

*THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS.*

I.

*THE WRITER AND THE READERS.*

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus through the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colossæ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.”—COL. i. 1, 2 (Rev. Ver.).

WE may say that each of Paul's greater epistles has in it one salient thought. In that to the Romans, it is Justification by faith; in Ephesians, it is the mystical union of Christ and His Church; in Philippians, it is the joy of Christian progress; in this epistle, it is the dignity and sole sufficiency of Jesus Christ as the mediator and head of all creation and of the Church.

Such a thought is emphatically a lesson for the day.

The Christ whom the world needs to have proclaimed in every deaf ear and lifted up before blind and reluctant eyes, is not merely the perfect man, nor only the meek sufferer, but the Source of creation and its Lord, who from the beginning has been the life of all that has lived, and before the beginning was in the bosom of the Father. The shallow and starved religion which contents itself with mere humanitarian conceptions of Jesus of Nazareth needs to be deepened and filled out by these lofty truths before it can acquire solidity and steadfastness sufficient to be the unmoved foundation of sinful and mortal lives. The evangelistic teaching which concentrates exclusive attention on the cross as “the work of Christ,” needs to be led to the contemplation of them, in order to understand the cross, and to have its mystery as well as its meaning declared. This letter itself dwells upon two applications of its principles to two classes of error which, in somewhat changed forms, exist now as then—the error of the ceremonialist, to whom religion was mainly a matter of ritual, and the error of the speculative thinker,

to whom the universe was filled with forces, which left no room for the working of a personal Will. The vision of the living Christ who fills all things, is held up before each of these two, as the antidote to his poison ; and that same vision must be made clear to-day to the modern representatives of these ancient errors. If we are able to grasp with heart and mind the principles of this epistle for ourselves, we shall stand at the centre of things, seeing order where from any other position confusion only is apparent, and being at the point of rest instead of being hurried along by the wild whirl of conflicting opinions.

I desire, therefore, to present the teachings of this great epistle in a series of expositions.

Before advancing to the consideration of these verses, we must deal with one or two introductory matters, so as to get the frame and the background for the picture.

(1) First, as to the Church of Colossæ to which the letter is addressed.

Perhaps too much has been made of late years of geographical and topographical elucidations of Paul's epistles. A knowledge of the place to which a letter was sent cannot do much to help in understanding the letter, for local circumstances leave very faint traces, if any, on the Apostle's writings. Here and there an allusion may be detected, or a metaphor may gain in point by such knowledge ; but, for the most part, local colouring is entirely absent. Some slight indication, however, of the situation and circumstances of the Colossian Church may help to give vividness to our conceptions of the little community to whom this rich treasure of truth was first entrusted.

Colossæ was a town in the heart of the modern Asia Minor, much decayed in Paul's time from its earlier importance. It lay in a valley of Phrygia, on the banks of a small stream, the Lycus, down the course of which, at a distance of some ten miles or so, two very much more im-

portant cities fronted each other, Hierapolis on the north, and Laodicea on the south bank of the river. In all three cities were Christian Churches, as we know from this letter, one of which has attained the bad eminence of having become the type of tepid religion for all the world. How strange to think of the tiny community in a remote valley of Asia Minor, eighteen centuries since, thus gibbeted for ever! These stray beams of light which fall upon the people in the New Testament, showing them fixed for ever in one attitude, like a lightning flash in the darkness, are solemn precursors of the last Apocalypse, when all men shall be revealed in "the brightness of His coming."

Paul does not seem to have been the founder of these Churches, or ever to have visited them at the date of this letter. That opinion is based on several of its characteristics, such, for instance, as the absence of any of those kindly greetings to individuals which in the Apostle's other letters are so abundant, and reveal at once the warmth and the delicacy of his affection; and the allusions which occur more than once to his having only "*heard*" of their faith and love, and is strongly supported by the expression in the second chapter where he speaks of the conflict in spirit which he had for "you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh." Probably the teacher who planted the gospel in Colossæ was that Epaphras, whose visit to Rome occasioned the letter, and who is referred to in verse 7 of this chapter in terms which seem to suggest that he had first made known to them the fruit-producing "word of the truth of the gospel."

(2) As to the occasion and subject of the letter. Paul is a prisoner, in a certain sense, in Rome; but the word prisoner conveys a false impression of the amount of restriction of his personal liberty to which he was subjected. We know from the last words of the Acts of the Apostles,

and from the Epistle to the Philippians, that his "imprisonment" did not in the least interfere with his liberty of preaching, nor with his intercourse with friends. Rather, in the view of the facilities it gave that by him "the preaching might be fully known," it may be regarded, as indeed the writer of the Acts seems to regard it, as the very climax and topstone of Paul's work, wherewith his history may fitly end, leaving the champion of the Gospel at the very heart of the world, with unhindered liberty to proclaim his message by the very throne of Cæsar. He was sheltered rather than confined beneath the wing of the imperial eagle. His imprisonment, as we call it, was, at all events at first, detention in Rome under military supervision rather than incarceration. So to his lodgings in Rome there comes a brother from this decaying little town in the far-off valley of the Lycus, Epaphras by name. Whether his errand was exclusively to consult Paul about the state of the Colossian Church, or whether some other business also had brought him to Rome, we do not know; at all events, he comes and brings with him bad news, which burdens Paul's heart with solicitude for the little community, which had no remembrances of his own authoritative teaching to fall back upon. Many a night would he and Epaphras spend in deep converse on the matter, with the stolid Roman legionary, to whom Paul was chained, sitting wearily by, while they two eagerly talked.

The tidings were that a strange disease, hatched in that hotbed of religious fancies, the dreamy East, was threatening the faith of the Colossian Christians. A peculiar form of heresy, strangely compounded of Jewish ritualism and Oriental mysticism—two elements as hard to blend in the foundation of a system as the heterogeneous iron and clay on which the image in the prophet's dream stood unstably—had appeared among them, and though at present confined to a few, was being vigorously preached. The

characteristic Eastern dogma, that matter is evil and the source of evil, which underlies so much Oriental religion, and crept in so early to corrupt Christianity, and crops up to-day in so many strange places and unexpected ways, had begun to infect them. The conclusion was quickly drawn : " Well, then, if matter be the source of all evil, then, of course, God and matter must be antagonistic," and so the creation and government of this material universe could not be supposed to have come directly from Him. The endeavour to keep the pure Divinity and the gross world as far apart as possible, while yet an intellectual necessity forbade the entire breaking of the bond between them, led to the busy working of the imagination, which arched over the void gulf between God who is good, and matter which is evil, with a bridge of cobwebs—a chain of intermediate beings, emanations, abstractions, each approaching more nearly to the material than his precursor, till at last the intangible and infinite was confined and curdled into actual earthly matter, and the pure was darkened thereby into evil.

Such notions, fantastic and remote from daily life as they look, really led by a very short cut to making wild work with the plainest moral teachings both of the natural conscience and of Christianity. For if matter be the source of all evil, then the fountain of each man's sin is to be found, not in his own perverted will, but in his body, and the cure of it is to be reached, not by faith which plants a new life in a sinful spirit, but simply by ascetic mortification of the flesh.

Strangely united with these mystical Eastern teachings, which might so easily be perverted to the coarsest sensuality, and had their heads in the clouds and their feet in the mud, were the narrowest doctrines of Jewish ritualism, insisting on circumcision, laws regulating food, the observance of feast days, and the whole cumbrous apparatus of

a ceremonial religion. It is a monstrous combination, a cross between a Talmudical rabbi and a Buddhist priest, and yet it is not unnatural that, after soaring in these lofty regions of speculation where the air is too thin to support life, men should be glad to get hold of the externals of an elaborate ritual. It is not the first nor the last time that a misplaced philosophical religion has got close to a religion of outward observances, to keep it from shivering itself to death. Extremes meet. If you go far enough east, you are west.

Such, generally speaking, was the error that was beginning to lift its head in Colossæ. Religious fanaticism was at home in that country, from which, both in heathen and in Christian times, wild rites and notions emanated, and the Apostle might well dread the effect of this new teaching, as of a spark on hay, on the excitable natures of the Colossian converts.

Now we may say, "What does all this matter to us? We are in no danger of being haunted by the ghosts of these dead heresies." But the truth which Paul opposed to them is all important for every age. It was simply the person of Christ as the only manifestation of the Divine, the link between God and the universe, its Creator and Preserver, the Light and Life of men, the Lord and Inspirer of the Church. Christ has come, laying His hand upon both God and man, therefore there is no need nor place for a misty crowd of angelic beings or shadowy abstractions to bridge the gulf across which His incarnation flings its single solid arch. Christ has been bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, therefore that cannot be the source of evil in which the fulness of the Godhead has dwelt as in a shrine. Christ has come, the fountain of life and holiness, therefore there is no more place for ascetic mortifications on the one hand, nor for Jewish scrupulosities on the other. These things might detract from the completeness of faith

in the complete redemption which Christ has wrought, and must becloud the truth that simple faith in it is all which a man needs.

To urge these and the like truths this letter is written. Its central principle is the sovereign and exclusive mediation of Jesus Christ, the God man, the victorious antagonist of these dead speculations, and the destined conqueror of all the doubts and confusions of this day. If we grasp with mind and heart that truth, we can possess our souls in patience, and in its light see light where else is darkness and uncertainty.

So much then for introduction, and now a few words of comment on the superscription of the letter contained in these verses.

I. Notice the blending of lowliness and authority in Paul's designation of himself. "An apostle of Christ Jesus through the will of God."

He does not always bring his apostolic authority to mind at the beginning of his letters. In his earliest epistles, those to the Thessalonians, he has not yet adopted the practice. In the loving and joyous letter to the Philippians, he has no need to urge his authority, for no man among them ever gainsaid it. In that to Philemon, friendship is uppermost, and though, as he says, he might be much bold to enjoin, yet he prefers to beseech, and will not command as "apostle," but pleads as "the prisoner of Christ Jesus." In his other letters he put his authority in the foreground as here, and it may be noticed that it and its basis in the will of God are asserted with greatest emphasis in the Epistle to the Galatians, where he has to deal with more defiant opposition than elsewhere encountered him.

Here he puts forth his claim to the apostolate, in the highest sense of the word. He asserts his equality with the original Apostles, the chosen witnesses for the reality of

Christ's resurrection. He too had seen the risen Lord, and heard the words of His mouth. He shared with them the prerogative of certifying from personal experience that Jesus is risen and lives to bless and rule. Paul's whole Christianity was built on the belief that Jesus Christ had actually appeared to him. That vision on the road to Damascus revolutionised his life. Because he had seen his Lord and heard his duty from His lips, he had become what he was.

"By the will of God" is at once an assertion of Divine authority, a declaration of independence of all human teaching or appointment, and a most lowly disclaimer of individual merit, or personal power. Few religious teachers have had so strongly marked a character as Paul, or have so constantly brought their own experience into prominence; but the weight which he expected to be attached to his words was to be due entirely to their being the words which God spoke through him. If this opening clause were to be paraphrased it would be: I speak to you because God has sent me. I am not an Apostle by my own will, nor by my own merit. I am not worthy to be called an Apostle. I am a poor sinner like yourselves, and it is a miracle of love and mercy that God should put His words into such lips. But He does speak through me; my words are neither mine nor learned from any other man, but His. Never mind the cracked pipe through which the Divine breath makes music, but listen to the music.

So Paul thought of his message; so the uncompromising assertion of authority united with deep humility. Do we come to his words, believing that we hear God speaking through Paul? Here is no formal doctrine of inspiration, but here is the claim to be the organ of the Divine will and mind, to which we ought to listen as indeed the voice of God.

The gracious humility of the man is further seen in his



association with himself, as joint senders of the letters, of his young brother Timothy, who has no apostolic authority, but whose concurrence in its teaching might give it some additional weight. For the first few verses he remembers to speak in the plural, as in the name of both—"we give thanks," "Epaphras declared to us your love," and so on; but in the fiery sweep of his thoughts Timothy is soon left out of sight, and Paul alone pours out the wealth of his Divine wisdom and the warmth of his fervid heart.

II. We may observe the noble ideal of the Christian character set forth in the designations of the Colossian Church, as "saints and faithful brethren in Christ."

In his earlier letters Paul addresses himself to "the Church"; in his later, beginning with the Epistle to the Romans, and including the three great epistles from his captivity, namely Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, he drops the word Church, and uses expressions which regard the individuals composing the community rather than the community which they compose. The slight change thus indicated in the Apostle's point of view is interesting, however it may be accounted for. There is no reason to suppose it done of set purpose, and certainly it did not arise from any lowered estimate of the sacredness of "the Church," which is nowhere put on higher ground than in the letter to Ephesus, which belongs to the later period; but it may be that advancing years and familiarity with his work, with his position of authority, and with his auditors, all tended to draw him closer to them, and insensibly led to the disuse of the more formal and official address, to "the Church," in favour of the simpler and more affectionate superscription, to "the brethren."

Be that as it may, the lessons to be drawn from the names here given to the members of the Church are the more important matter for us. It would be interesting and profitable to examine the meaning of all the New Testa-

ment names for believers, and to learn the lessons which they teach; but we must for the present confine ourselves to those which occur here.

“Saints”—a word that has been woefully misapplied both by the Church and the world. The former has given it as a special honour to a few, and “decorated” with it mainly the possessors of a false ideal of sanctity—that of the ascetic and monastic sort. The latter uses it with a sarcastic intonation, as if it implied much cry and little wool, loud professions and small performance, not without a touch of hypocrisy and crafty self-seeking.

Saints are not people living in cloisters after a fantastic ideal, but men and women immersed in the vulgar work of everyday life and worried by the small prosaic anxieties which fret us all, who amidst the whirr of the spindle in the mill, and the clink of the scales on the counter, and the hubbub of the market-place and the jangle of the courts are yet living lives of conscious devotion to God. The root idea of the word, which is an Old Testament word, is not moral purity, but separation to God. The holy things of the old covenant were things set apart from ordinary use for His service. So, on the high priest’s mitre was written Holiness to the Lord. So the Sabbath was kept “holy,” because set apart from the week in obedience to Divine command.

*Sanctity*, and *saint* are used now mainly with the idea of moral purity, but that is a secondary meaning. The real primary signification is separation to God. Consecration to Him is the root from which the white flower of purity springs most surely. There is a deep lesson in the word as to the true method of attaining cleanness of life and spirit. We cannot make ourselves pure, but we can yield ourselves to God, and the purity will come.

But we have not only here the fundamental idea of holiness, and the connexion of purity of character with self-

consecration to God, but also the solemn obligation on all so-called Christians thus to separate and devote themselves to Him. We are Christians as far as we give ourselves up to God, in the surrender of our will and the practical obedience of our lives—so far and not one inch further. We are not merely bound to this consecration if we are Christians, but we are not Christians unless we thus consecrate ourselves. Pleasing self, and making my own will my law, and living for my own ends, is destructive of all Christianity. Saints are not an eminent sort of Christians, but all Christians are saints, and he who is not a saint is not a Christian. The true consecration is the surrender of the will, which no man can do for us, which needs no outward ceremonial, and the one motive which will lead us selfish and stubborn men to bow our necks to that gentle yoke, and to come out of the misery of pleasing self into the peace of serving God, is drawn from the great love of Him who devoted Himself to God and man, and bought us for His own by giving Himself utterly to be ours. All sanctity begins with consecration to God. All consecration rests upon the faith of Christ's sacrifice. And if, drawn by the great love of Christ to us unworthy, we give ourselves away to God in Him, then He gives Himself in deep sacred communion to us. "I am Thine" has ever for its chord which complete the fulness of its music, "Thou art mine." And so "saint" is a name of dignity and honour, as well as a stringent requirement. There is implied in it, too, safety from all that would threaten life or union with Him. He will not hold His possessions with a slack hand that negligently lets them drop, or with a feeble hand that cannot keep them from a foe. "Thou wilt not suffer him who is consecrated to Thee to see corruption." If I belong to God, having given myself to Him, then I am safe from the touch of evil and the taint of decay. "The Lord's portion is His people," and He will

not lose even so worthless a part of that portion as I am. The great name "saints" carries with it the prophecy of victory over all evil, and the assurance that nothing can separate us from the love of God, or pluck us from His hand.

But these Colossian Christians are "faithful" as well as saints. That may either mean *trustworthy* and *true* to their stewardship, or *trusting*. In the parallel verses in the Epistle to the Ephesians (which presents so many resemblances to this epistle) the latter meaning seems to be required, and here it is certainly the more natural, as pointing to the very foundation of all Christian consecration and brotherhood in the act of believing. We are united to Christ by our faith. The Church is a family of faithful, that is to say of believing, men. Faith underlies consecration and is the parent of holiness, for he only will yield himself to God who trustfully grasps the mercies of God and rests on Christ's great gift of Himself. Faith weaves the bond that unites men in the brotherhood of the Church, for it brings all who share it into a common relation to the Father. He who is faithful, that is, believing, will be faithful in the sense of being worthy of confidence and true to his duty, his profession and his Lord.

They were *brethren* too. That strong new bond of union among men the most unlike, was a strange phenomenon in Paul's time, when the Roman world was falling to pieces, and rent by deep clefts of hatreds and jealousies such as modern society scarcely knows; and men might well wonder as they saw the slave and his master sitting at the same table, the Greek and the barbarian learning the same wisdom in the same tongue, the Jew and the Gentile bowing the knee in the same worship, and the hearts of all fused into one great glow of helpful sympathy and unselfish love.

But "brethren" means more than this. It points not

merely to Christian love, but to the common possession of a new life. If we are brethren, it is because we have one Father, because in us all there is one life. The name is often regarded as sentimental and metaphorical. The obligation of mutual love is supposed to be the main idea in it, and there is a melancholy hollowness and unreality in the very sound of it as applied to the usual average Christians of to-day. But the name leads straight to the doctrine of regeneration, and proclaims that all Christians are born again through their faith in Jesus Christ, and thereby partake of a common new life, which makes all its possessors children of the Highest, and therefore brethren one of another. If regarded as an expression of the affection of Christians for one another, "brethren" is an exaggeration, ludicrous or tragic, as we view it; but if we regard it as the expression of the real bond which gathers all believers into one family, it declares the deepest mystery and mightiest privilege of the gospel that "to as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the Sons of God."

They are "in Christ." These two words may apply to all the designations or to the last only. They are saints in Him, believers in Him, brethren in Him. That mystical but most real union of Christians with their Lord is never far away from the Apostle's thoughts, and in the twin Epistle to the Ephesians is the very burden of the whole. A shallower Christianity tries to weaken that great phrase to something more intelligible to the unspiritual temper and poverty-stricken experience proper to it; but no justice can be done to Paul's teaching unless it be taken in all its depth as expressive of that same mutual indwelling and interlacing of spirit with spirit which is so prominent in the writings of the Apostle John. *There* is one point of contact between the Pauline and the Johannean conceptions, on the differences between which so much exaggeration has been expended: to both the inmost essence of the Christian life

is union to Christ, and abiding in Him. If we are Christians, we are in Him, in yet profounder sense than creation lives and moves and has its being in God. We are in Him as the earth with all its living things is in the atmosphere, as the branch is in the vine, as the members are in the body. We are in Him as inhabitants in a house, as hearts that love in hearts that love, as parts in the whole. If we are Christians, He is in us, as life in every vein, as the fruit-producing sap and energy of the vine is in every branch, as the air in every lung, as the sunlight in every planet.

This is the deepest mystery of the Christian life. To be "in Him" is to be complete. "In Him" we are "blessed with all spiritual blessings." "In Him," we are "chosen." "In Him," God "freely bestows His grace upon us." "In Him" we "have redemption through His blood." "In Him" "all things in heaven and earth are gathered" "In Him we have obtained an inheritance." In Him is the better life of all who live. In Him we have peace though the world be seething with change and storm. In Him we conquer though earth and our own evil be all in arms against us. If we live in Him, we live in purity and joy. If we die in Him, we die in tranquil trust. If our grave-stones may truly carry the sweet old inscription carved on so many a nameless slab in the catacombs, "In Christo," they will also bear the other "In pace" (In peace). If we sleep in Him, our glory is assured, for them also that sleep in Jesus, will God bring with Him.

III. A word or two only can be devoted to the last clause of salutation, the Apostolic wish, which sets forth the high ideal to be desired for Churches and individuals: "Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father." The Authorized Version reads, "and the Lord Jesus Christ," but the Revised Version follows the majority of recent text-critics and their principal authorities in omitting these words, which they suppose to have been imported

into our passage from the parallel place in Ephesians. The omission of the familiar words which occur so uniformly in the similar introductory salutations of Paul's other epistles, is especially singular here where the main subject of the letter is the office of Christ as channel of all blessings. Perhaps the previous word, "brethren" was lingering in his mind, and so instinctively he stopped with the kindred word "Father."

"Grace and peace"—Paul's wishes for those whom he loves, and the blessings which he expects every Christian to possess, blend the Western and the Eastern forms of salutation, and surpass both. All that the Greek meant by his "Grace," all that the Hebrew meant by his "Peace," the ideally happy condition which differing nations have placed in different blessings, and which all loving words have vainly wished for dear ones, is secured and conveyed to every poor soul that trusts in Christ.

"Grace"—what is that? The word means first—love in exercise to those who are below the lover, or who deserve something else, stooping love that condescends, and patient love that forgives. Then it means the gifts which such love bestows, and then it means the effects of these gifts in the beauties of character and conduct developed in the receivers. So there are here invoked, or we may call it, proffered and promised, to every believing heart, the love and gentleness of that Father whose love to us sinful atoms is a miracle of lowliness and long-suffering, and the outcome of that love which never visits the soul emptyhanded, in all varied spiritual gifts, to strengthen weakness, to enlighten ignorance, to fill the whole being, and as last result of all, every beauty of mind, heart, and temper which can adorn the character, and refine a man into the likeness of God. That great gift will come in continuous bestowment if we are "saints in Christ. Of His fulness we all receive and grace for grace, wave upon wave as the ripples press

shoreward and each in turn pours its tribute on the beach, or as pulsation after pulsation makes one golden beam of unbroken light, strong winged enough to come all the way from the sun, gentle enough to fall on the sensitive eyeball without pain. That one beam will decompose into all colours and brightnesses. That one "grace" will part into sevenfold gifts and be the life in us of whatsoever things are lovely and of good report.

"Peace be unto you." That old greeting, the witness of of a state of society when every stranger seen across the desert was probably an enemy, is also a witness to the deep unrest of the heart. It is well to learn the lesson that peace comes after grace, that for tranquillity of soul we must go to God, and that He gives it by giving us His love and its gifts, of which, and of which only, peace is the result. If we have that grace for ours, as we all may if we will, we shall be still, because our desires are satisfied and all our needs met. To seek is unnecessary when we are conscious of possessing. We may end our weary quest, like the dove when it had found the green leaf, though little dry land may be seen as yet, and fold our wings and rest by the cross. We may be lapped in calm repose, even in the midst of toil and strife, like John resting on the heart of his Lord. There must be first of all, peace *with* God, that there may be peace from God. Then, when we have been won from our alienation and enmity by the power of the cross, and have learned to know that God is our Lover, Friend and Father, we shall possess the peace of those whose hearts have found their home, the peace of spirits no longer at war within—conscience and choice tearing them asunder in their strife, the peace of obedience which banishes the disturbance of self-will, the peace of security shaken by no fears, the peace of a sure future across the brightness of which no shadows of sorrow nor mists of uncertainty can fall, the peace of a heart in amity with all mankind. So



living in peace, we shall lay ourselves down and die in peace, and enter into "that country, afar beyond the stars," where "grows the flower of peace."

"The Rose that cannot wither"  
"Thy fortress and thy ease."

All this may be ours. Paul could only wish it for these Colossians. We can only long for it for our dearest. No man can fulfil his wishes or turn them into actual gifts. Many precious things we can give, but not peace. But our brother, Jesus Christ, can do more than wish it. He can bestow it, and when we need it most, He stands ever beside us, in our weakness and unrest, with His strong arm stretched out to help, and on His calm lips the old words—"My grace is sufficient for thee," "My peace I give unto you."

Let us keep ourselves in Him, believing in Him and yielding ourselves to God for His dear sake, and we shall find His grace ever flowing into our emptiness and His settled "peace keeping our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

A. MACLAREN.

---

*THE CONTRIBUTION OF SCIENCE TO CHRISTIANITY.*

THERE is nothing more inspiring just now to the religious mind than the expansion of the intellectual area of Christianity. Christianity seemed for a time to have ceased to adapt itself to the widening range of secular knowledge, and the thinking world had almost left its side. But the expansion of Christianity can never be altogether contemporaneous with the growth of knowledge. For new truth must be solidified by time before it can be built into the eternal truth of the Christian system. Yet, sooner or

later, the conquest comes; sooner or later, whether it be art or music, history or philosophy, Christianity utilises the best that the world finds, and gives it a niche in the temple of God.

To the student of God's ways, who reverently marks His progressive revelation and scans the horizon for each new fulfilment, the field of science presents just now a spectacle of bewildering interest. To say that he regards it with expectation is feebly to realize the dignity and import of the time. He looks at science with awe. It is the thing that is moving, unfolding. It is the breaking of a fresh seal. It is the new chapter of the world's history. What it contains for Christianity, or against it, he knows not. What it will do, or undo—for in the fulfilling it may undo—he cannot tell. The plot is just at its thickest as he opens the page; the problems are more in number and more intricate than they have ever been before, and he waits almost with excitement for the next development.

And yet this attitude of Christianity towards science is as free from false hope as it is from false fear. It has no false fear, for it knows the strange fact that this plot is always at its thickest; and its hope of a quick solution is without extravagance, for it has learned the slowness of God's unfolding and His patient tempering of revelation to the young world which has to bear the strain. But for all this, we cannot open this new and closely written page as if it had little to give us. With nature as God's work; with man, God's finest instrument, as its investigator; with a multitude of the finest of these finest instruments, in laboratory, field, and study, hourly engaged upon this book, exploring, deciphering, sifting, and verifying—it is impossible that there should not be a solid, original, and ever-increasing gain. Add to this man's known wish to know more, and God's wish that he should know more—for nature is fuller of nothing than of invitations to learn—and

we shall see how true it is that nature has but to be asked, to give her best.

The one thing to be careful about in approaching nature is, that we really come to be taught; and the same attitude is honourably due to its interpreter, science. Religion is probably only learning for the first time how to approach science. Their former intercourse, from faults on both sides, and these mainly due to juvenility, is not a thing to remember. After the first quarrel—for they began the centuries hand in hand—the question of religion to science was simply, “How dare you speak at all?” Then as science held to its right to speak just a little, the question became, “What new menace to our creed does your latest discovery portend?” By-and-by both became wiser, and the coarser conflict ceased. Then we find religion suggesting a compromise, and asking simply what particular adjustment to its last hypothesis science would demand. But we do not speak now of the right to be heard, or of menaces to our faith, or even of compromises. Our question is a much maturer one—we ask what *contribution* science has to bestow, what good gift the wise men are bringing now to lay at the feet of our Christ. This question marks an immense advance in the relation between science and Christianity, and we should be careful to sustain it. Nothing is more easily thrown out of working order than the balance between different spheres of thought. The least assumption of superiority on the part of one, the least hint of a challenge, even a suggestion of independence, may provoke a quarrel. In one sense religion is independent of science, but in another it is not. For science is not independent of religion, and religion dare not leave it. One notices sometimes a disposition in religious writers, not only to make light of the claims of science, to smile at its attempts to help them, to despise its patronage, but even to taunt it with its impotence to touch the higher problems

of life and being at all. Now science has feelings. This impotence is a fact, but it is the limitation simply of its function in the scheme of thought; and to taunt it with its insufficiency to perform other functions is a vulgar way to make it jealous of that which does perform them. We live in an intellectual commune, and owe too much to each other to reflect on a neighbour's poverty, even when it puts on appearances.

The result of the modern systematic study of nature has been to raise up in our midst a body of truth with almost unique claims to acceptance. The grounds of this acceptance are laid bare to all the world. There is nothing esoteric about science. It has no secrets. Its facts can be seen and handled: they are facts; they are nature itself. Apart therefore from their attractiveness or utility, men feel that here at last they have something to believe in, something independent of opinion, prejudice, self-interest, or tradition. This feeling is a splendid testimony to man as well as to nature. And we do not grudge to science the vigour and devotion of its students, for, like all true devotion, it is founded on an intense faith. Now the mere presence of this body of truth, so solid, so transparent, so verifiable, immediately affects all else that lies in the field of knowledge. And it affects it in different ways. Some things it scatters to the winds at once. They have been the birthright of mankind for ages it may be; their venerableness matters not, they must go. And the power of the new comer is so self-evident that they require no telling, but disappear of themselves. In this way the modern world has been rid of a hundred superstitions.

Among other things which have been brought to this bar is Christianity. It knows it can approve itself to science; but it is taken by surprise, and therefore begs time. It will honestly look up its credentials and adjust itself, if necessary, to the new relation. Now this is the position

of theology at the present moment. The purification of religion, Herbert Spencer tells us, has always come from science. In this case it is largely true. And theology proceeds by asking science what it demands, and then borrows its instruments to carry out the improvements. This loan of the instruments constitutes the first great contribution of science to religion.

What are these instruments? We shall name two—the Scientific Method and the Doctrine of Evolution. The first is the instrument for the interpretation of Nature; the second is given us as the method of Nature itself. With the first of these we shall deal formally; the second will present itself in various shapes as we proceed.

In emphasizing the scientific method as a contribution from science to Christianity, it is not to be understood that science has an exclusive, or even a prior claim, either to its discovery or possession. Along with the germs of all great things, it is found in the Bible; and theologians all along have fallen into its vein at times, though they have seldom pursued it long or with entire abandonment. There are examples of work done in modern theology, German and English, by the use of this method, which for the purity, consistency, and reverence with which it is applied are not surpassed by anything that physical science has produced. At the same time, this is *par excellence* the method of science. The perfecting of the instrument, the most lucid exhibition of its powers, the education in its use, above all the intellectual revolution which has compelled its application in every field of knowledge, we owe to natural science. Theology has had its share in this great movement, how much we need not ask, or seek to prove. The day is past for quarrelling over rights of discovery; and whether we owe the scientific method to Job and Paul, or to Bacon and Darwin, is just the kind of question which the possession of this instrument would warn us not to touch.

To see what the scientific method has done for Christianity, we have only to ask ourselves what it is. The things which it insists upon are mainly two—the value of facts, and the value of laws. From the first of these comes the integrity of science; from the second its beauty and force. On bare facts science from first to last is based. Bacon's contribution to science was simply that he vindicated the place and power, the eternal worth, of facts; Darwin's, that he supplied it with facts. Now if Christianity possesses anything it possesses facts. So long as the facts were presented to the world Christianity spread with marvellous rapidity. But there came a time when the facts were less exhibited to men than the evidence for the facts. Theology, that is to say, began to rest on authority. Men or manuscripts were quoted as authorities for these facts, always with a loss of impressiveness, a loss increasing rapidly as time distanced the facts themselves. Then as the facts became more and more remote the Churches became the authorities rather than individual witnesses, and this was accompanied by a still further loss of power. And the surest proof of the waning influence of the facts themselves, and the extent of the loss incurred by the transfer of their credential to authority, is found in the appeal, which quickly followed, to the secular arm. The facts, ceasing to be their own warrant, had to be enforced by the establishment of judicial relations between Church and State. It is these intermediaries between the facts and the modern observer that stumble science. Its method is not to deal with persons however exalted, nor with creeds however admirable, nor with Churches however venerable. It will look at facts and at facts alone. The dangers, the weakness, the unpracticableness in some cases of this method, are well known. Nevertheless it is a right method. It is the method of all reformation; it was the method of the Reformation. The Reformation was largely a revolt

against intermediaries, an appeal to facts. Now Christianity is learning from science to go back to its facts, and it is going back to facts. Critics in every tongue are engaged upon the facts; travellers in every land are unveiling facts; exegetes are at work upon the words, scholars upon the manuscripts; sceptics, believing and unbelieving, are eliminating the not-facts; and the whole field is alive with workers. And the point to mark is that these men are not manipulating, but verifying, facts.

There is one portion of this field of facts, however, which is still strangely neglected, and to which a scientific theology may turn its next attention. The evidence for Christianity is not the Evidences. The evidence for Christianity is a *Christian*. The unit of physics is the atom, of biology the cell, of philosophy the man, of theology the Christian. The natural man, his regeneration by the Holy Spirit, the spiritual man and his relations to the world and to God, these are the modern facts for a scientific theology. We may indeed talk with science on its own terms about the creation of the world, and the spirituality of nature, and the force behind nature, and the unseen universe; but our language is not less scientific, not less justified by fact, when we speak of the work of the risen Christ, and the contemporary activities of the Holy Ghost, and the facts of regeneration, and the powers which are freeing men from sin. There is a great experiment which is repeated every day, the evidence for which is as accessible as for any fact of science; its phenomena are as palpable as any in nature; its processes are as explicable, or as inexplicable; its purpose is as clear; and yet science has never been seriously asked to reckon with it, nor has theology ever granted it the place its impressive reality commands. One aim of a scientific theology will be to study *conversion*, and restore to Christianity its most powerful witness. When men, by mere absorption in the present, refuse to consider history,

or from traditional prejudice take refuge in the untrustworthiness of the records, it is unwise to refer, in the first place at least, to phenomena which are centuries old, when we have the same among us now.

But not less essential, in the scientific method, than the examination of facts is the arrangement of them under laws. And the work of modern science in this direction has resulted in its grandest achievement—the demonstration of the uniformity of nature. This doctrine must have an immediate effect upon the entire system of theology. For one thing, the contribution of the spiritual world to the uniformity of nature has yet to be made. Not that the natural world is to include the spiritual, but that a higher natural will be seen to include both. It cannot be said that Christianity as arranged by theology at present is highly natural, nor can it be said to be unnatural. In that relation it is simply neutral. The question of naturalness or the reverse is one which has not hitherto at all concerned it. There was no call upon theology to make its presentation of itself with a view to nature, and therefore, if that is an advisable thing, or a feasible thing, it has yet, on the large scale at least, to be attempted. In the natural world, the truth of the uniformity of nature took a long time to grow. No one in the first instance set himself to establish it. Innumerable workers in innumerable fields, engaged upon different classes of facts, found a mysterious brotherhood of common laws. Again and again, and everywhere again and again, the same familiar lines confronted them, few, simple, and unchangeable, yet each with a vanishing trend towards an upward point, hidden as yet in mystery. These workers did not formally consult together about these laws, or seek to follow them beyond the line of sight. Nor did they try to find a name for the hidden point to which all converged. But there grew up amongst them a sense of symmetry in the whole which found expression in the



formula, which is now the postulate of science—the “uniformity of nature.” In the same way, probably, shall we one day see disclosed the uniformity of the spiritual world. The earlier work had to be accomplished first, the scaffolding for the inner temple; but when the whole is finished there will be nothing in the spiritual world to put the mind of science to confusion. The laws of both as they radiate upwards will meet in a common cupola, and between the outer and the inner courts the priests of nature and the priests of God will go in and out together.

There may be laws, or actings, in the spiritual world, which it may seem to some impossible to include in such a scheme. God is not, in theology, a Creator merely, but a Father; and according to the counsel of His own will He may act in different cases in different ways. To which the reply is that this also is law. It is the law of the Father, the law of the paternal relation, the law of the free-will; yet not an exceptional law, it is the law of all fathers, of all free-wills. Besides, if in the private Christian life the child of God finds dealings which are not reducible to law, grant even their lawlessness if that be possible, that is a family matter, a relation of parent and child, similar to the earthly relation, and scarcely the kind of case to be referred to science. Into ordinary family relations science rarely feels called to intrude; and it is obvious that in dealing with this class of cases in the spiritual world, science is attempting a thing which in the natural world it leaves alone. If ethics chooses to take up these questions, it has more right to do so; but that there should be a reserve in the spiritual world for God acting towards His children in a way past finding out is what would be expected from the mere analogies of the family. It is a pity this distinction between the paternal and the governmental relation of God is not more apprehended by science; for there is an indelicacy about all these questions which arises from ignor-

ance of it—questions concerning prayer and natural law, “special providences,” and others—which is painful to devout people. It is not by any means that religion cannot afford to have these things talked of, but they are to be approached in privacy, with the sympathy and respect due to family affairs.

The relations of the spiritual man, however, are not all, or nearly all, in this department. There are whole classes of facts in the outer provinces which have yet to be examined and arranged under appropriate laws. The intellectual gain to Christianity of such a process will be obvious. But there is also a practical gain to the religious experience of not less moment. Science is nothing if not practical, and the scientific method has little for Christianity after all if it is not to exalt and enrich the lives of its followers. It is worth while, therefore, taking a single example of its practical value.

The sense of lawlessness which pervades the spiritual world at present re-acts in many subtle and injurious ways upon the personal experience of Christians. They gather the idea that things are managed differently there from anywhere else—less strictly, less consistently; that blessings or punishments are dispensed arbitrarily, and that everything is ordered rather by a Divine discretion than by a system of fixed principle. In this higher atmosphere ordinary sequences are not to be looked for—cause and effect are suspended or superseded. Accordingly, to descend to the particular, men pray for things which they are quite unable to receive, or altogether unwilling to pay the price for. They expect effects without touching the preliminary causes, and causes without calculating the tremendous nature of the effects. There is nothing more appalling than the wholesale way in which unthinking people plead to the Almighty the richest and most spiritual of His promises, and claim their immediate fulfilment, without

themselves fulfilling one of the conditions either on which they are promised or can possibly be given. If the Bible is closely looked into, it will probably be found that very many of the promises have attached to them a condition—itsself not unfrequently the best part of the promise. True prayer for any promise is to plead for power to fulfil the condition on which it is offered, and which, being fulfilled, is in that act given. We have need, certainly in this sense, to know more of prayer and natural law. And science could make no truer contribution to modern Christianity than to enforce upon us all, as unweariedly as in nature, the law of causation in the spiritual life. The reason why so many people get nothing from prayer is that they expect effects without causes; and this also is the reason why they give it up. It is not irreligion that makes men give up prayer, but the uselessness of their prayers.

There is one other gain to Christianity to be expected from the wider use of the scientific method which may be mentioned in passing. Besides transforming it outwardly and reforming it inwardly, it must attract an ever-increasing band of workers to theology. There is a charm in working with a true method, which, once felt, becomes for ever irresistible. The activity in theology at the present time is almost limited, and the enthusiasm almost wholly limited, to those who are working with the scientific method. Round the islands of coral skeletons in the Pacific Ocean there is a belt of living coral. Each tiny polyp on this outermost fringe, and here only, secretes a solid substance from the invisible storehouse of the sea, and lays down its life in adding it to the advancing reef. So science and so theology grow. Through these workers on the fringing reef—behind, in contact with the great, solid, essential, formulated past; before, the profound sea of unknown truth—through these workers, and through

these alone, can knowledge grow. The phalanx of able, busy, and joyful spirits crowding the growing belt of each modern science—electricity, for example—may well excite the envy of theology. And it is the method that attracts them. And every day theology too, as it knows this method, gets busier,—not undermining the old reef, nor abandoning it to make a new one, but adding the living work of living men to this essential, formulated past.

We are warned sometimes that this method has dangers, and told not to carry it too far. It is then it becomes dangerous. The danger arises, not from the use of the scientific method, but from its use apart from the scientific spirit. For these two are not quite the same. Some men use the scientific method, but not in the scientific spirit. And as science can help Christianity with the former, Christianity may perhaps do something for science as regards the latter. Christianity is certainly wonderfully tolerant of all this upturning in theology, wonderfully generous and patient and hopeful upon the whole. And so just is the remark of "Natural Religion," that the true scientific spirit and the Christian spirit are one, that the Christian world is probably prepared to accept almost anything the most advanced theology brings, provided it be a joint product of the scientific method with the scientific spirit—the fearlessness and originality of the one, tempered by the modesty, caution, and reverence of the other.

To preserve this confidence, and to keep this spirit pure, is a sacred duty. There is an intellectual covetousness abroad just now which is neither the fruit nor the friend of a scientific age—a haste to be wise which, like the haste to be rich, leads men into speculation upon indifferent securities, and can only end in fallen fortunes. Theology must not be bound up with such speculation. "If"—to recall one of the fine outbursts of Bacon—"if there be

any humility towards the Creator, any reverence for or disposition to magnify His works, any charity for man and anxiety to relieve his sorrows and necessities, any love of truth in nature, any hatred of darkness, any desire for the purification of the understanding, we must entreat men again and again to discard, or at least set apart for the while, these volatile and preposterous philosophies which have preferred these to hypotheses, led experience captive, and triumphed over the works of God; and to approach with humility and veneration to unroll the volume of creation, to linger and meditate therein, and with minds washed clean from opinions to study it in purity and integrity. For this is that sound and language which 'went forth into all lands' and did not incur the confusion of Babel; this should men study to be perfect in, and becoming again as little children, condescend to take the alphabet of it into their hands, and spare no pains to search and unravel the interpretation thereof, but pursue it strenuously and persevere even unto death."<sup>1</sup> The one safeguard is to use the intellectual method in sympathetic association with the moral spirit. The scientific method may bring to light many fresh and revolutionary ideas; the scientific spirit will see that they are not given a place as dogmas in their first exuberance, that they are held with caution, and abandoned with generosity on sufficient evidence. The scientific method may secure many new and unique possessions; the scientific spirit will wear its honours humbly, knowing that after all new truth is less the product of genius than the daughter of time. And in its splendid progress the scientific method will find some old lights dim, some cherished doctrines old-fashioned, some venerable authorities superseded; the scientific spirit will be respectful to the past, checking that mockery at the old which those who lack it make

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, v. 132-3.

unthinkingly, and remembering that the day will come for its work also to pass away.

So much for the scientific method. Let us now consider for a moment one or two of its achievements. Apart from the usual reservations, which it is hoped are always implied—that science is only in its infancy, that the scientific method is almost still a novelty, that therefore we are not to expect too much nor to be absolutely sure of what we get—there is a special reason in this case for remembering that science is new. For this will prepare us to expect its contribution to theology—its contribution, that is, where the actual subject-matter of laws and discoveries of science are involved, its method—in one direction rather than in another, and in certain departments rather than others. Itself at an elementary stage, we should be wrong to look for any very pronounced contribution as yet to the higher truths of religion. We should expect the first effect among the elements of religion. We should expect science to be fairly decided in its utterances about them, to become more and more hesitating as it runs up the range of Christian doctrine, and gradually to lapse into silence. Proceeding upon this principle we should go back at once to Genesis. We should begin with the beginnings, and expect the first serious contribution to theology on the doctrine of creation.

And what do we find? We find that upon this subject of all others science has most to offer us. It comes to us not only freighted with vast treasures of newly noticed facts, but with a theory which by many thoughtful minds has been accepted as the method of creation. And, more than this, it tells us candidly it has failed—and the failures of science are among its richest contributions to Christianity—it has failed to discover any clue to the ultimate mystery of origins, any clue which can compete for a moment with the view of theology.

Consider first this impressive silence of science on the question of origins. Who creates, or evolves; whether do

the atoms come, or go? These questions remain as before. Science has not found a substitute for God. And yet, in another sense, these questions are very different from before. Science has put them through its crucible. It took them from theology, and deliberately proclaimed that it would try to answer them. They are now handed back, tried, unanswered, but with a new place in theology and a new power with science. Science has attained, after this ordeal, to a new respect for theology. If there are answers to these questions, and there ought to be, theology holds them. And theology likewise, has learned a new respect for science. In its investigations of these questions science has made a discovery. It has seen plainly that atheism is unscientific. It is a remarkable thing that after trailing its black length for centuries across European thought, atheism should have had its doom pronounced by science. With its most penetrating gaze science has now looked at the back of phenomena. It says "The atheist tells us there is nothing there. We cannot believe him. We cannot tell what it is, but there is certainly something. Agnostics we may be, we can no longer be atheists."

This permission to theism to go on, this invitation to Christianity to bring forward its theory to supplement science here, and give this something a name, is a great advance. And science has not left here a mere vague void for Christianity to fill, but a carefully defined niche with suggestions of the most striking kind as to how it is to be filled. It has never been sufficiently noticed how complete is the scientific account of a creative process, and how here biology and theology have actually touched. Watch a careful worker in science for a moment, and see how nearly a man by searching has found out God. The observer is Mr. Huxley. He stands looking down the tube of a powerful microscope. Almost touching the lens, he has placed a tiny speck of matter, which he tells us is the egg of a little water-

animal, the common salamander or water-newt. He is trying to describe what he sees; it is the creation or development of a life. "It is a minute spheroid," he says, "in which the best microscope will reveal nothing but a structureless sac, enclosing a glairy fluid, holding granules in suspension. But strange possibilities lie dormant in that semi-fluid globe. Let a moderate supply of warmth reach its watery cradle, and the plastic matter undergoes changes so rapid, and yet so *steady* and *purposelike* in their succession, that one can only compare them to those operated by a *skilled modeller* upon a formless lump of clay. As with an invisible trowel the mass is divided and sub-divided into smaller and smaller portions, until it is reduced to an aggregation of granules not too large to build withal the finest fabrics of the nascent organism. And then it is *as if a delicate finger* traced out the line to be occupied by the spinal column, and moulded the contour of the body; pinching up the head at one end, the tail at the other, and fashioning flank and limb into due salamandrine proportions in so artistic a way, that, after watching the process hour by hour, one is almost involuntarily possessed by the notion that *some more subtle aid to vision than an achromatic, would show the hidden artist with his plan before him, striving with skilful manipulation to perfect his work.*"<sup>1</sup> So near has this observer come to a creator from the purely scientific side, that he can only describe what he sees in terms of creation. From the natural side he has come within a hair's-breadth of the spiritual. Science and theology are here simply touching each other. There is not room really for another link between. And it will be apparent, on a moment's reflection, that we have much more in this than the final completion of a religious doctrine. What we really have is the joining of the natural and the spiritual worlds themselves. It seems such a long way, to

<sup>1</sup> *Lay Sermons*, p. 261. The italics are ours.



some men, from the natural to the spiritual, that it is a relief to witness at last their actual contact even at a point. And this is also a presumption that they are in unseen contact all along the line; that as we push all other truths to the last resort they will be met at the point where they disappear, that the complementary relations of religion and science will more and more be manifest; and that the unity, though never the fusion, of the natural and the spiritual will be finally disclosed.

When we turn now to the larger question of the creation of the world itself, we find much more than silence, or a permission to go on. We find science has a definite theory on that subject. It offers, in short, to theology, a doctrine of the method of creation, in its hypothesis of evolution. That this doctrine is proved yet, no one will assert. That in some of its forms it is never likely to be proved, many are convinced. It will be time for theology to be unanimous about it when science is unanimous about it. Yet it would be idle to deny that in a general form it has received the widest assent from theology. But if science is satisfied, even in a general way, with its theory of the method of creation, "assent" is a cold word for theology to welcome it with. It is needless at this time of day to point out the surpassing grandeur of the new conception. How it has filled the Christian imagination and kindled to enthusiasm the soberest scientific minds, is known to all. For that splendid hypothesis we cannot be too grateful to science, and that theology can only enrich itself which gives it even temporary place. There is a sublimity about the old doctrine of creation—we are speaking of its scientific aspects—which, if one could compare sublimities, is not surpassed by the new; but there is also a baldness. Fulfilments in this direction were sure to come with time, and they have come, almost before the riper mind had felt its need of them. The doctrine of evolution fills a gap at

---

the very beginning of our religion: and no one who looks now at the transcendent spectacle of the world's past, as disclosed by science, will deny that it has filled it worthily. Yet, after all, its beauty is not the only part of its contribution to Christianity. Scientific theology *required* a new view, though it did not require it to come in so magnificent a form. What it wanted was a credible presentation, in view especially of astronomy, geology, and biology. These had made the former theory simply untenable. And science has supplied theology with a theory which the intellect can accept, and which for the devout mind leaves everything more worthy of worship than before.

HENRY DRUMMOND.

(*To be concluded.*)

---

### DIVES AND LAZARUS.

LUKE xvi. 19-31.

THE parable of the unjust steward was spoken for the purpose of encouraging rich men to make a right use of their wealth, as well as for the sake of reminding all Christians that the qualities which give success in the world and constitute practical wisdom are very much required in the kingdom of God. But the Pharisees, who were rich, and who under a show of godliness and piety kept a very firm hold on their money, laughed at the novel investment which our Lord proposed.

In our day the views of Christ regarding the distribution of wealth are seriously discussed by political economists, and no one ventures to deride His suggestion. There are still, however, double-dyed Pharisees, who with decorous solemnity and without a shadow of a smile listen to our Lord's recommendations, but listen also without the slightest intention of allowing them any practical force, without one