

OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

COWPER'S HYMNS.

I value Cowper's Hymns very highly. They are the free gustings of a soul earnestly longing "for a closer walk with God." They are also true lyrics; they are full of the spirit of poetry. There are a few of them in our new hymn book. There are others of them to whose insertion in it I can see no objection. These are the 5th, 6th, 13th, 19th, 29th, 34th, 35th, 36th, 37th, 39th, 43rd and 54th. But much as I prize Cowper's Hymns, I do not consider them perfect. There are two verses in them to which I specially object. The first verse is the one which begins with, "Return, O Holy Dove, return," and the next, the one which begins with, "There is a fountain filled with blood." I look upon both as containing unscriptural ideas and as being for that reason unsuitable for being used in the public worship of God. What is sung in church as well as what is preached should be strictly in accordance with the Word of God. That the stanzas to which I object are in almost every collection of hymns, I know; that they are regarded by many men of piety, intelligence and good judgment as thoroughly orthodox, I also know. For these two reasons it is necessary that I should state my objections to them in detail.

The first stanza to which I object is as follows:

"Return, O Holy Dove, return,
Sweet messenger of rest;
I hate the sins that made thee mourn,
And drove Thee from my breast."

In the first place, we have no authority in the Word of God for speaking of the Holy Ghost as a dove. The Church is addressed as a dove twice in the song of Solomon, but the Holy Spirit is not addressed as such in any part of the Bible. We are of course informed that the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon the Saviour. He descended in this form no doubt to indicate that Christ was holy, harmless, undefiled and separate from sinners. But to say that the Spirit descended like a dove and to address Him as a dove are two different things. If the Holy Ghost desired that He should be spoken of as the Dove of Heaven, He would unquestionably have moved the sacred writers to speak of Him by that name. It would, I think, be our wisdom to imitate Moses, and speak of God only by the names by which He makes Himself known.

I have seen it argued, that the term dove is employed only in a poetic sense, and that therefore it is proper to use it. My reply is, that God is so great and glorious a being, so high above us, that it is not becoming on our part to apply poetic names, or any other names of our own coining to Him. We must not only worship the true God, but we must worship Him by the names by which He has revealed Himself, and in the ways prescribed by Him. Milton was a greater poet than Cowper, yet he does not find it necessary to call the Holy Spirit a dove; he does, however, say that He "dove-like sat brooding on the vast abyss." I will not say that David was a greater poet than Milton; I suppose that in mere talents he was not equal to him. I have no hesitation, however, in saying that he wrote grander poems than Milton wrote; yet it never entered his head to speak of a person of the God-head as a dove. There is no poetic necessity for calling the Spirit a dove. Watts spoke of the Spirit as a dove before Cowper, but the hymn in which he took that liberty is one of his poorest. So little is the hymn "Come Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove," thought of in Scotland that it is not either in the Scottish, Free Church, or United Presbyterian Hymnal.

Having introduced Dr. Watts' name, I may state that I look upon him as having rendered great service as a hymnologist to the Church. He was a man of deep piety and great learning. He was also a good poet. He wrote, however, such a vast quantity of devotional poetry that it cannot all be valuable. His faults as a poet are thus pointed out by Dr. Johnson in his "Lives of the English Poets:" He writes too often without regular measures; the rhymes are not always sufficiently correspondent. He is particularly unhappy in coining names expressive of character."

In the second place, I object to the stanza beginning "Return, O Holy Dove, return," because it teaches that the Holy Spirit may depart from the Christian.

The second stanza in those of Cowper's hymns in our new book to which I object is this:

"There is a fountain filled with blood,
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins,
And sinners plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains."

My first objection to it is that there is an incongruity in the metaphor used. What the poet wished to show was the all-sufficiency of Christ's atonement. Unfortunately the metaphor he selected was not adapted for showing that. Metaphors must in their nature be suited to express or illustrate the ideas intended to be conveyed. They must, therefore, be grounded in realities. They must be drawn from things which are known, or at any rate, of which it is possible for us to form a conception. The sacred writers always employ metaphors in a proper manner. The poetical books of the Bible deserve close study for their literary beauties alone. There is not an incongruous metaphor in the whole Word of God. Homer, too, and Ossian, employ metaphors with great accuracy. They were close observers of nature, great imitators, and therefore great poets. Cowper, though always elegant, is not always fortunate in his use of metaphors. If he compared anything to a fountain, it should be to a fountain of water, or of something that flows out of the earth. A fountain of blood is a thing which does not exist. It was, therefore, improper to compare either Christ or the blessings of salvation to a fountain of that kind.

But though there are no fountains of blood, yet a fountain of blood is a conceivable thing; a fountain of blood, however, containing only the blood of one man, and yet so large that millions of men could be plunged into it is a thing that cannot exist; it is absurd to speak of it. I am not taking Cowper's fountain in a literal sense. I understand it as meaning the blood, atonement, or sacrifice of Christ. I hold, however, if his metaphor is natural and calculated to illustrate the unknown by the known that a literal fountain such as that of which he speaks should at least be a possibility.

My second objection to Cowper's hymn is that it is an utter misrepresentation of what Zechariah teaches. The ancient prophet says that a fountain should be opened for sin and uncleanness; the modern bard represents him as saying that a fountain of blood should be opened.

The term fountain may denote either the place in which water is springing up, or else the water itself. An instance of the use of the word in the former sense will be found in Leviticus xi. 36: "A fountain or pit wherein there is plenty of water shall be clean." That this also is the sense in which Zechariah uses the word seems to me certain. But if by fountain he means a place containing a cleansing element of some kind, what can it be but Christ? That the fountain of which he speaks is not Christ, but the blood of Christ is the opinion of some. It is the view expressed in Cowper's hymn. That Zechariah speaks, not of the blood of Christ, but of Christ himself, Christ containing all that is necessary to wash the soul from sin, I cannot for my own part doubt for a moment. Dr. Andrew Bonar, a writer who has carefully studied the modes of washing among the Jews, says, in his commentary on Leviticus, speaking of chapter xi.: "It is in reference to this chapter that Zechariah calls Christ the fountain for uncleanness." Dr. Thomson, in his admirable work, "The Land and the Book," speaks as follows: "I have repeatedly found wells closed up tight and the mouth plastered over with mortar. This may illustrate that passage in Zechariah xiii. 1: "In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness. This is indeed a beautiful and significant promise, which many actions and customs in this country shed light upon and render emphatic. Fountains are often sealed up until times of utmost need, and then opened for public use. Women take their soiled clothes to the fountains in secluded valleys and there do their washing. Sheep are washed at fountains from their defilements. Christ is not only the good shepherd, and His people the sheep of His pasture, but He is also the fountain in which their sins and pollutions are washed away. Vol. II. page 400. The Saviour is represented in other parts of the Bible as a fountain. Jehovah or Christ addressing the children of Israel says in Jeremiah: "My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken Me the fountain of living waters."

That Zechariah represents Christ as a fountain of water, not as a fountain of blood, is quite clear. He

knew that Jehovah spoke of Himself as a fountain of waters. He was too good a rhetorician to employ a metaphor that would not convey his ideas to the person he was addressing. He had never heard of a fountain of blood. He knew that the only fountains at which people ever washed were fountains of water. When he spoke of a fountain all his hearers would think of a fountain of water; not one of them would think of a fountain of blood. If Zechariah meant a fountain of blood, it is certain that he did not say what he meant. But that he said what he meant, we know.

Blood is spoken of in the old Testament as making atonement, and as hallowing; but not, so far as I remember, as cleansing or washing. Washing in blood is a New Testament idea. A fountain of blood, however, is neither a New Testament nor an Old Testament idea; there is no reference to anything of the kind in the whole Bible. John represents the martyrs as persons who had washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. He does not, however, represent that blood as being in a fountain.

The Old Testament frequently speaks of water as cleansing from sin. "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean; from all your iniquities and from all your idols will I cleanse you." Ezek. xxxvi. 25. If Ezekiel's clean water was to come out of Zechariah's fountain, it could not surely be a "fountain filled with blood."

In Lange's commentary on Zechariah xiii. 1, I find the fountain represented as having water in it, not blood. "The water which flows from the fountain in the text is a water of sprinkling, by which sin and uncleanness are removed." I do not deny that the principal act by which the fountain was opened was the shedding of Christ's blood.

My third objection to this stanza is that its teaching respecting the mode of applying the blood of Christ is unscriptural. Blood was applied under the Levitical law by sprinkling, not by plunging persons into it. John does not represent the people of God as plunged into Christ's blood. In one place he represents Christ as taking hold of them, and applying His blood to them; in another place he represents themselves as going to the blood shed for them and applying it to their filthy robes.

"Ho ye that thirst approach the spring,
Where living waters flow;
Free to that sacred fountain all
Without a price may go."

ATHANASIUS.

DUTY TO GOD FIRST.

AN INCIDENT ILLUSTRATIVE OF THE UNSPILINESS OF THE BIOGRAPHER OF JOHN KNOX.

In the Divinity Hall, Edinburgh, of the denomination of which Dr. McCrie was so distinguished a member, when, besides the students of the denomination, there were one or two from elsewhere in regular attendance, it was an established practice for the students to freely criticise the discourses of one another when delivered. On one occasion during the time that the Doctor was the active professor, not long before his death, the delicate task was set before them of a call to give their opinion of a discourse of a clever, scholarly junior student, a son of the Doctor, in his presence. A number of the students, though at other times so ready with their remarks now uttered not a word, nor any one, until the call came round to the writer, who rose, and as at other times with the discourses of other students plainly and at some length, gave his mind; commending freely where he thought commendation was due, and with equal freedom blaming where blame seemed to be deserved, or pointing out what was deficient or exuberant, or in any way needed to be improved. There was now only one on the roll uncalled, a senior student, who on being named, at once was on his feet, and instead of criticising the discourse delivered, occupied considerable time in endeavouring to overthrow the criticism upon it, in everything in which that criticism contained anything in the shape of blame. An elderly clergyman, who happened to be present, was the last requested to give his mind, which he did in a strain entirely similar to that of the previous speaker—criticising not the discourse but the criticism upon the discourse. Last of all the Professor himself gave his mind, in no shape supporting the views of the two previous speakers, but in every particular very decidedly supporting and confirming the criticism upon the discourse. Noble intellect! noble spirit! conferred, dis-