

ARTICLE IX.

THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE.

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AN unintelligent use of the Bible has greatly hindered the spread of pure Christianity. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were given by inspiration of God, and contain a perfect rule of faith and life. But to read the Bible without understanding it, is to waste one's time; and to undertake to expound it to others without understanding it, is to be a blind leader of the blind. A misinterpreted Bible is a principal source of error in the Christian world. It is, indeed, the stronghold of much of the error that is abroad. A rightly interpreted Bible is the only means of "saving knowledge and healthful civilization." Many, not to say most, persons, who believe that the Bible contains a revelation from God, seem to cease exercising their reason as soon as they take up the sacred volume. They appear to regard everything contained in it as a direct address from the Almighty to themselves, and they feel as if the statements or directions are to be applied, in every case, literally to themselves and to their own circumstances. Now this blind and unintelligent reading of the Scriptures may be a grievous snare. A literal application to ourselves, in circumstances so widely different from those which existed when the statements were made, or the directions given, may lead us far astray.

The Sacred Writings were originally addressed, in dark periods, to rude peoples, whose point of view, and habits of thought, were entirely different, in many respects, from ours in gospel-enlightened lands. It would not be reason-

able, therefore, for us to apply to ourselves, word for word, and letter for letter, whatever the Divine Being caused to be communicated to them. But it is reasonable to say, that from what the Lord caused to be said to the ancient Jews, or to the primitive Christians, we may properly infer what he would say to us in our circumstances. Of course, whatever spiritual truth was made known to them, and whatever moral duties were enjoined upon them, were intended for all men, and for all time; because that which is spiritual, and that which is moral, is unchangeable. But, along with these spiritual truths and moral precepts, were given statements and directions which were formal and external in their nature, or local and transient in their application; and they cannot, therefore, be applied to ourselves and our times without harm.

Revelation was gradual and progressive. This truth becomes apparent as we read the Scriptures. Our Lord taught that truths are revealed as men are able to bear or to receive them. The Divine Being evidently adapted his communications to the ideas and capacities of the men to whom they were made. This leads to the important conclusion that Christianity is a progressive development of truth. It was such from the beginning, according to the Scriptures. It is a progressive development of truth today. This does not mean that there has been, or is, or can be, any change in spiritual truth, or in essential morals; but it means that there have been, and are, and, as we may infer, there will be, changes in the human apprehension of divinely revealed truths. Our point of view, and habits of thought, change continually and necessarily with enlarged experience, sober reflection, and increasing knowledge of the works and ways of God in nature. These things, with increasing fullness of the Holy Spirit's light and power, as promised for gospel times, lead necessarily to great changes in the apprehension of divine truth by the people of God.

The most important business that men have to attend to in this life is, to search the Scriptures for the precious gems of truth; to study them diligently, laboring, with all the helps at their command, to discriminate between what in their contents was local and transient in application, and what is eternally true and unchangeably binding. This is no novel doctrine. It is the principle on which all intelligent Christians act in reading large portions of the Old Testament. We are taught in the New Testament, to read the Old in that discriminating way. But the letter of the New Testament is no more to be regarded in all particulars than that of the Old. To obey the letter of the New Testament in all things would require us, for example, to have a king and a strong military government. But the spirit of the whole Bible would require, and lead to the adoption of, a more mild and equitable form. The great contest of the seventeenth century, fought in the pulpit, through the press, and on fields of blood, was to decide, whether a Christian nation should regard the letter or the spirit of the Bible, in reference to the form of civil government.

So the letter of the Bible in both Testaments is in favor of slave-holding. As a consequence, many good people formerly defended and advocated it, unjust and inhuman as the system was. They read the Scriptures, and there they found that good men held slaves in the early ages, and that God tolerated and regulated the system. This bewildered and misled them. But the majority of Christians in this country had their eyes opened to see, what Christians in other countries had long seen, that, while the letter of the Bible could be appealed to in favor of slavery, the whole spirit and drift of Scripture was opposed to it, and called loudly for its abolition. So the great conflict of the nineteenth century had to be, whether the letter or the spirit of God's Word should be regarded in the solution of

the slavery question. The letter of the Bible was with the people of the South, as their religious instructors had carefully taught them. In a very significant sense, the letter killed them. But the spirit of Christ and of humanity, breathing throughout the Scriptures, gave life, and power, and victory to the anti-slavery hosts of the North.

The opening years of the twentieth century find the Christian world in the midst of another contest, waxing hotter and hotter, and brought about in precisely the same way with the slavery conflict. The letter of the Bible is favorable to a moderate use of wine and strong drink, and is against the total abstainers and prohibitionists. A blind regard for the mere letter of certain passages in Holy Writ keeps the pulpit in many places quiet, when it ought to be outspoken against iniquity. It causes some ministers to stand up as defenders of a business than which earth has none more cruel and Satanic. It leads many church-members astray, keeps up the number of moderate drinkers in some churches, thus furnishing a steady supply of recruits for the army of drunkards. It shows what a mighty hold the Bible has in the world, when the mere letter of it is strong enough to bolster up the liquor traffic in Christian nations, at a time when experience, science, humanity, and Christianity are, with one voice, demanding its suppression. But while the letter of the Bible is being used to deal death and destruction on every side, the spirit of the holy gospel of Jesus, the spirit of humanity and brotherly love, breathing throughout the Scriptures, is with the friends and advocates of total abstinence and prohibition. And it needs no prophet's ken to foretell the result of the temperance conflict.

In the same way, the letter of the Bible is favorable to the subjection of woman. The inspired apostle Paul is continually quoted against those who are claiming larger liberty for the handmaidens of the Lord. Earnest advo-

cates of woman's rights are in great danger, if they have not studied the principles of Scripture interpretation, of losing confidence in the holy men of old who spake and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. The writer heard a prominent lady-advocate, on one occasion, discussing the subject of "Woman at the Present Day." While she said many true things, and presented a statement of facts which might have had considerable influence on the minds of her hearers, her flings at the apostle Paul, and at the doctrine of inspiration, were calculated wholly to destroy her influence, and even the influence of her facts and arguments, with the people who heard her, who were, probably without exception, sincere believers in evangelical Christianity.

Some of us are in favor of giving to intelligent and good women all the privileges they desire, whether in the church or in civic society. At the same time we reverently bow to the Word of God, and believe that the apostle Paul was moved by the Holy Spirit when he directed the Christian women of Corinth to keep quiet in the church, and, if they wanted any information, to ask their husbands for it at home. A clear perception of the truth, that a direction, given by an inspired man, which was needed under the circumstances then existing, is wholly inapplicable now, under circumstances entirely different, and circumstances, too, brought about by the influence of the gospel itself, might preserve many people from serious and hurtful error.

A conflict is gradually but rapidly approaching, which will be one of the most serious and momentous in the history of Christian civilization. I mean the conflict between capital and labor, between wealth and the commonweal, between the privileged and favored few and the many who are discouraged and depressed. As in every contest occasioned by the spirit of Christianity coming

in conflict with the selfishness of men, the letter of the Bible will be appealed to by all defenders of the privileged and favored class; while the spirit of all Scripture, and the hitherto ignored teachings of Jesus, will be found to favor the poor and struggling, the weary and heavy-laden working-people. Where the teachings of Christ lead, where his spirit is, there will be life, and strength, and victory. As surely as a just and benevolent God reigns, and his word is true, the riches he is furnishing so munificently, enough and more than enough for all, will, by juster laws and a kindlier spirit, be diffused among the people. Then will pinching poverty, gross ignorance, and utter wretchedness, in the midst of Christian people, pass away forever.

Inasmuch as the misreading and misapplying of Holy Scripture leads to results so disastrous and fatal, is it surprising that we find in the Bible itself special warnings against following the mere letter of the Word? The apostle Paul says that he and his fellow-workers had been "made able ministers of the New Testament, not of the letter, but of the spirit"; "for," he adds, "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." And, at another time, he expresses an anxious desire that Christians "should serve in newness of the spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter."

It is appalling to think of the abuses and evils afflicting society, which have been defended and perpetuated by appeals to the letter of the Bible,—not only those already mentioned, but others, such as race-prejudice, caste, governmental oppression, war—irrational, inhuman, horrid war, militarism in time of peace, dueling, polygamy,—so that it has taken ages for the spirit of Christ working in the hearts of men to rid Christendom, even partially, of some of these monstrous abuses, while others of them are in full blast to-day, among Christians, darkening the earth, and destroying the people.

This state of things has of course encouraged and in-

creased infidelity. The wrong use made of the Holy Scriptures, the defending of hoary iniquities by appeals to the Bible, and the coldness with which the church, as such, has usually regarded reforms,—these things have, in these days of increasing intelligence, presented Christianity at a great disadvantage, and multiplied the number of doubters, unbelievers, and opponents.

The opening of the eyes of men generally to the true method of reading and applying Scripture, would doubtless lead to a more powerful revival of religion, and a mightier practical reformation, than the Christian world has yet seen. The science of scriptural interpretation is largely one of the future. Exegesis has done a grand and good work, in ascertaining and fixing the true meaning of words and texts. But the world is still waiting for the axiomatic principles and rules of interpretation, which, formulated by wise, learned, and godly men, shall be a safe and satisfactory guide to every earnest student of the Book of books.

The necessity of this must be apparent to every one who thinks of the diverse views taken of important subjects, spoken of in Scripture, by different Christians who are alike sincere. One styles our God and Saviour the God of peace, the God of love, the Prince of peace. Another styles him the God of battles, speaks of him as if he delighted in the shedding of human blood, and as if war were his favorite means of advancing the welfare of mankind. Think of the different and opposite views in regard to the Sabbath; in regard to the new birth, or change of heart; in regard to sanctification; in regard, indeed, to some of the most vital points in religion. Take the whole field of eschatology—involving the most interesting, although not the most practically important, truths revealed in Scripture—how widely do Christians differ in their views! And yet is not the scheme of things unfolded in Scripture—the spiritual truths which circle around the

Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ—is it not unique, intelligible, harmonious, and preachable? If only our able teachers would formulate, in a simple way, the rules we need for our guidance, in reading the Bible!

The success of the gospel, and the coming of Christ's kingdom, are hindered by nothing more effectually than by that blind *conservatism* which misreads the Bible, dreads change, and deplores progress. Surely, in a world where there is so much of error, sin, and suffering, changes are to be desired above all things—the changes and progress, I mean, which are effected by the reformatory spirit of the gospel of Christ.

All sensible men are, of course, in favor of *conserving* the truths of God's Word, and the knowledge acquired by the painful labors and experiences of our brethren of mankind who have gone before us. But it is a blind adherence to the mere letter of the Bible which makes so many people "conservative," in the popular sense of that word, in their philosophy of life, and in their practical politics; and afraid, also, of every blessed reform suggested by the gospel and spirit of Christ. It is an earnest study of the Scriptures, a desire to catch their real meaning and drift, much prayer for the light and guidance of the Holy Spirit, and an honest effort to obey Christ in all things, that makes other Christians radical and progressive in their philosophy and politics.