

WHAT IS UNITARIANISM?

It is often asked, in these days of enquiry, and the frequent change and commingling of opinions, what Unitarianism is? What do Unitarian Christians believe? What are their views of God, of Jesus Christ, of the Atonement, of the Holy Spirit, of the Bible, of the new birth, of religion generally?

I am not going to enter into any argument in defence of Unitarianism. I am not going to be controversial. I would simply offer a brief reply to the question stated.

Something of this kind, it is believed, is called for by the many misapprehensions which exist on the subject. The faith of Unitarians is often misunderstood and misrepresented; it may be permitted to say, calumniated. It is often denounced in the pulpit, and from the press, and in private and social meetings. People are warned against it as a soul-destroying error. There is a portion of the community which has a strong prejudice against it, without knowing precisely what it is, or why they should be afraid of it; only they are told, that they must have nothing to do with it; they must not hear its preachers, nor read the books of the denomination.

Now to such, could my voice reach them, I would say, in the language which was once used, when the question was asked "Can any good come out of Nazareth?"—"Come and see." Come and see what Unitarianism is. Understand before you judge; then receive or reject it. If it appear to be the truth of God,—if it appear to embrace the simple truths of the Gospel—then do not hesitate to acknowledge it as such. Do not be frightened by a name; do not allow yourselves to be influenced by what men say; fear God rather than man. Reverence the truth wherever you find it. Come and see what Unitarianism is, before you allow yourselves to cry out against it. Do not condemn it unheard. Do not allow yourselves to form your opinion of it from the imperfect and distorted representations of its enemies. This is what I would say, could my voice reach those who denounce it.

Unitarianism takes its name from its distinguishing tenet, the strict personal unity of God, which Unitarians hold in opposition to the doctrine which teaches that God exists in three persons. Unitarians maintain that God is one mind, one person, one individual being; that the Father alone is entitled to be called God in the highest sense; that He alone possesses the attribute of infinite, undivided Divinity, and is the only proper object of supreme worship and love. They believe that Jesus Christ is a distinct being from Him, and possesses only derived attributes; that he is not the supreme God himself, but his Son, and the medium through which he has chosen to impart the richest blessings of his love to a sinning world.

This may be called the great leading doctrine, the distinguishing, and properly speaking, the only distinguishing feature of Unitarianism. Unitarians hold the supremacy of the Father, and the inferior and derived nature of the Son. This is their sole discriminating article of faith.

On several other points they differ more or less among themselves. Professing little reverence for human creeds, having no common standard but the Bible, and allowing in the fullest extent freedom of thought, and the liberty of every Christian to interpret the records of divine Revelation for himself, they look for diversity of opinion as the necessary result. They see not how this is to be avoided without a violation of the grand Protestant principle of individual faith and liberty. They claim to be thorough and consistent Protestants.

There are certain general views however, in which they are mostly agreed, which they regard as flowing from the great discriminating article of faith above-named, or intimately connected with it, or which they feel compelled to adopt on a diligent examination of the sacred volume.

I begin with the character of God. Unitarians, as I said, hold his strict personal unity. They are accustomed, too, to dwell with peculiar emphasis on his moral perfections, his equity, his holiness, and especially his paternal love and mercy. They regard it as one of the chief glories of Christianity that it contains a clear assertion and full illustration of the doctrine that God is our Father. They give to this doctrine a prominence in their teachings, as one peculiarly dear to their hearts, one intimately interwoven with their conceptions of a true, cheerful, and elevating piety, and the obligations and encouragements to repentance, prayer, and an obedient life. It is the office of religion, as they view it, to purify the soul of man, to enkindle in it holy desires and affections, and become to it a source of light, strength, comfort, peace; and the paternal character of God, his infinite love, tenderness, pity, united with the holiness of his nature, is the great idea which must lie at the foundation of all such religion in the soul.

They believe that the mercy of God is not confined to a few, arbitrarily chosen out of the great mass of beings equally sinful in his sight; but that he yearns with a father's tenderness and pity towards the whole offspring of Adam. They believe that he earnestly desires their repentance and holiness; that his infinite overflowing love led him miraculously to raise up and send Jesus to be their spiritual deliverer, to purify their souls from sin, to restore them to communion with himself, and fit them for pardon and everlasting life in his presence; in a word, to reconcile man to God, and earth to heaven.

They believe that the Gospel of Jesus thus originated in the exhaustless and unbought love of the Father; that it is intended to operate on man, and not on God; that the only obstacle which exists, or which ever has existed on the part of God, to the forgiveness of the sinner is found in the heart of the sinner himself: that the life, teachings, sufferings, and resurrection of Jesus become an instrument of pardon, as they are the appointed means of turning man from sin to holiness, of breathing into his soul new moral and spiritual life, and elevating it to a union with the Father. They believe that the cross of Christ was not needed to render God merciful; that Jesus suffered, not as a victim of God's wrath, or to satisfy his justice. They think that this view obscures the glory of the divine character, is repugnant to God's equity, veils his loveliest attributes, and is injurious to a spirit of filial, trusting piety. Thus all, in their view, is to be referred primarily to the boundless and unpurchased love of the Father, whose wisdom chose this method of bringing man within reach of his pardoning mercy, by redeeming him from the power of sin, and establishing in his heart his kingdom of righteousness and peace.

I now proceed to speak of Jesus Christ. As before said, Unitarians believe him to be a distinct being from God and subordinate to him. The following may serve as a specimen of the processes of thought, views, and impressions, through which they arrive at this conclusion. I state them it will be observed, not by way of argument. I shall use no more of argument. I repeat, then is necessary to explain fully what Unitarianism is, and how it sustains itself,—on what foundation it professes to rest.

Unitarians do not rely exclusively, or chiefly, on what they conceive to be the intrinsic incredibility of the doctrine to which they stand opposed. They take the Bible in their hands, as they say, and sitting down to read it, as plain unlettered Christians, and with prayer for divine illumination, they find that the general tenor of its language either distinctly asserts, or necessarily implies the supremacy of the Father, and teaches the inferior and derived nature of the Son. In proof of this they appeal to such passages as the following:—"This is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent"—John xvii. 3. "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus."—1 Tim. ii. 5. "My Father is greater than I."—John xiv. 28. "My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me."—John vii. 16. "I speak not of myself."—John xiv. 10. "I can of mine own self do nothing."—John v. 30. "The Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works."—John xiv. 10. "God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye crucified, both Lord and Christ."—Acts ii. 36. "Him hath God exalted with his right hand, to be a Prince and a Saviour."—Acts v. 31.

They appeal to such passages, and generally to all those in which Jesus Christ is called, not God himself, but the Son of God; in which he is spoken of as sent, and the Father as sending, appointing him a kingdom, "giving" him authority, giving him to be head over all things to the church. Such passages, they contend, show derived power and authority.

Again; when the Son is represented as praying to the Father, and the Father as hearing and granting his prayer, how, ask they, can the plain, serious reader resist the conviction that he who prays is a different being from him to whom he prays? Does a being pray to himself?

Unitarians urge that passages like those above referred to, occurring promiscuously, are fair specimens of the language in which Jesus is spoken of in the New Testament; that such is the common language of the Bible, and that it is wholly irreconcilable with the idea that Jesus was regarded by those with whom he lived and conversed, as the Infinite and Supreme God, or that the Bible was meant to teach any such doctrine. They do not find, they say, that the deportment of the disciples and of the multitude towards Jesus, the questions they asked him, and the character of their intercourse with him, indicated any such belief on their part, or any suspicion that he was the Infinite Jehovah. We meet, say they, with no marks of the surprise and astonishment which they must have expressed, on being first made acquainted with the doctrine,—on being first told that he who stood before them, who ate and drank with them, who slept and waked, who was capable of fatigue and sensible to pain, was, in truth, the Infinite and Immutible One, the Preserver and Governor of nature.

They contend that the passages generally adduced to prove the Supreme Deity of Jesus Christ, fail of their object; that without violence they will receive a different construction; that such construction is often absolutely required by the language itself, or the connexion in which it stands; that most of those passages, carefully examined, far from disproving, clearly show the distinct nature and inferiority of the Son. They notice the fact as a remarkable one, that of all the proof texts of the Trinity, as they are called, there is not one on which eminent Trinitarian critics have not put a Unitarian construction, and that they say that Unitarianism may be proved from the concessions of Trinitarians themselves. It is certainly a very extraordinary fact, that there is not a single text of Scripture commonly adduced as proving the Trinity, which distinguished Trinitarian critics have not abandoned to the Unitarians.

Unitarians find difficulties of another sort in the way of believing in a tri-personal Deity. They object to the inherent incredibility of the doctrine in itself considered. They say, that they cannot receive the doctrine, because in asserting

that there are three persons in the Deity, it teaches, according to any conception they can form on the subject, that there are three beings, three minds, three conscious agents, and thus it makes three Gods, and to assert that these three are one, is a manifest contradiction.

So too with regard to the Saviour,—to affirm that the same being is both finite and infinite, man and God, they say, appears to them to be a contradiction and an absurdity. If Jesus Christ possessed two natures, two wills, two minds, a finite and an infinite, they maintain that he must be two persons, two beings.

In regard to his metaphysical nature and rank, and the time at which his existence commenced, Unitarians undoubtedly differ in opinion. Some hold his pre-existence, and others suppose that his existence commenced at the time of his entrance into the world. The question of his nature they do not consider as important. Some take this view. They think that the testimony of the apostles, the original witnesses, to whom we are indebted for our knowledge of him, bears only on his birth, miracles, teachings, life, death, resurrection, and ascension; that is, on his character and offices, and that beyond these we need not go; that these are all which it is important that we should know or believe; that the rest is speculation, hypothesis, with which, as practical Christians, we have no concern; that neither our comfort, our hope, nor our security of pardon and eternal life depends upon our knowledge or belief of it.

At the same time, all entertain exalted views of his character and offices. In a reverence for these they profess to yield to no class of Christians. The divinity which others ascribe to his person they think may with more propriety be referred to these. "We believe firmly," says one of the most eminent writers of the denomination, "in the divinity of Christ's mission and office, that he spoke with divine authority, and was a bright image of the divine perfections. We believe that Jesus Christ was the most glorious display, expression, and representative of God to mankind, so that in seeing and knowing him, we see and know the invisible Father; so that when Christ came, God visited the world and dwelt with men more conspicuously than at any former period. In Christ's words we hear God speaking; in his miracles we behold God acting; in his character and life we see an unsullied image of God's purity and love. We believe, then, in the divinity of Christ, as this term is often and properly used."

Unitarians do not think that they thus detract from the true glory of the Son. They regard him as one with God in affection, will, and purpose. This union, they think, is explained by the words of the Saviour himself. "Be ye also one," says he to his disciples, "even as I and my Father are one;" not one in nature, but in purpose, affection, and act. Through him Christians are brought near to the Father, and their hearts are penetrated with divine love. By union with him as the true vine, they are nurtured in the spiritual life. In his teachings they find revelations of holy truth. They ascribe peculiar power and significance to his cross. To that emblem of self-sacrificing love, they turn with emotions which language is too poor to express.

The cross is connected in the minds of Christians with the Atonement. On this subject Unitarians feel constrained to differ from some of their fellow Christians. They do not reject the Atonement in what they conceive to be the scriptural meaning of the term. While, however, they gratefully acknowledge the mediation of Christ, and believe that through the channel of his gospel are conveyed to them the most precious blessings of a Father's mercy, they object strongly to the views frequently expressed, of the connexion of the death of Christ with the forgiveness of sin. They do not believe that the sufferings of Christ were penal—designed to satisfy a principle of stern justice, for justice, say they, does not inflict suffering on the innocent that the guilty may go free. And besides, they believe that God's justice is in perfect harmony with his mercy, that to separate them, even in thought, is greatly to dishonour him. They believe that however the cross stands connected with the forgiveness of sin, that connexion, as before said, is to be explained by the effects wrought on man, and not on God.

They believe that in thus teaching, they do not rob the cross of its power, nor take away from the sinner his ground of hope. To the objection, that sin requires an infinite atonement, and that none but an infinite being can make that atonement, they reply by saying, that they find in their Bibles not one word of this infinite atonement, and besides, that no act of a finite being, a frail, sinning child of dust, can possess a character of infinity, or merit an infinite punishment; that it is an abuse of language so to speak; and further, that if an infinite sufferer were necessary to make due atonement for sin, no such atonement could ever be made, for infinite cannot suffer; that God is unchangeable, and it is both absurd and impious to ascribe suffering to him; God cannot die; and admitting Jesus to have been God as well as man, only his human nature suffered; that there was no infinite sufferer in the case; that thus the theory of the infinite atonement proves a fallacy, and the whole fabric falls to the ground. Still is not the sinner left without hope, because he leans on the original and unchanging love and compassion of the Father, to whom as the primary fountain, we trace back all gospel means and influences, and who is ever ready to pardon those, who through Christ and his cross are brought to repentance for sin, and holiness of heart and life.

By the Holy Spirit, Unitarians suppose is

meant not a person, but an influence, and hence it is spoken of as "poured out," "given" and we hear of the "anointing" with the holy spirit, phrases which they contend, preclude the idea of a person. It was given miraculously to the first disciples, and gently, as the gathering dews of evening, distills upon the hearts of the followers of Jesus in all ages, helping their infirmity, ministering to their renewal, and ever strengthening and comforting them. It is given in answer to prayer. As Christ said, "If ye being evil," imperfect beings, "know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him."—Luke xi. 13.

Unitarians believe that salvation through the gospel is offered to all, on such terms as all, by God's help, which he will never withhold from any who earnestly strive to know and do his will, and lead a pure, humble, and benevolent life, have power to accept. They reject the doctrine of native total depravity, but they assert that man is born weak and in possession of appetites and propensities, by the abuse of which all become actual sinners, and they believe in the necessity of what is figuratively expressed by the "new birth," that is, the becoming spiritual and holy, being led by that spirit of truth and love which Jesus came to introduce into the souls of his followers. This change is significantly called the coming of the kingdom of heaven in the heart, without which, as they teach, the pardon of sin were it possible, would confer no happiness, and the songs of paradise would fall with harsh dissonance on the ear.

While they earnestly inculcate the necessity of a holy heart and a pure and benevolent life, they deny that man is to be saved by his own merit, or works, except as a condition to which the mercy of God has been pleased to annex the gift of eternal life and felicity.

There is nothing peculiar in the sentiments which Unitarians, as a body, entertain of the Bible, which distinguishes them from other sects. They go to it as the fountain of inspired truth. They regard the several books which compose the volume, as the records of a Divine Revelation. They make it their standard, their rule of faith and life, interpreting it as they think consistency and the principles of a sound and approved criticism require. In proof of their veneration for the scriptures, they appeal to the fact that several of the best defences of Christianity against the attacks of infidels, have come from the hands of Unitarians,—a fact which no one acquainted with the theological literature of modern times, from the Reformation down to the present day, will call in question.

Unitarians have been accused of unduly exalting human reason. To this they reply, that the Bible is addressed to us as reasonable beings; that reverence for its records, and respect for the natures which God has bestowed on us, makes it our duty to use our understandings and the best lights which are afforded us, for ascertaining its meaning; that God cannot contradict in one way what he reveals in another; that his word and works must utter a consistent language; that if the Bible be his gift, it cannot be at war with nature and human reason; that if we discard reason in its interpretation, there is no absurdity we may not deduce from it; that we cannot do it greater dishonour than to admit that it will not stand the scrutiny of reason; that if our faculties are not worthy of trust, if they are so distempered by the fall that we can no longer repose any confidence in their veracity, then revelation itself cannot benefit us, for we have no means left of judging of its evidences or import, and are reduced to a state of utter scepticism.

Unitarians sometimes speak of reverence for human nature,—of reverence for the soul. They reverence it as God's work, formed for undying growth and improvement. They believe that it possesses powers capable of receiving the highest truths. They believe that God, in various ways, makes revelations of truth and duty to the human soul; that in various ways he quickens it—kindles in it holy thoughts and aspirations, and inspires it by his life giving presence. They believe that however darkened and degraded, it is capable of being regenerated, renewed, by the means and influences which he provides. They believe that it is not so darkened by the fall, but that some good, some power, some capacity of spiritual life, is left in it. But they acknowledge that it has need of help; that it has need to be breathed upon by the divine spirit. They believe that there is nothing in their peculiar mode of viewing Christianity which encourages presumption,—encourages pride and self-exaltation. They believe that the heart which knows itself will be ever humble. They feel that they must perpetually look to God for aid. They teach the necessity of prayer, and a diligent use of the means of devout culture. They do not then teach reverence for human nature in any such sense they urge, as would countenance the idea that man is sufficient to save himself without God. They pray to Him for illumination; pray that he will more and more communicate of himself to their souls. They teach the fighting influences of sin. They believe that in the universe which God has formed, this is the only essential evil, and that to rescue the human soul from its power, to win it back to the love of God, is the noblest work which religion can achieve, and worth all the blood and tears which were poured out by Jesus in the days of his humiliation.