

THE EXPOSITORY TIMES.

Notes of Recent Exposition.

THE editor of the *Scottish Congregationalist* (whom we take to be the Rev. Alexander Brown of Aberdeen) contributes an article to the September issue of that magazine on 'The Unpardonable Sin.' We are not much troubled with the unpardonable sin now. We are not so much troubled with any sin as our fathers were. It may be that we disbelieve the theology of the evolution school, which tells us sin is inevitable. It may be we can demonstrate its inconsistency with Scripture and with human nature. But it has affected us. We do not now make sin the centre of our religious thinking. Our fathers were driven insane by thoughts on the Unpardonable Sin. We run no such risk.

Well, we have to get back. The risk of insanity is better than the certainty of judgment. The warning of our Lord against what we call the Unpardonable Sin may have been addressed immediately to the men of His own generation. Mr. Brown believes that it was. But His words have a way of fitting men in all generations. And it is not likely that there ever was a time when men stood more in need of this word's warning than we do to-day.

The difficulty about the Unpardonable Sin is not to determine what it is, but why it is unpardonable. We are now agreed that, in Mr.

Brown's words, 'the blasphemy of the Holy Ghost is substantially the wilful rejection of the Spirit of Holiness that was incarnated in Jesus Christ.' The Holy Spirit being the author of all goodness, to reject goodness is to reject Him. The Jews rejected Him in Jesus Christ. We may reject Him in one another. We may deny that goodness is goodness, not because we do not recognise it as goodness, but because it is not convenient. That is blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. That is the Unpardonable Sin.

Why is it unpardonable? Three answers have been given. First, it is said when a man commits this sin he never repents of it. If the sinner would repent, he would be forgiven, but as no sinner ever has been known to repent of this sin, it is practically unpardonable, and may be so described. That answer will not do.

Next, it is said that this sin is so heinous as to carry a man outside the limits of God's grace. There is a sin unto death. It is simply so bad that God refuses to see that sinner's face any more. This is that sin. Repentance or not is nothing; the sinner never gets within cry of God again. But neither will that answer do. Esau may or may not have been guilty of the Unpardonable Sin; but when it is said that he found no place of repentance though he sought it care-

fully with tears, it does not mean that. God's creatures cannot pass beyond reach of the sweep of His white raiment. That answer will not do.

Last of all, it is said that the unpardonableness of this sin is not in this life but in the life to come. If a man repents of this sin, and any man may repent of it in this life, he will be forgiven. But if he does not, beyond death there is no forgiveness. It is an Unpardonable Sin only to those who persist in it unto the end. But Jesus seems almost to have anticipated this answer. For He says, '*Neither in this world, nor in that which is to come.*' That answer will not do.

So Mr. Brown invites us to let our theological systems take care of themselves for a little till we see what the passage itself actually is. The statement about the Unpardonable Sin is found in Mt 12^{31, 32}, Mk 3²⁹, and Lk 12¹⁰. Christ speaks as usual to the men who are listening to Him. They are the men of the pre-Messianic dispensation. They were God's chosen people. God had made a covenant with them, and the essence of it was the provision for the forgiveness of sins. By means of this provision, seen and symbolized in the morning and evening sacrifice, their sins were removed from them as far as the East is from the West, and they were 'holy' unto the Lord. It is true that there was some risk of their presuming upon this privilege. There was some risk that they might count the morning and evening sacrifice an unfailling passport to God's presence. If there were the regular observance of the appointed times and seasons, was there not the assurance of God's unwavering favour? There was the risk that they might reason so, and when goodness came into conflict with position that they might reject goodness and stand by position and privilege.

Jesus warns them of that risk, and that they are running it hard. He warns them that they are presuming upon their covenant privilege. If they think there is no limit to God's grace, while the

morning and evening sacrifice is maintained, they are mistaken. It is quite possible for them to break the covenant and lose the grace. They will do so if they prefer the sign of the covenant to the righteousness for which the covenant was established; if they reject goodness when they see it because it is not convenient.

Their rejection of Him is thus their loss of the covenant privilege of Israel. So far as the age in which they are living is concerned, they are castaways. He addresses them pointedly, according to an ancient and likely reading, retained in the margin of the Revised Version. '*All manner of sin shall be forgiven unto you men,*' He says. For this was their age (or 'world,' as we foolishly translate the word). It was the age of Israel's covenant privileges. Under it all manner of sin was forgivable—except one. And of course it could not be forgiven in that dispensation. It was to secure goodness and the recognition of it that that dispensation was formed. If its purpose is missed, those who miss it lose its advantage. It has nothing else to give them. In that age or dispensation (*αιων*) they have committed the Unpardonable Sin.

But it is the same in the age that is to come. The age that is to come is of course the Messianic age, the age of the Kingdom of God. It is the same under the new covenant as under the old. For the end of the Gospel, as surely as the end of the Law, is righteousness. Let the means for obtaining it be as superior as you please, nevertheless this is the end. And if righteousness is not attained, if goodness is not welcomed when it is seen and lies within the grasp, then there is no forgiveness. Nothing can take the place of goodness, not even the mercy of God in Christ.

Among the Book Reviews in the *American Journal of Theology* for the quarter ending September may be found the two following notes:—

Professor Barton, of Bryn Mawr College, reviews a book called *Biblical Apocalypics*, by Dr. Terry of New York. He says that the most successful part of Professor Terry's book is its treatment of the 'Apocalypse of the Synoptic Gospels,' which is another name for our Lord's discourse concerning the Last Things. Professor Terry believes that the discourse refers to one subject, not two, and that that one subject is 'the entrance of the Christ, through His Church, upon the heavenly career of control in the crises of the world's affairs, of which the destruction of Jerusalem was the first.' He therefore takes 'this generation' of Mt 24³⁴, Mk 13³⁰ literally; and holds that the 'all nations' of Mk 13¹⁰ refers to the Roman Empire. Professor Barton says, 'This is an interpretation which can be successfully defended on many grounds.'

The translation of Mt 28¹⁸ by the Revised Version, 'baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost,' first drew the ordinary reader's attention to the fact that there were two expressions in the Greek, one 'in the name' (*ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι*), the other 'into the name' (*εἰς τὸ ὄνομα*). At the same time, the ordinary reader was much puzzled to know what 'into the name' meant, and what was the difference between the phrases. A year ago Jul. Böhmer published in Giessen an essay on the subject. He examined the use of the Hebrew expression (*בְּשֵׁם*), and its translation in the Septuagint. He came to the conclusion that both in the Septuagint and in the New Testament 'in the name' and 'into the name' are used indifferently. The two expressions are equivalent and interchangeable. The special form 'into the name' is merely an individual peculiarity of St. Matthew and St. Paul. And the meaning of 'in or into the name' is simply 'in the presence of.' Böhmer's paraphrase of Mt 28¹⁹ is, 'Make all the nations My disciples, in that ye shall baptize them in the presence of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; that is, ye shall baptize who hold as a personal possession the essence of the Father,

the Son, and the Holy Spirit, ye who are also in the inmost fellowship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.' Professor Zenos, who reviews the book, does not agree with the interpretation, but he admits that so far as the linguistic facts go, the author has 'done his work in a truly scientific manner.'

There is an unsigned editorial article in *The Biblical World* for August on 'The Use of the Story in Religious Teaching.' The writer thinks that teachers, 'even the better class of teachers,' scarcely appreciate the value of art in pedagogy. The Bible stories owe their greatest charm to their almost perfect artistic form. It is this, together with their simplicity and transparency, that explains the hold which they have taken upon the human heart in all centuries.

They would not have this hold if they were not stories. If they were histories they would not have it. The writer of history is careful as to dates, the sequence of events, the externality of the narrative—by which is meant that he places the event outside himself in its own time and circumstances. The story-teller cares for none of those things. His numbers are for the most part three, seven, forty—numbers of symbolical meaning. He omits and rearranges the details of the story at will. Above all, he does not hesitate to add to the actual skeleton of facts the warm colouring of his own times and thoughts, his sympathies and antipathies.

The writer does not mean to say that the stories found in Genesis and Exodus, in Samuel and Kings, in the Books of Daniel and Jonah, are unhistorical. He is not considering the question whether they represent actual occurrences or not. The difference between the story and the history does not lie in that. It lies in their form. It is not a question of fact, but of literature. The stories may have as much fact behind them as the driest annals. The point is that the Bible story is a story. It is art and not science. Underneath

the presentation lies in every case a controlling motive, a great thought, placed by the supreme divinity in the heart of him who frames and formulates the story. Its strength, as well as its beauty, lies in that.

The consequence is that the stories of the Bible are of universal application. There is no subject which a teacher can desire to teach but will find illustration here. There is no experience which human life presents, that the Scripture stories have left untouched. In their perfect art they know no limitations of race or time. We sometimes speak as if the Hebrew story-teller wrote for the Hebrew race. He wrote for Hebrews certainly, but not for the race. He wrote for the individual, and the individual is the same all the world over, and finds the Hebrew story good.

The only question that the modern artist can ask respecting the stories of the Bible is this: 'Are they in their form and content too religious for modern use?' They are religious. They reflect a personal God. In their earlier examples they are boldly anthropomorphic in presenting Him. But just in this lies their worth, their undying worth, as stories. It is childhood we want to teach. Childhood is both religious and anthropomorphic. The stories of the Bible appeal, as no other stories do, to individuals and to nations in the early and teachable periods of life.

It has been said that the life of the late Professor Drummond circled round the word 'Conversion.' Some even say that the word conversion had a fatal fascination for him. It had the same fascination, they say, as the candle has for the moth. He had the advantage over the moth that he knew it was able to burn. Yet he never got away from it. And (the suggestion is) it burned him up at last.

That is too brief a biography of Professor Drummond. It is surely too tragic also. And

yet if the greatest tragedies are lives of indecision, there are many tragical lives about, and conversion has much to do with them. If Drummond did not perish before the popular conception of conversion, it will not be denied that the popular conception of conversion has held others for years together on the rack of uncertainty, and that in respect of the most momentous decision in life.

Is the popular conception of conversion scriptural? That is the question. And that is really the question which the late Dr. Field of Norwich seeks to answer in the paper which is published in the new edition of his *Otium Norwicense*. He wisely puts the question in a less radical form. Is 'Conversion' a scriptural term? That is how he puts it, and that is how he answers it. But he is not done till he has told us whether we ought to expect conversions in the popular sense or not.

The word 'Conversion' occurs but once in the Authorized Version. And there it is used not of individuals but of a class. There were two great classes into which the world was then divided. Of the Jews as a whole conversion could scarcely be used, but of the Gentiles it certainly could. And so we read in Ac 15³ that Paul and Barnabas, on their way from Antioch to Jerusalem, 'passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring *the conversion of the Gentiles*; and they caused great joy unto all the brethren.'

The question at once arises, Was the writer thinking chiefly of God or of the Gentiles? Did he mean to say that God was converting, *i.e.* turning, the Gentiles to Himself, or that the Gentiles were using such liberty of will as they had, and were turning to God? The word itself (*ἐπιστροφή*) means simply 'a turning.' And that the writer's thought is of the active 'turning' of the Gentiles to God, and not of their passive 'being turned,' is proved, says Dr. Field, by the 19th verse—'Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble

not them which from among the Gentiles *are turning to God*—for there the verb is used (*ἐπιστρέφουσιν*) from which the substantive here translated ‘conversion’ is formed, and the meaning is unmistakable.

Dr. Field does not mean to say that the Gentiles did or could turn to God without the operation of the Holy Spirit. He does not even object to the use of the word ‘conversion,’ which is found in all the English Versions, from Tindale to the Revisers. But its meaning must be understood. And its meaning is the same as that which St. Paul expresses in writing to the Thessalonians, when he says (1 Th 1^{9.10}), ‘*ye turned (ἐπεστρέψατε) to God from idols to serve the living and true God.*’

So the word ‘Conversion’ in the modern sense of a sinner’s conversion is a modern word. It is never used in that sense in the Bible. Is the verb ‘to convert’ so used? The passage that leaps at once to mind is Mt 18³, ‘Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.’ And Dr. Field admits that it is unique. Only in this passage of all that have to be considered is the simple verb (*στραφήτε*) employed; elsewhere it is the compound (*ἐπιστρέψατε*). This peculiarity was noticed even by Wyclif, who translated, ‘but [= except] ye be turned.’ It was also noticed by Tindale, who, however, translated, ‘except ye turn,’ and Tindale was followed by Coverdale, Cranmer, and the Geneva. The Rhemish (Roman Catholic) Version, however, translating the Vulgate (*nisi conversi fueritis*) rather than the original Greek, gave ‘unless you be converted,’ and unfortunately it was followed by the Authorized translators.

Now there is no doubt that Wyclif and Tindale did well to translate the simple Greek verb used here by the simple English verb ‘turn,’ and the Revisers have done well to restore Tindale’s rendering, ‘Except ye turn.’ Thus the compound verb ‘convert’ is left for the compound Greek

verb, which is found in all the other passages we have to deal with. But the central question remains. Was Wyclif right to translate the verb passively, ‘except ye be turned,’ or was Tindale right to translate it actively, ‘except ye turn’?

There is no doubt that Wyclif was wrong and Tindale right. For though the Greek verb is passive in form, in actual usage it is reflexive, or what the grammarians call ‘middle.’ The agent is himself the object of the action. The examples are numerous and unmistakable. Thus Mt 7⁶, ‘Lest they *turn again* and rend you (*στραφέντες ῥήξουσιν*);’ Lk 7⁹, ‘He *turned him about*, and said (*στραφείς εἶπεν*);’ Ac 7³⁹, ‘And in their hearts *turned back again (ἐστράφησαν)* into Egypt.’ From the *usus loquendi*, says Dr. Field, there is no appeal. And the *usus loquendi* is unmistakable.

Then this passage cannot be used as an example of conversion in the modern use of the word. And there is another reason. It is the partial nature of the change. It was not from sin that the disciples were urged to turn, but from the self-seeking which prompted the question, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ It was not to holiness but to meekness. Dr. Field quotes ‘the good old nonconformist’ Doddridge, ‘Except ye be converted, and turned from these ambitious and carnal views, and become,’ etc.; and ‘the evangelical’ Thomas Scott, ‘Though all the apostles, except Judas, were at this time regenerate, and “converted” in the general sense of the word, yet they all needed a very great change in respect of their ambition and carnal emulation.’

Now then, let us look at the passages that contain the compound verb. The most significant—Dr. Field calls it the cardinal text on which the question of the meaning of conversion turns—is Is 6¹⁰. Since the simple Greek verb is rendered by the simple English verb ‘turn,’ it is reasonable that the compound, if it is intransitive, should be translated by ‘return.’ This, however, is done only four times in the Authorized Version, and in

every case the meaning is literal, as Mt 12⁴⁴, 'I will return into my house,' never that with which we have to do. It is the compound form 'convert' that is used. And to that there was no objection when the Authorized Version was made, for then 'convert' was both transitive and intransitive. In the passage before us 'convert' is the word used, and it is used intransitively: 'Lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and *convert* (ἐπιστρέψωσι), and be healed.' In modern English we should say 'turn' or 'return.' The point to be noted, however, is that the action is attributed to the sinner, not to the Spirit of God.

But this verse is three times quoted in the New Testament. The Greek is the same as that which is used in the Septuagint version of Is 6¹⁰ (ἐπιστρέψωσι). It is, however, translated quite differently. The passages are Mt 13¹⁵, Jn 12⁴⁰ (Gr. ἐπιστραφῶσι or στραφῶσι), and Ac 28²⁷. In each case the A.V. translators have used 'convert,' and have used it *in the passive voice*. The same statement which in the Old Testament they attribute to the sinner they attribute in the New to God.

This is certainly wrong. It is true that in itself the Greek may be rendered either way. The same form is sometimes active and sometimes passive. Thus in 2 Sam 17⁸ it is first transitive and then intransitive: 'I will *bring back* (ἐπιστρέψω) all the people unto thee, as a bride *returns* (ἐπιστρέφει) to her husband.' But it is not so in the Hebrew. Apart from the sense, we know that in the passage just quoted the verb is first transitive and then intransitive, because in the Hebrew it is first the *Hiph'il*, that is, transitive, and then the *Kal* or intransitive. In translating the Old Testament we should expect that the A.V. would always follow the Hebrew and not the Greek of the Septuagint. It does so in this passage. But it does not do so always. In Jer 31¹⁸ the Hebrew is unmistakable, and should have been rendered, 'Turn Thou me, and so shall I turn.' But the Greek of the Septuagint Version is, as

usual, ambiguous, and unfortunately, under the misleading of the Vulgate, Wyclif and all subsequent translators rendered the text, 'Convert me, and I shall be converted.' The A.V. followed suit with 'Turn Thou me, and I shall be turned,' and even the Revised Version retains the mis-translation.

Well, in Is 6¹⁰ the Hebrew is equally unmistakable, and is correctly translated. And when this passage is quoted in the New Testament, it ought to be translated in the same way. The ambiguous Greek is determined by the unmistakable Hebrew. In each place the R.V. changes 'and should be converted' into 'and should turn again.' For the revision of the New Testament is much more rigidly accurate than is the revision of the Old.

The remaining passages are easily explained. In Ps 19⁷, 'The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul,' the Hebrew, Dr. Field points out, is a peculiar combination, which has nothing to do with the conversion of a sinner. He prefers the marginal rendering, 'restoring the soul'; but the literal translation is, 'making the soul to come again,' and that is actually given in the margin of La 1¹¹. Ps 51¹⁸ is more in point. But the A.V., 'sinners shall be converted unto thee,' ought to give place to the margin of R.V., 'sinners shall return unto thee,' for the language of the original is the same as that of Is 6¹⁰, already noticed. Is 60⁵, 'The abundance of the sea shall be converted unto thee,' is again off the line. Both the Hebrew and the Greek are different words, and the meaning is, 'shall be transferred unto thee.' But what of Lk 22²²? The A.V. translation is, 'And when thou *art converted*, strengthen thy brethren.' But the Protestant commentator agrees with the Roman Catholic that the reference cannot be to the conversion of Peter in the modern sense of that word. The meaning must be, says Dr. Field, 'when thou art come to thyself,' or, as in the Revised Version, 'when once thou hast turned again.'

The only passage that remains is Ja 5^{19, 20}. And Ja 5^{19, 20} is peculiar. But it is not difficult. It is peculiar in that the verb is transitive. The A.V. translation is, 'If any of you do err (*πλανηθῆ*) from the truth, and one convert (*ἐπιστρέψῃ*) him, let him know that he which converteth (*ἐπιστρέφας*) the sinner from the error (*πλάνης*) of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.' But there is no difficulty. For, though Dr. Field would prefer a simpler rendering, such as 'bringing back,' a rendering that would suggest the idea of a sheep that has wandered from the fold, which is certainly contained in the Greek words rendered 'err' and 'error,' still there is no serious objection to the word 'convert,' for no one would think of attributing an irresistible power to the *human agency* here spoken of, and the modern idea of conversion is excluded. Dr. Field again quotes Doddridge, 'who cannot be supposed to have had any prejudice against the popular idea of conversion,' and who thus paraphrases the passage: 'If any of you do wander from the truth, and one *turn him back to it*.'

Is there, then, in the Bible no such thing as conversion—conversion in the modern sense of the word? There is, but it is not called by that name. Zacchæus was converted by the preaching of Christ; three thousand were converted on the Day of Pentecost through the preaching of Peter; a 'great company of the priests' through that of Stephen, the gaoler of

Philippi through the stirring appeal of Paul; and Lydia by his more argumentative discourse. But in none of these cases is 'convert' or 'conversion' used. Dr. Field does not consider the word indispensable therefore. And if it is to be used at all, let it be used with discrimination. When a sudden and extraordinary change in regard to religion takes place in the state of mind of any individual, let that be called conversion. Let conversion also be used of the heathen, or the Jews, or any body of men whom it is sought to bring over from their former error or ignorance to the true faith. If it be done with charity, it should give no offence. But—

— 'But'—we must quote Dr. Field verbatim now — 'when conversion is insisted upon as universally necessary in order to a state of salvation—when preachers divide their hearers, being believers in a common Christianity, into the two classes of "converted" and "unconverted"—when the former class are led to cherish overweening ideas of their acceptance with God, and of their assurance of eternal salvation; and the latter are either driven to despair of their spiritual state, or else, without any real change of heart, to adopt the phraseology and exhibit the outward signs and badges of the converted;—a candid inquiry, how far such views of Conversion are consistent with a "discreet and learned" ministration of the Word of God, can never be deemed superfluous or inopportune.'