

OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

IS MAN RESPONSIBLE FOR HIS BELIEF?

BY REV. JOHN DUNBAR, DUNBARY-ON

While philosophers in the heathen world held, that truth lay between extremes, that moral rectitude consisted in living according to nature, and that pleasure or pain determined at once the right or the wrong, duty or the reverse; philosophers of the Christian world such as Chubb, maintained that all religions are alike; Bolingbroke, that God does not concern Himself with the affairs of men at all; Hume, that man is a mere machine; Lord Herbert, that sensual passion was no more to be blamed than thirst occasioned by dropsy; Hobbes, that every man's judgment, and Rousseau, that man's feelings were the standard of right and wrong; Brougham, that a man can no more change his belief than he can change the hue of his skin or the height of his stature; and last, if not least, Beecher declared that a man is responsible for criminal conduct only in as far as his higher nature can control his lower. Following such an array of pretentious names we would be led to conclude that man is not responsible for his belief, were it not that the wisdom that cometh from above assures us, not only that "with the heart man believeth," but that there is "an evil heart of unbelief," and that "out of the heart are the issues of life,"—assures us that the true and the right, alike in their origin and issue, are wholly independent of man's opinions or beliefs.

If we look at the matter for a little in the light of God's Word, it cannot be doubted, far less denied, that man's actions and utterances are the immediate evidence and outcome of his belief. No word, no act of man is self-existent, and everything he says or does, not only takes its origin, but its cast and its character too, from his pre-existent belief. Now if "as a man thinketh in his heart so is he," and if "out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false-witness, blasphemies," and if "every man shall be judged according to the deeds done in the body," we thus see the connection, as cause and effect, established and acted on by God Himself, between a man's deeds and beliefs, and how that holding man accountable for his deeds, he holds him in like manner accountable for that belief which precedes and produces them. In the earlier world the belief that wrong was right, did not make it right in the case of our first parents, or the antediluvians or inhabitants of Sodom, or shield them from its consequences, or in the later world as in the case of Judas, or Ananias, or Saul. In short, in the whole revealed economy of God it is ever a man's belief that determines a man's character here and decides his destiny hereafter.

Again, if we look at the matter in the light of providence, we will see that God's world teaches as uniformly and universally as God's Word, that while "there is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death," that a man's belief will never make the false true nor the right wrong, and that sincerity in that belief will not shield a person from the consequences of following it out. If, for instance, in the ordinary affairs of life, a man lodge money in a bank, believing it to be sound, simply because others do, his belief will not shield him from the effects of its failure; or another may purchase a lot of land, believing in the warranty given that it is good, he may after find that the land, though good, is not a little under stones and not less under water, or he may purchase out and enter on a line of business, believing that he can do as well thereby as his fortunate predecessor, but lacking his commercial skill, the result is a failure; or suppose another try his fortune on the sea, and having examined and purchased a ship which he believes to be seaworthy, but which really is not, because the material of which she was built was either unseasoned or unsound, or suppose the ship proved to be all that could be desired, yet either through defect of the compass or the calculation, she is in a wrong course, while he believes her to be right, need we wonder in the one case were she swamped in mid-ocean, or in the other shattered to pieces on a rocky shore. All such cases, and their name is legion, prove beyond a doubt, not only that man's belief will neither make wrong right nor shield him from the consequences of acting on such a belief, be it ever so strong or sincere. Do not the works of God as surely as His Word show that His laws, however recorded, never bend to protect the breaker, however good his inten-

tion or sincere his belief? On the contrary, there stands out indelibly engraven on the very portals of the kingdoms alike of nature as of grace, and clearly legible by the light it gives, the unalterable fiat of the Almighty that, as law puts forth all its power to protect those who keep it, so it no less puts forth all its power to punish those who break it. If providence thus punishes a man, it shows that he is guilty, and if guilty then he is assuredly responsible for his belief. Providence does not stop to determine the question whether a man's belief is voluntary or involuntary, but the course of nature moves on uniformly and universally, unaffected by human beliefs, and carrying before it all such theories and theorizings as would seek to check its progress or change its course.

But further, while it may not be doubted that men are responsible to God for their belief, it may be denied that they are responsible for it to man. Now, if it be admitted that a man's belief gives origin and character to his conduct, no man will be so foolish as to suppose, far less to say, that he has a right to do to his fellow-men just as he likes simply because he has that belief. This would be insanity in its worst and most woful form. This would be a direct death blow not only to personal and social liberty, but to all civil government as well. A man may hold and disseminate opinions directly destructive of all virtue or integrity, and thus seek to lower character and lessen restraint; or he may by a licentious life so deaden his sense of obligation as to lead him to the belief that he has the right to infringe on another's privileges or make free with his possessions, and if he is not responsible then he is not guilty. But does not the very fact of the deserved disapprobation of his fellow-men, stamped on such a course, in condemning it by word, in shunning his society, in refusing to invest him with certain trusts, powers or privileges, as well as presenting hindrances and imposing restraints on such conduct, go to show most decidedly that they hold him to be wrong, that he is guilty, and that in consequence he is responsible.

As the argument which proves man's responsibility to man for his belief, clearly cumulates and culminates when looked at in the light of civil government, I would not further either trespass on your space or test the patience of your readers. Permit me only to add that all error is, and must be, opposed not only to the mind and will of God, but also to the peace and progress of man. If error were innocent and not injurious, then, paradoxical as it may appear, the more wicked a man became the more innocent he would be, and the more good he would do. A man may degrade himself so as to call good evil and evil good, and believe it too, but his ignorance would not save him from its consequences. It may be said by way of palliation that it is difficult to know the true and the right, yet ignorance of these can never change their nature or their operations, and those who learn them not by the precepts which they present must learn them by the punishments which they inflict on all who disregard them. Much of this difficulty is solved and settled by the fact "That light is come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil," but the great Teacher who is the wisdom of God assures us that "If any man will do His will he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God."

MARITIME PROVINCES.

If it be desirable that our people so widely scattered in this Canada of ours should know each other, that the west should know what is going on in the east and the east what is going on in the west, the following sketch of a mission field in the region by the sea will not be without interest to those who live in Ontario as well as elsewhere.

There is known to the writer a pastoral charge which embraces an entire county. The county, including islands, is nearly 100 miles long, the breadth, so far as settlements are concerned, is hardly worth mentioning, in many places not more than the length of a farm back from the seaboard; and in no case except on the banks of rivers does it extend to more than two or three farms. The whole population at the last census was 18,810. Let me give the divisions in two ways, first in religion, second in origin of the people. In religion they are in these proportions. Romanists, 16,078, Church of England, 1,118, Presbyterians, 1,069; Methodists, 481. In origin as follows. French, 12,680; Irish, 3,695; Scotch,

1,215; English, 972. My impression is that the religious divisions are not very accurate, but so are they given in the census. These figures will give a general idea of the aspect of the work. There is a resident minister of each of the Protestant denominations referred to in the county, but the Presbyterians raise as much for ordinances as the other two combined, or very nearly so.

Some twenty-five miles from one end of the county is the shire town, which is the centre of operations of the Protestant ministers. Here are found the church and manse of our own people pleasantly situated, with some 100 families within a radius of ten miles. A very few live by commerce, the rest are fishers, farmers, and lumberers—some work at all three occupations at different seasons of the year. The soil is good if it were well worked, but it is not, as a general rule. Where attention is distracted between different employments, none is attended to as it ought. There is not a large measure of prosperity, and the Protestant population is not growing. These observations apply to the whole county.

Twenty miles north there is a small group of Scotch families—ten or twelve—and a little church where service is held some six Sabbath afternoons in the year, and about as often on week days or evenings. The communion is dispensed once a year, the communicants numbering from twenty to twenty-five. They are almost exclusively farmers here, though some fishing is done.

South-easterly there is a group of stations at distances respectively from the shire town of twelve, sixteen and twenty miles. Nearly all the people in this region came from the south of Ireland, and the Protestant part of them is divided between the Church of England and the Methodists. A few families are Scotch or north of Ireland, and so connected with us. There are, say, twenty-five families with about the same number of communicants. Here a student catechist labours four months in the summer, the rest of the year they are dependent on the pastor. At one of the stations there is a little church, in other places the services are held in school-houses.

Forty-two miles from the shire town and in one of the best fishing centres in the Province, there is a group of about half a dozen families, with a neat little church not quite finished, but the services are held in it in the summer. With the exception of a few Church of England adherents, all natives of Jersey engaged in the fish-exporting houses, all the rest of the population are French Romanists. Last summer a French student from Montreal laboured here, partly under the Board of French Evangelization and partly under the Home Mission Board. For the remaining two-thirds of the year they are dependent on the very occasional services of the minister who lives, as above stated, over forty miles away.

Nearly thirty miles further away, on the islands, are found between twenty and thirty families of Scotch origin, who were for a long time destitute of ordinances except an occasional visit from the Church of England minister, and many years ago some of them were confirmed. They were badly treated by the Church of their fathers, but they are not quite lost to us yet. Since mid-summer the pastor of the county has paid two visits to them, and was received with open arms. He means to look after them in the future. The following account of his last tour to the far away outposts, without any comments, will be left to tell its own tale. On a recent Sabbath he preached in the church at home at eleven o'clock, then drove twelve miles over a very bad road and preached at three, then eight miles further and preached at half-past six. On Monday he drove twenty-two miles, and preached in the evening. On Tuesday he drove eight miles, sailed in a boat seven miles, drove nine miles, rowed one mile and back again one mile, and preached twice. On Wednesday he came back to where he was on Monday, and preached again. On Thursday he drove home forty-two miles in a blinding snow storm.

Such is a specimen of the laborious work done in some of the scattered fields of the Provinces by the sea. Not a great many perhaps have work like that to do, but some have, and others know very little of the hardships to be endured. Many of the people ministered to have very little to spare for the support of the gospel. They have in many instances hard work to support life, yet out of their poverty they are willing to give something; and there is no prospect of them being self-sustaining in the present genera-