

ARTICLE V.

IS THEOLOGY AN IMPROVABLE SCIENCE?

BY REV. LEONARD WITHINGTON, D.D., NEWBURYPORT, MASS.

Equidem non inficior (qua sumus ignorantia circumsepti) quin plurima nobis implicita nunc sint, et etiam sint futura, donec deposita carnis mole propius ad Dei praesentiam accesserimus: in quibus ipsis nihil magis expedias quam iudicium suspendere, animum autem affirmare ad tenendam cum Ecclesia unitatem.

CALVIN, INST., Lib. III. Chap. II. Sect. 3.

THIS is a question which no man likes to answer promptly without knowing who the inquirer is. If it were put to a clergyman in New England by a rigid Scotch Calvinist, a follower of John Knox, he would probably answer intrepidly in the affirmative, and feel no hesitation as to consequences; but if it were put to him by a disciple of Theodore Parker, he might say: "No; I want no improvements which deny the materials and destroy the ground on which we must build." Yet the question is an absolute one. Theology either has reached its perfection and is incapable of further advancement, or it is still capable of amendment and shining with a clear light on a believing world. The argument which some bring to prove that it is incapable of advancement is not valid; namely, that it is founded on a divine revelation — it came in its origin perfect from the hand of its author; because we may say the same of creation and its laws — they have been all before us since man has been a spectator to their operations, and yet how slow have we been in finding out what seems so obvious when once found! When Papal delusion reigned over Christendom, the Bible was the same and was still in existence; yet we speak of Luther and the Reformers as great enlighteners of the world. The simplicity of truth is often the last thing that purblind mortals are fated to find.

The great secret is to find a medium, to improve for the future, and not destroy the past or present. It is one of the infelicities held out by such a glowing writer as Dr. Channing, that just in proportion as he awakens confidence in future discoveries, he pours distrust on all our present speculations and attainments.

The question, then, is, what is improvement? What is that which mends without destroying? If we saw a partially-lighted church for an evening service, we should conclude that its condition was not to be mended by pouring a flood of redundant light from a thousand chandeliers and gas-lamps, which would only oppress the eye and create confusion; but the object would be to carry the original glimmer to a permanent brightness; so in theology, we shall never cease in this world to see *through a glass darkly*, but we may polish the glass, and explain the enigmas as far as our faith may rest on certainty.

Our first business is to obtain a tact, or previous perception of what our cause needs, and what are the feasible passages to better light. We should say to ourselves, here is a defect, and here is an innovation which may supply it. As the gardener before he prunes his trees carefully surveys the branches and selects the dead or redundant limbs for his saw, so we should weigh the importance of the previous work. A vast deal of real ingenuity has been wasted on impractical attempts. Some parts of theology present at a glance difficulties which it is desirable to remove *if it were possible*; but our instinctive forecast and the whole tenor of church history shows that they are difficulties which always must meet a finite mind. All those questions which arise from comparing divine infinitude with human finites must ever remain unfolded, and a well-constituted mind naturally shrinks from them. The only thing you can say about them is: "there they are, in all their darkness and all their immensity, and all we can do is to discover the causes of their darkness, and draw the limit of our powers in respect to them." What does the reader think of the three following

quotations (let him compare them together), and which of the men has uttered the fairest truth?

“ Though they are all, all honorable men,”

which of them awakens the deepest recognition in your soul? Governor Everett, in an address at Amherst a few years since, says: “ Who does not in these choice and blessed moments, in which the world and its interests are forgotten, and the spirit retires into the inmost sanctuary of its own meditations, and there, unconscious of anything but itself and the infinite perfection of which it is the earthly type, kindling the flames of thought on the altar of prayer; who does not feel in moments like these, as if it must at last be given to man to fathom the great secret of his own being, to solve the mighty problem

‘ Of providence, foreknowledge, will, and fate.’ ”

So far the sanguine statesman; Dr. Channing coincides: “ This great subject has indeed baffled as yet the deepest thinkers, and seems now to be consigned, with other sublime topics, under the sweeping denomination of metaphysics, to general neglect. But let it not be given up in despair. The time is coming when the human intellect is to start into new fields, and to view itself and its Creator and the universe from new positions; and we trust that the darkness which has long hung over our moral nature will be gradually dispersed. This attribute of free-agency, through which an intelligent being is strictly and properly a cause, an agent, an originator of moral good and evil, and not a mere machine, determined by outward influences, or by a secret yet resistless efficiency of God, which virtually makes him the author and sole author of all human actions, — this moral freedom, which is the best image of the creative energy of the Deity, seems to us the noblest object of philosophical investigation. However questioned and darkened by a host of metaphysicians, it is recognized by the common consciousness of every human being. It is the ground of responsibility, the fountain of moral feeling. It is involved

in all moral judgments and affections, and thus gives to social life its whole interest, while it is the chief tie between the soul and its Creator. The fact that philosophers have attempted to discard free-agency from their explanation of moral phenomena, and to subject all human action to necessity, to mechanical causes, or other extraneous influences, is proof enough that the science of the mind has as yet penetrated little beneath the surface; that the depths of the soul are still unexplored.”¹ Archbishop Leighton strikes a different note: “One thing we may confidently assert, that all those things which the great Creator produces in different periods of time were perfectly known to him from eternity; and everything that happens throughout the several ages of the world proceeds in the same order and in the same precise manner that the eternal mind first intended it should. All that acknowledge God to be the author of this wonderful fabric, and all the things in it, which succeed one another in their turn, cannot possibly doubt that he has brought, and continues to bring, them all about according to that most perfect pattern subsisting in his eternal councils; and those things which we call casual are all unalterably fixed and determined by him. For according to that of the philosopher, where there is most wisdom there is the least chance, and therefore surely where there is infinite wisdom there is nothing left to chance at all.

“These things we are warranted and safe to believe; but what perverseness, or rather madness, is it to break into the sacred repositories of Heaven, and to pretend to accommodate those secrets of the divine kingdom to the measures and methods of our weak capacities. To say the truth, I acknowledge that I am astonished and greatly at a loss when I hear learned men and professors of theology talking presumptuously about the *order* of divine decrees, and when I read such things in their works. Paul, considering

¹ Channing's Review of Milton. When a writer throws out such splendid anticipations, is he not bound to give us some little clue to the solution he teaches us to expect?

this subject as an immense sea, was astonished at it, and, viewing the vast abyss, started back, and cried out with a loud voice, 'O the depths!' etc. Nor is there much more sobriety or moderation in the *many notions* that are entertained, and the disputes that are commonly raised, about reconciling divine decrees with the liberty and free-will of man.

"They always seemed to me to act a very ridiculous part who contend that the effect of the divine decree is *absolutely irreconcilable* with human liberty; because the natural and necessary liberty of a rational creature is to act or choose from a *rational motive*, or spontaneously and of purpose; but who sees not that on the supposition of the most absolute decree *this liberty* is not taken away, but rather established and confirmed? For the decree is, that such an one shall make free choice of, or do some peculiar thing freely. And whoever pretends to deny that whatever is done or chosen, whether good or indifferent, is so done or chosen, or at least may be so, espouses an absurdity. But in a word, the great difficulty in all these disputes is that with regard to the *origin of evil* Some distinguish, and justly, the substance of the action, as they call it, or that which is physical in the action, from the morality of it. This is of some weight; but whether it takes away the whole difficulty I will not pretend to say. Believe me, young gentlemen, it is an abyss, it is an abyss, it is an abyss, never to be perfectly fathomed by any plummet of human understanding."¹ Hopeless investigations then are certainly to be avoided. No doubt we may be discouraged too soon. No doubt the same problem seems hopeless to one man which is not so regarded by another. But an improvement that never can command general conviction in the church, or an innovation that sinks the very foundation on which it stands, are both to be avoided by an intelligent and humble foresight.

But in order to be understood let us take a few cases of hopeless innovations, which are not improvements, because they overthrow the very foundations they profess to modify.

¹ Archbishop Leighton's Theological Lectures, Lect. X.

With regard to sovereign grace, we must say, either it is communicated to the sinner by God, or the first impulse comes from the creature himself. The work is begun by man or God; whichever side you take, certain difficulties follow. If you say it is all grace, you must not unsay what you have affirmed. You must be consistent. You must not avoid a difficulty by a timorous ambiguity. There is an absolute question before you and there is no middle point; you must not divide the line which has neither breadth nor thickness.

With regard to unconditional election, it must be wholly without foreseen merit in the creature. This is the perfection of grace, that God seeks his creatures and they do not seek him. *Nullum elegit dignum; nullum tamen punit indignum.* This we cannot modify; this stands essential to the doctrine. We pass into another system if we cross the line which separates the two problems. We may indeed show that, on a subject so deep and so elusive of our logic, we cannot push our doctrine to all its apparent consequences. But we must beware of all improvements of our tenet which overthrow the very substance which they attempt to improve.

The attempt to establish the foreknowledge of God without election is a case in point.

The Trinity is a doctrine rounded off in the fourth century by keen defenders in the face of keen opponents. It is well compacted, and one part tallies with another. The Athanasian Creed (as it is called) was not intended to kindle devotion, but to show the logical possibility of the doctrine in the face of all the objections urged against it; and for that prime object it is a most perfect symbol. It presents a central idea well developed; and we confess, there is much more hope of overthrowing the doctrine than of improving it by any amendments which would make it more palatable to an objector. We expect no improvements in theology in that line; and for their non-expectation two reasons may be offered: 1st, The perfect unity of the

whole scheme; and 2d, The historical fact that no amendments have been successful; they have proved destructions. We have had Macedonianism, Sabellianism, the scheme of Dr. Samuel Clarke, and several others, and they have all ended in silently denying the doctrine, or removing no substantial objection. Even in the late improvement of denying the *eternal generation* of the Son, we see no gain. If the first person in the Trinity is the Father, and the second the Son, there must be some corresponding relation between them. Why not express it in the language of the old formulas? If Christ has a derived existence, i.e. the derived fulness of the Godhead; if the Father is the fountain of being, and Christ the stream — but the full stream — why not express it by some significant term? There is danger if you innovate here, you will disturb the connection of thought, and verge to Sabellianism, which Dr. Priestley tells us is only an artful way of being a Unitarian. The idea that supports this terminology is justified by some remarkable passages of scripture: (Coll. i. 15), “Who is the image of the invisible God, the first born of every creature” (*πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως*). It is scarcely possible to give a full meaning to those words without adopting this doctrine or falling into Arianism. So in John i., Christ was *with God* as a son; also (verse 14), he was *ὡς μονογενοῦς*, the *peculiarly begotten* of the Father. In the Epistle to the Hebrews an emanation is taught under a different figure, *ὡν ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως*: and it is hard to show this emanation without recurring to the established terminology. Innovations in language in such cases lead to innovation in thought. Besides the established language has this advantage, that, having floated through many a contest, it has been again and again explained, has been guarded from misconception, and ripened into perspicuity; whereas innovations demand new limitations and new explanations and renewed discussions which may be permitted to sleep.¹

¹ There are various passages of scripture which it is hard to interpret without supposing a peculiar derivation of the Son from the Father. Prov. xiii. 22.

One of the most remarkable instances of *improvement*, which upsets the very system it improves, is afforded by the late John Foster. Foster was a very ingenious, foreseeing, serious, and, some might say, a consecutive man. He thought he saw objections to the doctrine of eternal punishment. He allows that the scripture is fearfully strong on this subject, and he professes to retain all the other points in the evangelical system. He does not reject the rectitude of the law, the impossibility of being justified by it, the Divinity of Christ, or the necessity of an atonement. He leaves his old system just where it was, with the single exception that it is inconsistent with the goodness of God to make a human soul miserable forever. After allowing that the language of the Bible is formidably strong, he proceeds to say that his doubts arise from the moral argument (such as Dr. Channing recently brought against Calvinism); that is, eternity is so long and a commensurate punishment so dreadful, that it shocks our feelings, and we find it hard, perhaps impossible, to reconcile such a conviction with our best conception of the goodness of God. Man is the creature of time, born weak, and with innate propensities to evil; tempted, deceived, urged, harassed, and forsaken; how can he sin in his span of earthly being to a magnitude of guilt which cannot be expiated but by an eternal groan? Such is his significant question.

Now there sprang up another inquiry. Can his question be answered in the negative, and yet not impair or shake the

Colos. i. 18; John xiv. 28; Psalm ii. 7; Matth. xxviii. 18; John xvi. 15, x. 17, 18, v. 18-23, 30, and if we follow the ancient authorities, Isa. liii. 8. We do not suppose that the Son is more dependent on the Father than the Father on the Son; all the persons in the sacred Trinity are equally interdependent. But the Bible presents them in a distinct order, and in eternal relations, and so let us reverentially receive them. We bow to the ancient authorities. The only objection that can be made is, that the doctrine of the eternal generation introduces human conceptions into the divine existence. But how careful were the ancient Fathers to explain. Chrysostom says: *γέννησις, ἕχρονος, ἀσώματος, ἀόρατος, ἀπαθής, παντελῶς ἀνέκφρατος καὶ ἀκατάληπτος*, a generation not in time, not bodily, not of human passion, invisible and (carnally speaking) incomprehensible.—See Suicerus Lexicon, Vol. I. p. 755.

other parts of the believer's creed? If it is inconsistent with the goodness of God to punish the guilty forever, it is unjust. If unjust, then the law of God never was what we supposed; sin never was so great an evil; it never needed so important an expiation, and Christ was never so great a Saviour. The cross fades from our view; the atonement becomes unnecessary; in short, the whole system is shaken by the improvements. Foster himself could not have stood on his own ground; he must have gone forward or back; and certainly the whole school of his followers (if he had made any) must have sunk into a new theology. He placed a slippery sledge on the side of an icy hill, set it in motion on the glassy surface, and expected it to stop before it reached the bottom.

No improvements, then, can be expected from those modifications which are inconsistent with the original form and genius of the system into which they are introduced. The reason is, that truth is harmonious, and the mind has consecutive conceptions; and the discrepancy is sure at last to be discovered and rejected. Each system may be compared to a musical instrument; if one of the strings is *let down*, all the others must be relaxed, or that single string restored; for the instrument to be useful must be in tune.

We have no hope, then, from such amendments. We have no hope from finding any middle ground between Arminianism and Calvinism; we have no hope of finding any amendments of the doctrine of the Trinity. These issues have been so often stated and tried in different ages by the keenest minds that pride or piety could sharpen, that there is very little hope of new discoveries. The doctrines may be rejected, but they are not likely to be modified. There is no hope of a system of love without any doctrine like that partially advocated by Cudworth and More, and the Cambridge men of that age, and lately revived by some among us. There is no hope from a vague and all-embracing terminology, like that adopted by Bushnell, Higginson, Emerson, and all the transcendentalists; what they wish to gain in comprehen-

siveness they lose in precision. There is no hope from any of these sources; yet we profess to belong to the onward party; and, saying this, we feel bound to give some conception of the quarter from which new light may be expected.

In pushing forward any science there is a certain wise anticipation, arising perhaps from a careful retrospect of its wants, which is necessary in order to point our efforts to a hopeful direction. We must survey our powers, and consider what is within their scope; what is feasible, and what is impossible. *Prudens interrogatio*, to use the oft quoted maxim of Bacon, *est dimidium scientiæ*. "Every philosophical inquirer" says Dugald Stewart, "before he begins a set of experiments, has some general principle in his view, which he suspects to be a law of nature; and, although his conjectures may be often wrong, yet they serve to give his inquiries a particular direction, and to bring under his eye a number of facts which have a certain relation to each other." In ascertaining the distinction between the hopeful and hopeless in theological investigation, we have two rules to guide us. First, the inquiries which revelation discourages; and secondly, whatever the history of the church records as useless, subtle, vague, and unprofitable. Under the first class, we advert to the instance presented Rom. ix 19, 20: "Thou wilt say, then, unto me, why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? Nay, but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God," etc. It is natural to ask: why does the apostle bear down inquiry in this authoritative way? Why does he seem to discourage free investigation? Is not the gospel favorable to the freest thought? Yes; but consider the question to which he opposes this silencing answer. It is the hopeless question of the origin of evil, on which men have spent their strength in vain, and labored for naught. Now on such and all similar questions, to the investigation of which our powers are wholly inadequate, it is our wisest course to bow to the speaking or silence of the Bible, and not entangle our feet in a snare from

¹ *Elements of Philosophy of the Human Mind*, Vol. I. p. 395.

which no human speculation can ever extricate us; there is an emphasis and a significance in the peculiar kind of questions on which the apostle imposes his awful prohibition. "Nay, but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God." That man eminently replies against God, who selects one of his deepest mysteries as the subject of his own impertinent response. But, secondly, the dogmatic history of the church presents us a series of controversies in which piety, ingenuity, and learning have found no result. Curiosity has opened the road, but patience has found no end to its furlongs. These controversies have returned in various ages; and though some have elicited profitable truth, others have been attended with no positive light. They have labored in vain, and spent their strength for naught. They have sunk their Artesian tube down to the deepest layers, and all Israel has joined their efforts and their voices; saying: "Spring up, O well, sing ye unto it;" and, after all their labor and exhausted music, God has given them no water.

It is the signal of a well-constituted mind, and is what every theologian should aim at, to have the tact or foresight to see the mendable parts of his science; to draw the line in his own mind where human progression must stop, where the ground susceptible of cultivation meets the shore of the untillable deep; we must walk *παρὰ θύῃ ἀλὸς ἀτρυγέτου*, and mark the windings of the margin. "If we were to examine," says Dugald Stewart, "the present state of morals, of jurisprudence, of politics, and of philosophical criticism, we believe we should find that the principal circumstance which retards their progress, is the vague and indistinct idea which those who apply to the study of them have formed to themselves of the objects of their researches."¹ How true! How important! The remark holds with increased force in our religious investigations. Let us never waste our time on researches in which the human mind has always been baffled, and on which the sacred writers have preserved a significant silence.

¹ Elements, Vol. I. p. 48.

Having thus stated the importance of this line, and the difficulty of drawing it, perhaps it may be thought immodest in us to attempt to present some of the questions which seem to us to excite our better curiosity, by exciting the hope of a progressive solution. The catalogue of useless investigations would be a very long one. Let us implore the readers indulgence, while at the expense of our reputation perhaps, we, with a trembling hand, point to that part of the horizon where the refulgent stars may be expected to rise on some blissful morning.

First, then, though the evidences of religion is a hacknied subject, yet on this theme the church seems to be calling for new light. Particularly the prophecies are in a very confused state. The argument from the fulfilment of the prophecies is presented in a very uncritical and unsatisfactory manner; much more calculated to justify infidels than confirm Christians. When do the apostles quote the Old Testament strictly, and when loosely? How much chronology is intended in the definite numbers of their fervid strains? Let us reflect that infidels have been blamed for not accepting constructions which afterwards the most learned orthodox interpreters have upset. Recollect the four kingdoms in the second and ninth chapters of Daniel, and Professor Stuart's interpretation of them. The fact is, all our books on this subject are behind the age. Then the interpretation of the prophecies in the New Testament lie in the greatest confusion. We have either the neological temerity or the pious dogmatism of the Adventist, and each unworthy of our confidence. Oh for some sanctified erudition to clear up this subject. Oh that Christ would verify his promise, and give to some selected student in Andover, or some other seminary, the morning star to beam on our darkness.

¹ Bishop Chandler's work, entitled "A Defence of Christianity" from the Prophecies of the Old Testament, is by far the most critical and safest that we remember in the English language; yet he, we think, mistakes the meaning of Haggai ii. 6, 7, 8, 9; Gen. xlix. 16, and has given a doubtful meaning to other places.

Secondly, we need a better system of mental philosophy, written with a special reference to its bearing on theology, and especially limiting itself to the knowledge and ignorance of man. We cannot accept the postulate of Wardlaw, that the unregenerate metaphysician must be all error (reserving to ourselves at the same time the prerogative of judging who is unregenerate), and we cannot trust the dogmatism of Dr. Emmons; but some auspicious babe must be born, and some new book remains yet to be published, which shall harmonize our views and cause our philosophy and our faith to conspire in making our whole moral and intellectual being a unit in the service of our God and in the belief of his eternal truth.

Thirdly, we need a better exegesis of both the sacred languages. Much has been done, but much remains to be done; we have leaned too much to the side of reversion; we need to slacken back to a middle path. Here it is natural to recur to the name of Professor Stuart, a man whose labors are never to be recollected without a mingled sentiment of astonishment and veneration. In this country he almost created the science in which he was so much distinguished; with an imperfect training he had to force his way through a dark forest without a guide and without an associate, and to find his path amidst discouragement and suspicion to the light; his learning was only surpassed by his force of character. No mere man since the fall could complete his gigantic work, and *such* a man must die before his best influence could be felt. He had one fatal obstruction to the clearness of his lettered vision. He seemed to be ambitious to weld together the benefits of two hostile schools of interpreters — those who deny and those who receive the full inspiration of the Bible. This was an attempt above his strength; and certain maxims which did very well in the neologic school were utterly out of place among the receivers of authoritative revelation. This led him to some conclusions which neither party could adopt. In tuning his harp of ten strings, here were two that he could not bring

into concord. Many examples might be given. Let us take one,—the most striking perhaps. In interpreting the book of Daniel (ch. ix.) he makes all the glowing facts accumulate in the times of Antiochus Epiphanes; and yet he holds to a real Daniel, living in the times of the Persian empire. Now this is incredible. Why should that little, unimportant span of time in Jewish history so loom up in the enraptured vision of a prophet living almost four centuries before, and darting his eyes down through the whole line of redemption; how could such an interval of about three years and a half become so important to one standing on such an elevation? And then to be told that the Messiah which was “cut off, but not for himself,” was only a Jewish high priest, Onias III., and not the Lord of glory, who died for men! What a dwindle and a diminution for the common reader of the Bible! Now all this is much more consistent with an assumed Daniel, who took the old prophet’s name and lived in the time of Antiochus (we always exaggerate contemporary events) and made no pretensions to inspiration or historical truth, than it is to Mr. Stuart’s theory. The venerable professor is to be regarded as a miner, who went deep into the soil, and threw up vast heaps of ore, where the gold and quartz lie combined and confounded together, and where some hand, not with more skill, but more caution, must come and make a careful selection. We may at least hope that some dwarf may arise, who shall see farther by standing on the giant’s shoulders — non omnia possumus omnes.

But, fourthly, a very important improvement, and of which scarcely too much can be said, is a better *proportioning* the essential truths of the Calvinistic system, and indeed all the truths of revelation. We have seen, in some hazy evening, when Venus was shining in the east or west, the starry sky give a very inadequate conception of its collected light. Some of the brightest orbs were covered by a cloud; on one side there was clearness and on the other there was darkness; even the brightest planets, that did bore through,

were diminished in their lustre, and the whole celestial refulgence was altered in its proportion as well as its brightness. We have already expressed our sense of the danger of touching the old terminology, and our total want of hope of any improvement which shall consist in removing of the vital elements of the old system; in which "all the building, fitly framed together, groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord." They were rounded off in their first conception, and there was a dominant idea in the minds of the authors which led to consistency. There was something above the individual which governed him, even the immortal reason, a central light, a spark caught from the altar of God. It is peculiarly so with the Calvinistic system; its parts are necessitated by its central idea. But there are two innovations which may turn out to be improvements, of which it is still susceptible. One is, blending the elements in their true relative proportion — removing or diminishing all false antagonisms; and the other is, stating the most paradoxical parts cautiously, with a due regard to the weakness of our powers. The man that tries to have an intellectual faith beyond his inmost perceptions is insincere. There are two great constituents in Calvinism — sovereignty in God, sin in man; and sin cannot exist but by a violated obligation. Both are essential; both must be explained. Now it is clear that in old Calvinism, as it was left by Calvin, Beza, the Synod of Dort, and the Scotch school generally, the sovereignty element overshades the other. It does not accommodate itself sufficiently to those natural difficulties which the carnal mind is sure to find.¹ Our determination and effort always has been to alter *this proportion*. If we find the sovereignty element, like a great frowning pillar, placed near the doorway of the temple, we try — not to deny its existence or importance — but to remove it to its proper place, behind the chancel and beyond the altar. We take it from the abstract and put it into the concrete. It was

¹ We rather mean the apprehension of man as man, $\delta \psiυχικὸς \text{ ἄνθρωπος}$, whether carnal or not. The unassisted reason.

said of G. Poussin, the great Italian landscape painter, that his skill consisted in his admirable grouping. His particular parts—his single trees, lambs, and shepherds,—when closely surveyed, were found scarcely equal to the most ordinary artist; but when the whole scene was united, none could match him. There is a grouping also in theology. Half the trouble is made by a bald, insulated truth out of place. The original reformers were all high sovereignty men; and why? They met the enormous Pelagianism of the Romish church. Times have altered, and the same proportions do not accomplish the same end. Let us ask what a *modern* Luther would be. We must “rightly divide the word of truth.” It requires great skill to present a paradoxical doctrine in its just proportion and in its right place. When the centurion came to Christ to heal his servant (Matt. viii. 5), our Lord seized that opportunity to present one of the most repulsive principles that could meet a Jewish mind: “I say unto you, that many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.” What an instructive example! This discretion is left us. A preacher is like his own sexton,—a certain number of lights are given to illuminate the building; the arrangement is left to his own discretion, so as to fill every dark corner in the house; and thus the theologian must adjust the parts of his system so as to distribute the light, following only the demands of humanity and the general example of revelation.

As to the other part—the stating these difficult doctrines with a due regard to human weakness,—you will know what we mean when we refer you to the example of Bishop Butler. Butler’s theology may be imperfect; but his caution is perpetual. He is not a sceptic; his belief does not move round in a circle of perpetual occultation. No mind can be brighter when he faces the light.

In this connection we may mention the antagonisms which need to be removed. We are told in the Cambridge Platform, that formula of faith left by our fathers, Chap.

III. sect. 1, "God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will freely and unchangably ordain whatsoever comes to pass, yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered unto the will of the creature, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established." Now if this be true, let it be carried out to all its consequences; and half the Arminian objections drop to the ground; their reasoning and ours must be greatly modified, and perhaps the best men in the right wing of both parties be brought to agree.

Fifthly, There is another improvement. The language of the old formulas is *more* inadequate to convey the meaning in this age than in the times when they were written. The language of philosophy, the language of common life, has suffered silent innovation, as we see in our translation of the scriptures. Words suggest thoughts which their authors never intended, and often the hue and shading convey new impressions. Now this danger should be obviated by appreciating the change and restoring the original meaning. Let us give an example. We are told in the Westminster Shorter Catechism (Quest. 30) "God having out of his mere good pleasure elected some to everlasting life," etc. But "what" says an objector, "Does God act from caprice alone? Has he no reason for his conduct but his mere good pleasure? Do reason and foresight never govern his counsels; and does wisdom never enter his original designs?" Now from what we have just quoted from the Cambridge Platform, that "God did from his most wise and holy counsel ordain," etc., it is obvious that "by mere good pleasure" the Westminster divines could not mean caprice in opposition to wisdom; their design was to deny and give the negative to all foreseen merit in the creature in the ordainings of God; but their language needs to be explained. Many other instances may be given; and it sometimes calls for a smile of pity to see an obstinate conservative straying into the widest field of innovation, merely

because he has misunderstood the language of his master.

Sixthly, we need a fuller development of the gospel in its bearing on sentiment and practice; to discover and open some new roads from old ideas to new life. The bud is as yet but half blown; we long to see its expanded beauty and sweetness. We may compare the well-arranged truths of religion to the lamps on Cambridge bridge; as you ride in the evening from Boston, light after light strikes your eye, all glittering in an harmonious line, and every light shedding its radiance on your path as you continue your progression. The tree of life is blooming before us; its tendency is to cast its boughs on every side; let us not so prune the branches that it shall disgrace the earth by a mutilated shade.

Seventhly, It would be a great improvement to learn the concrete way of presenting some of the most difficult articles of religion. They become paradoxical chiefly by abstraction. The concrete method is abundantly sanctioned in the Bible. It was the very genius of a primitive people, and to such primitive conceptions God has seen fit to condescend. How much are we taught in the sacred record, by history, by symbols, by parable, by supposition, by visible illustration. Compare, for example, Moses's method of proving the existence of God and his right to our homage with that of Dr. Paley. Dr. Paley lays down the abstract principle, that design proves a designer; but Moses shows us God as actually creating the world, saying: "Let there be light, and there was light." He gives us the history of creation; and how much more impressive to the common mind. The death of Christ is illustrated by the previous sacrifices; and, to our mind, the doctrine of substitution is much more clearly exhibited by the account of the scape-goat (Lev. xvi. 20) than it is in some metaphysical diatribes we have read on that much-disputed subject. Some of the most important words in theology, the very lights that guide our reasoning, are only to be explained by their use in sacred history. Faith, for example, *πίστις*, the cardinal word, would

not present to Aristotle, Plato, or Cicero a glimpse of the meaning which it has acquired in the apostolic use. The same may be said of the words, God, Jehovah, Lord, flesh and spirit, righteousness, sin, repentance, justification, crucifixion, being crucified to the world, being crucified with Christ, regeneration, heaven, and hell; all these words acquire a meaning and a force in sacred history to the simplest reader, which no Pagan lection can impart. King William III., the glorious deliverer of England from arbitrary power and Popery, was accustomed to say to Bishop Burnet, that he must believe in the doctrine of predestination because it was involved in the doctrine of a special providence. Dr. Emmons has a very striking sermon in which he very clearly proves that the same doctrine lies at the bottom, as a sunk foundation, to all the other parts of the Christian system — foreknowledge, a special providence, the atonement, the Jewish dispensation, the success of the gospel; and Calvin, in his first book (*Institutes*, chap. XVI. sect. 4, 5), has illustrated the same truth. Very well, gentlemen; it is even so; but if the concrete way makes the doctrine more plain, why not always (certainly often) make it more plain by presenting it in the concrete way. This is the way adopted by all the sacred writers but Paul, and even he adopts it often.

Perhaps the most exercised metaphysician or mental philosopher, if he would confess the truth, never understands a principle, until he has seen it in its exemplification. Facts lead to principles, and principles are best seen in facts.

Eighthly, when looking back on the recollections of education, and remembering the lacerations of mind which come from contending principles taught with equal authority, one cannot but long and pray for some comprehensive and organizing mind to arise — a Bacon or a Leibnitz, who should harmonize our impressions and pour all the devious streams of knowledge into one channel. We want a better reconciliation of science and theology; so that eternally we

may not be weaving Penelope's web, to unravel in the night what was spun in the day. What we mean may best be illustrated by a remark of Charles Butler, the author of the *Reminiscences*, who tells us, that at the papal seminary where he was taught, all the lessons had one direction, which was to illustrate and confirm the Christian faith. Now if this was done by a false faith, or a mutilated science, it is not what we mean; but what we want is some comprehensive formula which shall save enlightened Christians from the shock felt when the discoveries of Galileo first dawned on the church, or which we felt when first told that the world was not literally made in six days. This apparent war of science and revelation often makes a college a bad place.¹ We often hear our older divines complain of the scepticism that now prevails; men have lost their faith; they are now sure of nothing; the dry-rot has reached the pulpit, and the preaching has lost its power, because it is neither so ardent nor decisive as in the precedent age. One reason undoubtedly is the want of harmony in our knowledge. What is a good theologian? He is undoubtedly an instructed Christian; and all his received impressions must blend in one just conviction. If it be truth, the deeper the better. Now it must be true, if science be true and revelation be true, that there is no real discord between them. We have made the discord by untuning the instruments; and though we allow that a well-trained mind must be accustomed to objections, and taught to triumph over them, it is delightful to come at last to an harmonious conclusion. Oh for a reformer worthy of the name and equal to the

¹ Let us speak from recollection. We must say on a calm review of college days that the passing from the materialism of Locke to Vincent's Catechism was a violent transition; and how the Moral Philosophy of Paley, which has Epicurianism involved in every page, got a place in an orthodox seminary, was a wonder. To keep any harmony in the instruction,

"Virtue must call oblivion to her aid."

Certainly college text-books are now better selected. The great object of education should be to have free investigation with as little inculcated scepticism as possible.

purpose, with a head radiant like the sun, and made beautiful and fragrant with every flower that piety can impart, — a Calvin and a Bacon blended, — to scoop our knowledge together, and make every article “ borders of gold with studs of silver.” Let us indulge the hope that it is possible.

Lastly, the danger of improvement, or rather holding up great hopes of future improvement, is, that it is apt to cast a secret distrust on our *present* attainments. The wisdom of an advancing orthodoxy must consist in bringing out of its treasures things new and old. It cultivates the tree without impairing the root. As Mr. Burke says in another department: “ By a constitutional policy working after the pattern of nature, we receive, we hold, we transmit our government and our privileges in the same manner in which we enjoy and transmit our property and our lives. The institutions of policy, the good of fortune, the gifts of Providence, are handed down to us and from us in the same course and order. Our political system is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world, and with the mode of existence decreed to a permanent body composed of transitory parts, wherein, by the disposition of a stupendous wisdom, moulding together the great mysterious incorporation of the human race, the whole at one time is never old or middle-aged or young, but in a condition of unchangable constancy moves on through the varied tenor of perpetual decay, fall, renovation, and progression. Thus by preserving the method of nature in the conduct of the state, in what we improve we are never wholly new; in what we retain we are never wholly obsolete.”¹ To cast a broad eye over the past and the future, to discern what the past has given us and what the future demands, has always been the character of intellectual reformers. Let Dr. Channing instruct us even by his very excesses. In his review of Milton, he says (page 47): “ We want new light, and care not whence it comes; we want reformers worthy of the name; and we should rejoice in such a manifestation

¹ *Reflections on the French Revolution.*

of Christianity *as would throw all present systems into obscurity.*" No, doctor, no; we want no such thing; and still less would we rejoice in such an effect.

Alack,

You are transported by calamity, —
Thither where more attends you.

We hold no form of Christianity which may not keep its identity and yet receive improvement.

Surely it is not necessary to be a sceptic in order to be a reformer. The greatest reformers have not been so; they have confined their innovations to the defective parts. In 1492, Oct. 12th, Columbus discovered America, or rather one of the Bahama Islands. How much remained to be explored; how many sounds and seas and rivers and creeks, the continent and its two great divisions! and yet nothing happened afterwards to disturb the certainty or diminish the glory of what the first day revealed.

POSTSCRIPT.

A reflection obtrudes itself on us here, and impels us to ask, what is the character of that mind which God may select as competent to the high office of the finished and finishing interpreters of theology to man. He has raised up men very accomplished, though not reaching absolute perfection. Paul was inspired; and apart from inspiration he was a chosen vessel, well fitted beforehand to receive the higher light. Augustine, Calvin, Edwards, were all organic men. But time, while it has increased the demand for the work, has in some respects rendered it more difficult. The materials have multiplied on our hands; the glittering fragments lie confused in a broken heap. Who shall select them? and what shall be the principle of the selection? Harmony and the word of God. Whoever has read the Supplementary Dissertations of Sir William Hamilton on the writings of Dr. Reid, must have been struck with the vast advantage the commentator receives from his thorough knowledge of the history of his subject. He selects well,

because he has a vast choice to select from. He confutes and rebukes with stunning blows, because he seems so much at home in the history of human opinions. He brings out of his treasures things new and old, because he knows what is new and what is old; and (if his corrections be correct) his predecessors are often at fault in speculation, because they are babes in dogmatic history. The man that is to mend our future theology must be a thorough student in past opinions; and oh what a field! One is tempted to say, as an old beggar we have heard of. A man led him into a vast field of potatoes, and promised to give him all he would dig; and he burst into tears, and exclaimed in agony, he should never *get it done*. The true reformer must know what has been said; he must trace the current of ecclesiastical speculation; he must see the cause and tendency of the varying systems; how they arose and why they vanished; he must see how artfully error imitated truth, and how much she prevailed through the specious imitations; how much theology has been influenced by philosophy; how much harm unsanctified learning has done, and how much more harm sanctified ignorance; he must be conscious of the benefits and dangers of free discussion, and how true it is that they who make the greatest clutter about free discussion are often the very people most imprisoned by man; he must see how all the sciences cluster about religion, receive from it an influence, and cast an influence on it; he must be a bold and yet a cautious man, independent and yet humble; he must have an honest and yet not affected partiality; he must see the bearing of the most tenuous questions; he must grasp a remote abstraction and the most delicate probability; he must give to "an airy nothing a local habitation and a name";¹ he must understand definitely, the "quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est: operamque dare ut collatae inter se majorum consulantur sententiae, eorum duntaxat, qui, diversis licet temporibus et locis, in unius tamen ecclesiae catholicae

¹ i. e. what seems so.

communione et fide permanentes, magistri probabiles extiterunt et quidquid non unus aut duo tantum sed omnes pariter uno eodemque consensu aperte, frequenter, perseveranter tenuisse, scripsisse, docuisse cognoscantur, sed absque ulla dubitatione non credendum, sed *examinandum* intelligatur. In a word, he must have a profound veneration for the word of God; like the Saviour, he must know "what was in man;" he must go from the wants of nature to the magazines of revelation, and from the magazines of revelation to the wants of nature; when the harp of God has ten strings he must not play on two or five, but pour all the fulness of its music on our listening ears, and charm our hearts by all the notes of the song of Moses and the Lamb; that is, we want a system which has fulness without deficiency; in which nothing is omitted, and nothing overstated; where a just proportion is observed, and, as the apostle says: "The whole body fitly joined together, and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edification of itself in love" (Eph. iv. 16).

Nor is this a flight of the imagination. Such a man and such a system will yet be found. We have organizations of Christianity which, relatively speaking, have *almost* accomplished all this. What has been done is therefore possible; that to which pious research shows a manifest tendency will at last be ripened into perfection. The late amiable and excellent Dr. Lowell had one distinction on which he was fond of dwelling, and which he supposed to be a central light for all investigation — the distinction between *Christianity* and *theology*; he supposed them to be two things, entirely distinct; and he cherished this distinction as an amulet, which he always wore next his heart to preserve him from all bigotry and speculative delusion. "I take up,"¹ said he, "a dictionary of religion, and find I know not how many hundred names of sects into which the

¹ Dedication Sermon at Cambridge, Dec. 25, 1857.

Christian world is divided. And when I behold these ensigns of party distinction, these badges of submission, as they too often are, to human authority, my perplexed and agitated mind goes back to repose itself at Antioch, where the believers, the brethren, they who were of one heart and one mind, were content with the simple appellation which denoted their allegiance to their Divine Master." But surely the good man overrated the value of healing words when they are not the symbols of healing things. He seems to think that one inclusive expression will merge all theological odium in eternal oblivion. Besides, does he not mistake the design of a system of divinity? The completeness of revelation does not supersede the necessity of a developed system, any more than a sight of the sun prohibits all research and speculation what the particles of the sun are. A system of divinity is, first, an organization of what the parts of revelation are; secondly, showing their connection; thirdly, carefully stating them with a strict reference to human ignorance and a limitation of our powers; fourthly, giving their adhesions, such as their metaphysical connections and their connection with material science; fifthly, their proof; and lastly, their bearing on the hearts and conduct of believers. Here is surely enough to do, without suffering theology, like Pharaoh's lean kine, to devour Christianity. Revelation, in its intrinsic perfection, reminds us of the torches of the lighthouse, lighted up on some semi-clouded night; in themselves they may be perfect, but that very perfection leads us to view them in their effects on the surrounding scene; we ask, how far their rays extend; how near them does the channel lie; what is the relative position of point Alderton and the Graves; shall we enter the inner harbor through broad sound-way or the direct channel. All these things the skilful pilot has in his mind, and may as well lay them down in his chart of the harbor; and in all these things even religious knowledge is progressive. Christianity stands parallel with nature, and nature is always the same; but our *insight* into nature is progressive, and per-

haps will be so, until her system is dissolved by the sound of the last trumpet, and the last fire causes the elements to melt with a fervent heat.

This shows us, too, why the future systems of divinity may be better than the past. For our part (we may be partial to the man) we do not believe there ever was a clearer head or a sounder heart, or a more organizing genius, or a more reverential faith, than were combined in John Calvin. Consider how he found systematic theology; consider how he left it; and if you could raise him from the dead, and project him among all the facilities of half a millennium *after* his own age, who would write a better system than he? The defects of Calvin are very much owing to the pressure of surrounding cognitions and influences. The sovereignty of God is enormously elaborated; but recollect, the world had just awoke from the enormous Pelagianism of the Roman church, and the evils of Antinomianism had been very imperfectly developed. Then, as to his bigotry: suppose you had met him just after the combustion of Servetus; suppose a committee of the liberals could have been sent to him from Boston, with Dr. Lowell for chairman. The modern addresses the ancient: "I am surprised, old man, at your want of charity; I am astonished that you should not see that theology is not Christianity. What! burn a man for differing from you in your theology, when his Christianity is the same! Horrible! Do you not see that the law of Jesus is the law of love; that many things in theology are very difficult; opinions have been divided; good men have differed; and that we ought to be careful to pull out the beam from our own eye before we condemn a fellow creature for his mote?" Now what would Calvin reply? Looking at him sternly, as Homer describes Achilles, he would say: "Young man, I do not know who you are, nor where you come from; but you had better get out of your swaddling-clothes before you come here to Geneva to teach your grandfather a lesson which he knew before you were born. To be sure I know that

charity or love is the law of the gospel; I have said so a hundred times; I know that, strictly speaking, theology is not Christianity; I know the difficulty of the subject and the vast extent of human ignorance; I allow that in things indifferent, we must tolerate the difference of each other's opinions; but here is a wretch that breaks through all bounds; he has a morbid appetite for every enormity; he believes that our very blood is vital, and runs a race through our arteries and veins; he calls the Trinity a three-headed Cerberus; he is a blasphemer full as much as a heretic. No, young man; when I burn the murderer, I protect the state; and here is a wretch who systematically murders souls!" We learn our moral lessons, as well as our material philosophy, through a long train of experiments.

From considering who the man is that can mend our theology, we can clearly see who is *not* qualified for that momentous work: and it is not always the man who is the most ready to encounter the task. It is no sign that a man is sure to succeed, because he is a volunteer. Men are apt to make one mistake: because religion addresses our affections, and lays its very terminology in our emotional nature, some are apt to think that it is also addressed to our fancy. Now the laws of the moral emotions are much more fixed than the laws of the individual fancy. This mistake is not confined to the old heretics, such as Marcion, Bassilides, Manes, etc., etc., but it has floated down all time, and has been seen in all ages. A very forgetive fancy may be exercised in *interpreting* the record, as well as substituting some system in its place. Laying out of view the morbid and the crazy, such as Baron Swedenborg and others, how many cobblers have we had in this sacred work, who did not know where the holes were in the old shoe to which the patches must be applied. The last man for this purpose is he whose fancy is strong as his reason is weak; who, so far from drawing the limits of human ignorance and how revelation meets it, has never once suspected there is such a border; the man who never read Butler's Analogy, or if he

has, could never understand it; who is always talking about logic, and always meaning a logic of his own; who has a wonderful mind for tracing recondite resemblances, and is incapable of seeing the broadest dissimilarities; who has a craving for the most insolvable questions; who is charmed, in selecting an opinion, with the difficulty of defending it; who delights to walk by moonshine, provided it come from a full moon shining on crusted snow; who builds a castle in the air, and then laughs at all his antagonists because they find no place for planting their batteries to overthrow it — because, *Negantis incumbit probatio*. Such geniuses we have; and their systems are irrefutable: “Wilt thou break a leaf driven to and fro; and wilt thou pursue the dry stubble?”

We estimate a man's power, in some degree at least, by the questions he selects for investigation. Thus we should hardly deem a man destined for success in mechanical invention who should spend years in searching after perpetual motion. We see the infancy of the age in the early heresies of the church, such as her maturity never solved, but consigned them over to a wise oblivion; no wise man will ever disturb their repose. All the first heresies (nearly) turned on the origin of evil. After having played with these puerile shadows for a time, the church then proceeded to real issues, the Divinity of Christ, and, a little later, to the Pelagian controversies. Now who would ever wish to go back? Who would ever call from its sepulchre, to a shadowy resurrection, a question that none but infants could ask, because none but angels can expect to answer it?

It becomes vastly more important that safe and competent men should take the work of improvement into their hands, from the fact that many modern improvements are destructive of old foundations. We have improvements coming upon us in shoals: they swim in a deluge. But what are they? They are not grafting the tree, but laying the axe at the root, cutting it down, tearing up its stump, and destroying every relict of its blossoms and its fruits. To improve

Christianity now, is to eliminate from its sacred record every vestige of the supernatural; to separate the influence of the gospel from its authority; to leave every man free to his own inventions, because he can palm these inventions on God; and to build a Sinai and a Calvary in every imagination that enlarges itself enough to receive them. Now every conservative man should state to himself what he wants. What are the peccant parts, not in revelation, but in our reception of it? Is the shadow of the tree distorted by the radiance of a setting sun? To speak plain, can Calvinism, or rather Paulcianism, be improved without destroying its ancient features? There used to lie at one of the wharfs in Boston, half a century ago, an old Dutch ship, very large and very clumsy; the most uncouth thing that ever floated on the water. It seemed to have been made by a company of artists who had a premium for doing their worst. And yet it was a ship, no mistake about it; there were the prow, the windlass, the stumps of the masts, the hatches, the quarter deck, the cabin, the rudder, and the tiller; indeed, all the components of a true ship. Place beside her one of the modern clippers. What a change! And yet what an identity!

Felix, quibus bene
Priscis ab omnibus
Possit libellulis
Vitam beantia
Haurire dogmata.—*Sir Thomas More.*