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WHAT IS HERESY?

Is every man who dares to exercise an independent thought on the Bible a heretic? Had the creed makers all the light? Has the Holy Spirit vouchsafed no light on His own truth since their day? These thoughts arise from reflecting on the tempest which has arisen out of a few harmless utterances of Rev. D. J. Macdonnell, of the Presbyterian church, a man who dared to *hope* that somehow, at some time, God will make an end of sin and suffering, or something to that effect. This man has been pronounced a *heretic*. The doctrine of the endlessness of the torment of the damned has been pronounced *fundamental*—as lying at the very foundation of Christianity. A doubt on such a matter is pronounced “a most dangerous thing” to entertain. The doubter accepts the Bible unqualifiedly, but he has thought it possible that orthodox divines may have misunderstood its teachings on this point. On the other hand, it has been assumed that to doubt the construction of the creed makers, to discuss or review the traditional belief of the church, or by admission to concede that the historical faith may be wrong, is a most dangerous thing to do. Those who do so, though in honest search of God’s truth, have been termed *Universalists*, *Materialists*, *Annihilationists*. Now, hard names are *not arguments*; it is an evidence of a weak cause to employ them, and only weak persons are influenced by them. It is a question, not of creeds or names, but what does the Bible really teach on this matter? If, as many good biblical critics aver, the Bible, while it teaches clearly future retribution, does not *clearly* teach that the wicked will be *conscious* sufferers for ever, why should men be dogmatic where God has left the thing a mystery? Very much has been taken for granted beyond what God has said. The subject of life and death is clearly set before us in the Bible—the salvation of believers, the destruction of unbelievers, the great judgment day—the irrevocable sentences, “Come ye blessed,” “Depart ye cursed,” &c.—the burning lake and the second death for the wicked. Here the great God drops the veil and hides them for ever from our eyes. By what authority can any make it binding on a man’s conscience to believe further than God has seen fit to reveal? and why should it be pronounced necessary to orthodoxy, and essential to Christianity, to lift the veil that God has let fall at the second death, and believe something that he has not revealed about the existence and condition of the damned through endless ages?

Let us distinguish what are the fundamentals of orthodoxy, and as to the rest—the non-essentials—allow liberty.

May not the essentials be comprised in these:—“The moral government of God; The Deity, Mediatorship, and Atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ; The universal sinfulness of mankind by nature; Justification by grace, through faith; The re-