

Is it too much to say, that at this distance from creation, with the eye of theology resting largely upon the incarnation and work of the man Christ Jesus, the Almighty should design with more and more impressiveness to utter Himself as the Wonderful, the Counsellor, the Great and Mighty God? Whether this be so or not, it is certain that every step of science discloses the attributes of the Almighty with a growing magnificence. The author of *Natural Religion* tells us that "the average scientific man worships just at present a more awful, and as it were a greater, Deity than the average Christian." Certain it is that the Christian view and the scientific view together frame a conception of the object of worship, such as the world in its highest inspiration has never reached before. The old student of natural theology rose from his contemplation of design in nature with heightened feeling of the wisdom, goodness, and power, of the Almighty. But never before had the attributes of eternity, and immensity, and infinity, clothed themselves with language so majestic in its sublimity. It is a language for the mind alone. Yet in the presence of the slow toiling of geology, millennium after millennium, at the unfinished earth; before the unthinkable past of palæontology, both but moments and lightning-flashes to the immenser standards of astronomy; before these even the imagination reels, and leaves an experience only for religion.

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

FIRST PAPER.

EXACTLY thirty years ago Bishop (then Mr.) Ellicott published the first edition of the first volume of his Commentaries on St. Paul's Epistles. Of those years no feature in

English literature has been more marked than the number and excellence of the expositions of Holy Scripture which have followed the volume just mentioned. The improvement in this branch of knowledge has been little less than a revolution. To go back now to the commentaries preceding those of Ellicott and Alford is to descend to a platform of sacred scholarship immeasurably below that on which we now stand. Of the last ten years the most conspicuous feature has been the number of popular expositions and series of expositions, some very good and others common-place, designed to bring the results of the best modern scholarship within reach of all intelligent readers of the English Bible.

Amid this abundance of expository literature, Systematic Theology has been somewhat neglected, and has indeed with some persons fallen into disrepute. There have appeared some very good books on Christian doctrines: but the number of them has been small. And efforts to build up a system of theology, or even to expound in its various relations any one doctrine, have not unfrequently been contrasted unfavourably with the consecutive study of the actual words of the Sacred Writers.

That this comparative repugnance to Systematic Theology has not been altogether without excuse, I shall in another paper endeavour to show. And it is not to be seriously regretted. For consecutive study of the Bible ought to precede, and to be the foundation of, systematic exposition of Christian doctrine. Our superstructure will be safe only so far as it rests on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets. I therefore cannot doubt that the special and almost exclusive attention during the past few years to exposition of the Bible will produce great and lasting benefit to the Church of Christ.

At the same time I hold firmly, and shall in these papers endeavour to prove, that Systematic Theology is the true

goal and aim of all consecutive study of Holy Scripture and gives to this study its highest worth, that this aim ever kept in view will greatly aid and guard from mistake our exposition of the various books of the New Testament, and that it is the noblest aim of human research.

By Systematic Theology I mean an effort to comprehend and to set forth in order in its various parts, and as a whole consisting of parts each bearing on the others, all that can be known by man about God and the mutual relations of God and man. It is a reflection in human thought of the Eternal Realities and of our relation to them. The aim of Systematic Theology is to raise this reflection, which through the essential imperfection and the moral contorsion of the mirror must ever be infinitely less than perfect, as near to perfection as possible; or, in other words, to bring about the closest correspondence possible between our conception of God, both in Himself and in His relation to us, and the Great Reality.

It has often been asked, What need have we for systems of theology, for uninspired delineations of Christian doctrine, when we have already the actual teaching of apostles and the recorded words of the Great Teacher? Why need we theories about the plain statements of Holy Scripture? Why need we rearrange and combine them into a system of our own? Is not the teaching of St. Paul and St. John better than that of modern theologians? To these questions the following reasons supply an answer.

We are compelled to systematize the results of our theological study because in the mind of each Sacred Writer the truths taught by Christ assumed the form of a SYSTEM; that is, they STOOD TOGETHER as mutually-related elements forming one whole. Consequently, only so far as we understand each writer's general conception of the Gospel can we understand his application of the one Gospel of Christ to the specific matters of Church life with which in each docu-

ment he deals. For each document was an outflow of, and was moulded by, this general conception.

This is conspicuously true of the intensely logical writings of St. Paul. For instance, he argues again and again that Justification through Faith involves Justification through the Death of Christ, and conversely ; and that each of these doctrines involves the universal fall of man. And many of his phrases, such as *crucified with Christ*,¹ *risen with Christ*,² are utterly unintelligible except when referred to his general view of the relation of the Christian believer to Christ. This compels us, if we wish to understand St. Paul's assertions and arguments, to endeavour to reproduce, by induction from his writings, his general conception of the Gospel, of Christ, and of God ; or, in other words, his system of theology.

It is true that already, from the hand of St. Paul, we have, in the Epistle to the Romans, an invaluable treatise on Systematic Theology. But even this will not suffice us. For we find all-important additions to it in his other Epistles, especially those afterwards written in the seclusion of prison life during his first long captivity. These Epistles greatly broaden the view derived from the Epistle to the Romans of St. Paul's conception of the Gospel. And, in order that our view may be harmonious, we are compelled to re-arrange in our mind his entire teaching.

We may mention in passing that this reproduced conception of the Gospel is not merely our only means of understanding the extant writings of the apostles, but is our chief immediate gain from study of them, more valuable indeed than a mere knowledge of the line of thought of each Epistle or Gospel. For it enables us to approach the mental platforms from which the sacred writers severally looked at Christ and the eternal realities ; and thus in some measure enables us ourselves to contemplate Him. Each

¹ Gal. ii. 20.

² Col. iii. 1.

Epistle is but a local and passing application of the Gospel ; whereas the Gospel, as St. Paul conceived it, is capable of endless application. To reproduce his conception of it, is therefore an abiding gain.

A second reason for systematizing the results of our theological study is that we are compelled to do so by the constitution of the human mind. We are all theorists ; men, women, and children. As soon as we begin to observe and to think, we begin to theorize. And this inborn tendency is one of the noblest qualities of the intelligence of man. We observe similarities in things around, and we unconsciously group similar objects, and thus form a conception of a group. We endeavour to account for phenomena by tracing several of them to one law, and for laws by tracing several of them to one general law. We arrange in order the results of our observation and induction that thus we may search for deep and broad principles underlying and accounting for all phenomena known to us. And we do this in proportion as any matter is real and important to us.

All this, when once we find reason to believe that behind and above the things seen are greater things unseen, and that these unseen realities are closely related to us, we cannot avoid doing in reference to them. And in proportion to our consciousness of the reality and the importance of the unseen will be the earnestness of our search after the ultimate basis and source of religious phenomena. A man who is satisfied with the present world and the present life, and cares nothing for the infinity and the eternity above and beyond them, will be indifferent to Systematic Theology. To him it will seem to be abstruse and absurd. But every earnest Christian arranges in order, often unconsciously, his thoughts about the unseen world which is so real and near and dear to him ; and seeks for the deeper harmonies which underlie even its apparent contradictions.

It will often be found that men who profess to reject all theological systems have some pet theory of their own which they wish to set up under guise of rejecting all theories.

A third reason for arranging in order the elements of our theological knowledge and noticing their mutual relations is that, apart from man's thought, the eternal realities, which if the Gospel be true underlie theology, are themselves actually related, forming one whole. The oneness of the Gospel is an outflow of the unity of God and of the universe. Consequently, unless we form a combined conception of the eternal realities as a whole we shall not conceive them as they actually are. Similarly, of a great and beautiful building it is not sufficient merely to examine each part separately with however great care. Unless we take a view of the whole and of each part in its relation to the whole, we do not appreciate even the various parts. So of the temple of Gospel truth.

Just as each step forward in natural science reveals a closer mutual relation of whatever material objects are within man's observation, so every deeper view into the unseen and eternal realities behind and above the visible creation reveals a like unity. To obtain this deeper view we must combine and arrange in order our conceptions of God and of His relations to us.

From the above it appears that man's inborn tendency to generalise, already given as a second reason for Systematic Theology, corresponds with the actual constitution of the world, seen and unseen, in which he lives. Because the objective world around us is essentially one, we cannot avoid endeavouring to form, in the subjective world of our own thought, a united conception of it.

The comparison, suggested above, of natural science with theology is worthy of further attention. A very good illustration of the need and aim of Systematic Theology is found in the science of astronomy.

For ages it had been noticed that while most of the stars retain their relative positions, a few of them are ever changing their position: and from the creation of man it was observed that apparently the sun rises and sets. These strange and interesting phenomena demanded explanation. Men sought first a connected conception of the apparent movements of the heavenly bodies, that thus they might learn their real movements. Various theories were put forward bearing the names of their originators or advocates. At first all of them might have been called human inventions; and might have been, and by some men were, rejected as mere theories. But at last it was found that one of them explained all the known facts of the case, and was the only conceivable explanation of them. And the careful observation of centuries has long ago made us absolutely certain that the system of Copernicus is correct, that it is a reflection in the mind of man of objective reality. In other words, it is now known to be, not an invention, as were the other systems, but a wonderful discovery of absolute truth.

Not content with this discovery, the restless intelligence of man sought to trace the exact path of the planets around the sun. Circles and complicated epicycles were suggested, and rejected as not explaining, but contradicted by, known facts. Kepler suggested that the orbits were ellipses, and finally suggested that the sun occupied one focus of the ellipse. This theory, or guess, was found to explain approximately all known phenomena, and has long ago been accepted as indisputable truth. In a similar way Kepler further discovered that the planets cover equal areas of orbit in equal spaces of time, thus explaining their quicker and slower motion at certain parts of their orbits; and that the squares of their times of revolution bear to the cubes of their distance from the sun the same proportion. It was afterwards found that these laws apply to the satellites revolving round planets, except that whereas the

just-mentioned proportion is the same for all moons of any one planet it varies for each central body according to its mass. These three laws explain the movements apparent and real of earth, sun, planets, and satellites.

But the discoveries of Kepler themselves demanded explanation. Why do the planets obey these apparently arbitrary laws? It is the glory of Newton to have discovered that Kepler's three laws are but particular applications of the one law of universal gravitation, which determines both the fall of an apple, the flight of a cannonball, and the path of a planet. He proved that, given such bodies as sun and planets, and a certain original impulse to each planet in a certain direction, and the constant operation of universal gravitation, the planets can do no other than revolve in elliptic orbits with the sun at one focus, covering equal areas in equal times, and in periods of which the squares bear always the same proportion to the cubes of the distance of the planets from the sun; and that the same is true of satellites and their central planet. Like Kepler's three laws, it is now universally acknowledged that Newton's law of universal gravitation is absolute truth. In other words, it is now seen that behind these human generalisations, results of man's mental effort, stands objective reality.

Similarly, unless Christianity rests upon a delusion, behind theological theories and religious phenomena are realities and purposes older and loftier than the planets and their orbits, consisting like the solar system of various elements all mutually related. The task of the systematic theologian is to gain, and to present, a correct view of these unseen realities in detail and as one whole. And he is successful only so far as his conception is a correct and full reflection of its great object-matter.

We have now seen that we are compelled to form for ourselves systems of theology, by the historical fact that

the greatest teachers of theology, namely the writers of the New Testament, did so, and that unless we imitate them we cannot understand their teaching; that, to form theories about every matter which deeply interests us, is a necessity of the human mind; and that systems of theology are needful because the object-matter of theology is itself a system, and therefore can be understood only so far as our thoughts about it assume systematic form.

If all this be true, theology claims a place among the sciences. And it claims the first place. Of the practical worth of the natural sciences, it is needless to speak. We see it in the material progress of modern civilisation. Not less evident are the practical results of Christianity. It has changed completely the face of human society; and has saved it from the utter ruin to which in the days of Christ it was evidently hastening. And in our day science and civilisation in their highest forms are found only in those nations in which Christianity is prevalent. All others are either sinking into decay or are being raised by influences from Christian nations. Copernicus and Luther were born and died almost at the same time. The one was the founder of modern astronomy. The chief work of the other was to propound a theory of man's reconciliation to God unknown to the mass of men in his day. And no Protestant questions now who rendered to mankind the greater service. To thousands the truth taught by Luther is more precious to-day than any material good. All this is a very strong presumption that Christianity rests on a foundation of fact and truth; or, in other words, that the matter of Christian theology is real. And, if so, it is indisputably as much above the matter of the natural sciences as are mind above matter, heaven above earth, the eternal and the infinite above the passing and the finite. The science which investigates matter so glorious is indeed the noblest branch of human research.

In a second paper I shall endeavour to show that this all-important subject is surrounded by special difficulties; and shall make suggestions with a view to overcoming them. I shall also begin to expound what seems to me the best method of theological research, a method in strict harmony with the essential constitution of the human mind and with the special nature of our object-matter. This method will be further expounded in a third paper. And a fourth paper will investigate the true relation between the results thus obtained and the dogmas of the Christian Church.

JOSEPH AGAR BEET.

JOSEPH AND MARY.

THE first and third Evangelists tell us all we know of Mary. They tell us that she was the espoused wife of Joseph, a carpenter of Nazareth, and that the Divine call came to her after her espousal and before her marriage. What a call it was, and what a prospect it opened up! No sooner was Mary left alone with her own thoughts than she began to realize something of what had been appointed her, and what she must now prepare herself to pass through. The sharp sword that Simeon afterwards spoke of with such pathos, was already whetted, and was fast approaching her exposed heart. On a thousand canvases throughout Christendom we are shown the angel of the annunciation presenting Mary with a branch of lily, as an emblem of her beauty and a seal of her purity; but why has no artist stained the whiteness of the lily with the red blood of a broken heart? For no sooner had the transfiguring light of the angel's presence faded from her sight, than a deep and awful darkness began to fall around Joseph's espoused wife. Surely if ever a suffering soul had to seek its right-