

## ARTICLE VI.

REGENERATION—THE WORK OF GOD.<sup>1</sup>

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AN unperverted mind will approach reverently any revelation of God in the destiny of man. The conception of an invisible Power, has itself a fascination for a finite mind. It is not strange that the Wind should have been deified in pagan theology. Little as a human mind can know of a power which the eye has never seen, yet when dependence upon such a power reaches out to cover everything in the future which renders immortality attractive, a sense of mingled grandeur and suspense is awakened, which holds the mind fast, in the attitude of a subdued and anxious learner. Metaphysical relations of truth in such connections are often unwelcome. Sometimes, indeed, they seem unnatural. The instinct of a docile spirit is to approach such truths as objects of faith, rather than as subjects of analysis.

To no theme is such a spirit more becoming than to the doctrine of Regeneration. In inviting your attention with such a spirit, to a single branch of this doctrine, it is my wish to contemplate by itself, as far as possible aloof from metaphysical debate, the revealed fact that

## THE CHANGE OF A HUMAN HEART IS THE WORK OF GOD.

I. We shall reach the most vital aspects of this subject most directly by first defining to ourselves, briefly, what we mean when we ascribe the change of a man's heart to Divine Power. This doctrine may be considered as affirming several truths.

In the first place, it affirms that a human soul never changes its own character from sin to holiness through the involuntary development of its own sensibilities. Holiness cannot so exist in emotive forms as to spring up impul-

<sup>1</sup> A discourse preached in the Chapel of the Theological Seminary, Andover.

sively in a heart which is unconscious of will to produce it. Holiness is not an instinct. It does not grow automatically out of the make of the soul, as with proper incitements, compassion, gratitude, reverence, may do. The heart of man, in relation to the causes of rectitude within it, is not like a harp, which to utter its voices needs only to be hung in the wind.

The doctrine we are to consider further affirms that man never turns from sin to holiness by an effort of his own will, independent of supernatural Power. This is something more than the assertion often made, "that man cannot change his own affections by direct volition." The inability involved in this latter assertion is not the fruit of depravity. The grace of God does not remove it. It lies in the constitution of mind, regenerate or unregenerate. A saint cannot, more than a sinner, love God by resolving "I will love God." Either might as reasonably resolve: "I will see this symphony of Beethoven; I will hear the beauty of Loch Lomond." The blind man had more of reason in his philosophy when he pronounced the color of scarlet to be *like* the sound of a trumpet.

The doctrine of man's dependence upon God for regeneration affirms nothing respecting such psychological possibilities of change. It affirms that man never turns from sin to holiness by any effort, direct or indirect, of his own will, uninfluenced by supernatural power. We do not affirm that he cannot do this, except in the figurative sense in which a mother cannot hate her infant; a compassionate man cannot bear the sight of a victim on the rack; a miser cannot part with his gold; Joseph's brethren could not speak peaceably unto him; God cannot lie. In the literal sense of both scientific and popular speech a sinner can, but will not, cease to be a sinner without the intervention of Divine Power.

Consistently with this view, the doctrine of Divine agency in regeneration also affirms that the unaided force of truth does not suffice to persuade the human soul from sin to holi-

ness. Here also we affirm only the fact of experience. The doctrine does not degrade the dignity of truth. It does not deny the intrinsic power of truth over mind as mind, regenerate or unregenerate. It does not refuse to discern in truth a tendency to convert a soul, and in the soul a tendency to yield to truth. It only affirms the fact of real life, that these tendencies are overborne. The suasive working of truth when not energized by the grace of God is a failure.

In this view is involved a subsidiary fact — that all human instrumentalities and expedients by which truth is intensified, and so made appreciable by human sensibilities, are powerless to change the heart. Authority, sympathy, reasoning, eloquence, the magnetism of person, and whatever else enters into the mystery of persuasion, in which mind impels mind by the enginery of speech, may change well nigh everything in man except his character. That, these auxiliaries to truth all fall short of, in their profoundest reach.

Let it be observed, then, once more, that when we ascribe to God the change which takes place in regeneration, we mean that, over and above all natural tendencies and finite agencies, God performs an act of sovereign power in every change of character from sin to holiness. What that act is, what that power is, other than as characterized by their effects, the scriptures do not teach, and we need not affirm. The psychological process of which moral conversion is the consequence is at best a theme of philosophical conjecture. Belief respecting it is no necessary part of faith in the biblical doctrine of regeneration. Beyond a declaration of the *fact*, we are not called upon to affirm or deny.

Our conception of the fact of divine agency in regeneration may be sharpened, however, and we may be protected against some confusion of faith, if we observe that, so far as we know, the act of renewing the human heart is an entirely *unique* disclosure of God. We know of nothing else like it in the history of the universe. We call it "creation." We pray, with the Psalmist, "Create in me a clean heart!"

Yet it is not an act of physical omnipotence, like that which creates an oak. We denominate this mysterious transformation "a new birth." Yet we should deserve the rebuke which our Lord gave to Nicodemus, if we should discern in the act such an expression of omnipotence as that which creates a soul. We picture this divine renewal as a "change of heart." We pray that the stony heart may be taken and the heart of flesh given. But ours would be a childish dream of heaven, if we should look for such a miracle of power as God wrought in the creation of the first woman. God cannot create a human character *as* he creates the being who sustains that character. God could not have created Adam's character *as* he created Adam. We speak loosely when we say in our creeds "man was created holy." So, infinite sovereignty could not have originated the piety of the beloved disciple *as* it summoned into being the fisherman of Galilee. We portray this unspeakable change as a "resurrection." We cry out in our despair, "Who shall deliver us from the body of this death?" But our despair must be eternal, if we have no other hope than *such* an act of Deity as the raising of Lazarus. The dry bones which Ezekiel saw were in vision only. So far as we know the history of God's working, regeneration stands alone. Divine forces in nature — even divine forces above nature, yet acting upon things material — present no parallels to it.

Consequently the emblems which we derive from the material and the sentient world to express the phenomenon of regeneration are only emblems. They are not kindred facts. They do not belong to the same plane of divine efficiency. They are not *definitions*, they are pictorial *descriptions*, of the new birth. The new birth transcends them, as matter sentient transcends matter inert; as intelligence transcends both; and as *character* transcends all organism of matter or mind. We shall often conceive most truthfully of such a phenomenon by throwing our minds back of the symbols devised for its expression. As a disclosure of God, it is at once original, solitary, and ultimate. Nothing like it, so far

as our knowledge extends, has preceded, or will follow, the earthly history of man. Nothing like it in the universe, so far as revealed to us, lies outside of the moral experience of the human soul. Such a phenomenon, and the primal Cause of it, cannot be exhaustively expressed by any similitude. They must be described by results, rather than defined by analysis. To whom will ye liken God ?

It may aid us further to conceive of the regenerating act as a unique disclosure of God's power, if we recall the fact that in like manner we conceive of the atonement as a solitary device of his moral government. Thus, also, we look upon the incarnation as an unparalleled expression of the personality of Godhead. It would be as truthful to confound these with the emblems by which we struggle with our poverty of speech to express them, as it is to confound the regenerating power, as is sometimes done, with creative power, or preserving power, or the power of miracle, or any other variety of executive energy emanating from the Will of God.

Yet if we observe faithfully the actual working of God in regeneration, and judge the cause by its effects, we are not left without some practical hints of its nature.

Thus we approximate a radical idea of it when we discover it to be a moral, as distinct from a physical power. We have a valuable notion of it, when we term it persuasive, as distinct from compulsory, in its operation. We derive fearful admonition from the fact that it is resistible, not invincible, by the subjects of it. Yet we rest in hope when we know that it is certain in its working, and sure of its end; not capricious, not chimerical. And do we not revere the supernatural majesty of it when we look up to the height of the solitude in which it works, without equal and without adequate symbol among all the revelations made to us of Infinite Mind ?

II. The proof of the fact of Divine Agency in regeneration is derived chiefly from the Word of God. Yet it cannot be needful in this place to dwell with exegetical minuteness on an array of proof-texts of such a truth. An analysis of the

text<sup>1</sup> of this discourse may serve as a specimen of the declarative passages in which this doctrine is taught.

“To as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God; which were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” We cannot press to the quick the significance of the word “power” here. Yet we need not shrink from it through fear of its implication against human freedom. We must concede, however, to an objector against the whole conception of a new birth that there is here an infelicity, though not necessarily an inaccuracy, in our English version. “Prerogative” is the idea which the word in its connection requires, rather than “ability.” “Privilege” it is rendered in the margin of our larger Bibles. “To them assigned he the privilege of being the sons of God.” But this is not the vital part of the passage in respect to the truth before us. That appears in the sequel: “Which were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” That is, this new birth which entitles men the sons of God, is not the fruit of ancestral dignity. It is not consequent upon the laws of natural generation. It is not the product of human influence. It is a work of God. Language could not be more explicit.

A most interesting feature of the scriptural method of teaching this truth is seen in the fact that no timidity is exhibited by inspired minds in their guardianship of it. They do not seem to fear that a change of heart will not be ascribed to God by those who experience that change. The passages are not numerous in which the central point of significance is, like that of the text, a contrast of Divine with human power. Occasionally, indeed, we read such monitory words as these: “By grace ye are saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves — it is the gift of God”; and such as these: “I have planted and Apollos watered, but God gave the increase; so then neither is he that planteth anything, nor he that watereth, but God.”

<sup>1</sup> John i. 12, 13.

Such, however, is not the general mood of inspiration on this subject. More frequently than otherwise, the fact of the divinity of regeneration is *inserted*, as if by the by; not as intrinsically inferior, yet as relatively subordinate, in the structure of the inspired thought. Thus, we are told that "God hath quickened us together with Christ"; the dignity of association with Christ being the gleaming point in the language. We are taught that "as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God"; with emphasis not chiefly on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but upon the dignity of the adoption. We are admonished, "God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation, through the sanctification of the Holy Ghost," in which not so much the divinity of the power, as the eternity of the election, is the focal thought. We are reminded, "Ye are washed, ye are sanctified by the Spirit of our God"; and not so much the agency of the change, as the contrast it has created with "thieves and drunkards and extortioners," marks the climax of impression. We hear Paul exclaiming: "What is the exceeding greatness of the power of God to us-ward who believe"; not the bald fact that it is the power of God, but the unutterable magnitude of that power, is the point of concentration.

Thus the inspired mind speaks at its ease of the fact of Divine working in regeneration, as if it were a truth which an experience of the change, or even an admission of the necessity of the change, would draw after it as an inevitable corollary. Inspiration does not *pet* the doctrine, nor prop the doctrine, nor seem to tremble for the honor of the doctrine. It treats the doctrine more regally. By collateral mention of it, by calm assumption of it, by cool implications of it, by unpremeditated allusions to it, and by delicate hints of it, the inspired mind treats it as if it were a truth of which an intimation is equivalent to a demonstration,—a truth which, once insinuated into the mind through crevices of thought, will be like light to the universe. It will assert itself. It will prove itself. It will vindicate its own dignity, and flood

all things else with its superabounding radiance. Such is the temper of the faith in this doctrine which the inspired writers would create in a believing soul. Theirs is a placid faith, an intrepid faith, an unsuspecting faith; a faith never wavering in itself, never tremulous over the treasure it guards; a faith which sees God so intensely in the wonders of his grace, that to its clear, calm eye this world seems like a "drop of water resting in the hollow of Jehovah's hand."

III. It is not needful for the force of argument, but it will be impressive for the purpose of illustration, to advance in this train of thought a step further, and inquire if there be anything in the experience of a change of heart which is suggestive of a supernatural Cause?

We see in the material world much which is immediately suggestive to us of the presence of God. We obtain our first vivid conceptions of Divine power from the evidences of that power in natural phenomena, over which we do not consciously pause to elaborate the conviction of God's working. We do not educe it from a nice balancing of probabilities. We see it; it forces itself upon us. We know it; it overpowers our consciousness of all speculative processes. We can only look on in silent awe while the wonderful perfections of God unfold themselves. Do we not thus see God in a cataract, in a tempest, in the lightning, in the ocean? Do we not thus discern his hand in the heavens, which are the work of his fingers? Do we not thus behold the light of his countenance in the dawn of morning? Do we not thus hear the sound of his footfall when night settles on the world? To a believing spirit these phenomena are all immediately suggestive of God.

Our present inquiry, then, is: Do we discover in the developments of the human soul in that process of experience of which conversion is the exponent any similar tokens of God's agency? Do we perceive anything which impels us to feel, as by intuition, that we are witnessing an act of God?

That every instance of conversion is of this electric character we cannot affirm. Not every work of God in the nat-

ural world is such. God acts in the formation of a vein of anthracite as efficiently as in the creation of the Himalayas. Science teaches us that the forces antecedent in the one case were as elemental and convulsive as those in the other. So in the spiritual world, the change of a soul in regeneration may be wrought by processes which conceal themselves from all eyes but that of him who sees where is the vein for silver and the place for gold. Yet to the wisdom of a later world those processes shall be seen to have been as formative and as revolutionary as any that have racked other natures with tumultuous conversion.

But some phenomena are observable in the experience of some minds which, assuming the scriptural theory of regeneration as a *possible* fact, are *immediate* tokens of the presence and the power of God. To some of these let us direct our thoughts.

1. Such phenomena may be observed in the *manner* of the conversion of some persons. Of this, illustration will be more convincing than abstract proof. Take, for example, the conversion of the Apostle Paul. Look at it as a fact in the history of mind. Set aside as irrelevant to the object before us whatever was miraculous in the events of that journey to Damascus. Make no account of the supernatural light, the voice from heaven, the shock of blindness. Consider not the means, but the manner, of that change in the man. Mark its impetuosity. Note the instantaneousness of that arrest of passion. It is like a torrent frozen in mid-air. Observe the revulsion of feeling. Threatening and slaughter give place to convictions of sin. Malignity is supplanted by prayer. Perceive the revolution of character in that instant of trembling and astonishment. Call it regeneration, conversion, new birth, or by titles more comely to philosophic taste; call it what you will, it is a change of character. The Pharisee becomes a penitent. The persecutor becomes a Christian. The murderer becomes a saint. For aught that appears in the narrative, the change is almost like a flash of lightning. How brief the colloquy which proclaims the whole

of it! "Who art thou, Lord?" "I am Jesus." "Lord what wilt thou have me to do?" We do not know that mind can move more rapidly than this in such a juncture of its history, and yet move intelligently. Then put together the two lives of the man — his life before, and his life after, this convulsive crisis. Saul and Paul join hands over this invisible gulf, as over the river of death — the same being, yet two different men. His character has experienced a change like the transmutation of metals. Take these as facts of sober mental history, and do they not seem to speak the presence of a supernatural Power? If the world could come to that ninth chapter of the Acts as to a modern discovery in psychology, philosophic systems would grow out of it; all futile in explanation of the process, but all confessing the reality and the divinity of the thing.

Yet this passage in the life of one soul is a representative of a class of changes of religious character, in which it is unphilosophical not to see the working of Divine power within the enclosure of finite being. Such a passage in the life of a soul was the conversion of Luther. Such also was that of John Bunyan and of Gilbert Tennent. Such was that of the late Rev. Dr. Wilson of Philadelphia, who was suddenly prostrated under conviction of sin, through a sense of the Divine goodness in the failure of his pistol to fell his antagonist in an assault. The mental experiences of such men, considered merely as data of mental science, deserve a consideration which they do not often receive. The world, from the beginning until now, has inferred the presence of supernal agencies in the mental changes of men, from less conclusive evidences than those furnished by such conversions as these. Socrates believed — and philosophy has revered him for the faith — that an invisible Spirit swayed his thought, and he believed it on less evidence than this. Napoleon believed — and poetry has discovered piety in the faith — that supernatural power intervened in his destiny; and he believed it on less evidence than this. It has passed into the cant of literature to ascribe inspiration, even divinity, to great minds on infinitely less evidence than this.

So have we seen and heard in our own day, and among men and women whose names will never be heralded in biographies, evidences of a power working in their souls, which suggests to us irresistibly the presence of God. We have seen great suddenness of conviction, — a blasphemer has been struck down by a sense of guilt, as if by a bolt of fire, like that which fell at Luther's feet. We have known a velocity of movement from conviction to penitence which has seemed like the speed of light. We have learned that such processes of conviction and conversion have tallied with the pleadings of intercessory prayer. Prayer has seemed to be prescient of history. We must abandon the laws of natural association if, with the scriptural doctrine of regeneration in the background, we do not see in such changes a work of God. It is not seldom that unbelief is awed into silence by them, even when they are still distasteful to its culture. The belief is thrust upon the incredulous observer, — he cannot resist it: — “This is not the work of man; this is not hypocrisy; it is not enthusiasm; it is no fiction of a mind fuming with effervescent sympathy; it is no nightmare of one frantic through fear of death: this is a work of God, — I can no more question it than I can question the power of a Creator if I see the solid globe quivering and gaping in the throes of an earthquake.”

2. The presence of Divine agency is often suggested, further, by the experience of men in conversion, not in the manner of the change, but in the *magnitude* of the change itself. John Foster has observed the evidence of Almighty Power in the awakening of intellect in those who are converted in gross ignorance. He says: “It is striking to observe how the rigid soul seems to soften and grow warm and expand and quiver with life. With the new energy infused, it struggles to work itself into freedom from the wretched contortion in which it has so long been fixed, as by the spell of some infernal magic. It is filled with a distressed and indignant emotion at its own ignorance; actuated with a restless earnestness to be informed; acquiring an unwonted

pliancy of its faculties to thought. We have known instances in which the intellectual change has been so conspicuous, that even an infidel observer must have forfeited all claim to be a man of sense if he would not acknowledge: 'This, which you call divine grace, whatever it really be, is the strangest awakener of faculties, after all.' "

But what is such intellectual awakening in comparison with the moral regeneration which underlies it! When a man who has spent half a lifetime in the dens of vice comes forth to sit as a meek disciple at the Lord's table; when it is said of a scoffer, "Behold he prayeth"; when we hear a thief crying "Lord remember me"; when a man whose name has been the synonym of vileness, and whose brutality cities have borne as a curse upon their youth, becomes a preacher of Christ; when one whom the moral sense of the world has doomed as an outcast, "lost" as no other sinner on earth can be, from whom the virtuous have turned aside in the street lest they should but touch the hem of her garment,—when such a one is seen coming to Jesus, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, and bathing them with her tears, and wiping them with the hair of her head, till he who knew no sin turns and says: "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much,"—how is it possible *not* to discern that God who doeth wonders?

Those early Christians of Rome and Corinth, had they no evidence of God's power in regeneration, when an apostle enumerated to them the loathsome catalogue of crimes by which Paganism had degraded humanity, and then added, "such also *were* some of you." Had such a man as Augustine no reason for the faith which was in him, that his "evil and abominable youth," as he affirms, was transformed by "thy grace only, O Lord, thy grace only"? Was this a visionary faith to such a man as Colonel James Gardiner? Who shall say that John Newton took the name of God in vain, in ascribing to Divine power that change in his heart which took him from the helm of a slave-ship, and taught him to compose, for all succeeding ages, such a hymn as that

commencing "One there is above all others"? Had a man with such a history no right to speak from his own experience of God's power in his soul, when he taught us to sing,

"Sweet was the time when first *I felt*  
The Saviour's pardoning blood"?

Had *he* no right to sing as he did,

"Amazing grace, — how sweet the sound! —  
That saved a wretch like me!"

3. Still another form of this illustrative evidence of Divine agency in regeneration appears in its *diffusiveness* to large numbers simultaneously. Scarcely can a more memorable exhibition of God be found than that presented by a revival of religion. Historians seldom take note of so obscure an event; yet if the secret connections of revivals with the destiny of nations could be disclosed, they would appear to be more critical evolutions of history than the Gothic invasions. A volume has been compiled, narrating the decisive battles of the world. But more significant than this, and probing deeper the Divine government of the world, would be the history of revivals.

Our sense of the reality of revivals as revelations of God is apt to be impaired by several causes. In certain periods their frequency so familiarizes our minds with them that they impress us as little as the tides. At other times the very vastness of their extent overpowers our ability to associate them with definite thoughts of God. It is our weakness, that in spiritual things our vision is often more intense in the specific and the minute, than in the multifarious and the immeasurable, disclosures of his working. Does not a single star in the sky sometimes move us more sensibly than the whole spangled heavens, roofing the world over? So, the conversion of one soul may seem to bring us nearer to the Infinite Mind than days of pentecost. Perhaps, more than all else, the pathological infirmities and the moral perversions, with which human nature defaces God's work in wide-spread revivals, fascinate our gaze as we look on. Our vision grows distorted. We cease to discern between good and evil. We

become like men who are color-blind. We are unconscious that it is our own disease which dims our eye.

But to any sane mind whose vision faith has sharpened, so that it can see truth luminous through murky surroundings, a revival of religion will appear to be one of the most godlike events in history. Regarded as an achievement of power only, to be made the theme of philosophical inquiry, it can be traced to no human forces. Viewed as an index of prophecy, it is often one of the night-signals of this world's march heavenward.

That swaying of a nation to and fro by secret agency, — by a Power, which no man sees, and no man hears, and no man can explain; of which no man can tell whence it comes or whither it goes, yet a Power which every man feels; and which singles out from the innumerable throng this one and that one, by laws of selection which no man can define, till scores grow to hundreds, and hundreds to thousands, and an army of the elect gathers at the bidding of this voiceless One — what mystery of faith could invite such incredulity as that involved in denying to such a phenomenon the Will of God? If men would but apply to the history of revivals the same laws of cause and effect which they adopt in reasoning upon the origin of the Crusades, no man with the scriptural idea of regeneration as an hypothesis in his mind, could withstand the evidence of Almighty Power in any revival which has commanded the faith of the church as a work of the Holy Ghost. We may sum up the testimony of such revivals, taken in the mass with all their perversions, in the confession made by many irreligious men of the last century, who had lived through the "Great Awakening" of that period, and by many also who have recently watched the phenomena of the "Year of Grace" in Ireland, that the events of which they had been eye-witnesses were inexplicable by any psychological laws which should not recognize the presence and the direct working of God in the souls of men.

4. Still another variety of the illustrative evidence of Divine agency in regeneration is found in a class of facts

which indeed are exceptional in their character; yet they are among the signal exhibitions of God in Christian experience. I allude to certain *abnormal* growths of Christian life which are unproductive of Christian joy. To those who are familiar, to any large extent, with unwritten Christian biography, this will suggest a distinct and most instructive class of examples of regenerate experience. They utter unconscious testimony to the working of him whose glory it is to conceal a thing.

When certain varieties of temperament come under the sway of regenerating grace they shrink instinctively from faith, even from hope, that the life of God may have been imparted to such as they. The credibility of experience in these cases is marred by no overweening self-confidence. The most fastidious sceptic is not here repelled by the assumptions of haughty sanctity. No honest lip can curl in contempt of the inconsistency of character with profession. These Christians make no professions. They express no assurance. They enjoy little or no hope for themselves. The inner life of some of them is as the valley of the shadow of death. Yet who that knows anything of unrecorded Christian history does not recall some from this group of crushed spirits, who have exhibited to all spectators an overwhelming testimony to the working within them of infinite power? They have seemed to exhale the evidence of God's indwelling. They have commanded from others a confidence which they dared not whisper to themselves. They have been as unconscious as infancy of the beauty of the Divine life they expressed. They wist not that their faces shone. Men stand in awe of such characters, and gather around them to make obeisance to them. God hath indeed chosen these weak things to confound the wise. Sceptics are dumb in their presence; rude men are mellowed; and strong men bow themselves at the glance of their meek eye. They make us weep when they speak of God's dealings with them. Their silence is more eloquent than speech. "I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God,

and for the testimony which they held." In emergencies of our mental life do we not sometimes turn to these voiceless witnesses for refuge? Does not our coarser faith lean upon them with a firmer trust than upon strong men armed, and mighty men of valor? We are not careful at such times to inquire whether the emotions which overwhelm us can be justified by this world's wisdom. We do not care whether they can be accounted for by a syllogism. Something within us assures us that in communing with such beings we hold converse with him whose temple they are. We bid kings and counsellors of the earth to fall back to the right and the left, and let these few choice spirits go up before us. We follow those who have been chosen kings and priests unto God.

This unconscious testimony to the Divine indwelling occasionally exhibits itself in strange — yes, in fearful — forms; for it is contrasted with strange and fearful forms of suffering. I can never listen to the singing of some of the hymns of Cowper without a thrill of reverence for the grace of God which could work so mightily in a diseased soul. Some of Cowper's most affecting lyrics, to which millions of Christian hearts have turned lovingly, as to the most truthful expression of their own experience which they have ever found, except in the Psalms of David, were composed during those eleven years in which, as he tells us, not a solitary moment of hope of his own salvation ever cheered his soul. By those rivers of Babylon he sat down and wept; and his wailings have been heard in thousands of the sanctuaries of Zion to-day. Oh mystery of Grace, — that regenerating love should thus gleam out and make radiant the path of sympathizing beholders, when not a ray of it could find ingress to the bleared and swollen eye of the unconscious believer!

May we venture to probe the mystery? Can it be the object of such a phenomenon to give to the universe a monument of God's triumph over Satan, in a conflict the severity of which *submerges* weak human nature to depths which light cannot pierce? In the shock and struggle of that warfare, in which the supremacy over man's soul is contested by un-

seen belligerents, may it not be that God sometimes suspends the hiding of his power, and lays out the forces of his will in majesty which the human consciousness cannot bear to look upon? Shall man *see* God in such conflicts and live? But the reflex influence of such experience upon the usefulness of the believer is more intelligible. I have heard it said by one, the fragrance of whose memory yet fills this place, that "no man could be qualified to write a commentary on the Psalms of David, who had not known some great sorrow." So, when God regenerates a chosen one who is to become dear to the hearts of many generations, the secret method of grace sometimes is to work out the change by processes which shall disclose its reality to all minds but his. To him the volume is sealed until the time of the end. Yet his tremulous fingers have written it that the scriptures might be fulfilled: "I will lead the blind by a way they knew not; I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known me."

Even upon the insane experience of such a soul we may reasonably found our faith in the divinity of the Power which dwells in it. We turn from the testimony of such a one in his despair, to his testimony as we doubt not he rehearses it to awe-struck angels. "Poor Cowper," as thy friends used to call thee, — "Our guide, our teacher, our brother," rather would we name thee, — what thinkest thou now of God's dealings with thy soul? Dost thou not now understand those mysterious eleven years? Was it not worth eleven years of sorrow, to be thus enabled to express some of the experiences of God's people in all coming time? Was it not worth eleven years of conflict, to be thus disciplined as the witness of God to unborn millions among whom this shall be told as a memorial of thee? Was it not worth eleven years of bondage to the powers of darkness, to be thus led to the composition of one such song of Zion as that in which thou hast taught us that "God moves in a mysterious way"? Was it not worth eleven years of despair, to be thus moved by the throes of thine own anguish to assure all other believers, as thou hast done, that "There *is* a fountain filled with blood"?

Dost thou not now see that when thou didst say for our comfort,

“Then, in a nobler, sweeter song,  
I'll sing thy power to save,”

thou didst speak words of unconscious prophecy?

IV. The doctrine of Divine agency in regeneration is fruitful of practical results.

1. Of these one of the most obvious is a disclosure of the profound nature of depravity. Evil is radically crafty. The serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field. We get even from an experience of sin no such profound notion of it as we derive from the means and powers necessary to eradicate it. So we approximate the radical idea of depravity most nearly through this revelation of God's work in the new birth.

To discern the vital truth here, unconfounded by fictitious alleviations, we need to guard our thoughts against the conception of a depravity which is not guilt. In the subject of a moral government, guilt and depravity are equivalents. Depravity, as has been shown in a previous discourse,<sup>1</sup> in any sense of it which makes it an object of moral displeasure, is character; nothing less, nothing more. And depraved character is guilt. The need of a work of God to change the heart suggests, therefore, the depth of this depravity of character which the common sense of men recognizes, and the common conscience condemns as *guilt*. The necessity in question is proof of the exceeding sinfulness of sin. It denounces no involuntary corruption; it permits no such burial of our sense of personality. It demands no conviction of sin for constitutional degeneracy; it inflicts no such suffocation upon conscience. The soul that sinneth, *it* shall die. The son shall *not* bear the iniquity of the father.

The necessity of creating extinguished faculties would be a light matter in comparison with that which actually presses upon an unregenerate soul. The real emergency of the case probes deeper. It reaches down, down, to the lowest depths

<sup>1</sup> Bib. Sac., January 1866.

of conscience, where such ideas as right, wrong, guilt, remorse, punishment, pardon, are the elements; down below theories of the make of the soul as a creature of power, below the *stock* it comes from as a prisoner of the body; down to what the soul is in its own *chosen* being. And there, in that underground of conscious character, regenerating love finds faculties not one of which is defunct, sensibilities which are all quivering with life, a will which baffles death in its tenacity; an unshattered soul, which in its wholeness can obey God, and will not. The sinner can give to God *all there is of him* — and will give nothing. The depravity therefore which his dependence proves, I repeat, is the depravity of guilt. Such depravity is an incomparably more fearful thing, for it is more profound and more hateful, than degeneracy of stock or taint in the blood. The difference is the measureless one between misfortune and crime. Morally estimated, the misfortune is nothing — the crime infinite. The degeneracy of blood is only a condition of probation — the depravity of guilt is a chosen doom.

What, then, must such depravity be, if it be so profound as to need the intervention of omnipotence to root it out? Divest the thought for a moment of technical dialect. Conceive what must be the character of that intelligent soul, that sane mind, that free being, that responsible man, whose sheer guilt constitutes his helplessness, and creates his need of the interposition of a power such as has no parallel that we know of in God's working elsewhere. Who shall gauge that moral abyss in which a soul lies, when, with its godlike endowments of intelligence, conscience, and freedom intact, it is fallen because it would plunge down; prostrate, because it will not rise; guilty, because the unmitigated and unrelenting forces of its will are concentrated in the choice to be so; and *therefore* its salvation is thrown back — an anomaly in the history of the universe — upon the resources of Infinite Mind? By what similitude shall we paint such a being's unlikeness to God? What shall we call him? Yet such is man as the gospel finds him. Such is man lost, the

world over. Such is man unregenerate in schools of science and in homes of refinement, as well as in the abodes of poverty and the lairs of vice. To the dispassionate thoughts of God this ruin of soul is a reality, whatever we may think of it. His calm eye looks down on this assembly, and singles out this lost one, and that lost one — how many, who dares to conjecture? — “Lord, is it I?” To him this desolation of godlike being is a reality as vivid as the great white throne.

2. The moral uses of this doctrine of the new birth also disclose in it a singular harmony. No other theory of human nature prostrates man so low before God; yet no other uses so honestly for the purpose of that abasement man’s own intelligence, the workings of his own reason, the longings of his own heart, the convictions of his own conscience. Confronted with the Word of God on this subject, a man is made to see with his own eyes, to hear with his own ears, to understand with his own intellect, to interpret his own nature, to feel in his own consciousness, and, if regenerated, to yield in his own personality. Thus the whole man is humbled. No one part of him gives the lie to another. God’s work within him does not falsify his necessary beliefs. He is not made a maniac or a fanatic or a mystic. Nor is he left for one moment to the reasonable indulgence of a conception which jars the integrity of his conscience or taints with suspicion his thoughts of God. Truth here, as in all other revelations of itself, hints at a system of congruities.

3. Through this opening we have also an impressive outlook upon the work of man’s renewal as a work worthy of God. One of the most suggestive thoughts in our modern literature is the title of a sermon by one of our own preachers: “The Dignity of Human Nature shown from its Ruins.” So we might discourse of the “Majesty of God as shown in the Reconstruction of the Ruins of the Fall.” In this work God does but reclaim his own. He rebuilds the fragments of his own image. His work is the more godlike, the more loftily we exalt the human constitution within which he

operates. In this we indulge no self-assertion: we only assert God. For the more godlike the man in his endowments as regenerating grace *finds* him, the more awful has been the shock of his fall, the more profound is the depth of his ruin, and the more superhuman, therefore, are the attributes exhibited in his recovery. We have no pinions with which to wing our flight to the altitude of such an achievement. We can only look on speechlessly at a work so much like God in its conception, and so honorable to him in its consummation.

4. Yet we change our position by a step only, and it is not so much the sovereignty of God that we see in the new birth as his condescension. It is characteristic of those aspects of truth which from one angle of vision display the Divine dignity most impressively, that from another they exhibit the Divine lowliness inexplicably. So it is with the work of God in man's renewal. Viewed from above as a work of dominion, nothing appears more like a Sovereign God; yet viewed from within, nothing seems its equal as a disclosure of a condescending and self-forgetful Friend.

Said Whitefield, on one occasion when overcome by a sense of his personal election by the divine mercy: "Why me, Lord; why me?" So might we inquire respecting every renewed child of Adam: Why has God chosen this one? Why that one? Why is a fallen one singled out from this boundless universe of souls? Why should God stoop and reach down so low? Why expend his wisdom, his power, his patience, his love, his complicated and costly beneficence on passions so odious and hearts so obdurate? We can have no adequate conception how odious they are to him. We, through mere refinement of taste, revolt from contact with guilt in its grosser forms. When a sensitive woman encounters savage vices to save the souls of men, we look on with awe. But few understand the sacrifice. We call it a heroism which is not of this world. Yet what, in the comparison, must every unrenewed heart be to the mind of God,— a Mind infinite in its sensibilities as well as in its

perceptions; a Mind, therefore, whose recoil from sin is an unrevealed experience, because no other mind is capable of conceiving such a revelation? It should not have surprised us if God had deemed it beneath his dignity to regenerate a depraved soul. So man would have reasoned. We should have said that Divine magnanimity ought not to be thus humiliated. Omniscient thought ought not to be abased, immaculate purity ought not to be contaminated, infinite love ought not to be shocked, the eternal choice ought not to be degraded by such inglorious association. Why did not God reason so? Why did he not simply doom the ruin to its desolation? Why did he not bury its ghastliness from the sight of the universe, and—leave it there?

5. This subject also individualizes the Holy Spirit as a personal Friend. That is not an unmeaning peculiarity of the plan of salvation which assigns to the distinctions in the Godhead diverse relations to this work. A mature Christian experience finds no unnaturalness in a concentration of itself at times upon one or another of these manifestations of God in redemption. That is an imperfect acquaintance with God which has not led the heart to embrace in its distinct consciousness of affection the Holy Ghost. A reality of Christian life is expressed in that language of affectionate praise in which psalmists have taught us to address the third person of the Trinity. Our Saviour knew the cravings of the regenerate heart when he gave to the Holy Spirit a sympathetic, rather than a reverend title: "The Comforter, he dwelleth with you."

6. We may learn, finally, from this theme one element of the spirit with which men should seek their own salvation. No sinner can seek eternal life aright, none will seek it in earnest, whose soul is not pervaded with the conviction of his need of a change which must be wrought by the power of the Holy Ghost. The soul must again stand face to face with God, as in the hour of its creation. This conviction cannot legitimately lead to helpless inactivity. It cannot tempt to impenitent delay of duty. The sense of moral

helplessness is never to be sought as an end: it is to be used as a means. Its proper drift is to deepen more profoundly the sense of guilt, until the sense of guilt shall impel the sinner to him who only can redeem. This, then, is the conviction which the pulpit should impress upon an unregenerate sinner. He should be taught to feel that he is so overloaded by his own sins, he is so obstinate in his own perverseness, he is so prostrate in the helplessness of his own guilt and in the guilt of his own helplessness, that nothing but almighty grace will save him. This is the measure of his guilt, — that he needs omnipotence to change his heart. No other view than this meets the facts of a sinner's condition. He is thus in the hands of God. He is thus dependent on God's will for his conversion. He is made thus dependent by his own wilfulness in sin; by nothing else. This is dependence in the supreme degree. It is ultimate, as no other dependence can be. The question of a sinner's salvation, therefore, must be suspended upon God's own good pleasure. It is no anomaly that the result is locked up in the recesses of an eternal purpose. It is no merciless decree that he hath mercy on whom he will have mercy. It is in love, my impenitent hearers, that you are permitted to stand in this emergency alone with God. It is the joy of Christian faith to leave you there. The solicitude of friends must leave you there. All human appliances and means of grace must leave you there — in the hands of God. We entertain no views of truth which would remove you from those everlasting arms. We teach no such theology as would relieve you from this dependence of guilt upon Almighty Grace. We preach no such theology. We hold no such. We can gather around you, with our sollicitudes, instructions, persuasions, entreaties, warnings. We can go with you to the throne of mercy, and there plead for you. But there our work ceases. We must, and we rejoice that we may, leave you there, — each one, shut in to his own solitude with GOD.