

PROGRESS IN THEOLOGY.

EXTRACTS FROM ADDRESS DELIVERED BY REV. PRINCIPAL CANN, D.D.,
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Bishop Butler, in his great work, writes as follows: "And as it is owned that the whole scheme of nature 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 intimations 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 on by nature accidentally, or which seem to come into our minds by chance. Nor is 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 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 lie 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.

After quoting Macaulay, who says, "That in divinity there cannot be a progress analogous to that which is constantly taking place in pharmacy, geology, and navigation," and referring to those who assert that theology must bring itself in harmony with the spirit of the age, the learned Dr. goes on to say:

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 whether our knowledge of the Christian doctrines 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 "hear" in the days of His ministry, and which it was reserved for Apostolic 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 spake 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.

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.

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 my 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.

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 geogony, 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.

2. Again, I argue the imperfection of the suggested analogy from the promise of the Holy Spirit to be ever with the Church as its teacher. This promise is found in passages such as the following: "But the comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in My name, He shall teach you all things, and shall bring all things to your remembrance whatsoever I have told you." "When the Comforter is come He shall testify of Me." "He shall receive of mine, and shall show it unto you." Accordingly it is said, "ye have an unction from the Holy One, and know all things." "The anointing which ye have received of Him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you; but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in Him." (John xiv. 16, xv. 26, xvi. 14; 1 John ii. 20, 27.) This last passage shows that the Spirit as teacher was not promised to the twelve only, though they in a special sense became partakers of His influences. The Spirit is to dwell in the Church, and in the hearts of all true believers, and to dwell there for ever. Thus is fulfilled what Jeremiah spake concerning the new dispensation: "I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts, . . . and they shall teach no more, every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, know the Lord; for they shall all know Me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord." It is thus insured that all believers shall correctly apprehend (so far at least as may be necessary to salvation and the integrity of the Christian life) the great facts and principles of the Christian faith. This, surely, is not straining the language quoted but is clearly keeping within its limits. The Holy Spirit is promised to all true disciples, not only to sanctify and comfort them, but to teach them concerning Christ and His kingdom. Such knowledge is imparted to them that no man can lead them fatally astray; they can distinguish between the "lie" and the "truth," and when Anti-Christ comes he cannot persuade them to embrace his error. Now, I do not understand that the indwelling of the Holy Ghost in all believers from the beginning is inconsistent with the supposition that Christian truth, even under His teaching, as by means of the progress of events, shall have additional light thrown upon it, so that the knowledge of the Church shall grow and increase, the depth and fullness of meaning which is in Scripture be more perfectly apprehended, and views and applications of truth at present attained become the possession of a Church ever approaching maturity in knowledge as in holiness, and prepar-

ing for the coming of the Lord. Such progress of the Church seems no more at variance with the promise of the Spirit than does the growth of the individual in knowledge under the Spirit's continual teaching, the study of the Word, and the discipline of Providence. For whilst the promise of the Spirit is made good to each and every believer from the beginning of his new life, so long as here he "grows in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." Not reluctantly, but with deep and grateful joy, would we recognize the possibility—the certainty—of this advancement in knowledge. No new revelation will be vouchsafed, but the Spirit, communicated with increasing fulness, will enable the Church more perfectly to understand the revelation which we now have; and her knowledge—her theology—will become increasingly profound, comprehensive, and harmonious. Truths which at present many of us do little more than tolerate—since we cannot silence the testimony of Scripture to them—will be seen in such glorious relations to other truths that all hesitation in receiving them will be past. An increasing knowledge—the dawn of a brighter day—will bring together in the harmony of faith those whose diversities of views and of interpretations, strongly emphasized, have too much kept them apart. Nor is it incredible that the clearer light shed upon the whole contents of Scripture will lead to valuable apologetical results; and that the truth received with greater completeness (though the unholy mind can never love it) will more and more show itself a fortress impregnable all around. But we must correctly conceive the kind of progress in divine knowledge which we are permitted to anticipate, and the way in which it will be made. Any movement forward will be in the same line—so to speak—in which the Church has achieved the progress which marks the past. There will be no forsaking of this line for another. The Church will not inaugurate a new progressive era by altering her course, by going back from her attainments, by casting aside her theology received from the beginning. She will not lay the foundations of a new edifice, nor tear down the courses which have been securely built, but whatever additional stones she may find worthy to have a place in the structure will be laid on and incorporated in harmony with the design. Imperfections will be removed, additional buttresses supplied, a more perfect beauty added, but the noise of demolition—of those who "break down the carved work with hammers and axes"—will not be heard. (Psalm lxxiv. 6.) But many, it may be feared, who are most earnest in asserting the law of progress in theological science do really, under the name of progress, contemplate a process which must at least begin with demolition.

3. The character of inscrutable mystery attaching to several of the great doctrines of the Bible suggests a limitation of theological enquiry which impairs the analogy between nature and revelation as fields of progressive discovery. No ground will here be taken in forgetfulness of what has been already said touching the clearness with which Scripture delivers its great message. But whilst we cannot miss the general purport of Scripture, whilst nothing can be plainer than its manifestation of the Gospel, undeniably it offers to our faith doctrines which are altogether mysterious, and which it is impossible that the human understanding should investigate. I may instance the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the action of the Spirit in regeneration and sanctification, and the Resurrection. In the apprehension or explanation of these doctrines we cannot proceed a hair's-breadth beyond the plain statement of the Bible. They relate to things entirely beyond the reach of inductive research or any kind of legitimate speculation. No study of human experience, or of our own mental operations—no science of any kind—can throw the least additional light upon them. We cannot obtain a deeper knowledge of them than was possessed by those who first carefully examined the Scripture statements regarding them. But these doctrines, it is obvious, are of the highest consequence in Christian theology—in revealed religion. They are so essential to it that their denial (the denial, indeed, of any one of them) would completely change its character. Not only are these doctrines of exceeding importance in themselves; they are so related to the whole system of Christian truth that every part of it is greatly affected by them. They are the pivots on which theology turns, the framework on which it is constructed. A theology which leaves out the mysteries cannot be the theology of the Bible.

The area of progress is thus necessarily circumscribed. We do not, be it observed, take the ground of Mansel and others, that a science of theology (which would necessarily embrace the unconditioned as a factor) is impossible. We believe in the validity of theological science, and reject the notion that our knowledge of the divine is merely regulative and practical. We believe, too, in theological progress, within certain limits; but the mysteries of revealed religion, we cannot but think, unite with the considerations already presented in putting the science of theology, as regards progress, in a different category from the natural sciences.

MR. FINNEY, a London dentist, claims to have found a filled tooth in the jaw of an Egyptian mummy. Dentistry was further advanced 4,000 years ago in Egypt than is supposed.

THE American Episcopal Church reports 48 dioceses, 13 missionary districts, 63 bishops, 3,350 clergy, 312,718 communicants, 28,365 Sunday-school teachers, with 265,555 pupils.

I HAVE never been able to discover that a man is at all the worse for being attacked. One foolish line of his own does him more harm than the ablest pamphlets against him by other people.—Macaulay.