were two conceivable modes of converting water into wine: one, by a simple volition, as one moves a limb; the other, through agencies adapted to secure the result. Did our Lord simply will the water to turn to wine, and did it obey his behest? Did he simply bid the billows on midnight Galilee be still, and did they obey his word? Or did he secure these results as we secure results, through the instrumentality of second causes? There has ever, to my mind, been grandeur in the thought that God speaks, and it is done; that at his word a new and completed solar system would take its place in the great field of space, obedient to the creator's word, as the cultured archangel. But is there not more poetry than truth in such sentiments?

Were we to remove a house, we should remove the obstacles, put rollers under it, and apply force. The ques-

tion is not, would God, were he to move it, employ the same means? but, would he not employ means similarly adapted to secure the results? not whether this is his ordinary mode, but whether the nature of things does not preclude any other.

So far as we can trace the divine hand, ends are reached through the intervention of means. Look which way we will, we are amazed and fascinated by the skill, contrivances, and wondrous adaptations which meet our eyes. All through the realm of nature, God seems as dependent upon means in effecting his ends, as men are in effecting theirs. The eye, the ear, the human form, are more skilfully and cunningly planned than any structure man ever builds. Such is the universal and undeviating reign of law through nature, that a class of scientists are disposed to deny the existence of any other force, and to vote God off the theatre, as an unnecessary factor. The skill and wisdom of God seem to have impressed the Psalmist quite as deeply as his power. "O Lord," he exclaimed, "how manifold are thy works; in *wisdom* hast thou made them all" (Ps. civ. 24). "The Lord by *wisdom* hath founded the earth; by understanding hath he established the heavens. By his knowledge the depths are broken up, and the clouds drop down the dew" (Prov. iii. 19). Wisdom, skill, contrivance, are great factors in the construction of things.

Is not this equally true in the moral world? Here undeviatingly, as in the natural, does not God secure his ends through the instrumentality of second causes? Were we intent upon reforming the drunkard, we should ply

habitations, makes the wrath of men praise him, and is lifting the world into millennial light ; and in accomplishing the work, how marvellously is he adjusting means to ends ! The abrogation of American slavery, for illustration, displayed wisdom unsurpassed in the realm of nature. Yet that great event was brought about so obviously through the intervention of natural causes and human agencies, that multitudes fail to see anything else. So it is with providences, overruling and overturning through the world and through the ages. So silently God is working, so in accord with natural law and the ordinary trend of things, as to conceal the presence of the worker. For this reason myriads of daily divine interpositions are unrecognized, and myriads of prayers are daily answered, for which no credit is given and no earthly record is made.

A rebellion, driven by uncontrolled passions, has broken out against the divine government ; and God has undertaken to limit and repress it, evidently not by mere volition, but by a stupendous and complicated system of agencies, including the incarnation of his Son, the atonement of sin, the revelation of his will, the church, the ministry, and a thousand instrumentalities ; but so silently is he working, so hidden behind this great network of means, that men fail to recognize anything but machinery in the field.

This, I am aware, does not prove that God cannot secure his ends otherwise ; but the fact that, so far as we can see, he never does, is pretty satisfactory evidence that the nature of things is such as to render it impossible.

This view is confirmed by the fact that God, as appears to us in executing his plans, always chooses the

their redemption cost. Could a mere volition draw all men to himself, he certainly would not stand with outstretched hands, all the day long, entreating men to accept pardon; nor should we hear such melting appeals as these: "How can I give thee up, Ephraim!" "Why will ye die, O house of Israel?" "O that they were wise!" "What more could have been done in my vineyard, that I have not done in it?" "How oft would I have gathered thy children together . . . but ye would not!" These are not the utterances of one who can, by his mere fiat, control human choices. Could we move or stop the railroad train by a mere command, we should dispense with the costly machinery now in use; and, may we not believe, that he who required the fragments to be gathered up, adopts the same principles of economy? God is evidently working in the moral world on the same line in which he calls his people to work. "Sanctify them through thy truth," was the Master's prayer, for the sufficient reason, doubtless, there was no other way to sanctify men.

But it will be asked, Do not miracles disprove this theory of divine limitations? Are they not direct, supernatural, divine interpositions, suspending or setting aside natural law, and reaching ends without the intervention of means? So they are, to some extent, regarded. Dr. Charles Hodge defines a miracle, as "an event, in the external world, brought about by the immediate efficiency, or simple volition of God,"<sup>1</sup> and discards the idea of any intervention of natural law, or second cause. But I think the more general opinion now is, that miracles are brought about, like the ordinary operations of nature, through the instrumentality of natural causes. This we are assured is true of at least some of the miracles of the Bible. The opening of the Red Sea for the exodus of Israel certainly lacked no element of a miracle, yet it was brought about by a strong east wind. "The Lord caused the sea to go

<sup>1</sup> Systematic Theology, Vol. i. p. 618.

back by a strong east wind, all the night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided." It was certainly no less a miracle, and was no less subservient of the end for which it was wrought, because effected through the instrumentality of wind.

"Moses," we are told, "stretched forth his rod over the land of Egypt and the Lord brought an east wind upon the land all that day, and all that night; and when it was morning, the east wind brought the locusts. And the locusts went up over all the land and rested upon all the borders of Egypt." When they had desolated Egypt, "the Lord," the narrative continues, "turned an exceedingly strong west wind, which took up the locusts, and drove them into the Red Sea; there remained not one locust in all the borders of Egypt." This was a miracle wrought through the agency of second causes.

That fearful calamity brought upon Israel in consequence of David's numbering the people, destroying seventy thousand in a single day, and which, had not God interfered, would soon have made Jerusalem a sepulchre, was inflicted through the instrumentality of an angel; still it bears every mark of a miracle.

It was through the same instrumentality that God smote the army of Sennacherib, and one hundred and eighty-five thousand warriors were dead.

"The angel of death spread his wing on the blast  
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed."

To what extent God is carrying forward his stupendous plans, whether by miracle or what are termed natural processes, through the agency and co-operation of angels, we have no means of knowing. One of these bright beings introduces himself to the Beloved Disciple as a "fellow-servant." "He maketh," we are told, "his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire," that is, he uses them as he does winds and lightnings. There is certainly no heresy in the theory that miracles, like the wonders of nature, are effected through the instrumentality of means.

This theory has the advantage of running clear of all suggestions of pantheism. It cannot be charged with investing inanimate matter with vitality and intelligence, equal to understanding and doing its maker's will. It holds that water in Cana of Galilee turned to wine, not of itself, not because so commanded, but because God turned it to wine—turned it, doubtless, very much as he is turning water into wine to-day in a thousand vineyards; that he blighted the fig-tree very much as he is to-day blighting fig-trees all over the world; that he is hushing billows to rest to-day on a thousand seas, and doing it in the wisest and best way, and that it is not preposterous to believe his mode was not essentially different, two thousand years ago, on the waters of Galilee.

But this, it will be said, is precisely the theory adopted by the early enemies of Christianity to break down the miracles of the New Testament. They attributed them to Egyptian magic and to the occult laws of nature, and assumed that any one, understanding these secrets, could do the same things, and present the same credentials to a divine commission that Christ and his followers presented. But their logic is utterly fallacious. It assumed that men can understand how Christ cured the leprous and the palsied, opened the eyes of the blind, and gave back life to the dead, though they are, and doubtless are to remain, too densely ignorant to know what is life, or law, or matter, or force. It assumes too that men could throw up mountains, determine the path of comets, preserve order in stellar regions, and wield the powers of nature as God does, if they understood the laws by which it is done. In other words, the objection assumes that men possess infinite knowledge and infinite power.

How do miracles, it will be asked, differ from the ordinary processes of nature, or what we term the natural, from the supernatural? If natural law is properly defined, "the mode of divine action," the difference is wholly extrinsic, lying in the time and circumstances in which, and

the ends for which, they occur. It was these only which made the finding of a shekel in the mouth of a fish, a miracle. In other circumstances the event would have been a very ordinary occurrence. It was wholly the circumstances in which the fig-tree was withered, and the waves on the angry Galilee were quieted, and nothing in themselves, which made the events miraculous. It was the opportune moment, and the wondrous circumstances only in which fire from heaven consumed the sacrifice on Carmel, which places that event among the miracles of the Old Testament. Had it fallen on some ordinary occasion, in some solitary place, the event would have been regarded only as, perhaps, an unusual freak of nature.

No distinct line is drawn in the Bible between the natural and what we term the supernatural. The miracles of Christ, he frequently termed his *works*, and he seems to have identified them with the processes of nature in the assertion, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work." The Bible classifies the two together, assumes their essential similarity. In the same connection, it affirms "God divided the Red Sea in sunder, made his people pass through the midst of it," and "He smote great kings, and slew famous kings, Sihon king of the Amorites, and Og king of Bashan." "He giveth food to all flesh," "covereth the heavens with clouds, and prepareth rain for the earth." The death of the impious Herod was as truly a divine interposition as the resurrection of Lazarus. "An angel," we are told, "smote him, because he gave not God the glory, and he was eaten with worms, and gave up the ghost. To outward appearance, he was attacked with a loathsome disease, from which he never recovered, and perhaps only the inspired seer discerned anything unusual in the event. Was it a miracle? A hostile fleet, in time of war, is hovering near our coast. The danger is imminent. Earnest and unceasing prayer ascends to God, and suddenly a terrific storm scatters and disables the fleet, and an infant colony is saved. The most scepti-

cal must regard the event as a remarkable divine interposition. Was it a miracle? Was that signal providence which threw the Monitor in the way of the Merrimac, and saved our unprotected northern cities from the shells of an enraged foe, a miracle? Where can the line be drawn between the natural and the supernatural?

1. The two certainly do not differ as to their cause. Both are equally products of divine efficiency. The great volumes of nature and revelation have the same Author, and bear incontestable evidences of the same handwriting. Both treat of the same great subject, *God*, and there is not the shadow of dissonance in their utterances. The heavens, as truly as the Bible, "declare the glory of God."

2. Nor do they differ in that miracles are a more signal and marvellous display of divine power. They certainly are not. The calling back of Lazarus to life, after having been four days dead, was a wonderful transaction. We bow before it awe-stricken. But how it dwindles into insignificance compared with the creation of that intelligence! There is more grandeur in bringing into being one mind, than in all the miracles of both Testaments. What is walking on the Sea of Galilee, or hushing its billows, to the creation of the heavens and the earth? What are all the miracles wrought in Judæa and Galilee, compared with the perpetually recurring wonders in stellar regions? There are, as the Master intimates, greater works than miracles.

3. They differ chiefly in that one is an ordinary, the other an extraordinary, display of divine power. One is *in*, the other *without*, the usual channel of things. Dr. Emmons properly defines a miracle, as "an effect wrought by God, out of the common course of nature." The wonders performed by the Master would not have been wonders if they had been common occurrences. They are worthy of the name of miracle only because they are extraordinary works. "If I," he says, "do not the works which no other man doeth, believe me not."

4. The word itself (*σημιον*) standing for miracle, expresses one of its chief characteristics. If "the Lord be God," the prophet assures the people, gathered in Carmel, he will give you a *sign* in attestation of the fact; in other words, verify it by sending fire from heaven. Fire immediately falls from heaven—an unmistakable divine indorsement of what the prophet had said. The apostles presented just such divine credentials, "God bearing them witness, both with signs, and wonders, and divers miracles." On just such testimony the Master largely bases his claims. "The works," he says, "that I do, they bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me." "The Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works." "If I do not the works which no other man doeth, believe me not." A miracle, then, is a divine guarantee for some truth.

Are miracles, it will be asked, *supernatural* events? The answer depends upon the meaning we attach to the word "nature." They are plainly superhuman; and if nature is adequately defined, as "everything outside of God," they are supernatural. But if we include in the word the laws of the material world, and make them, as I think we should, "modes of divine action," then miracles are not above or outside of nature, but constitute only another class of divine operations.

This view strikes me as utterly subversive of the chief objection urged against the miracles of the Bible, and against the whole structure of Christianity, so largely based upon them. The objection assumes that a miracle is a suspension of natural law, and that such a thing cannot be. The celebrated argument of David Hume is to the effect that human testimony, by which alone miracles are supported, is often untrustworthy; and it is more probable that men should deceive and be deceived, than that the uniformity of nature should be interrupted—the former being in accordance with, and the latter opposed to, human experience. "Scholarship rejects miracles" is,

in substance, the argument, if anything so untruthful deserves the name, of Robert Elsmere. But the theory that miracles, so far from infraction of natural law, are brought about through its instrumentality, removes this objection, and makes the healing of the sick, and the raising of the dead, just as credible, antecedently probable, and as truly matters dependent upon testimony, as the falling of rain-drops or the rotation of the earth. Then "why should it be thought a thing incredible that God should raise the dead?"

It may be objected to the views of this paper, that the laws of nature are not "modes of divine action," but forces inherent in matter, working out results by their own potency; therefore miracles, if such things can be, and the operations of nature owe their existence to different causes, one to God, the other to matter. Still our position is not to the slightest extent invalidated, as it must be admitted—any other view is atheistic—that God directs and uses these blind forces.

Nor is our position invalidated by the theory that God sustains to the material world about the relation the soul of man sustains to his body, pervading and directly controlling it, everywhere present, and everywhere conscious in it. Nor is it invalidated even by the theory that matter in its ultimate essence is *force*, and as force resides only in will, the material world therefore is but a state or condition of the Divine will; consequently there can be no such thing as means, or second causes; for it would still remain true, that natural and supernatural events belong to substantially the same class, and are secured in the same way.

We may possibly find in this paper an explanation, at

election, as the only alternative, either a universe with moral evil or a universe without moral beings? and that the former involved an infinite preponderance of well-being? Who can say *the inevitable* is not an infinite factor in the things that are, and are to be?—a factor which, when understood, will silence every cavil against the ways of God, and the final allotments of intelligent beings? "*It must needs be*" may loom up into amazing significance by and by. Perhaps, too, we may here find the solution of a problem more inexplicable in practical life than any other embodied in the complaint of the Psalmist, "Why standest thou afar off?" From how many burdened weary hearts this question is forcing itself! How many are asking, Why in the long, long, strife, apparently so equal, between good and evil, is there so little of divine intervention in the interests of the right! Faith finds repose in the assurance, God is doing all he wisely can for each sentient thing. May not the intellect, also, in the assurance, that there may be limitations, of which we now know little, growing out of the necessities of things?

Then what good, it will be asked, comes of prayer? As it can add nothing to the power, wisdom, or obligations of God, how can it enable him to do more than he is already doing? By promising to hear prayer, I answer, God encourages men to approach him, and become partakers of the purity and blessedness which come from communion with the Infinite Intelligence. By withholding such encouragement, one of the chief channels through which God is now communicating his thought and peace to human hearts, would be closed. The final cause of prayer, though far from the chief good which comes of it, I have little doubt, is its reflex influence.

The somewhat prevalent idea that the divine power in the moral world is unlimited, finds support in neither the reason nor the word of God. Of all tenets which have foisted themselves into human creeds, I cannot but deem this one of the most pernicious. If God can rectify

and remedy all that is wrong, do more, by his simple fiat, than can the aggregate of all human effort, the inference is inevitable that he will, in the end, allow no real evil to accrue to his kingdom, either from the apathy of his friends or the hostility of his enemies; and that human conduct will play but an insignificant part in the final make-up of things. Can any belief be more paralyzing to all religious endeavor, whether of saint or sinner? If this theory is true, sin is but a trifle, life but a play, on whose throw nothing solemn and eternal necessarily depends. God is responsible for final issues, and we may repose in the assurance, that whatever is, is, or in the end will be, best.

The views presented in this paper lend tremendous emphasis to the duty of coworking with God. Such is the mechanism of moral beings, they can be reached and savingly benefited only through moral influences. The work of applying these influences to human hearts is devolved, in conjunction with the Holy Spirit, upon men. "It was God's good pleasure, through the *foolishness* of *preaching*, to save them that believe." Whether the Holy Spirit can, to any large extent, regenerate men without human co-operation, we do not know. Since he does not, the presumption is there are insuperable obstacles in the way. It is safe to say that Christian work is indispensable to the conversion of the world, and that its value can be measured only by that of the world's salvation. Every Christian heart should be solemnized by the declaration of the apostle, "*Ye are God's fellow-workers*"—not instruments, but associate laborers. Such is the economy of things, that the human element, feeble, imperfect, relatively infinitesimal, may be, for aught we know, as essen-