

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

enly throne, to tread the streets of Jerusalem as a temporal prince, is too gross a conception to be for a moment entertained. An earthly crown has encircled the brow of a Nero and a Domitian, but a spiritual diadem is only his to wear, "on whose vesture and thigh is written the name KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS."

ARTICLE VI.

THE SALVATION OF INFANTS.

BY REV. ALVAN TOBEY, DURHAM, NEW HAMPSHIRE.

THE controversies through which Christianity has been carried, were in many instances greatly useful in the development and application of the Christian doctrines, and especially in the correction of those errors which had become intertwined with them. The false philosophy which has often corrupted, and still oftener encumbered, the teachings of the scriptures, could not be so effectually removed in any other way as by the thorough sifting of discussion. It is indeed a process that shakes up truth and error in such confusion as may perplex observers not well skilled in distinguishing one from the other. The advocates of truth may be found defending some erroneous appendage, that should be thrown off as an excrescence, or mistaking some matter of fact supposed to be important, though really not material. But, in the result, truth comes out of the confusion, more beautiful and stronger for being freed from the incrustations of antiquated error, the monstrosities, contradictions, absurdities, which false philosophies have bound around it.

It is nearly a third of a century since a controversy arose, of not a little interest at the time, on the question, whether "the damnation of infants is a doctrine of the Calvinists." The parties were men of high standing and influence in their different spheres: Dr. Lyman Beecher, of Boston, and Prof.

Andrews Norton, of Cambridge. Dr. Beecher, in republishing a sermon first issued twenty years before, "On the Government of God," appended a note, indignantly denying the charge against Calvinists, of "believing and teaching that infants are damned, and that hell is doubtless paved with their bones." He declared that he had "never seen or heard of any book which contained such a sentiment, nor a man who believed or taught it." Prof. Norton replied to this note, maintaining the charge that "the monstrous doctrine" is found in Calvinistic writers of the highest authority, and is necessarily a part of the Calvinistic system.¹

It is not our intention to give an account of this controversy. But a careful reading of the successive Articles suggests some considerations which may be worth the attention of all who find themselves called to engage in such discussions, or to inquire into the opinions of former times.

1. There ought to be more care than is common with regard to the spirit of religious controversy. More of a respectful, kindly, and conciliatory manner towards an opponent than is usual with controversial writers, would abate nothing from their independence and manliness, or the strength of their arguments, while it would give them far greater influence with those from whom they differ and those who have not taken the side of either party. A clear, decided, strong expression of our opinions and our reasons, is only a just treatment of our subject and our readers. But boasting, taunts, sneers, or even ridicule, produce irritation, not conviction; and, if joined with weak arguments, they secure contempt rather than respect. Nor, if an argument appear entirely successful against an opponent, does an air of triumph and proud self-gratulation add anything to its force, but rather detracts from its dignity. A successful disputant, like a successful warrior, can afford to be magnanimous. Only so does he best consult his own honor.

¹ The Articles, which are of marked ability and research, may be found in the *Christian Examiner*, Vol. IV. for 1827, pp. 431—448; Vol. V. for 1828, pp. 229—263, 316—340, 506—542; and in the *Spirit of the Pilgrims*, Vol. I. for 1828, pp. 42—52, 78—95, 149—164.

Besides, it is often the fact that an argument which is conclusive on some one important point, leaves untouched other questions of substantial consequence in relation to the whole subject. And candor (without which no amount of ability or learning is worthy of confidence) requires that we do not over-estimate our success.

2. We should be very cautious in ascribing to others obnoxious opinions, which may seem to us natural and logical inferences from doctrines avowed. The modes of intellectual training, and the habits of thinking and reasoning, are so diverse, that inferences which to some minds are natural, logical, and inevitable, are not so to others. Few, if any, are always self-consistent, either in their belief or their practice. In some, inconsistency is much more obvious and frequent than in others. But inconsistency of reasoning is a more charitable supposition than a manifest contradiction of first principles. Only such opinions should be ascribed to writers of a past age as they have plainly authorized.

3. There is some modification of theological belief and methods of reasoning, with the progress of time. The Calvinism of Calvin and Turretin is not exactly the same as that of Jonathan Edwards and Joseph Bellamy. Still less is it the same as that of Timothy Dwight or Nathaniel Emmons, of Andrew Fuller or Thomas Chalmers, of Edward D. Griffin or Leonard Woods. How large a departure constitutes an essential change, is a question about which men will differ; and they will disagree very much according to their estimate of the points of doctrine concerned. There is room for honest difference in this matter. It cannot be said that the slightest departure from the statements of Calvin is an abandonment of Calvinism. And yet there are some principles so distinctive, that if they be given up, the system is abandoned. But if the depravity of man, in its entireness, depth, and strength, as never overcome by any human culture alone; if the supreme sovereignty of God in the bestowment of his Spirit and in the salvation of those whom he hath from the beginning chosen to eternal life; and if the wise, righteous, benevolent, eternal purposes of God in all events

and all worlds, providing and carrying out the plan of redemption by the blood of Christ, be fully maintained, can it with any reason be said that the essential or distinctive principles of Calvinism are forsaken? Even though there should be some explanations and methods of presenting the free agency of man not found in the writings of Calvin, and such as will better guard the sovereignty of God from the appearance of conflict with the first principles of truth and justice, still, are not all the essential principles of the system preserved?

Whatever may be the answer to this question, truth is of far greater importance than a name. And highly esteemed as the name of Calvin justly is, only the weakness and folly of bigotry can deter us from receiving truth which he did not find, and rejecting error which he held. No human name, however worthily honored, can be rightly made a shibboleth, which all men must "frame to pronounce alike," under penalty of being excluded from the company of the faithful.

A history of opinions held in former ages with regard to the future condition of infants, might doubtless be interesting and instructive. But the object of the present Article is, with only a glance at the past, to consider what we have reason to believe on the subject.

Very early in the history of Christianity, as a consequence of the natural connection in men's minds between outward signs and the inward experience signified by them, the doctrine of baptismal regeneration seems to have arisen, and, in agreement with it, the belief that the baptism of infants is necessary to their salvation. While some thought there might be an intermediate state for infants dying unbaptized, others, like Cyprian and afterwards Augustine, rejecting this idea as unscriptural, believed them to be consigned to eternal punishment for the sin of their nature. This continued to be the belief of the Romish church generally until the Reformation, except as it was modified by the doctrine of purgatory, which furnished a "*limbus infantum*."

The Reformers, rejecting purgatory, some of them reject-

ing also baptismal regeneration, retained the theory of depravity as a corruption of the essential nature, the very substance of the soul, by descent from Adam, and held generally that infants of believing parents are saved on account of the faith of their parents, but other infants cannot be saved. The Augustinian and Calvinistic doctrine of election or predestination was also held by Calvin's followers applicable to infants as to adults, — the doctrine that some are selected for salvation, and others are consigned to eternal death without any regard to their own agency and their personal character. Some, however, like Zuingli, rejected this belief in its relation to infants, or held that all infants who die are chosen to salvation. Others, like Watts and Ridgely, did not maintain it in all its extent and consequences, though they do not seem to have found methods of setting it aside which were quite satisfactory to their own minds. It is not unusual with writers of a later period to say, as Pelagius did long before, they “do not know what is done with infants,” or, as President Dickinson of the college at Princeton said, “it concerns us to leave them in the hands of that God whose tender mercies are over all his works.” Now, and for some generations past, theological writers who refer to the subject, very commonly express the hope, and many of them the full belief, that all infants who die are saved. This method of speaking is not peculiar to any class of theologians, and is scarcely more common with those of one school than another. And yet there are those who do not seem to think we have ground for a very decided belief on the subject.

The opinion has been expressed that half the human race die in their infancy. When we consider that a vastly greater proportion of such deaths occurs in barbarous and heathen lands than among civilized and Christian people, we shall not, perhaps, think the estimate too high. And this large class of our fellow-beings, whether half or less, are so interesting as to draw forth towards them the tenderest and strongest, as well as the most amiable, affections of our nature. The hearts which have bled at the death of infant children are so numerous in every community, that few

questions can be asked of more general and deeper interest than this: What is the evidence that those who die in their infancy have everlasting life? Is there proof sufficient to take away all reasonable doubt whether it is well with them? Or is the question one about which God has told us nothing clearly in the Bible, and we have no knowledge from other sources, so that, whatever favorable opinions we may form, we must hold them as the suggestion of our wishes, and not as our settled belief, on substantial and sufficient grounds?

Surely the consideration of this subject is something more than a matter of curious speculation. We ought to have reasons, if we can, that will satisfy our minds and give us rest in our belief with regard to it. But, as it is a fact well known, that, in times past, many theologians have not believed that all infants who die are saved, and, probably, some serious persons now have doubts and fears respecting their condition, we have reason to look at the grounds for apprehension, and try to find whether such apprehension can be removed.

What, then, is found in the character and condition of the human race, and in the Bible, to awaken doubt or fear about the well-being of those who depart from this life in that early stage of it in which there is no knowledge and no actual practice of good and evil?

There is, first, the great and terrible fact of human depravity. In all the history of the past, in all our observation of men, and in all our self-knowledge, as well as in the Bible, we have the truth coming before us continually, that men are prone to evil, that this tendency is not occasional and partial, but perpetual and universal; "for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."

There are two principal theories of depravity as affecting the character and condition of infants, with many variations and qualifications. One is, that human nature is itself essentially evil previous to any moral action, and utterly incapable of any good unless it be changed. According to this theory, the salvation of any infant is impossible unless

he have a new nature given him, and also the pardon of that sin which lies in his nature.

The other theory is, that human nature is not of itself evil previous to moral action, but has a tendency or bias to evil, such as makes it certain that the child will sin, and he always does sin, as soon as he begins to act morally, unless prevented by the grace of God. According to this theory, it is not the nature itself that needs to be changed, but the tendency, bias, or inclination; and without this change the salvation of infants is impossible. There is also need of pardon wherever there is actual sin.

Whichever theory of depravity is held, the universal necessity of regeneration may be a second reason for doubt and fear with regard to the future condition of infants.

But these two objections to the belief of infant salvation are substantially the same. Their force consists in the supposition that God cannot, or does not, by his renewing power and grace, prepare the soul of the infant who dies, for the purity and blessedness of heaven. This ground of apprehension is as strong against the belief that any part of those who die in their infancy are saved, as it is against the belief that all are. If any are regenerated before they come to the period of intelligent and accountable moral action, regeneration so early is possible; and there is nothing in the condition and character of the infant to make it impossible for all dying in that early stage of life to be heirs of salvation.

But all have believed that some of these early dead are saved. At no period of the church has it been denied that the children of believing parents, if they die after being truly consecrated to God, have life eternal. The promise of God — “unto you and your children” — seemed to make this unquestionable. The severest creeds also speak of “elect infants;” and if such have been saved, there is nothing in the native depravity of the human race, and the necessity of regeneration, to make it impossible that all who die in their infancy may be. The difficulty on this ground is the same in all; and if it be overcome in some cases, it may be in

others. Whether it will be overcome in all cases remains a question to be answered.

There are some portions of the scriptures from which the inference has been drawn, that many who have died in their infancy were not saved. Such are the narratives of the destruction of the world by the deluge; of the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah; of the extermination of the Canaanitish nations; of God's destroying judgments visited upon families for the peculiar sins of the parents, as in the case of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. It may, perhaps, be supposed that there is a confirmation of the inference from these narratives in the well-known declaration, that God will visit the iniquities of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation; and also in the general principle, both of the Bible and of God's providential government, that children do suffer in consequence of the misdeeds of their parents.

To the apprehensions which may be suggested by these facts, it may be replied, that all they tell us about God's treatment of men in this world really decides nothing as to the condition of infants in another world. It does not go a single step beyond this life. The veil between this life and the future is not lifted. Infants die, and their death is often caused by the wickedness of their parents; is, indeed, a part of the punishment visited by God's providential and moral government on parents for their crimes. We all know that multitudes of infants die; some by violence, and some by disease; some from want, some from cruelty, and some from excessive but mistaken care; some overwhelmed with their parents in the same destruction, and others snatched from the arms of parental love. But their death, however it may come, does not reveal anything of their condition afterwards. Because it is in many instances the natural consequence of parental iniquity, and the terrible judgment of God upon it, we have no reason to infer that those infants must perish forever. They may be taken away from their parents, or cut off with them, as a judgment of God on those who gave them birth, and yet be saved from that everlasting destruction which they would have incurred

if they had lived in sin and died impenitent. The Old Testament gives us very little information about the life to come. It does not, like the New Testament, keep the unseen world constantly open before us. The judgments of God which it narrates are, almost wholly, those which in this life he visits on such as have been guilty of flagrant wickedness. Their children being involved with them is a part of their punishment. But, surely, we are not obliged to infer that their children will perish forever because they are so cut off, any more than we are obliged to infer that all children who die will perish forever because they die. In truth, the same event may be a terrible judgment to the parent, and the greatest mercy to the child.

Will it be said that the New Testament represents faith in Christ as the necessary condition of salvation; and therefore, as infants do not believe, they cannot be saved?

To this it has been well replied, that the scriptures speak to those who are competent to receive the truth by believing and obeying it. The Bible is not addressed to infants before they are capable of moral action; and it cannot be supposed that God demands the same conditions of them as of those who can know their duty and do it. It is required of a man according to that he hath, and not according to that he hath not. Our Lord plainly teaches that any other principle of government would be unjust. And can any course inconsistent with this principle be pursued in God's treatment of infants? Certainly they cannot be condemned for rejecting the gospel; for in fact they do not reject it. If they do not confess Christ because they cannot, neither do they, nor can they, deny him.

The doctrine of imputation may be, indeed, has been, supposed by those who hold it, especially if they believe it the only proper explanation of the essential facts and peculiar truths of the gospel, to have some bearing on the subject.

But if, according to this theory, the sin of Adam is reckoned to his posterity, so that they all, including infants, are exposed to eternal death on account of it; in like manner

the righteousness of Christ is reckoned to the elect, so that they all shall be saved on his account; and, for anything we know, all who die in their infancy may be "elect infants."

The question has been asked, if all infants are saved, what is the great and peculiar benefit of infant baptism?

Infant baptism is an ordinance of deep interest, and fraught with rich blessings to those, both parents and children, who have proper views of its meaning, and make a right use of it. But it is an ordinance of the church on earth, and sufficiently significant, as it brings to her and her children who live, precious blessings during their course of trial in the present life. On this account, doubtless, it affects their condition in the life to come. And is not this enough? Why should we look for anything more? How indeed can we suppose the baptism of an infant who dies to have any influence on its salvation, unless we retain with the ordinance, more or less distinctly, something of the old, absurd fiction of baptismal regeneration?

It has been suggested that an unquestioned belief of infant salvation will operate in some cases as a temptation to infanticide. And possibly, in rare circumstances of crime already committed and infamy certain to result from exposure, or of extreme suffering from poverty, such a belief may contribute to overcome natural affection, and so strengthen the power of the tempter, when he says to a wretched parent: It will be easy at once to make your infant happy forever and relieve yourself of sore trouble.

But if such a regard for consequences should have any influence on our belief or its avowal, on the other side an argument from the consequences may be brought, of much greater weight. The denial of infant salvation, on what are supposed to be the principles of Christianity, will prejudice the minds of many against the faith of the gospel, and operate on them as a strong temptation to infidelity. The apparent unreasonableness and cruelty of infant perdition makes it, if admitted to have a logical or real connection with the evangelical system of belief, a ready and effective weapon in the hands of those who oppose such a system.

They have seen this, and have not been slow to use the advantage thus given them. Nor does it seem possible to escape such damage to the true faith, unless it can be shown that we may reasonably believe they have a fair trial after they leave this world, or that they are saved. And since we are constrained to set aside the supposition of another state of trial after this life, as inconsistent with the general tenor of the scriptures and with some of their plainest teachings, we may have, before any careful consideration of the direct arguments, a reasonable inclination towards the belief of infant salvation.

What reasons now have we to believe that all infants who die are saved ?

1. First, from all we know of God's justice, this belief is reasonable. His justice, so far as our knowledge goes, is more in favor of it than against it.

It may indeed be objected to our reasoning from the attributes of God, that they are matters so far above our comprehension as to make it impossible to bring them within the narrow limits of our understanding, or subject them to the forms of our logic. God is above us, unsearchable, past finding out. We should not be so presumptuous as to think that we can compass with our little minds the infinity of his being and perfections, or that we can fathom the reasons of his ways and the methods of his government.

Yet he himself addresses our capacity for knowledge of good and evil, and for judging between truth and error, between right and wrong, in relation to his treatment of men. He calls us to employ our thoughts, and send forth our inquiring and reasoning faculty vigorously and widely, with regard to the relations we sustain to him and his government. It is a great folly, a great sin to *think* that we are not made to think, and to argue that we have no capacity for argument, because our power of thought and argument is limited, and we can go no further than we have ground to stand on.

The principles of truth, which are elementary and self-evidencing, when presented to the mind, lie at the foundation of all our reasoning. It is only as we stand on these

principles that we can prove the existence of God, or, indeed, that we can prove anything. The belief of some things always carries along with it the belief of some other things. With the existence of God, the creator and governor of the world, proved or admitted, we have also the belief of his perfect, unchangeable goodness and justice. According to some philosophers and theologians, his justice proceeds from his benevolence, is prompted by it, and has no other aim but to maintain his goodness and give it full effect. According to others, both attributes are original or primary in him, justice no less than benevolence. According to all, both are coincident and consistent; and though one may be modified in its operation by the other, neither can have its strength weakened, its glory tarnished.

But what says the justice of God with regard to the subject before us? Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? Certainly he will. Can he destroy the righteous with the wicked? Surely not. And does not the supposition that God will turn over to everlasting destruction a large and most interesting portion of the human family, who have had no real and personal trial of their character, conflict with the clearest, most settled ideas, and the fullest knowledge we have from all sources of God's justice? Who will say it does not?

Perfect justice in a ruler must prompt him to bestow rewards and inflict punishments on his subjects exactly as they are deserved. To him who deserves much, must be given much; and to him who deserves little, must be given little. On the same principle, if there be any who have done neither good nor evil, to them neither good nor evil must be given.

It follows, of necessity, that if the infants of our race are not really sinners, they cannot, in strict justice, be subjected to punishment. Although they belong to a sinful race, and will sin when they shall be capable of moral action, to inflict punishment while they are not personally and truly sinners, would be to violate the principles of eternal truth and justice on which the throne of God stands.

It will be said by some that, though infants have not actually sinned, they are really sinners, because they have a sinful nature. By the hypothesis of imputation, or of the federal headship of Adam, in which he acted for all mankind (his offspring, or those who were really existing and acting in him when he sinned), many theologians have held that infants, before they begin to act, are truly sinners and justly exposed to eternal death.

With this view of the matter there will arise to many minds an uncomfortable feeling, an ugly apprehension of finding it exceedingly difficult, if not quite impossible, to repel the charge of regarding God as the author of sin. It looks as if the infant were made a sinner, without, in any sense, a choice or agency of his own, and made such even thousands of years previous to his own personal existence. The objector can say to such a view of the infant character and condition, apparently with unanswerable force, that by it God makes the child a sinner, and then holds him condemned to eternal death for being a sinner.

Still, it is interesting to know that able men who have held this opinion have thought they could find something in their views of God's justice favorable to the salvation of infants. Dr. Griffin, in his sermon on "Adam, our Federal Head," has these two paragraphs:

"On the whole, we must conclude that infants might justly be sent to hell. We do not come to this conclusion from reason, but from the revelation of God. Whatever our blinded reason may say about so mysterious a matter, we must bow in submission to the decision of God." This decision, he thinks, is given in the fifth chapter of Romans. Perhaps, at this time, the most competent students of the Bible may have a different opinion.

"Now, do not go away and say that I have preached that there are infants in hell of a span long. I am not sure that I have a right to offer or to form an opinion on this subject. It may be human weakness, but I cannot help hoping that all infants will be saved, notwithstanding what I am forced to say about the requisitions of justice. And I found this

hope on two considerations: First, the immediate object of punishment is to convince others that if they sin they must suffer; but infants cannot be impressed with this truth by the punishment of infants; and adults are sufficiently impressed by the punishment of adults. The punishment, therefore, does not seem to be so absolutely necessary as in other cases. Secondly, by appointing a day for the 'revelation of the righteous judgment of God,' he seems desirous to show creatures the reasonableness of his measures; and it now seems as if it would be easier to make this impression on creation if he did not make creatures and send them to hell before they knew their right hand from their left."

Dr. Griffin thus declares a hope that all infants will be saved, founded on the objects and reasonableness of God in the execution of his justice. But may we not find stronger ground for such a hope in the first principles of his justice?

The infinite One is so far above us that we must, if we would be wise, acknowledge ourselves unable to comprehend him and his works. It would, indeed, be the presumption of folly and the weakness of vanity for us to pretend that we can always explain, and so "justify the ways of God to men." But the unfathomable mysteries of his providential and moral government give us no warrant for ascribing to him a course of proceeding that appears contradictory to the first principles of all justice, human and divine. And this we seem to do, if we say that God has created men sinners, without any choice or action of their own, and then consigned such as die infants to everlasting death, with no opportunity nor possibility of change in their character and doom. Surely we should be cautious lest we charge God foolishly; and by no means should we justify those who would call him a "hard master, reaping where he has not sown, and gathering where he has not strewed." No reasoning can be more essentially erroneous and mischievous than that which perverts or sets aside the very idea of justice.

From all we know of God's justice, the only reasonable conclusion is, that infants who die before they have knowl-

edge of good and evil, are not condemned to perish forever. And since we are informed of only two conditions in the world to which we are hastening, we may hope and believe that they have everlasting life.

2. This belief is greatly strengthened by the love of God. Many theologians regard benevolence as the foundation attribute of his character, the fountain-spring of his moral nature. God is love; and we must suppose that his goodness, if it do not originally prompt, yet does always support and guide (may we not say control?) his justice. Certainly there can be no real conflict between these two essential qualities of his moral being.

The purpose of our argument does not require us to show that the destruction of infants would be unjust, though we think it has been shown. It is enough if we have no reason to believe the justice of God unavoidably requires such severity on all who belong to the sinful race. Then his benevolence, in conjunction with his justice, very strongly supports, if it do not perfectly establish, the belief, that they will be saved.

And how can the justice of God require the destruction of that part of the human family who have had no real and personal trial of their character, when it does not require the destruction of the whole? God's justice has allowed him to make provision for the salvation of all men,—all, certainly, who are competent to know and accept its terms,—so that even the chief of sinners may have eternal life, whoever will believe in Jesus Christ. Surely, then, it may allow that infants who die, however affected by the inheritance of depravity, shall, by the same provision, in some way have eternal life. And if justice do not forbid this great gift of God to the helpless and harmless heirs of our natural life and death, we must suppose that his benevolence will secure the boon to them. If they have done neither good nor evil, it cannot indeed be said that they deserve the blessedness of heaven, any more than they deserve the punishment of hell. Strictly, they deserve neither one nor the other. Reward, then, must be a gratuity, and punishment a severity, both

alike undeserved. And since the love of God has provided salvation for sinners who have been long and deeply guilty, if they turn to him whom they have offended, since his love calls them to turn with the offer of life eternal, must not the same love give life eternal to those who have not so offended, though they belong to the offending race? What other conclusion can be in any way consistent with all we know of God's love?

The love which so shines out in all the exhibitions that God makes of himself by his works, and which in his word is declared to be the source, the moving spring of his plan of redemption, the love which gave his Son to be the propitiation for our sins, which moved Christ to come from heaven and die on the cross for us, — for the wilfully and perversely wicked, — we cannot suppose would leave the helpless offspring of humanity, who have not learned to know good and evil, in everlasting death. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Has he not, then, so loved the world as to make provision that whosoever is not capable of actually committing sin, nor of believing in Christ, shall not perish, but have everlasting life? If we may reason at all from the attributes of God, it seems to be a fair conclusion that he has. It would be hard to find a case in which an argument from both the justice and the love of God, has greater force than with regard to the subject before us.¹

3. But this argument does not stand alone. It is very strongly supported by the teachings of the scriptures con-

¹ It is apparently the fact, that some time intervenes after the birth of a child before the commencement of its moral and accountable action. It is assumed in this Article that such appearance agrees with the reality. But some suppose that moral action begins at birth. To such, a portion of our reasoning may not seem to be conclusive. Still this supposition cannot diminish the force of the argument from the scriptures. And is not the strength of what has been said of the justice and the goodness of God, as bearing on the subject, diminished more in appearance than in truth? On the supposition that moral action begins at birth, it seems plain that the justice and the love of God must regard infants more favorably, as they must be less guilty, than any other portion of the human race.

cerning the kingdom of God. The work of Christ is represented to us in the New Testament as bringing good in some way to the whole world. It was prompted by God's love, and is in its object and provision, its reach of kindness and salvation, a real benefit to all the human race. Mark the language : God so loved the world (Jno. 3 : 16). God sent his Son that the world through him might be saved (3 : 17). Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world (1 : 29). Christ is called the Saviour of the world (4 : 42). And this has come to be, perhaps, the most common term by which he is known. It is said also that he should taste death for every man (Heb. 2 : 9); that he gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time (1 Tim. 2 : 6); that God is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe (4 : 10); and that Jesus Christ is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the whole world (1 Jno. 2 : 2). The two last passages quoted are worthy of special notice, because they make a distinction between those who believe and those who do not believe, expressly declaring that God is the Saviour of all men, and Christ the propitiation for the whole world. It is utterly inconsistent with the view of God's love and the provision he has made by Christ, both extending to the whole world, as they are set before us in these passages, to suppose that a large part of our race are not, and cannot be, blessed by the coming of Christ. The infant portion of mankind, it seems, must be within the arrangement made by the divine love and grace, if these sayings of the divine word are true. Why should it not be ?

Will it be said that, according to the view taken of the infant character, they are not really sinners, and, therefore, cannot be partakers of the atonement? It is true that they do not need the pardon of sins which they have not committed, any more than the heathen need pardon for not believing the gospel, when they have not heard it. But they belong to a sinful race, and are liable and prone to sin. They need to be saved from their liability and proneness to sin, and from all the evils of their union with corrupted

human nature. And this salvation, with an immortality of blessedness, may be secured to them through Jesus Christ. His work of mediation and salvation is more than a bare expiation for actual sin. It reaches further, and more fully provides the grace of God for all our spiritual necessities than atonement or expiation alone can.

There is some analogy between the condition of very young children and the condition of those who have not heard the gospel. Supposing men to be penitent, in whose ears the glad tidings never sounded, may they not be saved on account of that redemption purchased by that Saviour of whom they have not heard? It has been by no means a strange opinion, among Christians of literary culture, that Socrates, the best and wisest of the Greek philosophers, was really a good man; that he manifested a truly Christian spirit; and that, if he had heard the gospel, he would have died for the faith of Christ with the same constancy and calmness in which he suffered for his integrity. If this opinion be correct, is he not saved through Christ, though he never on earth heard that glorious name?

The early history of New England relates that the missionary Mayhew, found an Indian woman who, having lost several children, was impressed with the thought that she might pray to the Great Spirit for the life of one recently given her. The child of her prayer lived; and the mother continued praying to the God who, she believed, had granted her request. Afterwards the gospel was preached to her, and at once she received it, saying: "This is the God to whom I prayed." Was she not in the way to be saved through Christ, before she heard of him?

The Old Testament saints, it has been frequently said, believed in a Saviour who was to come, and were saved through him. But where is the evidence that they generally had any clear and consistent ideas of a Saviour to come? The whole system of temple worship and sacrifices was, indeed, prophetic of "better things." But did they understand the prophecy? Did they see in the daily sacrifice, the burnt-offering, and the sin-offering, a type of the great

expiation which was to be made for the sins of the world by the Son of God? Were not those bloody rites, even to the most intelligent of them, unless, perhaps, in some rare exceptional cases, only a significant acknowledgment of their own guilt? "The prophets inquired and searched diligently concerning salvation, searching what or what manner of time the Spirit did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow; unto whom it was revealed that not unto themselves, but unto us, they did minister the things reported by them who have preached the gospel." When the prophets were so little informed, others must have had far less knowledge of the Saviour to come. Yet, if penitent, they were saved through redemption by Christ.

So, doubtless, those little children who have actually begun a life of sin, if they are penitent, are saved through Christ, though they may never have heard of him. If they have a capacity for sin, they have a capacity for repentance; and, being penitent, they are saved. The knowledge of a Saviour is not essential to the salvation of those from whom, in the providence of God, such knowledge is withheld. Every penitent, humbled soul is redeemed by Christ's blood, and blessed with life eternal.

And that large portion of the human family who die in the period of infancy, too early for them to have become actual sinners, must we not suppose the provision, through Christ, reaches them, so that "of such is the kingdom of God"? How otherwise does this provision answer to God's love for the *world*? How otherwise did he give his Son, that the *world* through him might be saved? How otherwise did Christ give himself a ransom for *all*? How, indeed, is he the Saviour of all men, and the Saviour of the world? It must be, according to the revelations of the gospel, that the whole world is benefited by the work of Christ; so benefited that salvation is provided and offered freely for all as God's gift, and that all shall have eternal life who do not choose the way to eternal death, and persist in their choice.

4. In the fifth chapter of Romans, more plainly than anywhere else, it is declared that the consequences of Adam's sin come upon all men, as descended from him. And there we find a direct comparison and contrast of the evil effects resulting from the transgression of Adam, and the good effects resulting from the work of Christ. The parts of the chapter most fully presenting this comparison are the 15th verse, and from the 18th to the 21st, inclusive. "But not as the offence, so also is the free gift; for if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many." "Therefore, as by the offence of one, judgment came upon all men to condemnation, even so by the righteousness of one, the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous. Moreover, the law entered that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound: That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life, by Jesus Christ our Lord."

Can these declarations be understood as meaning less than that the evils which come to men unavoidably, from the disobedience of Adam, are fully counterbalanced by the good which is procured for them, so that they may receive it if they will, through Jesus Christ? The disastrous effects of Adam's sin on the whole family of man are declared; and the fact that the grace of God has provided, through Christ, a remedy equal to those disastrous effects, is also declared as plainly. So far, then, as the infant portion of the human family is exposed to perish in consequence of descent from Adam, eternal life is provided for them by the grace of God, through Jesus Christ. Otherwise, it does not seem to be true that, "as judgment came upon all men to condemnation, so the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life;" and that "where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." Can it be, consistently with this comparison, that the work of Christ is more limited, in the extent of its reach

and its provided blessings, than the curse of sin introduced by the first transgressor?

5. "For of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19: 14). Has this declaration the meaning which would be taken from it by a plain, unlearned reader? It looks like a direct, general, and authoritative statement, that infants are entitled to the blessings of the kingdom, and so a decisive proof that if they die they have everlasting life. Has it all this force?

The declaration is found in three different places: Matt. 19: 14; Mark 10: 14; Luke 18: 16. In Matt. it is, "of such is the kingdom of heaven;" in the other gospels, "of such is the kingdom of God." But the change of the last word makes no difference in the sense. No fault is to be found with the translation. The Greek words cannot, perhaps, be more exactly expressed than by the English words used for them. Indeed, they seem to be plain enough. Any man of good sense and ordinary information would probably find no difficulty in obtaining a natural and satisfactory sense from the passage, if it had not been suggested by the more learned, that there is some objection to taking the easiest and most obvious meaning as true.

The meaning which seems the most natural is, that such persons as the little children brought to Jesus, whom the disciples had forbidden to come, have part in the kingdom of heaven. Why should not this be taken for the true meaning?

It has been objected that the words, taken exactly, would mean that the kingdom of heaven is composed of infants, and so would exclude all others. But this is not their natural meaning as addressed by the Master to his disciples. They could not so misunderstand him, for they regarded themselves as having part in the kingdom of which he speaks.

The chief objection has been, that the meaning which seems the most natural conflicts with the teachings of the Bible in relation to depravity. For example: we all "were by nature the children of wrath;" "that which is born of the flesh is flesh;" "behold, I was shapen in iniquity;" "fool-

ishness is bound in the heart of a child;" "they are all under sin." These passages, and others like them, doubtless teach the native depravity of man. They teach that children are prone to sin. But unless they show that infants (for the children brought are called infants in Luke) are incapable of having part in the kingdom of heaven, and of so being saved from sin and death, they fail to show that the declaration, "of such is the kingdom of heaven," is not true of them as a fact.

Really our Lord, by these affecting words, makes no direct reference to the character of children. He does not say they are sinful, or prone to sin, or holy, before they are actually wicked. He only declares a very important fact concerning them, that they have a part in the kingdom which he came to establish; in other words, that his kingdom of salvation reaches to them with its blessings.

This implies that they have need of such salvation. The design and the operation of establishing his kingdom in the world, is to save men from sin and death, from sin and all its consequences. Of course, then, if his kingdom reaches to them, they have need, in some degree at least, of his salvation. Thus the declaration, taken in its obvious sense, supposes that they are, somehow and to some extent, involved in the evils of sin. So far is it from standing in opposition to the doctrine of native depravity.

An explanation that gives the passage a different meaning from the one most obvious, has been thought by some correct. It has been said that the Greek word translated "of such," *τοιούτων*, may mean "such-like." And so it has been supposed to be spoken of persons who are like little children — who are humble, confiding, teachable. With this idea of the meaning, it has been thought equivalent to the saying of our Lord on another occasion (Matt. 18: 2, 3), when he took a little child and set him in the midst of the disciples, and said to them: "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." But this was spoken to the disciples expressly to rebuke their pride and teach them humility; because they had asked him:

Who shall be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And the words we are considering were uttered on a different occasion and for a different purpose—when little children were brought, to encourage their coming to him for his blessing. The two passages not having the same purpose, are not likely to have the same sense.

It is also a decisive objection to this way of taking the one before us, that, so understood, it has an occult meaning not naturally expressed by the words as they stand, and not to be regarded as true, unless there were stronger reasons for it than appear.

And is there not at least as great danger of doctrinal error from the supposition that an imitation of the naturally amiable traits of childhood is the way to have a part in the kingdom, as by the supposition that little children themselves have a part in it?

Let us now look at the reasons for the plain, common understanding of the words.

1. The fact of its being the plain, common way of understanding them, is a strong reason for it. There is no law of language more universal and unquestionable than this: the most obvious and natural meaning of a word or passage is to be taken, unless there be something in the connection or in the nature of the subject forbidding it. And there is nothing in this connection, or in the nature of the subject, showing that the natural and obvious meaning should not be taken.

2. A second rule of interpretation, very much like the first in its universality, is, that the meaning is to be preferred which best agrees with the grammatical connection of the passage. Now, the words before us are directly connected, in their grammatical construction, with the command: Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not. They give the reason for the command. The causative conjunction *for* (*γάρ*) unites the reason with the command, and does not allow between them so long a pause as a period. And so, by the grammatical construction, “of such” (*τοιούτων*) should refer directly to the children mentioned.

3. Another important rule of interpretation is, that in all doubtful cases, the sense is to be preferred which best agrees with the evident design of the writer or speaker. Here the manifest design of our Lord is to reprove and correct the error of the disciples, who opposed little children coming to him. And this design requires that *such* should refer personally to the children present. To suppose that other persons are meant, who have some likeness to children, does not by any means so well answer the purpose. It blunts the edge of the reproof. But when we hear the Master saying: "Of such little children as these, whom you would keep away from me, is the kingdom of God, the kingdom which I came to establish in the world," we see that the error of the disciples is corrected.

With these three reasons in favor of the meaning that would, at first view, be taken by the common reader, how can we refuse it, and prefer another sense, which does not seem to be naturally expressed by the words? There are no laws of language more universal and unquestionable than these. And they ought to be decisive.

There is also much greater force thus given to the lesson drawn from the example of these children, as related by Mark and Luke. It is a piece of additional instruction, and not merely an application of that which had been said before. The Great Teacher says, in effect: "You, and every one else, must also become like these very children, whom you would keep away from me, in order to receive the blessings of my kingdom."¹

¹ It must be admitted that many commentators, perhaps a majority of those who have the highest reputation, are against this way of understanding the passage. But, so far as we have observed, they do not show a careful and thorough examination of it. And there is good authority on this side. The words are frequently quoted by the best writers as having the meaning we find in them. Alford, one of the latest and best critics, takes them in this sense, and intimates no doubt of its correctness. "We can hardly read our Lord's solemn saying, without seeing that it reaches further than the mere then present occasion. It might one day become a question, whether the new Christian covenant of repentance and faith could take in the unconscious infant, as the old covenant did; whether, when Jesus was no longer on earth, little children might be brought to him, dedicated to his service, and made partakers of his blessing? Nay, in the pride of the human intellect, this question was sure one day to be raised: and

The question may be asked: Does the phrase "the kingdom of heaven," certainly include in its meaning eternal salvation? This expression, or the similar synonymous one, "the kingdom of God," is used nearly a hundred times in the gospel histories. Generally the words are those of the Saviour himself. And it needs but a little candid attention to the manner of his using them, for any one to be satisfied that he so speaks of the blessings, present and eternal, brought to men by him. There are slight variations in the idea suggested of these blessings, from the circumstances in which he speaks. But the kingdom of God was that reign of truth and love and salvation which the Messiah came to establish. It came nigh when he was proclaimed. Of it he taught: "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God;" and "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation; neither shall they say, lo, here! or lo, there! for behold, the kingdom of God is within you." Of it he said to Pilate: "My kingdom is not of this world."

Will it be said that this kingdom has an outward form in the church, and the words of our Lord may be only an assurance of peculiar privileges to children brought to him as connected with his church? But the privileges of the church are not limited to this life. The children brought to Christ while he was on earth, doubtless, had peculiar privileges secured to them, as connected with his church in this world, if they lived; and so have those dedicated to him since; but if they died in their infancy they had none, unless in the life to come. Those of them who died so early must have been saved, or it was a deception to say that they had part in the kingdom of God.

The exact meaning of this declaration would be met if some infants are saved, for example those who have been dedicated to God by their believing parents. But there is

our Lord furnishes the church, by anticipation, with an answer to it in all ages. Not only may the little children, infants, be brought to him, but, in order for us who are mature to come to him, we must cast away all that wherein our maturity has caused us to differ from them, and *become like them.*"

no intimation that the meaning should be so limited. And, so far as we can see, there is no distinction of character, before the knowledge of good and evil, which gives ground for such a difference. We may, therefore, naturally and reasonably, understand "of such" to mean, of these and all who are like them. And so of every infant who dies, the epitaph is true that Coleridge wrote for one :

"Ere sin could blight, or sorrow fade,
Death came, with friendly care,
The opening bud to heaven conveyed,
And bade it blossom there."

This, then, is the conclusion to which we are led by the kindly declaration of our Lord concerning little children: that the provision of grace establishing the kingdom of God reaches their condition, and so they all will have part in the salvation of the kingdom, unless as they advance from infancy they cut off themselves by sin, impenitence, and unbelief. Hence may be inferred the peculiar propriety of their being consecrated to God as heirs of his grace, unless those who are responsible for them, and should give them this consecration, are unbelievers, so that the act would be only mockery and a lie.

The sum of the whole matter is this: God made man upright, and placed him on trial, under law to live or die, as he should obey or disobey. He broke the law, and brought on himself its just condemnation. By its exact terms he would have been cut off without reprieve or remedy; for it has no promise, no provision for anything but obedience or death. Then he would have had no posterity.

But God's purpose of wisdom and goodness, from the beginning, was to give him, after he had fallen, and the sinful race of which he was the head, not only a fair but a merciful probation, in which they might have opportunity of being recovered from the power and the condemnation of sin, and blessed with everlasting life. His love prompted him to introduce a remedial system, a provision above the law

yet sustaining its righteousness and authority, so that he may save all the penitent who turn to him. He freely and truly offers salvation to all; and his revealed design is to save all who in fact repent.

It is indeed his arrangement, the plan of his supreme and sovereign wisdom, that all men, by their descent from Adam, enter upon this life with the disadvantage of a tendency to evil, which makes it certain that they will sin when they come to put forth moral action. But his plan also is, that they begin life with the advantage of being under a remedial system. The very existence of the race on earth, as descended from the first transgressor, is essentially connected with the remedial system, and dependent on it; and by its recovery from sin and death is possible to all, as certainly as God is fair in his offers and true in his promises. All those who have sinned would be saved by the remedy through Christ, if it were not that they choose the way of sin, and persist in their choice. This they do in the exercise and abuse of that moral freedom and personal agency with which he has endowed them, and which is the glory of their being. So they perish when they might be saved, because they will not choose life. And surely the wisdom and love which provided the remedial system adapted to the condition and equal to the wants of the race, do not leave out of it those who die before they know good and evil, and are actually sinners, whose very existence depended on its introduction. To suppose they do, is quite inconsistent with the arrangement by which, "where sin abounded, grace did much more abound," and with the Lord's saying, in relation to infants: "Of such is the kingdom of heaven."