

A Dark Mirror on Pardonable Agnosticism.

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I Cor. 13:9 and 12.—"For we know in part . . . For now we see through a glass darkly."

Religious faith is unequivocal; religious dogmas are arrogant. There is no dogmatism so pronounced as that of ecclesiastical hierarchs; no confidence so sanguine as that of religious dominies. To be orthodox is regarded as advisable; to be pronounced is held a necessity. The man who questions is designated a heretic; the man who pleads uncertainty, an unsafe religionist. At ordination council the candidate who honestly acknowledges a degree of uncertainty regarding many favorite dogmas jeopardizes his chances of receiving ecclesiastical orders, but even ignorance may stalk forth in honorable garb if it but dogmatically assume a dictatorial air.

What a pitiable fact. Men talk about divine things, wisely discourse on supernatural themes, and boldly assume to draw aside the veil from the holy of holies, as if faith had imparted omniscience to these pious minds of ours, and religion had no mysteries.

Alas, when will religion have courage enough to acknowledge its ignorance and orthodoxy cover with a mantle of becoming charity the limitations of these finite minds. "I know," is a strong man's assertion, but "I don't know," indicates a courage that should wrest the crown from the brow of either bigotry or false zeal. An English medical professor remarked to his class. "Let us remember, gentlemen, that there are some things we do not know, even the youngest of us," and one will not need a wide religious experience to come to the conclusion that the same remark might have pertinency when applied to ecclesiastical bodies.

God certainly hath revealed many things for the instruction of his noblest creation, and man's wisdom has climbed mountains, fathomed seas and compassed worlds, until in earth and sea and sky there seems little beyond his ken. Even sacred things have yielded to his inquisitive mind, and by means of the critic's tools, the archaeologist's spade, and the lance of textual surgery, he has gone into enquiries, until from grave and bone and slab he has established or reputed sacred beliefs, and in doing so perhaps generated a host of little blue devils that come with a "ha, ha, ha, ha!" you boasted of rock, but behold the sand."

Brethren have we not sustained loss by claiming too much? Even agnosticism has its strength. Let us be honest enough to frankly acknowledge that there are some things we do not know, and thus we will look skepticism out of countenance by our simple childish faith. Arrogance in religion is as obnoxious as arrogance in science or arrogance in anything else for that matter, and is antagonistic to the spirit of this beautiful psalm of love; therefore let charity build her castle of virtue, and faith support with sure foundations the walls where love has planned and builded. We know only in part, but that part shall have its supplement in faith, and where we cannot know let us enshrine our larger childhood, and in these "mysteries of grace" fear no wholesome agnosticism. This is demanded from the very A. B. C. of religion. For instance who can know God? True, the scholars have named his attributes, but what human mind can grasp these? God is omnipresent, omniscient, eternal; these are common enough terms, but common though they be, no human mind can grasp the meaning of either. Eternity, like the other words, is only a term coined to cover man's ignorance, and no mind can think eternity. Time is man's measure of duration; eternity is God's. Where God came, or how; or when, we cannot know, nor can we understand the statement that he never came but always was.

Even the more human qualities of the divine parent rank beyond our limited knowledge. We say God is love, and we magnify the little term "so loved," but how little do we know what it means. We can know a friend's love, a parent's love, and what finite mind can measure the heart of God?

"For the love of God is deeper
Than the measure of man's mind;
And the heart of the eternal,
Is most wonderfully kind."

The same is true of God's anger, God's jealousy, God's mercy, and our knowledge of the most high, though much assisted by the life and personality of his son Jesus, must remain, in time, imperfect, for now we only know in part. We cannot know God as he is.

Again, how true this is of the terms "heaven" and "hell." The words are common enough, but who can understand either. In poetry and prose, in art and literature, we talk and write and paint about heaven, and wile away our cares with thoughts of—

"Sweet fields arrayed in living green,
And rivers of delight."

But who imagines heaven as sweet fields of living green and rivers of delight? Were it so, surely this would not be the crowning height of celestial happiness. We talk of robes of white and golden crowns, but these metaphors are only human phases to cover human weakness, and no man dreams of heaven except with higher thoughts than these little words convey. The simple

fact is we do not know, for now we see through a glass darkly. Then let us consider this dark mirror. Why this limited knowledge? How is it impossible for man to know fully that which God no doubt intends he shall ultimately know?

I. In the first place, this dark mirror consists in our limited vocabulary. We have no words to perfectly express divine truths. Our verbal terms designate human conditions and experiences, and not those of the spiritual world. Life is but our childhood after all, and we have not learned our language yet. The writer of this poem says—"When I was a child I spake as a child." I could not speak in any other way, and in the light of eternity man's allotted span will be his childhood days. Then this being true, we cannot speak the thoughts of God—we cannot know the mysteries of eternity.

For example, we cannot explain intricate truths or scientific facts to our little ones, because in any adequate description we must use words which they know not the meaning of. The difficulty is in their limited vocabulary, and no power on our part can atone for their lack of understanding. They have not mastered scientific terms for they are but children. God meets the same difficulty in these children of a larger growth. His wisdom cannot bridge our limitations nor supply that which is wanting in man's mental fallibility. Unless God change us, and make us supernatural, even he cannot teach us supernatural things; hence though we know something of what heaven means, for we know it means rest and peace and love, yet we cannot fully know. Even the inspired writers must of necessity be handicapped by this human limitation; e. g., John's account of the heavenly city sounds very material—"Her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like jasper or crystal. . . . Her wall was great and high . . . with twelve gates. The city was pure gold like unto pure glass. The foundations and walls were precious stones, the gates were pearls and the streets were gold." It is almost pitiful in its little childish beauty. No human intelligence could have done better than did the Patmos dreamer, and yet could these minds of ours be satisfied with such a heaven? Certainly not, but the Holy Spirit must use the words and metaphor common to man. We could understand no others, and the words that would properly describe heaven have not yet been coined. Had they been, they should be foreign words and unknown metaphors to us for they would deal with worlds we know not of. Now we know in part.

The same is true of the antipodes of heaven. In attempting a description of the world of the lost the inspired writers have been compelled to use human imagery, for this was all they knew or were capable of knowing. "Gehenna," or the valley of burning; "the bottomless pit;" "where the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched;" "A lake burning with fire and brimstone"—all these are but human forms of speech. Ah, this too is pitiful though awful as an attempt to describe the world of lost spirits, and how childish the attempt. But we too are children yet and speak as children yet. No one can think of a spirit literally burning, and these terms, though the most startling that the mind of man had yet conceived, by no means can make known to us the condition of departed souls that do not know God. They speak of place and physical agony, and yet may not hell itself be a condition rather than a place, and Milton's words be true,—

"The mind is its own place,
And can make a heaven of hell, or a
Hell of heaven."

Other language limitations might be given, but let this suffice. It will not now be difficult for us to recognize how futile would be any attempt, even made by God himself, to describe conditions and things for which human beings have no proper words or imagery. We must still speak with human tongues, and they who speak to us must use a language we can comprehend, else we are edified not. We cannot sing the Lord's songs in a strange land, and surely have but imperfectly learned heaven's language yet, for now we only know in part.

II. In the second place this dark mirror consists in our imperfect analogies. Man learns by comparing things unknown with things known; in other words he learns by analogy. But suppose we have in analogy nothing to compare the unknown with. Then we are helpless, impotent. For example, we could not describe the beauty of a rose to a man who had always been blind. We might tell him of its shades and color, but he has never seen color, and can have no conception of what we mean. Color is a word that has no meaning to him, and hence his limitation and our impossibility. Could a man who has never seen prismatic hues have any conception of the beauty of the rainbow? You may describe the blended shades and sweeping arch, but he knows not what you mean, neither can he know. These are beauties that are beyond his little world of perpetual darkness, and he can never know them until he too has eyes to see. So it is with you and me. We are blind to the spirit world, and have nothing to compare heavenly virtues with. We may have our little conceits about these things, but after all they are only built upon our hopes, and expressed by imperfect human metaphor. For in-

stance, we think of angels moving freely through the air, and the only analogy we have to this is the flight of birds; hence artists always picture angels as having wings like birds. Our better sense, however, tells us that this is only a human device to express that of which we have no knowledge, for we cannot know how angels come and go. How they move, what they look like, how they joy, we do not know, nor could God make us to know and still have us remain creatures of earth. Their world is higher than ours and we have nothing with which to compare beings of such heavenly splendor; we can only know in part.

III. In the third place this dark mirror consists in our limited capacity to realize and appreciate spiritual joys and realities. It is one of the laws of God that our kingdom cannot appreciate the delights of the next higher. The mineral may shine as a diamond, but it cannot breathe the ozone like the lily nor wave its beauty in the summer sun. The lily may enrich the air with its fragrance, but it can know nothing of the song the little bird above its trumpet folds may sing. The bird may fill the air with the sweetness of its song, but it will sing no better because it has a golden cage. To each there is a limitation; to each there is a world higher than its own, and the lower cannot know the higher. So man; he has his own world of thought and feeling, of joy and hope, and he cannot rise above it and still be man. Angels occupy a higher kingdom than we, and we cannot pass to theirs nor comprehend their joys, or know their wisdom, until we too become spiritual beings.

With our best intellect we could not make the singing bird understand the value of a golden cage, for it has no conception of the comparative values of metals. This is man's kingdom, and cannot be entered into by beings from a lower. Neither could God, omniscient though he be, make man to understand the marvellous richness of his own world, the spiritual kingdom, until man himself becomes a spirit and rises above the kingdom in which he is a man. Jesus himself, knowing man's limitations, did not attempt an explanation, not even of spiritual life—that much of heaven and God divinely imparted to us—but likened it to the wind, the ways of which we cannot understand, or to the grain of wheat which falls into the ground. We must be content with mystery until we move up higher, for now we see through a glass darkly.

IV. Finally, this dark mirror consists of the physical world with its ambitions, its passions, and its sins. Even these bodies of ours will dim the heavenly sight. Man's predilections and prejudices mingling with his aches and pains, so stain and deaden the spiritual vision that he cannot see aright. "This body of sin" is a colored shade surrounding the light of God once breathed into the soul, and so mars the clearness of our vision. Man cannot rise completely above his personal bias, nor rid himself of self. Heaven will shine to us in the light or shade of our little wants and whims. An Indian's thought of heaven was that of a happy hunting ground. The Hebrew's was of a city like unto Mount Zion. But John writes with the vision of his homeless Lord before him, and tells us of a house with many mansions. So each according to his nature will think of heaven, and we cannot quite rid ourselves of our predilection, for our desires and hopes will color all our vision. We see through a glass darkly. But the time hastens on when we shall rise to the higher vision and see without a veil between. Not in time shall it be but by and by
"When the mists have rolled away."

Calvinism.

Calvinism.

IV.

Calvin's Institutes of the Christian religion were published in 1536, when he was 26 years of age. They came forth from a seething caldron, and it is not to be wondered at if there was some froth. Still, they are a great production for a young man, and for such an age. To these Institutes we must go for his system, not to the caricatures of his enemies. I cannot give even an outline of this monumental work. Epoch-making it was in the first degree. But I will quote a sentence or two, which will show us the drift of his beliefs: "Free-will does not enable any man to perform good works, unless he is assisted by grace, indeed the special grace which the elect received through regeneration." This is argued at length, (Vol. I., page 306 following). This distinction was insisted upon by our predecessors, but is rarely touched at the present day.

Another item from the same chapter on "Man deprived of freedom of the will, and miserably enslaved" in which he quotes with approval from Augustine, "Let no man flatter himself: of himself he is a devil; his happiness he owes entirely to God. What have you of your own but sin?" "Why presume so much on the capability of nature? It is wounded, maimed, vexed, lost." "When any one knows that he is nothing in himself and has no help in himself, the weapons within himself are broken, and the war is ended." So far his quotation from Augustine. Calvin then proceeds: "God bestows his grace upon us, that we may know that we are