

To most men, probably, the word suggests a period of moral trial in the present life, during which a character is formed which will be permanent either in good or evil. When the question of future probation is discussed, these later notions are apt to be transferred to the life beyond—one writer having in mind one conception, another a different one. Not infrequently the conception carried over is that of a protracted period of moral discipline under conditions of temptation and conflict. And objection is raised to the supposition of a future probation, because, it is alleged, the other world is not adapted, like the present, to be the theatre of such a conflict.

So far as I shall maintain the reasonableness of an expectation that some members of our race will have a probation in the future life, it is on the basis of the fundamental verities of Christianity. I accept the doctrines of original sin, incarnation, atonement, eternal punishment, which have won general assent in the Church, and have gained definite and commanding theological statement with the progress of its history. With these I accept such a dogma of probation as can be squared with them. And to me the whole question of probation seems thus to be intimated. We have had decisions of it founded solely on the Augustinian, or Augustinian and Federal, theory of the primitive state, limiting probation to our first parents and denying it to fallen man; or on a theory that man, notwithstanding the fall, has full power to keep the divine law perfectly, and that every man (including, possibly every infant) is a complete moral person and agent, as was Adam, and, like him, is here on trial; or on various modifications, and even confusions of these theories. What we need is a Christian answer; that is, one that conceives of probation in the terms, and under the conditions, not of natural law merely, nor of moral law exclusively, but of Christianity. The final answer to the question depends upon a true apprehension of the Gospel. And the interest in the special question is becoming so great, because it is beginning to be seen that it is but one aspect of the fundamental question: "What think ye of the Christ? Whose Son is he?"

From the Christian point of view, probation is a gracious and not merely a legal state. Augustine teaches that it was more than the latter even for unfallen man. But, however this may be, for fallen man this is necessarily its character. It implies that for some reason or other God deals with mankind upon principles which exceed the measure of retributive justice, or of what used to be called the covenant of works. In an unpublished manuscript, a copy of which is in my possession, President Edwards makes the word probation equivalent to "the offer of a Savior." This suggests the true point of view. Probation, whatever it may have signified for unfallen man, means, for men now, opportunity for the formation of personal character on the basis, and under the motives, of a system of redemption.