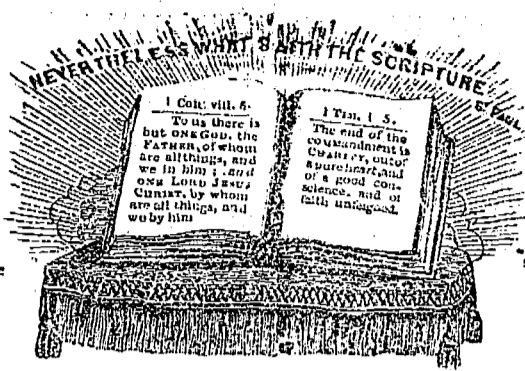


# THE BIBLE



# CHRISTIAN

TRUTH, HOLINESS,

LIBERTY, LOVE.

Vol. V.]

MONTREAL, DECEMBER, 1848.

[No. 12.]

## GOD OUR FATHER.

BY DR. CHANNING.

"When we conceive of God as a pure Spirit, and dwell on his incommunicable perfections, of which we see no image or resemblance in any beings around us, he alludes the feeble vision of our minds. It is then almost impossible that the affections can be excited and centered upon him. Such views of God furnish us no object on which we can rest, as on a reality. Now the Scriptures invest this pure and infinite Spirit with a character, relations, and qualities which we can comprehend,—such as are continually displayed around us, such as constantly address and touch our hearts, such as we can revolve in thought and meditate upon with ease and delight, such as are attractive and promise happiness; and thus they furnish us the best and most effectual means for exciting and cherishing the love of God. Of all the interesting characters and relations in which the Scriptures, especially the books of the New Testament, exhibit the Supreme Being, that of *Father* is the most common, prominent, striking.....

"No character could bring God so nigh as this of the *Father*. There is no relation which we know so familiarly as the parental. What name recalls so many thoughts and feelings, so many favors and tender remembrances, as that of parent? The Scripture, then in giving this view of God, place him before us in a clear, intelligible light. We are not called to dwell on perfections which are utterly incomprehensible, the names of which are sounds in the ear, but excite no ideas in the mind, and which have no tendency to interest the heart. God is our Father.....

"I fear it has been the influence of many speculations of ingenious men on the Divine character to divest God of that paternal tenderness which is of all views most suited to touch the heart. I fear we have learnt insensibly to view him as possessing only a general benevolence, which he extends over his wide creation, a benevolence neither very strong nor ardent, not descending to individuals, and not essential to the felicity of the Divine nature. Now this distant and almost indifferent benevolence will hardly seize on our affections. It may please us in moments of calm speculation. It will not inspire a love strong enough to curb our passions, to compose our sorrows, to influence our lives. For these ends we need to have other views frequently suggested to us,—those views of God's affection for us and for his wide family, which his parental relation to us suggests, and which the kindness of his providence compels us to receive.

"Let me now ask, why these views of God may not be cherished, and why we may not suppose that God has properly the feelings of a father towards us. It is objected, that the supposition implies that God is not infinitely happy in himself, but derives happiness from his creatures; and this derivation, we are told, is dishonorable to God. But I do not perceive that we dishonor God by believing that his creation is a real source of felicity to him, that he finds a real happiness in doing good, and in viewing with complacency obedient, virtuous, and happy children. To me there is no actor of a perfect man, that the happiness of others is his own, that he knows no higher joy than to confer and witness felicity, that his heart responds to the feelings of those around him? And if this is perfection in man, can it be an imperfection in God? Do we, indeed, exalt God, when we represent him as unaffected by the state of his creatures? Next to ascribing malignity to him, what can we say worse of him than this,—that he looks on the joys and sorrows of his own creatures without joy and without pity?.....

"We cannot see much to envy, in the felicity of a being who has no feeling of interest

and love extending beyond himself. Deprive God of the happiness of love, and we deprive him of that enjoyment which we have every reason to believe the most inexhaustible in the universe."

## LOVE THE PRINCIPLE OF HARMONY IN THE UNIVERSE.

"The Christian possesses a great advantage in the contemplation of nature. He beholds *unity* in the midst of *variety*. He looks round on the *chanting scenery*, and in every leaf of the forest, every blade of grass, every hill, every valley, and every cloud of heaven, he discovers the traces of Divine benevolence. Creation is but a field spread before him for an infinitely varied display of *love*. This is the harmonizing principle which reduces to unity and simplicity the vast diversity of nature,—this is the perfection of the universe. It clothes in moral glory every object we contemplate. The Christian truly may be said to hear the music of the spheres. He hears suns and planets joining their melody in praise to their benignant Creator. His ear, and his ear, alone, is tuned to this heavenly harmony. His soul is *love*."

## THE MERCY AND JUSTICE OF GOD.

"*Mercy* is an essential attribute of God, not an affection produced in him by a foreign cause. His blessings are free, and bestowed by another on those whose welfare he disregards. He really loves mankind; and this is the great motive, first cause, and highest spring of their redemption. Thus I have endeavored to place before you Divine goodness in the glory in which it shines in Scripture.

"But I must not stop here. This doctrine, whilst obscured by some, is carried to excess by others. There are those who, when they hear of the essential and infinite mercy of God towards even the sinful, imagine that God has no aversion towards sin, and cannot punish. Unhappily the minds of men are prone to run to extremes. They cannot be driven from one sentiment without vibrating to its opposite. Some men, as we have seen, array the divinity in darkness and terror.—God, according to them, is so holy, that he looks on sinners with no feelings but indignation. His anger burns; his sword is unsheathed; it falls more rapidly than the lightning; and nothing saves us from its sharp destruction but the merciful Son, who interposes between us and the descending ruin, receives it into his own breast, and thus appeases the wrathful Deity. When these representations are opposed as inconsistent with the character of Him whose name is Love, who created and who preserves us, the mind is then prone to reject all its former conceptions, and to form a deity altogether insensible to the distinction between good and evil, between holiness and sin,—incapable of feeling displeasure or of inflicting punishment.

"But the Scriptures forbid us to cherish these partial and mutilated views of the Divine character. They teach his essential, self-moved mercy; and this most affecting view of God I would always hold up to you, that you may love him with your whole hearts. Happy should I be, were I permitted to make them my only theme. Happy, indeed, could I hope that no other motive is needed than this,—that the goodness of God, whenever enforced, excites, in all who hear, the sentiments of gratitude, and the purpose of obedience. But there is reason to fear that some minds are so fallen, that this very doctrine which imposes such obligation is abused to licentiousness, and employed to produce the feeling of security in a sinful course. There are some who think, if they do not say, that, since God is so good, his laws may be broken with impunity. To guard against such a perversion of the doctrine I have enforced, let me repeat that his mercy is not an undistinguishing fondness; that whilst he compassionates the offending, and has appointed methods for their reformation and forgiveness, he is unchangeably the enemy of sin; that his very character, as the universal Father, requires him to punish and

humble the disobedient, selfish, unjust, proud, and impure, to redress every principle and practice opposed to the order and happiness and perfection of his creatures."

## THE SPIRIT OF LIFE IN JESUS CHRIST.

"A man," says the Apostle Paul, "is the image and glory of God." And truly, it is from our own human nature, from its deep experiences, and earnest affections, that we form our conceptions of Deity, and become qualified to interpret the solemn intimations which creation and scripture afford to us respecting him. Without the stirrings of divine qualities within us, without some consciousness of that which we ascribe to the All-perfect, the names and descriptions by which he is made known to us would be empty words, as idly sent to us as treatises of sound to the deaf, or some "high discourse of reason" to the fool. All that we believe without us, we first feel within us; and it is the one sufficient proof of the grandeur and awfulness of our nature, that we have faith in God; for no merely finite being can possibly believe the infinite. The universe of which each man conceives exists primarily in his own mind; there dwell the Angel he enthrones in the height, and the Demon he covers with the deep; and vainly would he talk of shunning hell, who never felt its fires in his bosom; or he converse of heaven, whose soul was never pure and green as Paradise.

In virtue of this resemblance between the human and the divine mind, Christ is the representative and revealer of both. God, by the very immensity of his nature, is a stationary being, perfect and therefore unchangeable: and so far as Jesus Christ was "the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever;" so far as one uniform mind and power possessed him, as one sacred purpose was impressed upon his life; so far as he the emblem of Deity; affording us, in speech, in feeling, in will, in act, and idea of God, which nothing borrowed from the material creation or mortal life can at all approach. His unity of soul, the unalterable spirit pervading all his altering moods of thought,—in short, his identity with himself, is altogether divine. In so far, on the other hand, as he underwent vicissitudes of emotion; in so far as he spake, thought, acted differently in different periods of his career, and a changed hue of soul came over him, and threw across the world before him a brighter or a sadder shape; so far as he the ideal and picture of the mind of man. His self-variations are altogether human.

The casual vicissitudes of feeling in Christ, his alternations of anxiety and hope, of rejoicing and of tears, have often been appealed to, as traces of his having had a like nature with our own. The appeal is just; and shows us that he was impressed, as we are, by those outward incidents which may make the morning happy and the evening sad. But, besides these accidental agitations, which follow the complexion of our external lot, there is a far more important set of changes, which the affections and character undergo from internal causes; which occur in regular succession, marking and characterizing the different periods of mental, if not of physical life; and constitute the stages of moral development through which the noblest minds visibly pass to their perfection. The incidental fluctuations of emotion raised by the good or evil tidings of the hour, are but as the separate waves which the passing wind may soothe to a ripple or press into a storm; but the seasonable changes of character, of which I now speak, are rather the great tidal movements of the deep within us, depending on less capricious forces than the transient gale, and bearing on their surface the mere film of tempest or of calm. The succession is distinctly traceable in the mind of Christ, making his life a model of moral progressions the most impressive and sublime. He thus

becomes in a new sense the representative of our duty, our visible and outward conscience; revealing to us not only the end to which we must attain, but the successive steps by which our nature reaches it; the process as well as the result; the natural history of the affections which belongs to the true perfection of the will. He is the type of the pure religious life; all its developments being crowded, by the rapid ripening of his soul, into his brief experience: and we read in the gospel a divine allegory of humanity, symbolical of those profound and silent changes, of passion and speculation, of faith and love, through which a holy mind rises to its most godlike power.

The only incident recorded of the childhood of Jesus strikingly commences the analogy between his nature and ours, and happily introduces him to us as the representative of the great ideas of duty and God within the soul. The annual pilgrimage from his village to the holy city, which had hitherto been the child's holiday, full only of the wonder and delight of travel, seized hold, on one occasion, of deeper feelings, which absorbed him with their new intensity. The visit which had become conventional with others, appeared at once with its full meaning to him: and with the surprise of a fresh reverence, he turned from the gay streets, and the sunny excursion, and the social entertainment, to the quiet courts of the temple, where the ancient story of miracle was told, and the mystery of prophecy explained. Eager to prolong this new and solemn interest, he missed, you will remember, the opportunity of travelling back with the caravan of Nazareth: and when told by his parents, on their return in quest of him, "Thy father and mother have sought thee sorrowing," he replied, with a tone not altogether filial, "Know ye not that I must be about my Father's business?"

The answer is wonderfully expressive of the spirit of young piety, taking its first dignity as an independent principle of action in the mind. The lessons of devotion are, for a long time adopted passively, with listening faith; the great ideas dwindling, as they fall from the teacher's lips, to the dimensions of the infant mind receiving them. When the mother calls her children to her knees to speak to them of God, she is herself the greatest object in their affections. It is by her power over them that God becomes Venerable; by the purity of her eye that he becomes Holy; by the silence of the hour that he becomes Awful; by the tenderness of her tones that he becomes Dear. That the parents bend, with lowly look and serene result, before some invisible Presence, is the first and sufficient hint to the heart's latent faith; which therefore blends awhile with the domestic sympathies, simply mingling with them an element of mystery, and imparting to them a deeper and less earthly coloring. But the thoughts which constitute religion are too vast and solemn to remain subordinate. They are germs of a growth, which, with true nurture, must burst into independent life, and overshadow the whole soul. When the mind, beginning to be busy for itself, ponders the ideas of the infinite and eternal, it detects, as if by sudden inspiration, the immensity of the relations which it sustains to God and immortality: the old formulas of religious instruction break their husk, and give forth the seeds of wonder and of love; every thing that seemed before great and worthy is dwarfed; and human affections and duties sink into nothingness compared with the heavenly world which has been discovered. There is a period, when earnest spirits become thus possessed; disposed to contrast the grandeur of their new ideal with the littleness of all that is actual; and to look with a sublimated feeling, which in harsher nature passes into contempt, on pursuits and relations once sufficient, for the heart's reverence. At such a crisis it was that Jesus gave the answer to his parents; when his piety first broke into original and self-luminous power, and not only took the centre of his system, but threatened to put out those lesser and dependent lights which, when their place is truly understood, appear no less heavenly. He spake in the entrance