

PROGRESS IN THEOLOGY.

ADDRESS DELIVERED BY REV. PRINCIPAL JAVEN B. KNOWLTON, D.D., AT THE CHURCH OF BRISTOL (1875.)

Bishop Butler, in his great work, writes as follows: "And as it is owned that the whole scheme of Scripture is not yet understood, so, if it ever comes to be understood before the restitution of all things, and without miraculous interpositions, it must be in the same way as natural knowledge is come at, by the continuance and progress of learning and of liberty, and by particular persons attending to, comparing, and pursuing inclinations scattered up and down it, which are overlooked and disregarded by the generality of the world. For this is the way in which all improvements are made, by thoughtful men's tracing on obscure hints, as it were, dropped up by nature accidentally, or which seem to come into our minds by chance. Not in it at all incredible that a book, which has been so long in the possession of mankind, should contain many truths as yet undiscovered. For all the same phenomena and the same faculties of investigation from which such great discoveries in natural history have been made in the present and last age were equally in the possession of mankind several thousand years before. And possibly it might be intended that events, as they come to pass, should open and ascertain the meaning of several parts of Scripture." The field of Scripture is here likened to the field of nature, and it is suggested that we may expect discoveries to be made in the former similar in importance to those which are being made in the latter. In the context of the passage quoted, Butler distinguishes between "practical Christianity, or that faith and behaviour which renders a man a Christian," and "the study of those things which the apostle calls going on unto perfection, and of the prophetic parts of Scripture; and the knowledge which we may expect thus to increase is to shed its light upon the province more remotely connected with faith and practice. This great and sagacious thinker is also careful not to assert that the truths which he supposes may still be concealed in Scripture will, in the present state, be brought to light, for he expressly says—"If the whole scheme of Scripture ever comes to be understood before the restitution of all things." At the same time the words of Butler might well be cited in favour of the view that important discoveries in theology yet remain to be made—discoveries such as shall prove of essential value in removing objections to the scheme of revelation. Theology, according to this great authority, may well be progressive in the same sense as the natural sciences are progressive.

Quite different is the opinion of Macaulay. Having stated that natural theology is not progressive, he proceeds: "But neither is revealed religion of the nature of a progressive science. All truth is, according to the doctrine of the Protestant Churches, recorded in certain books. It is equally open to all who in any age can read those books; nor can all the discoveries of all the philosophers in the world add a single verse to any of those books. It is plain, therefore, that in divinity there cannot be a progress analogous to that which is constantly taking place in pharmacy, geology, and navigation. A Christian of the fifth century with a Bible is on par with a Christian of the nineteenth with a Bible; candour and natural acuteness being of course supposed equal. It matters not at all that the compass, printing, gunpowder, steam, gas, vaccination, and a thousand other discoveries and inventions which were unknown in the fifth century are familiar to the nineteenth. None of these discoveries and inventions have the smallest bearing on the question whether man is justified by faith alone or whether the invocation of saints is an orthodox practice." This eminent writer regards progress in theology analogous to that which we witness in the demonstrative and inductive sciences as impossible. Butler, indeed, is speaking of theological progress in its bearing upon apologetics, and Macaulay in its bearing upon the reconciliation of Romanists and Protestants; but still their opinion cannot be harmonized, for a progress such as the Bishop refers to must be made upon principles which would allow important advances in dogmatics. Who, then is right—Butler or Macaulay? Or can we accept the view of neither without modification? These questions are certainly of very great importance, not only to the professional theologian, but to all who receive the Scriptures as from God, and desire rightly to value the communications therein addressed to them.

There is a class of writers who speak much of the Church and the theology of the future, leaving the impression that these may be expected to differ widely from the Church and the theology of the present; but they say nothing definite regarding the extent to which this difference may reach. We are assured, however, that theology, if it would remain in credit—or rather recover its credit—must avail itself of the vast progress made in science, philosophy, and biblical scholarship since the creeds were constructed, must bring itself into harmony with the spirit of the age, and must cordially accept those principles of progress which apply to every department of human thought and enquiry. But we have writers of the same spirit who, not content with asserting the necessity of progress, do not shrink from trying their hand at the reconstruction of Christian dogma, and who have proposed changes which are radical enough. A specimen of this will be found in the revision of the doctrines of the Trinity, Original Sin, and the Atonement, essayed by the Rev. H. R. Haweis. We do not stay to enquire whether emendations of doctrine such as those now referred to are anything more than attempts to rehabilitate errors long ago exposed and rejected—to revive Sabellianism or a Pelagianism of the early centuries; our subject is, without any appeals *ad invidiam*, to look calmly at the general ground on which the necessity of theological progress is affirmed.

It will be clearly understood that we are here concerned with the professed opponents of Christianity, who say that its dogmas must eventually disappear before the advancing enlightenment of mankind, and who consider that in labouring to discredit these dogmas they are rendering an important service to humanity. On both sides of the question before us we find professed friends of the Gospel; and the matter of contention is whether our knowledge of the Christian doc-

trines is subject to the same law of progress which all recognize in the experimental sciences.

Let it be further kept in view that the question has not respect to progress in the communication of divine truth in the Word of God. It is allowed, on all hands, that there is progress here. The later parts of the Old Testament disclose many things which are not contained or which are but dimly hinted at in the earlier. The New Testament is a much clearer and fuller revelation of doctrines than the Old. Though the teachings of our Lord, as recorded in the Gospels, may contain the germs of all doctrines of His kingdom, there were many things which the Disciples could not "bear" in the days of His ministry, and which it was reserved for Apostolical teachings after Pentecost fully to deliver. Thus from the beginning the scheme of grace was being gradually unfolded, and the "light shone more and more unto the perfect day." We do no honour to Christ in putting the words which He spoke above those which He gave to His Apostles, and in refusing to recognize the more complete development of doctrine in the Epistles! But the canon of Scripture is now complete, and the gifts of inspiration withdrawn. The doctrines of the Christian faith have been delivered, and till the Lord shall come, we may not expect other and higher revelations. We are not commanded to "hold the tradition," and to "hold fast the faithful word which we have been taught," but since the seat of Parnassus recorded his vision no religious teacher may "add to the words of his testimony." Our appeal must lie to the Scriptures, as we have had them for eighteen centuries—to the Old Testament and the New, and no doctrine which cannot be proven from these has any right to claim acceptance as part of our theology. It would seem, therefore, at first sight, as if progress in doctrine in theology such as marks the history of the Church from the beginning of revelation to the close of the canon were not afterwards to be expected. If, however, the position of Butler be the right one this need not be so, doctrinal progress may characterize the history of the Church after revelation ceases, not less perhaps than before. Inexhaustible material for the construction of doctrine lies before us in the Bible, and in the improvement of the human mind as an instrument of discovery, the increase of knowledge which may subserve theological investigation, and the fresh light continually shed on Scripture by the unfoldings of Providence we may have the assurance—certainly the possibility—of a continual progress in theological knowledge. This progress need not be arrested by the completion of the canon any more than progress in natural science by the completion of creation. A long time will elapse before earth, and air, and sea shall have been perfectly scrutinized, and the laws which govern the entire *kosmos* ascertained; till the time comes, natural science must continue to advance, and I shall venture to think that the Word of God is less inexhaustible than His works, and that the process of investigation and discovery in the more glorious realm will sooner or later come to an end?

Let us say at once, that we are not to take the ground that Macaulay is entirely right, and Butler entirely wrong. We believe in theological progress within certain limits. It is, as we shall afterwards see, matter of history that such progress has been made; but history, we think, also concurs with certain general considerations now to be advanced, in disallowing the analogy suggested by Butler, or, at least, in greatly limiting its scope.

The considerations to which we refer are the following: 1. The clearness with which Scripture, in accordance with its purpose, exhibits its great doctrines marks an important difference between nature and revelation as provinces of investigation.

We must speak with great caution and reverence regarding the design with which a revelation has been made to man. We must not assume that we understand fully the counsels of God in any matter; and in a matter affecting so many interests and serving so many purposes as the communications of Scripture, modesty of speech is certainly to be enjoined. But surely we do not err in saying that, so far as we are concerned, the great design with which Scripture was given is to teach us the way of salvation. Whatever other purposes the divine wisdom intended it to serve, it was meant to convey to us that knowledge of the Father and of the Son which is eternal life. "The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man," in order that we may know how "to glorify God, and enjoy Him for ever." In accordance with this, its purpose, we might expect, therefore, that the general tenor and scope of Scripture would be plain. If difficult and protracted investigation must be held before the import of its gracious message can be determined, the value of that message will, practically, be greatly impaired, but if the parallel shall strictly hold between nature and the Bible, laborious and lengthened scrutiny and many futile attempts to apprehend its scope and principles might be expected to precede any just conception of them. For nature has not revealed her secrets at once. It has been necessary to put her to the torture. The sciences have been built up by years and centuries of patient toil, and in many cases the foundations of them have had repeatedly to be laid anew. Now, in looking to Scripture, we soon discover that in the delivery of its great truths it actually possesses the attribute of clearness and explicitness which we would have expected to distinguish it. The way of life and the way of death are clearly set before us. No person with a sincere purpose can misapprehend the directions of this divinely-appointed guide. It is not merely the leisurely and those possessed of superior understanding and education who may peruse the book to advantage. "He that readeth may run." The path of life is so little intricate that "the wayfaring man, though a fool, shall not err therein." And if we attend to the several truths and duties necessarily connected with the momentous practical question referred to, we shall find that Scripture is unmistakable in its teaching regarding them all. Is it necessary to know that man has fallen into an estate of sin and misery from which he cannot deliver himself, that God, infinitely just and holy, cannot pass by sin, but must execute upon it condign punishment, that, rich in mercy, though inflexible in justice, He has found a way, even through blood, in which expiation may

be made, and the guiltiest who will accept His grace be forgiven and admitted to favour; that He cleanses from sin and prepares for His holy presence all those whom He pardons; that He claims from us supreme affection, and faithful service all the days of our lives? The Word of God (read in connection with the ordinances of God) has spoken not doubtfully upon these things since the time when its first instalments were given; every subsequent portion, as added to the canon, shed fresh light upon the gracious purpose of God; and, since the New Testament has been written, those high matters stand revealed in the light of perfect day. Now, this clearness of Scripture must, partly at least, account for the fact that in the history of Bible interpretation there is no counterpart to what has occurred in the sciences, when the very principles on which it was attempted to construct them were discovered to be errors. For science has often required to demolish its own work, and begin, as it were, *de novo*. When the ancient astronomy regarded the earth as the centre of the universe the mistake was sufficient to hinder any true science of astronomy. The heavens might be "scribbled o'er, cycle or epicycle, orb on orb," but there was no release from the perplexity of the primary blunder. In the early speculations in chemistry the like mistakes were made, and even since chemistry may properly be called a science, it has, in some directions, proceeded on erroneous assumptions which arrested progress, and the exposure of which rendered necessary a large measure of reconstruction. The whole world knows that in the history of geology, or geognony, the same thing has been illustrated. Now it cannot fairly be said that the history of theology exhibits any parallel to this. The fundamental theological ideas have never been misconceived by the true Church of God. No mistake has been committed analogous to that which makes the sun and the stars revolve around the earth; or which regards fire, earth, air, and water as the elements of all things; or which explains stratification as the effect of the flood. Much has been added to the early theology; for no one will contend that the theology of Adam, or of Abraham embraced all that is contained in the theology of Paul; but it cannot be shown that any incongruity existed between the earlier and more limited faith and the enlarged doctrine of the apostle. And if there was unity in the faith of the Church during the long preparatory dispensation, in which "at sundry times and in divers manners" the Word of the Lord was coming to man, an equal unity (to say no more) will certainly be found since the completion of the sacred volume. Errorists have existed in every age; men who mangled or totally rejected leading doctrines of revelation, and "preached another gospel which is not another;" but the perversities and eccentricities of errorists must not be alleged in opposition to the view now stated. It is the doctrine held by the Church of God which is here in account: it is the history of this doctrine which must come into comparison with the history of the science of nature. There are many passages in Scripture the interpretation of which is undeniably difficult. The most learned and able men, though free from bias, have not been able to agree about them. After eighteen centuries of study (to refer to the New Testament only) there are some of these passages on which we have scarcely any light at all. They may remain for centuries more, perhaps always, the *offensacula criticorum*. But the existence of such passages does not render doubtful the teachings of the Bible, or affect its general character of clearness in statement. All the great doctrines of Scripture are so well established by texts, the meaning of which is not open to dispute, that we cannot reasonably be asked to suspend our judgment regarding these doctrines until the obscure texts are elucidated. The Word of God, we know, is ever consistent with itself; and whatever these difficult passages mean, they contain nothing to shake our confidence in doctrines supported by a large induction of clear and harmonious proof. "All things in Scripture," says the Westminster Confession, "are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them." But it may be asked, Are we not confusing practical knowledge with scientific? It is a practical acquaintance with Scripture, we shall be told, which is necessary to salvation and to holy living, not the scientific knowledge which we term "theology;" and this practical acquaintance may be easily gained. But a practical acquaintance with the objects and facts of the world around us is also easy of attainment, *i.e.*, such a knowledge of them as shall enable us to maintain existence, and even secure a good degree of comfort. Without any acquaintance with botany or agricultural chemistry, one may have knowledge to use the natural fruits which are wholesome, nay, to prosecute husbandry with good success. He may be rich in flocks and herds while he knows nothing of zoology. Both in Scripture and in nature the knowledge necessary to immediate practical ends is easily attained, yet in both true science may be difficult; nay, in order even to its beginning, may require long and laborious study; whilst it may be capable of prosecution and advancement beyond any assignable limits. Has not the preceding argument, then, neglected this very important distinction? To this we reply that theology does not differ from a practical knowledge of religious truth in the same manner as the scientific knowledge of nature differs from the practical knowledge of its objects and laws to which reference has been made. In some respects, and within certain limits, the scientific knowledge and the practical are identical in religion. They are not to be distinguished as we distinguish the scientific knowledge of nature from such practical acquaintance with it as may suffice to employ it for our benefit. The cognition of religious truth involved in a vital and salutary appreciation of it is not different, so far as it goes, from the cognition of the theologian. The same things are known in both cases; so far as the intellect is involved, its operation in both cases is virtually the same. What higher conception of the great principles of our faith—what more recondite knowledge of them—can the theologian reach than the ordinary Christian, of fair intelligence, who devoutly studies his Bible and hears