

SPECIAL
ARTICLES

Our Contributors

BOOK
REVIEWS**"HIGHER CRITICISM: WHAT IS IT?"**

(United Presbyterian.)

Most Presbyterians are familiar with the story, how George Gillespie helped the Westminster Assembly of Divines to answer the question: "What is God?" We are told the Assembly was in perplexity how to answer it, that they had recourse to prayer for special guidance, that George Gillespie—one of its members—led the Assembly in its appeal to the Throne of Grace, and that the opening sentence of Gillespie's prayer was: "O God, thou art a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in thy being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth."

This sentence of adoration, it is said, was instantly accepted as God's answer to the united prayers of the Assembly, and at once incorporated into the Shorter Catechism and stands today as the answer to the question: "What is God?"

This story has encountered criticism in its two forms, lower and the higher.

The function of lower criticism, the simpler form, would be to secure the best and most accurate account of the incident. For example, last Sabbath you heard your pastor give the incident somewhat loosely in the course of his sermon. Then, a year or two ago, you remember having read an account of the incident in your Church paper, which varied a little from the pastor's narrative. Manifestly the best plan would be, to go back down the stream of time and trace the story to its first source or origin. You do this, and you find that the incident was first given to the world by Hetherington, who wrote a history of the Westminster Assembly. You accept Hetherington's narrative as the true account. This is lower criticism, also called textual criticism, because its sole effort is to get at the true text. The plays of Shakespeare are scattered all over the world, and today scarcely any two editions of the same play are identical. Lower criticism undertakes to work back to the oldest editions and so establish the true text. The task is laborious, painstaking and fatiguing, but comparatively simple. Such, then, is the nature of lower criticism, or textual criticism, which has been elaborated into a science, resting upon sound principles of procedure.

But, how now has higher criticism dealt with the Gillespie story?

First, it was noticed that Hetherington had not seen the records of the Assembly. He says so in the preface to his book. Next, upon going to the records or official papers of the Assembly it was found that Gillespie was not present in the Assembly, when the Divines were at work upon the Shorter Catechism. He had left and returned to Scotland months before. He was not present at the time and therefore could not have made such a prayer. And, to end all, the official records proceed to tell how the question, "What is God?" came to be answered. The records show that the answer was condensed from the answer of the Larger Catechism, which in turn was made on the basis of the catechism of one Herbert Palmer, in comparison with other well-known catechisms of that day. Herbert Palmer was chairman of the committee of the Assembly that had the matter in charge.

The nature of higher criticism may be gathered in general from this example. We constantly read and hear of "higher criticism," and, if we may judge from inquiries that come to us, there are many plain people that would like to

know just what it is. In this article we attempt nothing, except a general notion of the science.

Lower criticism had for ages been familiar to the Church. It was the science of textual criticism, or an effort to get at the true text of Scripture by diligently comparing all existing copies or manuscripts. Long ago it attained the dignity and importance of a science, with a sane method and safe results.

Higher criticism invaded the province of Holy Scripture something over a century ago. Eichhorn was its father, and the date 1780. He called it higher criticism, to distinguish it from textual criticism, which was already an accepted science.

Because all other literature had been made to pass through the fires of higher criticism, Eichhorn, with an able head and devout heart, subjected Holy Scripture to the same test. His object was apologetic—to defend the Bible against the scorn of its enemies. He investigated the internal condition of the Old Testament books, to learn from the books themselves—from their own contents or internal characteristics—as well as from all external sources—their authorship and origin.

It will at once be seen that this new science is much more complex and difficult than the humbler one of textual criticism, and vastly more fascinating and engaging. Also, it must appear that its so-called results are far less sure and safe, because there is too much room for mere conjecture and because the science is as yet too young to be sure of its ground.

Some of the tests or principles of the higher criticism are The Historical Evidence, The Evidence of Style, The Evidence of Opinion, The Evidence from Citations, The Evidence of Testimony, and The Argument from Silence, all which are brought into use in order to ascertain the probable date and authorship of a document or book. Centuries must yet elapse, in all probability, before the principles of higher criticism become firmly established and the method is accepted as an accredited science.

At present it is too much guess work to bother about.

The Church will have to place the whole matter in the hands of her scholars and have them sift it to the bottom, as she has had to do with every other science, so-called, in the past. The result is not uncertain.

THE CONVINCING ARGUMENT.

No definition of truth or argument for truth can equal the effectiveness of a life. It is important to remember this as we find ourselves being carried away with zeal for our own pet statements about the gospel. Kingsley, in his preface to "Hypatia," says of the fifth century that "the churches of the East were vanishing before Muhammadan invaders, strong by living trust in that living God whom the Christians, while they hated and persecuted each other for arguments about him, were denying and blaspheming in every action of their lives." Men try to prove by logic that certain courses are right, forgetting that "what you are thunders so that I cannot hear what you say." Our one universally convincing argument for Christianity must ever go on two feet.—S. S. Times.

Prayer for our enemies is the surest evidence of our charity to them.—Soul.

DIVISIONS AMONG THEM.

By C. H. Wetherbe.

A plea for the practical union of all who call themselves Christians, looks well as a theory, but it is a fact that many of those who constantly urge the plea do not illustrate it in practice. Divisions among themselves frequently occur. In some instances they break out with harsh violence. Some small question of propriety gives occasion for hot dispute, and then a splitting apart by members of the same church. A religious paper, published in Nashville, Tenn., tells of a division which recently occurred in a church in that State. It states that about thirty-two members withdrew from the church "because the congregation would not use instrumental music in the worship, and preferred to work only as the church, and not in connection with, and as a supporter of, the missionary society—because the church insisted upon managing its own finances and other affairs." It is further said: "The difference is over things which all admit are not essential to the work of the church and the worship of God. All could have continued the work and worship acceptably to God without these things, but all could not have done so with them."

So it seems that nothing vital was involved in the bad division. The ground for it was small, and comparatively incidental. And yet those people have long protested against the wickedness of divisions among God's people. They have lamented and wept over the sins of "sectarianism." They have denounced the "denominations" for retaining their various distinctive names, and for their refusal to abandon certain beliefs and practices in behalf of "Christian union." These pleaders charge the other bodies with the great sin of hindering the answering of Christ's prayer for the oneness of Christians, and also the progress of His kingdom. But why do not they themselves give us examples of unity among all who claim to believe and practice the same things? Why is it that they divide among themselves on questions of minor importance? If sectarianism be very sinful, why are not divisions in their own ranks just as sinful? They are giving to unconverted ones frequent examples of division, occasioned by small differences of opinion.

Verily, something besides one name, to be used by all Christians, is greatly needed. The people of the world are much more influenced by a true Christian spirit in all church members than they are by a mere name and by mere profession. A personal union with Christ, and well expressed, is the greatest thing.

The Banner of Truth in Ireland states: None but one actually engaged in the work of the I. C. M. can possibly realize the change that has come over this country during the last few years with regard to our work among the Roman Catholics. I well remember when we were pelted off the streets whenever we attempted to hold open-air meetings. Today this is all changed, and I am happy to say it was my great privilege to address hundreds of Roman Catholics at open-air meetings in Dublin, where there was perfect quietness, as they drank in the gospel message of a free salvation through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We sang our gospel hymns, and spoke freely to them of the love and willingness and power of Jesus to "save to the uttermost all who come to God through him."