

Theology from the Standpoint of a Young Christian.

A Paper Read Before the Shelburne Co. B. Q. M., Nov. 9th, by a Young Layman, and Published by Request.

There are many apologies that I might urge for the incompleteness and numerous faults of this paper. I shall content myself with two: 1. The vastness of the theme—Theology. 2. The narrowness of my scope of vision—From the standpoint of a young Christian. I am here like one who, while not yet "inured to alphabetic toil," attempts to master the subtleties and explain the wonders of Shakespeare's Hamlet, or like a carpenter's apprentice endeavoring to allure from their maze of architectural grandeur the mysteries in the construction of St. Paul's Cathedral. But how often each one of us is led to exclaim: The Poverty of human wisdom! the poverty, the poverty. Until wearied with our searches for that which seems unattainable and faint with our weepings we fall before Him who is the Fount of Wisdom and cry:

"We have but faith; we cannot know
For knowledge is of things we see.
But yet we trust it comes from Thee,
A beam in darkness; let it grow."

But as from the nature of our title the subject given me was for the purpose rather of displaying the ignorance and confusion of youth, than for eliciting that wisdom found only with age, I will proceed, as it seems to be the first requisite, to find a definition of theology. Literally it is the science of God. That is a very bold statement and may be paraphrased as the systematic compilation of all the thoughts and revelations that men have had or now have of Divinity. Thus theology is not simply the scientific expression of our creed, or of any creed, but of all creeds, orthodox and heterodox. The Baptist has a theology, so has the Buddhist; so have the Catholics and the followers of Confucius. Wherever man is found, there we meet with ideas of God—from the ignorant heathen falling before his idol, his shadow of divinity, to the cultured Christian knowing that "God is love," and displaying that God in their lives, both the frenzied dervish dancing before the sacred flame, and the savage of whom Pope spoke:

"Lo the poor Indian whose untutored mind,
Sees God in clouds and hears him in the wind."

I have been speaking of theology, and to illustrate my point have, I believe, gone beyond my definition into religion. Between the two there exists a marked difference. The Indian, the dervish, the heathen, the Christian whom I referred to above were all religious men, worshipping their God. But behind these emotional worshipping beings there is a mind that searches, an intellect that studies and a craving for knowledge slow to be satisfied. From these elements is evolved the Theologian. Like all sciences theology is of the mind; from the heart alone springs religion. As the philanthropist is to the physiologist as the lover of flowers to the botanist, so to the theologian is the man of religion. In the language of physiology, man is a biped, of the order mammalia, etc., etc. But to the poet, the philanthropist, speaking in the language of the heart: "What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god!" A flower, in botanical terminology, is an organ of the plant which subserves the purpose of producing seed, and consists of stamens, pistils, etc., etc. But to the lover of flowers, to a soulful woman:

"O Father Lord,
The most beneficent, I bless thy name
That thou hast mantled this green earth with flowers,
Linking our hearts to nature."
Or to the heart of that poet "who uttered nothing base."
"The meanest flower that blooms can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."

Carrying our comparison to its third stage we hear the theologian say: "God is a spirit, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent." A grand and sublime statement, but in marked contrast listen to the man of religion as he bows, head and heart, before his God: "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." There is nothing in the universe, seen or unseen, like the human soul, save the heart of the Eternal, of which it is a branch. The mind of man is a marvel, but of the human heart—now a lily-cup receiving the ambrosial dew of heaven, now a golden altar breathing with sweet odors to its God—what can we say? It is a theme for the lyric singers of Paradise, too sacred for an earthly muse. But our subject is not Religion, but Theology; and this leads me to further remark that the two classes, though often coincident, may exist apart. The theologian may be the most irreligious man in the world, his immense knowledge, or theories, of God having led him to self-gratification; his daring inspection of God-hood having become impiety;

and like one "beholding his natural face in a glass who goeth his way and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was," so may he behold the very majesty of God and then turn to the world to demand a crown not for Jehovah but for himself. This brings me to the direct inquiry, "Is the Study of Theology Beneficial?" which I with your forbearance will attempt to investigate.

It has been proved that wealth is not a blessing to all, that happiness is not always to be sought, and that knowledge in like manner is only power to a class. In itself a blessing, it may become a curse and often has been of no value to its possessors. The fault is with the possessors and not with knowledge. The same breeze that with inharmonious rattle and clatter rummages amongst a pile of old rubbish, may when it passes along the sensitive strings of an molian harp arouse from their sleep notes of such exquisite sweetness that the soul is wooed away from its sorrow or raised to divinest grief; such that an angel "hearing may appear mistaking earth for heaven."

The study of theology may, by unfolding the mysteries of that God who is "great and greatly to be praised," awake the noblest aspiration in the student's breast, or, as it happens in all studies, may by the delay of truth plunge the soul into abject despondency. He who would study theology, and here let me say without further comment that it is not a science for the clergy alone, he, I say, who would study theology, must have some qualifications, the first of which I consider to be *Sincerity*. Without sincerity we can do nothing successfully, nor, what is more important, uprightly. Sincerity knows no obstacles, it acknowledges only the right. It seeks not for the establishing nor strengthening of any creed, but with Pilate simply asks, "What is Truth?" He that has such sincerity will not make his knowledge a stumbling block nor carry his investigations into impiety; for he seeks that which "when a man hath found for joy thereof he goeth and selleth all that he hath and buyeth it." Another requisite is *Time*. The study of theology is not for off-hours, a pastime when the supper is ended and the newspaper read. It is a critical moment when the human soul first dares to ask for wisdom. The question then is simply this: Will he devote himself to the search for that which he asks, and sacrifice all that he may find it? Some things must be attended to—the duties of home, of church, of country. The rest must be second to the grand question, which we expressed above, "What is truth?" How important then to have time, how important to make time, for he that knows the alchemy of genius may, like Midas of antiquity, pick up insignificant moments and find them, in his hands, transmuted into golden life-times. "Drink deep or taste not of the Pierian stream," is the advice given to the bards, and this phrase has an everyday counterpart in the well-known words: "A little learning is a dangerous thing." Let him then who thinks of studying God, like one who "intending to build a town sitteth down first and counteth the cost," decide whether he is willing to devote the requisite time to his investigations. If not let him ask whether he is willing to receive into his life "a dangerous thing." To put our hand to the plough and then turn back is to find, to-morrow, ourselves before an abyss of doubt where today we left a furrow. It is a terrible moment when on the battlefield of the human soul faith and doubt meet in hand to hand contest. Fiends are lurking ambushed on the plain, while in the lurid sky above eddy the invidious vultures in narrow and narrowing circles. Then, as the Iron Duke at Waterloo sighed for "Night or Blucher," so from the centre of the struggle arise the anxious agonizing appeals: "God or Reason! God or Reason!" Happy to that soul to whom the former comes, and glorious for that to whom, as Blucher came to Wellington amid the gathering shades of night, so in the twilight of the fray reason appeals rearing the mantle of God.

I have in this paper extolled that man, who obey the dictates of religion and bows in reverence before the God of his heart. He is fortunate, but thrice fortunate is he who has a hope and a "reason for the hope he has within him."

There is another requisite for the truth-seeker which I would speak about, but with a condition. That requisite is *Independence*. For the last one hundred years the word "independence" itself has effected marvels. Often it has in its true light led men to glorious reform, but often serving but as a cloak for license and unrestraint, it has engendered rebellion against society and against God. The sage Carlyle exclaimed: "Pin thy faith to no man's sleeve;" but men, aflame with the desire for revolution, have sacrificed faith both in God and man. Leaders of the church have forgotten how unworthy the race is to touch even "the hem of the Anointed's garment," and have come with brazen foreheads—these shepherds of the flock!—to impiously question the acts of the Almighty, turning their shepherd's crook into a stupendous mark of interrogation. Such independence is unwise, is sacri-

ligious. It is the independence born of false philosophy—how unlike the "liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free." Standing as we do encompassed by so many systems of thought, offered, as we are, so many ways of salvation by this philosopher and that, it is well to remember the words of one who has tested them and found them grand, grand, but yet incomplete:

"Hold thou the truth; define it well,
For fear divine philosophy
Should step beyond her mark, and be
Procress to the Lords of hell."

I have come almost to the conclusion of what I have thought fit, not of what I would like, to say. I desire, however, to add a word on *Contemplation*. I have chosen that term because of the sublimity of the idea it contains. There is religion embalmed in that word contemplation, by derivation, to mark out a temple or place for meditation. Where is the man who refuses to rear an altar to his God, and not an altar simply where he can stand with "flesh of ram and blood of goats" beseeching forgiveness, but where in mingled adoration and wonder, he can listen while "the heavens are declaring the glory of God?" What can theology present like this. Its teachings, which have been likened to a pyramid which awes with its sublimity, but which when entered is found to be the tomb of one man, may amaze and elevate; they cannot satisfy. They lead us to heights where we can see the "kingdoms of time and eternity before us, but where the chill minds of heartless speculation may blight all vegetation and turn the water into ice. Victor Hugo's character, the Bish Bienvu, standing in his little garden with his face turned toward God, is a much grander sight than he who amid musty manuscripts and with learned formulae thinks "by searching to find out God." Of the former it was said: "Without seeking to comprehend the incomprehensible he gazed at it. He did not study God, he was dazzled by him." Nature is the grand amen of the Scriptures—it is more. The Bible is one noble but unfinished paragraph, the books of which are sentences, the chapters words. Were I permitted to punctuate it while I would place an exclamation mark after the Psalms, a question mark after Job, a good round period after the Proverbs and would connect the prophecies by a hyphen with the books of the New Testament, I would at the close of the Revelation make the mark of an incomplete sentence, the continuation, but not the conclusion, of which is in the Book of Nature.

"Wondrous truths and manifold as wondrous
God has written in those stars above,
And not less in the bright flowers under us
Stands the revelation of His Love."

O, that a voice from the heights of high heaven might ring throughout the world as clear as trumpet toned as that which struck the ear of the Judaea shepherd; O, that along the mammon-loving mart, through the homes into the hearts of the people, there might sound, till the smith drop his sledge, the carpenter his hammer, the clerk his pen and the world its cares, to hear the words of Jehovah: "Be still and know that I am God."

Delightful Studies in the Word.

About ten years ago there chanced to fall into my hands a small book called "The College of Colleges," being a complete record of the proceedings and addresses at Mr. Moody's summer school, if I remember rightly, for 1886.

Among the addresses was one by the late Dr. Broadus, on the Epistle to the Hebrews. This address was an eye, and brain, and heart opener, and has been the means of leading to many delightful hours for the writer of this. The key-word to the epistle is "Better;" the subject, "Christ's Superiority to Judaism." Thirteen different times in the epistle is Christ, or some phase of his work, shown to be superior to the various articles of Judaism. Chapters one and two prove that He is greater than the angels, who, by the way, are here shown not to be redeemed human beings. Chapters 3 and 4 show Him to be greater than Moses. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 give convincing proof that He is greater than any earthly priesthood. Chapters 8, 9, and 10 argue clearly that Christ is superior to the temple, the law, the daily service, the smoking altars and the various sacrifices. Of the remaining chapters, the eleventh contains the superior "Roll of honor" of the ages. The twelfth is an exhortation to sons, and the thirteenth is an exposition of brotherly love. Here is the list of "better" items in Christianity:—1. Chap. 1:4 "Better than the angels." 2. Chap. 6:9 "Better things." 3. Chap. 7:7 "Less blessed of the better." 4. Chap. 7:19 "Better hope." 5. Chap. 7:22 "Better Testament." 6. Chap. 8:6 "Better covenant." 7. Chap. 8:6 "Better promises." 8. Chap. 9:23 "Better sacrifices." 9. Chap. 10:34 "Better substance." 10. Chap. 11:16 "Better country." 11. Chap. 11:35 "Better resurrection." 12. Chap. 11:40 "Better thing." 13. Chap. 12:24 "Blood of sprinkling that speaketh better things than that of Abel."

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