

THE
Canadian Independent.

VOL. XXIII.

TORONTO, MAY, 1877.

No. 11.

THOUGHTS ON SOME PHASES OF THEOLOGY AT THE PRESENT
TIME.

BY THE REV. PRINCIPAL WILKES, D.D., LL.D.

It is our custom at the services connected with the opening and closing of the sessions of our College, to request an address from some one of our ministerial brethren, on such topic as he may select. At this closing exercise, I have been asked to perform this duty, and have chosen the subject announced. But I wish to guard you against the supposition that the choice has arisen from any local circumstances, and distinctly to say that my treatment of it will have no reference whatever to them. I am looking abroad rather than at home, my thoughts are turned towards the development of the theological thought throughout Anglo-Saxondom, and, therefore, I protest *in limine* against being considered in the slightest degree the critic of any teaching nearer home, whether on the one side or the other of conflicting schools. Moreover, my treatment of this subject must be rather in the form of hints than of exhaustive analysis, for that would require a volume instead of a mere address. Hence I have said "Thoughts."

Few intelligent men are disposed to deny that the subjects embraced in theology are of supreme moment, yet many of them complain that they cannot be treated in a scientific manner. They say, truly, that the age in which we live is dominated by the scientific method of thought; and then, with something of a scornful tone, they charge the students and expounders of theology with wrangling rather than teaching after any trustworthy fashion. "What are we to understand or believe?" they exclaim, "amid this war of words and opinions called orthodox or heresy, sound or unsound. We look for something clear, precise, definite, like the facts and theories in geology, botany, chemistry; or like the laws of the physical universe which astronomy has unfolded, and you give us dogmatic assertions in which you do not agree together; and you give us interpretations of the same sacred writings which differ widely one from the other."

Perhaps candour requires the recognition of some truth in this charge. It may be that prevalent discussions on theological questions are, in some measure at least, open to such unfavourable criticism. But let the sin be laid at the right door. It is not theology that is to blame, but rather its expounders and defenders. Theology is really a science, and may be treated scientifically; if they who speak and write about it do so in an unscientific manner, the blame is theirs. Yet must it be remembered, that science is only a *provisional* reading of the facts of nature; that the scientific interpretation of them differs in every age, changing with the changing time, taking new and larger forms as the years pass: that "even since the beginning of the present century it has had at least three shibboleths—Convulsion, Continuity, Evolution—and has stoutly declared—quite