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Some Facts of
Religion and of
Life: Sermons
Preached before
Her Majesty the
Queen in Scotland,
1866-76.

John Tulloch



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**Some Facts of Religion and of Life: Sermons
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**SOME FACTS OF RELIGION
AND OF LIFE**



**SOME FACTS
OF
RELIGION AND OF LIFE
SERMONS
PREACHED
BEFORE HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN
IN SCOTLAND
1866-76**

BY

JOHN TULLOCH, D.D.

**PRINCIPAL OF ST MARY'S COLLEGE IN THE UNIVERSITY
OF ST ANDREWS; ONE OF HER MAJESTY'S
CHAPLAINS FOR SCOTLAND**

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS

EDINBURGH AND LONDON

MDCCCLXXVII



TO
HER MOST GRACIOUS MAJESTY
THE QUEEN
THESE SERMONS
PREACHED IN HER MAJESTY'S PRESENCE, AND
PUBLISHED WITH HER APPROVAL
Are Dedicated
WITH FEELINGS OF THE
MOST RESPECTFUL LOYALTY
AND REGARD



THESE Sermons were occasional in the strict sense of the word.—They were preached at intervals, and in the discharge of a special duty. In such circumstances the preacher is apt to revert to familiar lines of thought, or to dwell on such facts of the religious life as seem for the time most appropriate. He does not aim at presenting any consecutive outline of Divine Truth.

ST MARY'S COLLEGE,
January 1877.



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I.

RELIGION AND THEOLOGY.

2 Corinthians, xi. 3.—“The simplicity that is in Christ.”

HERE is much talk in the present time of the difficulties of religion. And no doubt there is a sense in which religion is always difficult. It is hard to be truly religious—to be humble, good, pure, and just; to be full of faith, hope, and charity, so that our conduct may be seen to be like that of Christ, and our light to shine before men. But when men speak so much nowadays of the difficulties of religion, they chiefly mean intellectual and not practical difficulties. Religion is identified with the tenets of a Church system, or of a theological system; and it is felt that modern criticism has assailed these tenets in many vulnerable points, and made it no longer easy for the open and well-informed mind to believe things that were formerly held, or professed to be held, without hesitation. Discussions and doubts which were once confined to a limited circle when they were heard of at all, have penetrated the modern mind through many avenues, and affected the whole tone of social intelligence. This is not to be denied. For good or for evil such a result has come about; and we live in times of unquiet thought, which form a real and painful trial to many minds. It is not my intention at present to deplore or to criticise this modern tendency, but rather to point out how it may be accepted, and yet religion in the highest sense saved to us, if not without struggle (for that is always impossible in the nature of religion), yet without that intellectual conflict for which many minds are entirely unfitted, and which can never be said in itself to help religion in any minds.



The words which I have taken as my text seem to me to suggest a train of thought having an immediate bearing on this subject. St Paul has been speaking of himself in the passage from which the text is taken. He has been commending himself—a task which is never congenial to him. But his opponents in the Corinthian Church had forced this upon him; and now he asks that he may be borne with a little in “his folly.” He is pleased to speak of his conduct in this way, with that touch of humorous irony not unfamiliar to him when writing under some excitement. He pleads with his old converts for so much indulgence, because he is “jealous over them with a godly jealousy.” He had won them to the Lord. “I have espoused you,” he says, “to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” This had been his unselfish work. He had sought nothing for himself, but all for Christ. That they should belong to Christ—as the bride to the bridegroom—was his jealous anxiety. But others had come in betwixt them and him—nay, betwixt them and Christ, as he believed—and sought to seduce and corrupt their minds by divers doctrines. “I fear, lest



by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from *the simplicity that is in Christ.*”

What the special corruptions from Christian simplicity were with which the minds of St Paul’s Corinthian converts were assailed, it is not necessary for us now to inquire. Their special dangers are not likely to be ours. What concerns us is the fact, that both St Paul and Christ—his Master and ours—thought of religion as something simple. Attachment to Christ was a simple personal reality, illustrated by the tie which binds the bride, as a chaste virgin, to the bridegroom. It was not an ingenuity, nor a subtilty, nor a ceremony. It involved no speculation or argument. Its essence was personal and emotional, and not intellectual. The true analogy of religion, in short, is that of simple affection and trust. Subtilty may, in itself, be good or evil. It may be applied for a religious no less than for an irreligious purpose, as implied in the text. But it is something entirely different from the “simplicity that is in Christ.”



It is not to be supposed that religion is or can be ever rightly dissociated from intelligence. An intelligent perception of our own higher wants, and of a higher Power of love that can alone supply these wants, is of its very nature. There must be knowledge in all religion—knowledge of ourselves, and knowledge of the Divine. It was the knowledge of God in Christ communicated by St Paul that had made the Corinthians Christians. But the knowledge that is essential to religion is a simple knowledge like that which the loved has of the person who loves—the bride of the bridegroom, the child of the parent. It springs from the personal and spiritual, and not from the cognitive or critical, side of our being; from the heart, and not from the head. Not merely so; but if the heart or spiritual sphere be really awakened in us—if there be a true stirring of life here, and a true seeking towards the light—the essence and strength of a true religion may be ours, although we are unable to answer many questions that may be asked, or to solve even the difficulties raised by our own intellect.



The text, in short, suggests that there is a religious sphere, distinct and intelligible by itself, which is not to be confounded with the sphere of theology or science. This is the sphere in which Christ worked, and in which St Paul also, although not so exclusively, worked after Him. This is the special sphere of Christianity, or at least of the Christianity of Christ.

In distinguishing these spheres I am well ay/are that they are not contradistinguished. The sphere of theology is not outside that of religion, and even the simplest Christian experiences presuppose certain postulates which may be matters of philosophical and theological controversy. The practical side of our spiritual life cannot be disjoined from the intellectual,

and I have no wish to disjoin them, and still less to depreciate the necessity and importance of theological science for fixing and defining the great ideas upon which every form of the Christian life rests. This would be entirely opposed to my own point of view, which especially recognises the value of rational inquiry into all theological ideas whatever.

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But admitting that the theological and religious spheres everywhere in the end run into one another, it is none the less true that the facts of the Christian life are infinitely simple in contrast with the questions of theology, and that there are hosts of difficulties in the latter sphere which in no degree touch the former. It is my present purpose to point this out, and to show in what respects the religion of Christ—the life of faith and hope and love which we are called upon to live in Him—is really apart from many intellectual and dogmatic difficulties with which it has been mixed up.

I. This is shown, first of all, in what I have already said of the comparative simplicity of the order of facts with which religion as set forth by Christ deals. Nothing can be simpler or more comprehensive than our Lord's teaching. He knew what was in man. He knew, moreover, what was in God towards man as a living Power of love, who had sent Him forth "to seek and save the lost;" and beyond these great facts, of a fallen life to be restored, and of a Higher Life of Divine love and sacrifice, willing and able to restore and purify this fallen life, our Lord seldom traversed. Unceasingly He proclaimed the reality of a spiritual life in man, however obscured by sin, and the reality of a Divine Life above him, which had never forsaken him nor left him to perish in his sin. He held forth the need of man, and the grace and sacrifice of God on behalf of man. And within this double order of spiritual facts His teaching may be said to circulate. He dealt, in other words, with the great ideas of God and the Soul, which can alone live in Him, however it may have sunk away from him. These were to Him the realities of all life and all religion. If there are those in our day to whom these ideas are mere assumptions—"dogmas of a tremendous kind," to assume which is to assume everything—at present we have nothing to do with their point of view. The questions of materialism, or what is called *agnosticism*, are outside of historical Christianity altogether. They were nothing to Christ, whose whole thought moved in a higher sphere of personal Love, embracing this lower world. The spiritual life was to him the life of reality and fact; and so it is to all who live in Him and know in Him. The Soul and God are, if you will, dogmas to science. They cannot well be anything else to a vision which is outside of them, and cannot from their very nature ever reach them. But within the religious sphere they are primary experiences, original and simple data from which all others come. And our present argument is, that Christ dealt almost exclusively with these broad and simple elements of religion, and that He believed the life of religion to rest within them. He spoke to men and women as having souls to be saved; and He spoke of Himself and of God as able and willing to save them. This was the "simplicity" that was in Him.

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Everywhere in the Gospels this simplicity is obvious. Our Lord came forth from no school. There is no traditional scheme of thought lying behind His words which must be mastered before these words are understood. But out of the fulness of His own spiritual nature He spoke to the spiritual natures around Him, broken, helpless, and worsted in the conflict with evil as He saw them. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” He said at the opening of His Galilean ministry, “because He hath anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised.”¹ These were the great realities that confronted Him in life; and His mission was to restore the divine powers of humanity thus everywhere impoverished, wounded, and enslaved. He healed the sick and cured the maimed by His simple word. He forgave sins. He spoke of good news to the miserable. All who had erred and gone out of the way—who had fallen under the burden, or been seduced by the temptations, of life—He invited to a recovered home of righteousness and peace. He welcomed the prodigal, rescued the Magdalene, took the thief with Him to Paradise. And all this He did by His simple word of grace: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”² “If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask Him?”³



This was the Christianity of Christ. This is the Gospel. It is the essence of all religion—that we feel ourselves in special need or distress, and that we own a Divine Power willing to give us what we need, and save us from our distress. Other questions outside of this primary range of spiritual experience may be important. They are not vital. What is the Soul? What is the Divine nature? What is the Church? In what way and by what means does Divine grace operate? What is the true meaning of Scripture, and the character of its inspiration and authority? Whence has man sprung, and what is the character of the future before him? These are all questions of the greatest interest; but they are questions of theology and not of religion. I do not say that they have no bearing upon religion. On the contrary, they have a significant bearing upon it. And your religion and my religion will be modified and coloured by the answers we give or find to them. We cannot separate the life and character of any man from his opinions. It is nevertheless true that our religious life, or the force of divine inspiration and peace within us, do not depend upon the answers we are able to give to such questions.



1 [Luke, iv. 18.](#)

2 [Matt. xi. 28.](#)

3 [Matt. vii. 11.](#)

It is the function of theology, as of other sciences, to ask questions, whether it can answer them or not. The task of the theologian is a most important one—whether or not it be, as has been lately said,⁴ “the noblest of all the tasks which it is given to the human mind to pursue.” None but a sciolist will depreciate such a task; and none but a sceptic will doubt the value of the conclusions which may be thus reached. But all this is quite consistent with our position. The welfare of the soul is not involved in such matters as I have mentioned. A man is not good or bad, spiritual or unspiritual, according to the view he takes of them. Men may differ widely regarding them, and not only be equally honest, but equally sharers of the mind of Christ. And this is peculiarly the case with many questions of the present day, such as the antiquity of man, the age and genesis of the earth, the origin and authority of the several books of Scripture. Not one of these questions, first of all, can be answered without an amount of special knowledge which few possess; and secondly, the answer to all of them must be sought in the line of pure scientific and literary inquiry. Mere authority, if we could find any such authority, would be of no avail to settle any of them. Modern theology must work them out by the fair weapons of knowledge and research, with no eye but an eye to the truth. Within this sphere there is no light but the dry light of knowledge.

But are our spiritual wants to wait the solution of such questions? Am I less a sinner, or less weary with the burden of my own weakness and folly? Is Christ less a Saviour? Is there less strength and peace in Him whatever be the answer given to such questions? Because I cannot be sure whether the Pentateuch was written, as long supposed, by Moses—or whether the fourth Gospel comes as it stands from the beloved apostle—am I less in need of the divine teaching which both these Scriptures contain? Surely not. That I am a spiritual being, and have spiritual needs craving to be satisfied, and that God is a spiritual Power above me, of whom Christ is the revelation, are facts which I may know or may not know, quite irrespective of such matters. The one class of facts are intellectual and literary. The other are spiritual, if they exist at all. If I ever know them, I can only know them through my own spiritual experience; but if I know them—if I realise myself as a sinner and in darkness, and Christ as my Saviour and the light of my life—I have within me all the genuine forces of religious strength and peace. I may not have all the faith of the Church. I may have many doubts, and may come far short of the catholic dogma. But faith is a progressive insight, and dogma is a variable factor. No sane man nowadays has the faith of the medievalist. No modern Christian can think in many respects as the Christians of the seventeenth century, or of the twelfth century, or of the fourth century. No primitive Christian would have fully understood Athanasius in his contest against the world. It was very easy at one time to chant the Athanasian hymn; it is easy for some still, but very hard for others. Are the latter worse or better Christians on this account? Think, brethren, of St Peter and St Andrew taken from

4 Mr Gladstone, ‘Contemporary Review,’ July 1875, p. 194.

their boats; of St Matthew as he sat at the receipt of custom; of the good Samaritan; the devout centurion; of curious Zaccheus; of the repentant prodigal; of St James, as he wrote that a man is “justified by works, and not by faith only;”⁵ of Apollos, “mighty in the Scriptures,” who “was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord,” and yet who only knew “the baptism of John;”⁶ of the disciples of Ephesus who had “not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost;”⁷ think of all the poor and simple ones who have gone to heaven with Christ in their hearts, “the hope of glory,” and yet who have never known with accuracy any Christian dogma whatever,—and you can hardly doubt how distinct are the spheres of religion and of theology, and how far better than all theological definitions is the “honest and good heart,” which, “having heard the Word, keeps it, and brings forth fruit with patience.”⁸

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II. But religion differs from theology, not only in the comparatively simple and universal order of the facts with which it deals, but also because the facts are so much more verifiable in the one case than in the other. They can so much more easily be found out to be true or not. It has been sought of late, in a well-known quarter, to bring all religion to this test—and the test is not an unfair one if legitimately applied. But it is not legitimate to test spiritual facts simply as we test natural facts; such facts, for example, as that fire burns, or that a stone thrown from the hand falls to the ground. The presumption of all supernatural religion is that there is a spiritual or supernatural sphere, as real and true as the natural sphere in which we continually live and move; and the facts which belong to this sphere must be tested within it. Morality and moral conditions may be so far verified from without. If we do wrong we shall finally find ourselves in the wrong; and that there is a “Power not ourselves which makes for righteousness” and which will not allow us to rest in wrong. This constantly verified experience of a kingdom of righteousness is a valuable basis of morality. But religion could not live or nourish itself within such limits. It must rest, not merely on certain phenomena of divine order, but on personal relations—such relations as are ever uppermost in the mind of St Paul, and are clearly before him in this passage. It craves not merely facts but beings. Moreover, the higher experience which reveals to us a Power of righteousness in the world, no less reveals to us the character of this Power as a living Will or Being. Shut out conscience as a true source of knowledge, and the very idea of righteousness will disappear

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5 [James, ii. 24.](#)

6 [Acts, xviii. 24, 25.](#)

7 [Acts, xix. 2.](#)

8 [Luke, viii. 15.](#)

with it—there will be nothing to fall back upon but the combinations of intelligence and such religion as may be got therefrom; admit conscience, and its verifying force transcends a mere order or impersonal power of righteousness. It places us in front of a living Spirit who not only governs us righteously and makes us feel our wrong-doing, but who is continually educating us and raising us to His own likeness of love and blessedness. We realise not merely that there is a law of good in the world, but a holy Will that loves good and hates evil, and against whom all our sins are offences in the sense of the Psalmist: “Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight.”



So much as this, we say, may be realised—this consciousness of sin on the one hand, and of a living Righteousness and Love far more powerful than our sins, and able to save us from them. These roots of religion are deeply planted in human nature. They answer to its highest experiences. The purest and noblest natures in whom all the impulses of a comprehensive humanity have been strongest, have felt and owned them. The missionary preacher, wherever he has gone—to the rude tribes of Africa, or the cultured representatives of an ancient civilisation—has appealed to them, and found a verifying response to his preaching. St Paul, whether he spoke to Jew, or Greek, or Roman, found the same spiritual voices echoing to his call—the same burden of sin lying on human hearts—the same cry from their depths, “What must I do to be saved?” It is not necessary to maintain that these elements of the Christian religion are verifiable in every experience. It is enough to say that there is that in the Gospel which addresses and touches all in whom spiritual thoughtfulness and life have not entirely died out. It lays hold of the common heart. It melts with a strange power the highest minds. Look over a vast audience; travel to distant lands; communicate with your fellow-creatures anywhere,—and you feel that you can reach them, and for the most part touch them, by the story of the Gospel—by the fact of a Father in heaven, and a Saviour sent from heaven, “that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.”⁹ Beneath all differences of condition, of intellect, of culture, there is a common soul which the Gospel reaches, and which nothing else in the same manner reaches.



Now, in contrast to all this, the contents of any special theology commend themselves to a comparatively few minds. And such hold as they have over these minds is for the most part traditionary and authoritative, not rational or intelligent. There can be no vital experience of theological definitions, and no verification of them, except in the few minds who have really examined them, and brought them into the light of their own intelligence. This must always be the work of a few—of what are called schools of thought, here and there. It is only the judgment of the learned or thoughtful theologian that is really of any value on a theological question. Others may assent or dissent; he alone knows the conditions of the question



⁹ John, iii. 15.

and its possible solution. Of all the absurdities that have come from the confusion of religion and theology, none is more absurd or more general than the idea that one opinion on a theological question—any more than on a question of natural science—is as good as another. The opinion of the ignorant, of the unthoughtful, of the undisciplined in Christian learning, is simply of no value whatever where the question involves—as it may be said every theological question involves—knowledge, thought, and scholarship. The mere necessity of such qualities for working the theological sphere, and turning it to any account, places it quite apart from the religious sphere. The one belongs to the common life of humanity, the other to the school of the prophets. The one is for you and for me, and for all human beings; the other is for the expert—the theologian—who has weighed difficulties and who understands them, if he has not solved them.



III. But again, religion differs from theology in the comparative uniformity of its results. The ideal of religion is almost everywhere the same—“To do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with God.”¹⁰ “Pure religion” (or pure religious service) “and undefiled, before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.”¹¹ Where is it not Always the true, even if not the prevalent type of religion, to be good and pure, and to approve the things that are excellent? “Whatever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things” and do them, says the apostle,¹² “and the God of peace shall be with you.” Christians differ like others in intellect, disposition, and temperament. They differ also so far, but never in the same degree, in spiritual condition and character. To be a Christian is in all cases to be saved from guilt, to be sustained by faith, to be cleansed by divine inspiration, to depart from iniquity. There may be, and must be, very varying degrees of faith, hope, and charity; but no Christian can be hard in heart, or impure in mind, or selfish in character. With much to make us humble in the history of the Christian Church, and many faults to deplore in the most conspicuous Christian men, the same types of divine excellences yet meet us everywhere as we look along the line of the Christian centuries—the heroism of a St Paul, an Ignatius, an Origen, an Athanasius, a Bernard, a Luther, a Calvin, a Chalmers, a Livingstone; the tender and devout affectionateness of a Mary, a Perpetua, a Monica; the enduring patience and self-denial of



¹⁰ [Micah, vi. 8.](#)

¹¹ [James, i. 27.](#)

¹² [Philippians, iv. 8, 9.](#)

an Elizabeth of Hungary, a Mrs Hutchinson, a Mrs Fry; the beautiful holiness of a St John, a St Francis, a Fénelon, a Herbert, a Leighton. Under the most various influences, and the most diverse types of doctrine, the same fruits of the Spirit constantly appear—“Love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.”¹³



All this sameness in diversity disappears when we turn to theology. The differences in this case are radical. They are not diversities of gifts with the same spirit, but fundamental antagonisms of thought. As some men are said to be born Platonists, and some Aristotelians, so some are born Augustinians, and some Pelagians or Arminians. These names have been strangely identified with true or false views of Christianity. What they really denote is diverse modes of Christian thinking, diverse tendencies of the Christian intellect, which repeat themselves by a law of nature. It is no more possible to make men think alike in theology than in anything else where the facts are complicated and the conclusions necessarily fallible. The history of theology is a history of “variations;” not indeed, as some have maintained, without an inner principle of advance, but with a constant repetition of oppositions underlying its necessary development. The same contrasts continually appear throughout its course, and seem never to wear themselves out. From the beginning there has always been the broader and the narrower type of thought—a St Paul and St John, as well as a St Peter and St James; the doctrine which leans to the works, and the doctrine which leans to grace; the milder and the severer interpretations of human nature and of the divine dealings with it—a Clement of Alexandria, an Origen, and a Chrysostom, as well as a Tertullian, an Augustine, and a Cyril of Alexandria; an Erasmus no less than a Luther, a Castalio as well as a Calvin, a Frederick Robertson as well as a John Newman. Look at these men and many others equally significant on the spiritual side as they look to God, or as they work for men, how much do they resemble one another! The same divine life stirs in them all. Who will undertake to settle which is the truer Christian? But look at them on the intellectual side and they are hopelessly disunited. They lead rival forces in the march of Christian thought—forces which may yet find a point of conciliation, and which may not be so widely opposed as they seem, but whose present attitude is one of obvious hostility. Men may meet in common worship and in common work, and find themselves at one. The same faith may breathe in their prayers, and the same love fire their hearts. But men who think can never be at one in their thoughts on the great subjects of the Christian revelation. They may own the same Lord, and recognise and reverence the same types of Christian character, but they will differ so soon as they begin to define their notions of the Divine, and draw conclusions from the researches either of ancient or of modern theology. Of all the false dreams that have ever haunted humanity, none is more false than the dream of catholic unity in this



13 [Galatians, v. 22, 23.](#)

sense. It vanishes in the very effort to grasp it, and the old fissures appear within the most carefully compacted structures of dogma.

Religion, therefore, is not to be confounded with theology, with schemes of Christian thought—nor, for that part of the matter, with schemes of Christian order. It is not to be found in any set of opinions or in any special ritual of worship. The difficulties of modern theology, the theories of modern science (when they are really scientific and do not go beyond ascertained facts and their laws), have little or nothing to do with religion. Let the age of the earth be what it may (we shall be very grateful to the British Association, or any other association, when it has settled for us how old the earth is, and how long man has been upon the face of it); let man spring in his physical system from some lower phase of life; let the Bible be resolved into its constituent sources by the power of modern analysis, and our views of it greatly change, as indeed they are rapidly changing,—all this does not change or destroy in one iota the spiritual life that throbs at the heart of humanity, and that witnesses to a Spiritual Life above. No science, truly so called, can ever touch this or destroy it, for the simple reason that its work is outside the spiritual or religious sphere altogether. Scientific presumption may suggest the delusiveness of this sphere, just as in former times religious presumption sought to restrain the inquiries of science. It may, when it becomes ribald with a fanaticism far worse than any fanaticism of religion, assail and ridicule the hopes which, amidst much weakness, have made men noble for more than eighteen Christian centuries. But science has no voice beyond its own province. The weakest and the simplest soul, strong in the consciousness of the Divine within and above it, may withstand its most powerful assaults. The shadows of doubt may cover you, and you may see no light. The difficulties of modern speculation may overwhelm you, and you may find no issue from them. But there may be that within you which these cannot touch. If you wait till you have solved all difficulties and cleared away the darkness, you may wait for ever. If your religion is made to depend upon such matters, then I hardly know what to say to you in a time like this. I cannot counsel you to shut your minds against any knowledge. I have no ready answers to your questions, no short and easy method with modern scepticism. Inquiry must have its course in theology as in everything else. It is fatal to intelligence to talk of an infallible Church, and of all free thought in reference to religion as deadly rationalism to be shunned. Not to be rational in religion as in everything else is simply to be foolish, and to throw yourself into the arms of the first authority that is able to hold you. In this as in other respects you must “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,” remembering that it is “God which worketh in you.” You must examine your own hearts; you must try yourselves whether there be in you the roots of the divine life. If you do not find sin in your hearts and Christ also there as the Saviour from sin, then you will find Him nowhere. But if you find Him there, Christ within you as He was within St Paul,—your righteousness, your life, your strength in weakness, your light in darkness, the “hope of glory “within you, as He was all

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this to the thoughtful and much-tried apostle,—then you will accept difficulties and doubts, and even the despairing darkness of some intellectual moments, when the very foundations seem to give way, as you accept other trials; and looking humbly for higher light, you will patiently wait for it, until the day dawn and the shadows flee away.



II.

THE DIVINE FATHERHOOD.

MATTHEW, vi. 9.—“Our Father which art in heaven.”

THE Lord's Prayer touches all hearts by its simplicity and comprehensiveness. Its familiar words come home to us with a living meaning in comparison with which all other words of prayer are cold. The more we use them, the more we feel what true, healthy, happy words of prayer they are—how deeply they reach all our spiritual necessities, and carry them forth in one harmonious utterance to the throne of grace. The prayer is also one of more manifold and hallowed associations than any other. It is the catholic prayer of Christendom—the few heaven-taught syllables which unite the hearts of the faithful everywhere, and amidst divisions of opinion and diversities of service, in parish church and cathedral choir, draw the hearts of God's children together, and inspire them with a common feeling of brotherhood as they say, “Our Father.” It is the dearly-remembered prayer of childhood, when the mind as yet only vaguely understands what the heart with its deeper instinct owns; when the human realities of father and mother interpret the solemn language, and make its awe pass into sweetness. And in after-years, when we may have learned many forms of prayer, and sought a varied expression for the varied wants of life, the old beautiful words come back to us, as far more full of meaning—more adequate in their very simplicity—than all we have otherwise learned; and we realise the truth so near to the centre of all religion, that the child's heart is the highest offering we can offer unto God—holy and acceptable in His sight.

The opening words of the prayer—“Our Father which art in heaven”—form the keynote from which all the rest starts, and to which they lead up. Let us try in a simple, unsystematic way to find the meaning of the words. This meaning in a certain sense is not far to seek.

The words of the text unfold three aspects of truth.

I. Fatherhood.

II. Common Fatherhood.

III. Perfect Fatherhood.

The idea of Father is the generic idea of the text. We are taught to pray to God as our *Father*. “After this manner ye shall pray,” our Lord taught His disciples. He had been speaking of the hypocritical prayers of the Pharisees in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets; and of the “vain repetitions” of the heathen, thinking “they shall be heard for



their much speaking.” He unfolds a higher conception of prayer as a living communion of spirit with spirit, of children with a Father. There was nothing absolutely new in this conception of Divine Fatherhood. No novelty is claimed for the conception. Even the heathen had spoken of the supreme Deity as “the Father of gods and men.” The idea of Fatherhood is supposed by some to be an essential part of the primitive Aryan conception of God. And in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, the idea frequently appears. “Doubtless,” says Isaiah,¹⁴ “Thou art our Father, though Abraham be ignorant of us, and Israel acknowledge us not. Thou, Lord, art our Father.” “Have we not all one Father?” is almost the closing utterance of Jewish prophecy.¹⁵ The idea of Divine Fatherhood, therefore, could not have presented any novelty; the very language used by our Lord may not have been heard for the first time. “Our Father which art in heaven,” may have been customary words of prayer to the Jews. We may have in them an utterance of religious thought common to the Jewish schools of the period. Some have pleased themselves with this idea. Some have even imagined that the Lord’s Prayer in its several details was a familiar Jewish prayer. Nor would it matter if it were. For here, as with other parts of our Lord’s teaching, it is not absolute novelty that is claimed for it. It is not that the same things or similar things were never said before by any teacher. But it is that no one has ever said them, as He did, “with authority.” No one ever transfigured them, as He did, with living light for the souls of men, or gave them such a creative transforming power over the wills of men. This is the Divine originality of our Lord, that He illuminated all truth, traditionary or otherwise, concerning our relations to the Divine, and imparted to it a force and life of meaning that it never had before. The idea of Divine Fatherhood, for example, became animated in all His speech and in all His acts into a spiritual principle, such as neither Gentile nor Jew had before felt it to be. In Christ, God was seen not merely to be the creative Source of the human race, “who hath made us, and not we ourselves;” He was not merely a Divine Power or Ruler; the Divine Personality—creative and authoritative—was not only brought forth in Him into a clearer and happier light: but more than this—it was made plain that God loves men, and cares for them with a genuine, moral affection. As a wise and good man regards his children—and in a far higher degree—God regards us. He not merely made us and rules us, but He truly loves us; and all His actions towards us—all His dealings with us—spring from love. Love is the essence of the Divine Fatherhood in Christ. It sums up all its other meanings. We may love wrongly: a human father may allow his affection to outrun his justice in dealing with his children. There is no security for the balance of moral qualities in us. But in God as revealed in Christ there is a perfect consistency of all moral attributes, and love is the expression of this con-

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14 [Chap. lxiii. 16.](#)

15 [Malachi, ii. 10.](#)

sistency. As St John says, “God is love.”¹⁶ The revelation of the Divine love in Christ is in a true sense the revelation of all else. All other truth can be conceived from this point of view. All leads back to this source.



And this it was which men had hitherto failed to see. They had been unable with a clear vision to reach this Source, and to perceive how all Divine action springs out of it. They had never before got to the true point, from which, and from which alone, all the other characteristics of the Divine fall into order. It had been from the beginning of the world, and even continues to be, one of the hardest things for men to believe that God really loves them. They lacked then, and they often lack still, faith to look beyond the appearances of nature and the issues of life—frequently so full of evil—to a Light in which there is no darkness, and to a Love of which there is no doubt. The fowls of the air and the lilies of the field of which our Lord speaks in this chapter might have taught them better, if they had been able to see all the Divine meaning in them. But, after all, evil lay near to many poor human creatures as a bitter burden too heavy to be borne; and the lilies of the field were far away, and the birds of the air sang not for them in the branches. The lack of faith to look beyond the darkness and evil of the world, and to read the Divine meaning of good in all nature and providence is, after all, for many men, perhaps for most men, something rather to be deplored than to be wondered at.



But this Divine truth has been brought near to us all in Christ. In Him the great Source of all being is perfectly good. He has a Father’s heart. He loves all creatures He has made. “This is the message which we have heard of Him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all”¹⁷ “He that loveth not, knoweth not God; for God is love”¹⁸ It is only in Christ that the character of God thus appears in perfect light and love, casting out all darkness and fear, shining with the lustre of a perfect spiritual harmony. There is a supreme Will above us. God is our Creator, our Ruler, our Judge. But primarily and essentially God is our Father in Christ. All His purposes with us—all His rule over us—all His judgment upon us,—goes forth out of His love, and because He desires our good. He afflicts not willingly. If He punishes, it is because He loves. This is the essential revelation of God in Christ—the central idea of the Divine from which all other ideas go forth. They are, if not subordinate to this—for *subordination* is not a proper aspect under which to regard the Divine attributes in relation to one another—yet executive of this, which is the supreme, essential, Divine fact revealed in Christ. And it requires only a slight knowledge of Heathenism and Judaism to know that neither Gentile nor Jew fully understood this fact before “the



16 1 John, iv. 8.

17 1 John, i. 5.

18 Ibid. iv. 8.

Dayspring from on high visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” When the humble Christian looks up to God, and says, “Father,” with some real insight and feeling, such as Christ Himself had of what He says, he has a vision of the Divine beyond all other visions. He sees God, if not “face to face,” yet heart to heart. The spirit of bondage—the sense of fear—dies out of him; the Spirit of adoption takes hold of him, and all his being goes forth in the cry, “Abba, Father.”

II. But God is not only a Father in Christ; He is our Father—the Father, that is to say, *not* of any class or sect or nation of men, but the Father of all: “He hath made of one blood all nations of men.”¹⁹ Not only so, but He exercises the same paternal relation to all who will only claim Him as a Father, and address Him in the language of our text, “Our Father which art in heaven.” This is the simple, undiluted meaning of the text, and we must not let ourselves be robbed of its blessing and comfort by any theological glosses whatever. The relation of Divine Fatherhood in Christ is universal, and may be claimed by all who will honestly accept the position of Christ, and use His language. This is the simple solution; and there is no other solution of all the difficulties in which the subject has been involved.

This community of Fatherhood in the Divine was for the first time made manifest in Christ, and realised in Him towards all men. In no respect, perhaps, does the religion of the Gospels more brightly vindicate its divine Original. All distinctions of humanity, diversities of race, of colour, of culture, disappear in Christ. In Him there is neither Greek nor Jew, barbarian nor Scythian, bond nor free. Brāhman and Sūdra, priest and beggar, master and slave, are all alike before God. The Supreme stands in the same relation to all. Jewish jealousy, Greek or Roman aristocracy, Egyptian or Indian caste, vanish before Him. There is no individual, no class of individuals, no family or race or sect, no tribe or nation—white, brown, or black—can claim any special relation to Him. All are the same in His sight—all may claim equal access to Him. This is now a mere commonplace of Christianity. But when it was for the first time fully disclosed in Christ, it was intolerable alike to Jew or Gentile. It required a special revelation to make it known to the Apostle St Peter; it was but faintly apprehended by the early Jewish Churches planted by St James and St Peter; it needed the great Apostle of the Gentiles to hold it steadily before the conscience, to fix it as a living germ of thought in the intelligence of mankind.

Not only so; but the Christian Church has been continually liable to fall below this great idea, and to let it become obscured. The equal community of all in the Divine is a truth which few Christian communities hold with consistency, or carry out to its clear consequences. There are widespread notions in all our Churches which could not last a day if

¹⁹ Acts, xvii. 26.

this truth were thoroughly apprehended and applied. And the cause of the misapprehension is not merely the pride of some—that love of exclusiveness so natural to the human heart, or desire of power so dear to it, which all organisations, ecclesiastical as well as civil, naturally breed; but it is also the servility of others. It is not only the Pharisee thinking himself nearer to God, and giving thanks that he is not as other men; but it is the publican overdoing his humility, and not so much as lifting his eyes to heaven, save through some one standing between him and heaven. Just as men have difficulty in believing at all in the Divine love, or that they have a Father in heaven who has no thoughts towards them but thoughts of good; so they have difficulty in believing that their share is as direct and immediate as that of any other in this love—in saying with all their hearts, “Our Father.” They have difficulty in recognising that they are as near to God, and as dear to God, as any priest is or can be; that they are as close to Divine blessing, and have an equal share in it with any minister. They shrink from the fulness of Divine privilege which they have in Christ. They are content to stand afar off, if only some transmitted ray of the heavenly favour may reach them—some broken shower of the Divine blessing may fall on them. This spirit of religious servility lies deep in human nature; and Christian Churches have too often fostered it and used it, instead of trying to kill it, and to educate the popular religious conscience into a full perception of spiritual life and freedom. It is out of this servile spirit—this “spirit of bondage again to fear,” as the Apostle terms it²⁰—and not merely from pride and a perverted love of power, that ideas of human priesthood come, and tendencies so constantly reappear towards a mediatorial religion incarnated in human forms and symbols. Continually men are sinking below the full conception of the Divine love; and as they do so, the priest comes into the foreground and offers to mediate between them and a God whom they have ceased to comprehend. Priestcraft grows as true religion dies. When men make much of priests, they cease to believe in God. This is the essential evil of ceremonial and priestly religion. It implies doubt of the equal love of God towards all men—of His equal care and concern for all—of the direct interest which all have in the Divine Fatherhood—the immediate share which all have in the Divine love.

The idea of a Priesthood is a valuable and a true idea, in so far as it represents the reality of a spiritual order, and the necessity of certain men being devoted to educate other men in the perception of this order and in duty towards it in so far, in short, as it shadows forth and brings home to us the infinite help that there is in God for all human creatures. In the struggles and aspirations of life, and especially of the religious life, we instinctively cling to others who seem wise and good, and able to help us in our upward way. There is a wonderful faith in the human heart, with all its waywardness—faith in a Divine guidance, which others can interpret for us better than we ourselves. This is the moral meaning of a priesthood,

20 [Romans, viii. 15.](#)

and it is a true meaning. The idea of such help is deeply planted in the religious soul. We would say nothing to weaken it where it is combined with intelligence and sense. But so soon as the idea of moral help becomes translated into ceremonial power or privilege, it passes into falsehood. The priest then becomes not merely the representative of a spiritual order, but the dispenser of spiritual good. By some outward act done to him he is supposed to stand nearer to God than others—he claims to stand nearer to Him, and to hold the blessings of God in his hand, to give according to his own choice and discrimination. Of all this there is not a trace in the Gospels. God is there equally near to all. He is equally the Father of all who will come to Him as children and claim His Fatherly affection. And, on the other hand, all men are alike before Him—Pharisee and Sadducee, priest or scribe, have in themselves no spiritual advantage or divine right. If any are disposed to say, “We are the children; others are outside of the divine circle within which we dwell,”—Christ says, in reply, that He is able to raise up children unto Abraham from the very stones of the street.²¹ He everywhere passes by external distinctions, and brings into prominent relief those essential characteristics of human nature which bring men together, and make them common or alike before God—those spiritual qualities which, in comparison with mere intellectual or social qualities, unite them on the same level. Dismissing from view all the accidents of which men make so much—distinctions of social or intellectual grade, of education or ability or culture—He fixes attention on the broad moral features in which we are all comparatively one—sinners alike needing salvation, alike capable of salvation. In His unerring sight, no one stands before another; in His unerring, comprehending love, no one receives to the default of another. He is the Father of all. “Of a truth God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him.”²²

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III. But God is not only “Our Father;” He is “Our Father which art in heaven.” This conveys to us the idea of perfect Fatherhood; and this idea is an important complement of those we have already considered. The effect of our previous exposition is to bring the Divine very near to man. God is a Father. He is our Father. The Supreme Being is represented under the nearness and dearness of a familiar human relationship. We approach Him, as children a father. We are in the presence of One who loves us, who cares for us, who desires only our good. All this is fitted, if anything can be fitted, to touch within us the instincts of spiritual affection, and awaken in our hearts that love of God which ought to be the guide of our lives. But mistake is apt to arise out of this very familiarity with the Divine which we are taught to cherish in Christ. We are apt to think of God as altogether such an one as ourselves. His heart of love so near to us, so open to us, may be supposed to be a heart like our own

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21 [Matt iii. 9; John, viii. 39.](#)

22 [Acts, x. 34, 35.](#)

in its weakness as well as in its tenderness—subject to influence as well as open to entreaty. We may carry up, in short, the idea of human frailty, as well as of human affection, to the Supreme. And it is needless to say that this has been universally done in all human religions. An element of human passion is found clinging to every natural imagination of Deity. The Divine is pictured as subject to animal instincts and gratified by animal sacrifices. The most cruel and dreadful practices have sprung out of this picture of a Divine being as not only to be entreated of men, but propitiated by them—moved by some ceremony which they performed or some victim which they offered. You have only to realise the picture to see how irreligious it is. A God of such a nature could be no God. A being pleased with sacrifices and burnt-offerings, whose disposition towards men was affected by the slaying of a victim, and the sprinkling of its blood upon an altar, is hardly a moral being at all. The taint of weakness in its grossest form clings to such a notion of Deity. You must get quite out of the region of such notions before you attain to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ—of a Father who is at the same time “Our Father which art in heaven.” In Christ the Supreme is seen to be a perfect Moral Will, whose sacrifices are the reasonable services of the creatures He has made.

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The essence of the Divine Fatherhood in Christ, as we have said, is love, but love which is wholly without weakness; not any mere tenderness, or pitifulness, or affectionateness, but a perfectly good Will, at once just and loving, righteous and tender, holy and gracious. It is only in our imperfect perceptions that these moral attributes are separable. Essentially in the supreme Will, they are inseparable. A love which failed in justice would be no true love, morally speaking. A tenderness which lacked righteousness would become mere good-nature, and issue in evils probably worse than the most rigorous equity. A grace which was without holiness would be no blessing. To break up or separate these moral conceptions in God is a fertile root of false religion, and, we may add, of false theology.

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The invocation of the Lord’s Prayer in its full form, unspeakably tender as it is, blends inseparably all these moral conceptions. It brings God into the closest personal relation to us, and yet it raises Him infinitely above us. It reveals a love near to us, and which we can fully comprehend, and yet a love transcending while it embraces us. No closeness of relationship with God brings Him down to our level. He remains far above us. “Our Father,” indeed, but “Our Father which art in heaven”—the Head not merely of the lower world of visible beings in which we live, and move, and make our daily bread—but the Head as well of a higher world or order of being. The expression “which art in heaven” must mean this at least. It must mean that there is a transcending sphere in which God dwells. Such an idea of a higher world—a world of spirit, and not merely of matter—a supernatural order exceeding yet embracing the natural order, seems necessarily implied in religious thought. It is the teaching more or less of all spiritual philosophy that such a world is the true world of be-

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ing—of substance and reality—of which the visible material world is only the transitory form or expression. Nature is a veil or screen hiding God in His essence from us, while revealing Him in His operations. We must pierce the veil of sense, and get behind the screen, of which our outward lives themselves are a part, before we reach the higher world, where God is the light which no man can approach unto.

This conception of a higher life than the present—a supernatural life in which all the elements of good that we know here shall be perfected, and all the elements of evil expelled—seems the essential foundation of religious aspiration—of all lifting of the soul towards the Divine. Apart from such a conception, prayer seems a mockery, worship a delusion. Yet we have lived to see an attempt to build religion upon a mere basis of Nature—on the denial that there is a higher world at all, and that man himself in his varied activities is the highest form of being, above which there is nothing, or nothing at least which we can ever know. Unless all the past expressions of the religious instinct are a delusion, this must be a delusion. Not in himself, but above himself—in a higher, holier, and perfect Being—has man in his best moments hitherto sought the power of religious consolation and the bond of his spiritual life. It has been the awe of such a Being which has most moved man to religious thoughtfulness, and inspired him with the dread of sin. He has never been able to sustain his higher aspirations, or to purify his inner life, by Nature. If there is nothing beyond himself to which he can lift his eyes, he will not lift them at all. The only object of religion which can at once engage his intelligence and affection is a Father in heaven. If we worship, we must worship a Glory that is above us. If our hearts move in prayer, they must move towards another Heart that liveth for ever, in which there is all the love, and far more than the love, that is in us, and yet in which there is none of the weakness which mingles with love in us. If we bow in adoration, we must bow before a Personal Presence—a throne at once of mercy and of judgment, of righteousness and of grace—a Will higher than our own, whither our wills, feeble and wavering, yet amidst all these fluctuations pointing beyond earth and flesh, may ascend. Such a Will it is, such a Presence, such a Heart, such an enthroned Personality, that is revealed to us in Christ: a Father, yet a Judge; a Saviour, yet a Lord; near to us, yet infinitely transcending us; “having respect unto the lowly,”²³ yet “the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy.”²⁴ Towards such a Presence and Person should we worship when we pray “after this manner”—“Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy Name.”

23 [Psalm cxxxviii. 6.](#)

24 [Isaiah, lvii. 15.](#)

In conclusion, let us bear in mind that we cannot claim God as our Father unless we are willing to be His sons. His will towards us changes not. His name remains for ever the same. But we cannot know His will, we cannot claim His name, if we reject His love. To them who reject His love, His will is no longer one of love, but of wrath; His name is no longer a name of endearment, but of terror. It is of the nature of the Divine Love that it should not spare the impenitent and unbelieving, the contemptuously selfish and guilty, who say in their hearts, "Who is the Lord that He should reign over us?" It belongs to the idea of Divine Fatherhood that it should cast from its embrace those who disown its solicitations; who turn away from its light and love the darkness, because their deeds are evil. The more "Our Father in heaven" loves us, the more fearful it is for us by wilful sin to reject His love—the more must we suffer if we do so. Brethren, it is the very love of God which, despised, makes the wrath of God. It is the very Fatherliness of the Divine which makes it a "consuming fire" against all unrighteousness and ungodliness of men.



III.

THE PEACE OF CHRIST.

“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you.”—[JOHN, xiv. 27.](#)

HERE is a singular beauty and depth of meaning in these words. Every spiritual mind owns this directly, whatever difficulty it may have in analysing and entering into all the meaning. Like many words of St John, they address more directly the spiritual instinct than the spiritual intelligence. We *feel* them more than we can explain them. They meet our silent aspirations. They give an answer to our deepest longings.

Christ came to give peace on earth. The promise of the Advent was, “Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth Peace.” The promise might seem to have failed of its fulfilment. Men strive for the mastery as of old, and amidst the movements of human ambition, and the contradictions of human opinion, peace seems as far off as ever. This is true, and yet the text is also true. The peace which our Lord came to give—which He left with His own when He went away—which He gives now—not as the world giveth—to all that ask it, is not peace as men often mean by the word. It is not external quiet, or ease, mere composure or comfort such as men desire and crave after. The Gospel is nowhere said to be a Gospel of earthly comfort. The happiness which Christ promised is not happiness in the sense of exemption from trouble, or danger, or sorrow. On the contrary, the Lord assured His followers that in the world they would have tribulation. Even as He had been tried and suffered, so would they. The servant was to be as his Lord, the disciple as his Master—in this respect and in others. Yet they were assured of peace. The “weary and heavy laden”—those on whom the burden of care or sorrow might fall most heavily—were to have “rest” unto their souls. Their peace was to work through patience and suffering. It was not only to be compatible with conflict and danger and toil, but in and through these it was to come; and while all things were shaken around them, and “without were fightings, within were fears,”²⁵ “the peace of God, which passeth all understanding” was to “keep their hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”²⁶

What we think of most naturally in connection with such a subject is our Lord’s own life—so majestic in its repose—so grand in its peacefulness—with such a pervading depth of calm in it, and yet so troubled outwardly. And here no doubt is the key to the meaning. Our Lord’s own life—His spiritual manifestation in life and death—is the best interpreter

25 [2 Cor. vii. 5.](#)

26 [Philip. iv. 7.](#)

of all His profoundest sayings. For the Christian lives only in Christ. He has no life apart from Him. All Christian thought is hid in Him. All Christian experience grows out of Him.

According to the terms of the text, our Lord makes first an explicit promise of peace as His gift to His disciples; and then sets in contrast with His own gift the gifts of the world. "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: *not* as the world giveth, give I unto you." We will best bring out the meaning of the divine gift by placing in front the gifts with which it is contrasted.

I. Christ frequently draws in sharp and decisive terms the contrast betwixt Himself and the world. We "cannot serve," He tells us, "God and mammon."²⁷ "If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him."²⁸ It is nowhere said that the world is worthless, or that mammon is unattractive. On the contrary, the very sharpness of the antagonism drawn by Christ implies that what is called the world has powerful attractions for man. It has fair and promising gifts to offer him; otherwise there need have been no such decisive contrast drawn betwixt Himself and it, and no such solemn warning that we cannot serve both Him and it.

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Now, what are the gifts of the world? What is meant by the world, and the attractions by which it lures man? There can be no doubt of the general meaning. The world is the outside life of man. Its gifts are possessions, dear to his senses, his intellect, and even his heart. It rewards with its own. If we serve it, it will not disown us. To the ambitious man, who knows how to use skilfully the instruments of ambition, it gives influence and authority. To the self-indulgent man, it gives the means of indulgence. It tempts the sight with seeing, and the ear with hearing. It ministers enjoyment in a thousand forms. To the industrious, it yields the fruit of industry; for the careful, it heaps up riches; for the clever and adventurous, it presents endless resources of satisfaction and scope of enterprise.

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It is needless to speak lightly of such things. They have naturally a great attraction for all. To get on in the world and receive of its best gifts, is a legitimate aim. It is an incentive to youthful aspiration and middle-aged ambition. It is the inspiration of some of the most definite and valuable forms of social virtue and domestic happiness. It is the spur of social progress—the spring of industry and civilisation. Therefore there is and can be nothing wrong in so far using the world. There is nothing to be disparaged in the things which the world gives, if they are given for honest work. Our Lord nowhere hints that we are not to touch its gifts, but rather to condemn and cast them from us. But what He everywhere implies is, that these gifts at the best are not enough for us. They minister enjoyment—they are

27 [Matt. vi. 24.](#)

28 [1 John, ii. 15.](#)

means of usefulness; but there is that in man which they cannot reach. It is, in short, the abuse and not the use of the world which our Lord reprobates. It is when the heart so loves the world that it has no room for other love; when the mind so fills itself with the things of sense, or intellect, or imagination, or passion, as to exclude the sense of higher, Divine things, that judgment is passed upon it, and it is clearly true that whosoever “loveth the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”

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It will be always difficult to persuade the young that the world cannot satisfy them—that its gifts, however fair and attractive, are, if not delusive, yet inadequate to the higher wants of the human soul. They seem so far from the fulness that the world can give them. They stand at such a distance from its giddy heights of ambition, of pride, of pleasure, that they believe, or often do so, that they would be happy if only they once reached those heights, and could look back from them with a proud complacency on all that they had gained. Yet if there is anything more frequently verified by experience than another, it is the fact that the very highest triumphs of the world do not give happiness. And always the more is this the case where the nature that has sought such happiness is a true and noble nature. The more profound the springs of life, the more difficult are they to reach. The more real the heart, the less easily can it be filled. There are depths in almost every human being that no merely outward gift can reach. The success after which we strive fails to gratify. The joys which have spurred us on perish in the using. The brightest of them wear out, and there is no spring of renewal in them. The glittering height that tempted from afar is found when reached to be a barren level. The knowledge which was dear in the prospect is fruitless in the possession. The glory of the gift vanishes with its realisation. The “light that never was on sea or land,” and has drawn the youthful spirit from afar, fades into the common day. The very capacity of enjoyment decays, and is ready to vanish away. The eye is no longer satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. The intellect is no longer tempted by inquiry; and out of the very pride of aspiration comes the weakness of exhaustion, or the despair of truth.

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Such are the world’s gifts at the best. Taking the highest view, they fail because they leave the spiritual side of our nature untouched. They fail, moreover, in themselves, because, like all outward realities, however real, they do not last. The life goes out of them. It withers like the grass, “and the flower thereof falleth, and the grace of the fashion of it perisheth.”

II. Now the gift of Christ is the opposite of all this.

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(1.) It is primarily inward, while the gifts of the world are outward. Our Lord knew what was in man. He was Himself a man, profoundly conscious of all the higher qualities and activities of our being. He saw that the root of human misery was the attempt of man to satisfy himself with this world, or with things merely external. This it was that made Him

lay His ban upon the world as His own special antagonist. It was not the outside in itself that He condemned; nothing external, in so far as it was merely external or natural, did He for a moment interdict—for that would have been to interdict His own work. But He denounced the outward when it absorbed the inward and took its place. The world in His view was the displacement of the spiritual by the material—not matter itself, or any form of external advantage, glory, or beauty, but the heart materialised, the mere good of earth in room of the higher good of the Spirit. No happiness, He assured man, could be reached in this way. The nature of man demands spiritual as well as natural food. It cannot live by bread alone. It cannot quench immortal longings by mere draughts of sensual or even intellectual gratification. These are good to give you what they have, but you need more than they have; and God Himself can alone give you all you need. And I who am the Revelation of the Father—of His grace and truth—can alone satisfy the wants of your souls. “Come unto me, and I will give you rest.”²⁹ “Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.”³⁰

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There is something in the very language of the text that suggests the immediate relation of the soul to God, and the deep inwardness of the gift which it promises. Peace is an inward resting. A mind at peace is a mind not only calm and unruffled in its temporary mood, but profoundly composed in its unseen depths. There is not merely quiet upon the surface, but a deep-seated rest of the inner life—

“It is not quiet, it is not ease,
But something deeper far than these.”

57

The expression itself betrays something of this deeper meaning even in its ordinary application—as when we look abroad upon the sea, or the silent hills as they sleep in the tranquil folds of the evening light, and say, How peaceful they are! we mean not merely that the wind is down or the air is still, but that Nature rests in her inner central depths.

It is such an inward reality—quiet *within* the soul—a restful life beneath all other life—that Christ gives to them that are His. It is something deeper than sense, or intellect, or passion, or all the shows of that life which we can see, or hear, or touch. It is no mere harmony of natural powers—although it is also this; but it is a positive spiritual endowment—a *gift* from the Divine—something which at once settles and stays the spirit on a foundation that cannot be moved, though the earth be removed, and the waters roar and

29 [Matt. xi. 28.](#)

30 [John, iv. 13, 14.](#)

be troubled. It is the consciousness of God Himself as our loving Father, and of the strength of the Divine Will which we have chosen against all human selfishness and sin.

Christ did not concern Himself with man's outward life. He did not try to change the direction of His external activities, although some have conceived His mission after this manner. He nowhere says to His disciples, "You are to come out of the world." At the close of this very discourse His prayer for them is, not that they should be taken out of the world, but that they should be kept from the evil that is in it.³¹ He leaves alone man's outward career; and through the power of His mighty sympathy—of His living affinity with all his true wants—He lays hold of man's inner life. Here was the root of good or evil—of happiness or misery. Here was the spring which, as it was sweet or bitter, imparted health or disease, life or death, to all the forces of human activity. And our Lord applied the remedy here. He took of His own and gave it unto man. He seized the root of his personal life and planted it in God. And this is to do everything for man—to satisfy his most restless craving, as well as give meaning to his highest aspirations—to reduce all the discords of his life to a unity; so that whatever may befall him, "the peace of God, which passeth all understanding," shall keep his mind and heart through Jesus Christ. From within outwards the change is wrought. Settled in the Divine—at one with God—there goes forth from this sure stay—this bright confidence—a silent yet potent influence bringing every thought and feeling and act into obedience to Him, gently yet strongly binding all into that unity of the spirit which is the bond of peace.

(2.) But further, the text enables us yet more fully to understand the peace of which it speaks. "Peace I leave with you, *my* peace I give unto you." The peace which Christ gives is *His own*. Can we say more distinctly what this was? whence it was? The peace of Christ was the fulness of the Divine in Him. It came forth from the perfect unity of the Father and Himself. It was the expression of this unity—the natural reflection of His entire self-surrender to the Father's will. His peace was unbroken because His obedience was unmarred. It was His meat to do the will of Him that sent Him, and finish His work. His life on earth was the perfect life of God—the incarnation of the Divine. He dwelt in the radiant fulness of the Divine Presence, daily His delight rejoicing before Him; and so resting with undimmed trust in the Divine, He could have no fear. No shadow of unrest could touch Him. None ever did touch Him, save at the last, when the darkness of the world's sin so covered Him that He cried out in agony. This momentary interruption of our Lord's peace shows more clearly than all else its character and depth. For alarm could only reach Him through the inner hiding of that Presence which had never before forsaken Him. Unrest only came when the darkened burden of His sin-bearing upon the cross obscured the light of that ineffable

31 [John, xvii. 15.](#)

love in which He had hitherto dwelt, and left Him for the time as it were alone—without God.

The source of Christ's peace, then, was union with God. It was the enjoyment of His nearness to God, and the fulness with which he rested in the Divine love. The peace which He gives is the same which He enjoyed. Our peace, like His, can alone come from the living unity of our will with the Divine Will; we must be one with the Father, as He is. This unity was in Him originally as the Father's eternal Son; it is in us derivatively through the Son. "The glory which Thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and Thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that Thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as Thou hast loved me."³²

In Christ we are made one with God, "who hath reconciled us to Himself."³³ "Now, in Christ Jesus, ye who sometimes were afar off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition." And thus reconciled to our heavenly Father, we are made partakers of His own nature—reinvested with the fulness of His own image—consecrated by His own Spirit. Christ is created within us unto all good works. The old selfish nature is destroyed. The new life of self-sacrifice, purity, and love, lives and grows in us. The same nearness to God—or something of this same nearness—the same enjoyment in the Divine Presence and in divine work—the "mind that was in Christ" become ours in Him. "We apprehend Him of whom also we are apprehended." We enter into His life; we are "joint heirs in His Sonship." And as this higher life grows strong, peace waxes more full. Perfect love casteth out fear—the fear of the guilt that we own, of the evil we have done, of the death that we deserve. All sense of wrong, and the misery that comes from it, fall gradually away. And while the gifts of the world lose their attraction, and the sense of all lesser enjoyment grows feebler by experience, this increases in the very use of it. The relish of the Divine is sweeter the larger it is tasted. The joy of God is deeper the longer it is known. The peace that passeth all understanding is yet the more understood the more it is cherished.

(3.) This peace, we may further say, touches every aspect of our spiritual being. From within it radiates all around. It illumines the reason, and quiets the conscience while it sustains the heart. There is light in it as well as rest. It penetrates the intellect, and suffuses it with its own strength. It gives stability amidst the many fluctuations of our mental mood. It stays the mind as in a stronghold, when assailed by the arms of doubt. Yet, from its nature, it comes to us mainly in the form of trust. It is relief from a burden more than a solution of difficulties. It is the haven of the spirit returning to God from weary and vain voyaging after

32 [John, xvii. 22, 23.](#)

33 [2 Cor. v. 18. Eph. ii. 13, 14.](#)

other good, more than satisfaction of the intellect seeking after Truth. It is quiet fruition rather than clear vision. It is affection rather than knowledge. It is the soul cleaving unto God with the strong pinions of faith and hope, amidst darkness and storm still holding on, rather than the soul dwelling in clearness and seeing face to face. It is strength in Another, and not in ourselves. And what is this to say but that it is religion and not science? It is the grasp of the absolute amidst the accidental, of the Immutable amidst the mutable. It is the consciousness of an abiding Love, to whose bosom we may ever fly when all else threatens us—when we are broken and wounded by the way, and our hearts are beginning to fail us for fear. It is, in short, nearness to God—the blessed assurance which God Himself can alone give that *He is there*, whatever our cold doubts may say—that the everlasting arms are around us, even when we do not feel their quiet and strong embrace.



In God such peace is ours through Jesus Christ. In God alone. Elsewhere we may get many things, but we shall not get this. The world may give us its choicest gifts; but unless we sink utterly away from God, we shall need more than these. Religion, if it be a reality at all, is the greatest reality. The peace of God and of Christ, if it be not a devout illusion, is a fact which should be at the root of all our life. It can never be something which we only need at last, when we come to die, and having exhausted the gifts of the natural life we are warned to prepare for another. No; it must be ours now if we would enjoy it then. It must be the pith of our common labour, and the inspiration of our daily happiness, if we should have its joy at last, and finally enter into its fulness in the presence of God—at whose right hand there are pleasures for evermore.



“Now the Lord of Peace Himself give you peace always by all means. The Lord be with you all.” Amen.



IV.

LAW AND LIFE.

Galatians, vi. 7.—“*Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.*”

THERE is a great order of justice in all lives—an underplan of equity upon which life as a whole is built up—judgment being laid to the line and righteousness to the plummet.³⁴ The traces of this divine measurement are not always discernible. There are many confusions, and what may seem great injustice, in individual cases. There are lives which seem never to have fair-play. Accidents of birth, or of physical or mental organisation, have disordered them from the first, and left them without their share of moral opportunity. I know of no greater mystery in nature than such lives, which have had no chance of good, and scarcely any capacity for it. But this, like all other mysteries, must be left to God. He will deal fairly in the end, we may be sure, with such lives, and not judge them above what they are able to bear. They are safe in God’s love, if any are. His pity reaches to the depth of all human frailty. But taking moral life as a whole, it is plainly dealt with on a plan of rigorous equity. Opportunity and capacity are given, and service and fruit are demanded in return. A great law of righteousness is seen working everywhere, and bringing forth results after its kind—of good unto good, and evil unto evil—notwithstanding all appearances to the contrary.

For the present, it is this element of law in life which is our subject. It is not well for the Christian mind to dwell exclusively upon the mere goodness or clemency of God, and still less to make such goodness any excuse for the poor, weak, and vacillating endeavours which we sometimes make to do what is right in His sight. The apostle never makes such allowance for himself or others; and in the text, he has laid down, in a figure indeed, but in a figure so intelligible that the plainest mind may follow it, the law of moral order—of action and reaction—which never fails in human life. “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” His argument in the passage is, that every man must answer for himself and his own doings to God. The shadow of responsibility is never away from us—not even in the clearest sunshine of the Divine love. The fact that every thing we do bears its natural consequence is not at all touched by the higher evangelical fact, so often elsewhere expressed by him, that it is “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us.”³⁵ Give all force to this higher fact. If it were not for the Divine mercy, we should not only be, but remain, miserable sinners, “without God

³⁴ *Isaiah, xxviii. 17.*

³⁵ *Titus, iii. 5.*

and without hope in the world.” But the other fact is not the less true—not the less universal; and for the present we will do well to follow his line of thought in this respect.

The spiritual or evangelical tone of mind is apt at times to overlook the sterner side of human life. It delights itself with the great possibilities of Divine grace, and the immense changes from evil to good which are not beyond its scope. But the Divine order is nevertheless a fact, and it is highly important that we should not deceive ourselves regarding it. Should we deceive ourselves, God is not mocked. His laws are not altered by our self-deception. They work out their issues with undeviating certainty. Every man is only what he is really before God, and his life is all along only what he makes it, with or without God’s grace and help in doing so—“for every man shall bear his own burden.”³⁶ No one can share with another the moral realities of his life, whatever these are. Our cares and sorrows—such accidents of trouble as come to us from without, and at times weigh heavily upon us—others may share and help us to bear.³⁷ But we must bear alone the results of our own conduct. We must reap the harvest which we have sown, and eat the fruit of our own doing. The issues of our free will are our own and no other’s; and we need never try to shift this burden, if it prove a burden, upon another. We must stand before God carrying the freight of our own deeds, and receive according to these deeds done in the body, whether they be good or evil.

The language of the text plainly looks at this sterner side of human life as something which needs emphasis. We are apt to overlook or underestimate it; and therefore the apostle takes care that it shall be brought clearly into sight, and that we shall be under no mistake about it. The harvest is always after its kind. “He that soweth to his flesh, shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit, shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.”³⁸ “Let every man prove his own work.”³⁹ The law tells with equal force on both sides. That which is sown to the Spirit is spiritual, and the harvest thereof is everlasting life. The good seed brings forth good fruit. The lives of the good teem with an ever-accumulating wealth of goodness, and the golden grain hangs more heavily in the late autumn of their years. But this side of the divine law needs not so much to be enforced as the darker side. Men readily believe that if they do well, God will deal well with them. Or if there is a strange spirit of distrust sometimes on this score—as with the man who hid his talent in the parable—yet such a temper is less frequent than the dearth of spiritual insight altogether. It is far more

36 [Galatians, vi. 5.](#)

37 [Ibid. vi. 2:](#) “Bear ye one another’s burdens.” The apostle indicates the distinction of the two cases by a distinctive expression. His expression in verse 2 is βάρν; in the [5th verse](#) φορτίον.

38 [Galatians, vi. 8.](#)

39 [Ibid, vi. 4.](#)

common for men to think of God as likely to overlook sin than to fail in rewarding good. The latter state of mind may not be uncommon amongst serious people. From the very depth of devout awe there springs sometimes a strange distrust of God as a hard taskmaster, reaping where He has not sown, and gathering where He has not strawed. But even this worst type of a perverted Calvinism is better—as it is certainly less frequent—upon the whole, than spiritual deadness, or that natural Epicureanism which takes its chance of good or evil, and thinks that the Divine order is not so unbending, after all—that life is not so grave as religion would make it, or moral punishment so sure as God threatens.

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In our time there is but little fear that men will sink into a superstitious dread of God. The spirit of awe is not a prevailing spirit in our modern life and literature. Men and women alike are sufficiently alive to their rights; and the talent, instead of being hid away in a napkin, in fear of what the Lord will say, is used in the face of all, with a free audacity which plainly means that we know what we are doing, and that we are not afraid of God's reckoning with us in the end as to the use of our gifts and opportunities. The modern spirit, if it has not lost the old reverence for God—for there may be a true reverence beneath much freedom—has yet ceased to be afraid of Him. It looks to Him with a sure and bright confidence that honest service of every kind will not fail of its reward. It is only too self-confident; and its dangers are all on the side of self-confidence. Is there, after all, a Divine order? it is apt to say. Is wrongdoing, after all, of so much consequence? Is it in the largest sense wrongdoing to yield free indulgence to my pleasure-loving instincts—to gratify, in such way as appears to me good, my natural desires and appetites? Why should I not do as I please and live as I will? This is the tendency of modern life; and it is against this tendency that the text, and many texts, warn us.

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It is very natural for men in high, health and fulness of strength to think that they may do as they please, and give free rein to the power of natural passion or the gratification of worldly instinct. But let them not be deceived. There is a Divine order, although men may ignore it or fail to recognise it; and no misconception of theirs can alter or reverse it. Against this order all life which is not *right* must break and go to ruin. If we yield ourselves to fleshly indulgence, we shall reap in the end corruption; and nothing can save us from it. The laws of health are invariable. Let us use our bodies well—restrain and discipline and refine them—and they will be well. Let us use them ill, and make them the instruments of unlawful excess, and it will be ill with them. This may not appear all at once. The laws of temperance and purity may be broken for a time, or may seem to be broken with impunity: and the strong man may rise again and again with what looks like unbroken health from the disgrace of self-indulgence. But his heart deceives him in the moment of his strength, and the day of retribution is travelling swiftly onwards in the very morning of his pleasures. It may be said without any exaggeration that not a single sensual excess is ever practised with impunity.

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It leaves some weakness of body or foulness of mind behind it—probably both. The divine rules of temperance and purity bind us, body and soul, in their golden links; and let us break off any of these links, or rudely dislocate them, and the order of health is not merely disturbed, but the life for whose protection it was given is deeply injured. And let excess of any kind be continued, and the golden security becomes an iron bondage. The will which has ceased to restrain itself within the Divine order gradually loses all due control, and finds its only pleasure, which is at the same time its greatest misery, in self-abandonment.

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The world is full of lives thus broken and flawed in a vain struggle with the Divine order which rules them and will not let them go free. From bad they have gone to worse, ever downward in the course of self-indulgence, till they can only look upward from an abyss of shame to an irrecoverable ideal. At first it seemed a little thing to yield. Why should they not taste the pleasures which so many had tasted before them, and from which apparently they had reaped no harm? But the harm never fails if the evil is really done. It works somehow—invisibly, if not visibly. And the vengeance which may tarry in one case comes swiftly in another. The temptations which some have struggled with and mastered, prove demons of power over others, and leave them no rest. And so the love of indulgence grows more irresistible, and the path of what was thought pleasure becomes the path of misery and disgrace. We say with pity, What a wreck such a man has made of his life! And there is no wreck so pathetic, if we clearly think of it. But the sequel is, after all, only as the beginning; and the grain as the seed which was cast into the ground. There has been a sure process of sowing, growth, and maturity; and the miserable spectacle of moral baseness is as real a development as any natural growth. The first choice of evil seemed of little moment—the excess of passion seemed only the excess of youthful strength. But excess bred lawless appetite, and appetite grew by what it fed upon, and as it grew it ate like a canker into soul and body. The tempted will was drawn away of its own lust, and enticed. “Then, when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin; and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.”⁴⁰

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This is merely one illustration. But, like all Divine laws, the law of moral order “fulfils itself in many ways.” The mean and avaricious life—the selfishness which hides itself under the guise of over-prudence—deteriorates as surely as the self-indulgent life, that seeks merely its own gratification. The operation may be more slow or more hidden in the one case than in the other. The life that lacks all generosity and “minds only its own things” may seem what is called respectable, and rise for a time in the world’s esteem; but it is poor and ignoble at the best, and it gets poorer with the advance of years. All finer traits—nay, all sources of moral good—are gradually worn away. The world is more and more with such a life, and more and more corrupts it. Of meanness there come narrowness and ugliness of character,

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40 James, i. 15.

habits of jealousy and discontent which consume the very core of spiritual dignity, and deaden at the root any high hope or aim of happiness. No spirit, perhaps, is so sure of its final reward of misery as the spirit which has sought to grasp everything for itself, without thought of others, or even the capacity of using what it grasps or spending what it accumulates. Its very accumulations become its torment, while the sanctities of affection and the sweetness of nature wither before its sight.

The case which seems most at times to defy the law of divine order is that of criminal ambition—when a daring and unscrupulous nature has triumphantly carried out some scheme of well-planned or of powerful craft, and seems securely to enjoy the crown of his wickedness. Then, to the commonplace observer the world seems a chance, and man the plaything of the strongest will. One has only to be bold enough in sin to gain his ends. Amidst the gaze of vulgar admiration the audacious criminal is mistaken for a hero, and the incense of even religious applause may rise around him. The hearts of the good may misgive them as they see “the wicked boasting of his heart’s desire, and blessing the covetous.”⁴¹ But here, where the operation of the Divine righteousness looks as if suspended for a time, there is working a sure retribution, often hastening on to a terrible fulfilment. Out of the very heart of pride there comes the impulse to a fall. The intoxication of strength leads to the first step of weakness; and the hero of the hour sinks amidst curses into the obscurity of the impostor or the ignominy of the felon. So long ago as the time of the Psalmist, this fate of triumphant wickedness had been sketched: “I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a green, bay tree: Yet he passed away, and, lo, he was not; yea, I sought him, but he could not be found. Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright: for the end of that man is peace. But the transgressors shall be destroyed together; the end of the wicked shall be cut off.”⁴²

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So we must believe, if we believe in God at all. A God less than immutably righteous, hating the evil and punishing it, as He loves the good and rewards it, would be no God at all. The absolute justice of the Divine, so far from being, as with much popular religion it is apt to be, a thought of alarm, is the supreme thought of comfort to every rational mind, as it is the root of all rational religion. “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” Where could righteousness be found if not at the heart of all life? And obscured as its manifestations may sometimes be, and perplexing its developments, it is never at fault. Appearances may belie the eternal order. Vice may enjoy prosperity, injustice flourish, and the wicked be exalted. But beneath all this apparent disorder, Divine righteousness is working out its due ends. The moral evolution, like the natural, may be marked by many imperfections; but the

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41 [Psalm x. 3.](#)

42 [Psalm xxxvii. 35-38.](#)

“survival of the fittest” is the law of both alike. That which is right and suitable remains in the end. Through all complications and chances of evil, righteousness at last is brought forth as the light, and judgment as the noon-day.⁴³

For the Divine order, we are to remember, is not merely a temporary manifestation now and here, but a continuous development. The lines of our higher life run onwards, and “it doth not yet appear what we shall be.” Even if the kingdom of divine righteousness were less clearly apparent now, there is a future kingdom and glory where the evil shall be redressed and the good rewarded. To many religious people the idea of retribution is mainly associated with the future. They delight to dwell on the assurance that all will come right at last, whatever wrongs may remain here. In the final reckoning there will be no mistake. The imagery of the Gospels is for them not a parable but a reality. And on that great harvest-day, when the angels shall go forth, sickle in hand, to gather in the wheat and the tares, they rejoice to think that there will be no confusion. God knoweth them that are His, and He will separate betwixt the righteous and the wicked with unfailing hand. However the wheat and the tares may have been mingled here, a clear partition will then be made; and while the wheat is brought into the garner of God, the tares shall be burned with unquenchable fire. Every man shall bear his own burden in the light of that awful judgment.

Let us be sure that this great imagination mirrors an eternal truth. The good and the evil, if not here, yet hereafter, run on to their consummation. All shall finally reap as they have sown, and at length stand revealed in their true character, crowned with glory or shame—“glory, honour, and peace, to every man that worketh good;” but “tribulation and anguish upon every soul of man that doeth evil.”⁴⁴

This is sure; but not less sure is it that the process of moral retribution is daily working itself out before our eyes. Long before we gather into our arms the final harvest, we are receiving according to what we have done, whether it be good or evil. In the end we shall still be as we have been, only in more perfect measure. “He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still.”⁴⁵ Let us not imagine that there will be any different principles of moral order in the end than at the beginning—God is always judging us as He will judge us at the last. The end is not yet. The harvest still tarries. The cornstalk is not matured, nor the full grain shown in the ear. But we are making our future every hour, and with many of us the crop is fast ripening into the eternal day.

43 [Psalm xxxvii. 6.](#)

44 [Romans, ii. 9, 10.](#)

45 [Revelations, xxii. 11.](#)

Two practical reflections occur to us at the close: (1.) Let us never trifle with conscience. Conscience is the revelation of the Divine order and law of our lives. We may be mistaken or in doubt about many things. But when conscience clearly says of any temptation, *No*; it is not right so to think or do,—then we may be sure that our duty is plain. And misled or uninformed as we may sometimes be, the great lines of conduct are always clear. We know at all times that it is better to be good than to be bad—to think truly, to act purely and generously, “to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly.” If we yield to falsehood or impurity; if we commit injustice; if we are envious of our brother’s good, and would wrong him if we could; if we give way to sinful passion, and instead of bringing under obedience the body, pamper and indulge it,—there is a voice within us tells us we are wrong, even when we stifle it. Wrong assuredly we are whenever we trifle with duty or sink below our own sense of what is good and right; when the law in our members, warring against the law of the mind, brings us into captivity to the law of sin which is in our members.⁴⁶ Moral deterioration and punishment follow with sure foot such declension and conquest. If we would avoid the evil, then let us avoid it at the first. Let us shun its appearance, resist its approach, and when it assails us, overcome it by good.

(2.) Let us further reflect that no life is above the law of good, or can ever trample upon it with impunity. There is a not uncommon delusion that lives of exceptional greatness, either in quality or position, may allow themselves a licence which others dare not follow. A man of remarkable intellect or genius is supposed sometimes to be above ordinary rules; and his errors are spoken of with leniency, or even a sort of admiration. Still more frequently, perhaps, a man of exceptional position, born to rank and fortune, is thought to be only doing what might be expected in yielding to youthful pleasures beyond others. But truly there are no such exceptions to the great principles of moral order which govern the world. These principles never fail, and are never infringed without injurious consequences. For “he that doeth wrong shall receive for the wrong which he hath done: and there is no respect of persons.”⁴⁷ If any life is exceptionally endowed, or exceptionally privileged, that life, above all, should show forth the excellence of the Divine order which has enriched it or placed it above others. Any other thought betrays a secret scepticism of such an order at all—and is a deception, however it may seem justified. Whatever we may think, God is not mocked.

Let us be sure, one and all, that our sin will find us out; that there is one way of excellence, as there is one way of happiness—and one alone—the way of self-denial and duty, doing whatever we do in word or deed in the name of Christ, giving thanks unto God and the

46 [Romans, vii. 23.](#)

47 [Colossians, iii. 25.](#)

Father by Him. May God lead us all in this way, strengthen, stablish, settle us, till He finally bring us to the rewards of His eternal kingdom. And to His name be all the glory. Amen.



V.

THE NATURAL AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE.

[John, ii. 10.](#)—“Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse: but thou hast kept the good wine until now.”

EVERY one understands the natural meaning of these words. The incident which gave rise to them is one of the most striking in our Lord's life, and, like all its other incidents, has a significant bearing upon human life in general. As we read it, we seem to forget for a moment the “Man of Sorrows,” and the tragic elevation of a self-sacrifice which knew no pause and invited none in others—whose great key-note was, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.”⁴⁸ Here there is no shadow of the Cross. Neither the gloom of Calvary, nor the loneliness of the “Son of man, who had not where to lay His head,”⁴⁹ is near to a picture bright with the assembly of wedding guests and the cheer of wine for the wedding festival. If we need any such lesson, we are here taught that the presence of Christ is not only for the darker, but also for the brighter moments of our lives—that all we do in our festive no less than our solemn hours should be beautified by the companionship of Him who was called with His disciples to the marriage in Cana of Galilee—that, in short, the consecration of His love should rest upon every aspect and activity of our being.

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But it is not any general lesson of this kind of which I am now thinking. These words from an early period have been taken by themselves and turned into a parable, speaking a deeper meaning than lies upon the surface. They have been taken as applicable to a great contrast presented in the natural and the spiritual life respectively. Men who delighted in the language of Scripture, and studied it as almost their only literature, have been pleased to read in “the good wine set forth at the beginning” the charm of the natural life in its early freshness, finding its good at first; “and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse:” and again, in “the good wine kept until now,” the different law of the spiritual life, growing from weakness to strength, and from difficulty to enjoyment, preserving its good things to the last.⁵⁰

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It matters little that the parable is a fanciful one. It is easy to see now that the words do not convey any such meaning. They were used apparently in their simple, direct sense,

48 [Matthew, xvi. 24.](#)

49 [Ibid. viii. 20.](#)

50 See Trench's Notes on the Miracles of our Lord, pp. 108-110, and the quotations from mediaeval writers and others there given.

without any hint of a higher application. This is an obvious criticism which it requires no knowledge to make. Yet the associations of the higher meaning linger around the words, and we may well take them to illustrate what seems in itself a truth of great importance. No one need fear that we shall forget our Biblical criticism in so doing. After all, there are meanings imposed upon texts by good people, and zealously held by them, quite as fanciful as this, and having no better foundation. No one need quarrel with the spiritual fancies which have gathered around some Scriptural texts, so long as they are used merely for didactic or practical purposes. It is only when the controversialist would turn them to his purpose, and the theologian would wrest the meaning of revelation to impose an antiquated dogma, that we must be careful to read Scripture “as any other book,” and to hold closely to its critical and historical meaning.

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There is no fancy in the thought which these words have been taken to express. There is a natural life, and there is a spiritual life. The law of the former is to set forth its good wine at the beginning; afterwards comes that which is worse. There is an immutable process of decay in all mere natural enjoyment. On the contrary, the law of the spiritual life is a law of increase. There is a spring of constant renewal in it. The good wine is kept to the last. Let us dwell upon this contrast for a little.

I. The natural life is the life into which we are all born. It is our life of sense, and passion, and intellect. Need I speak of the good of such a life in its first healthiness and vigour. All its impulses are impulses of gladness. It is like good wine to the palate. As a poet of our own day has sung—

“How good, is man’s life, the mere living! how fit to employ
All the heart, and the soul, and the senses for ever in joy!”

The “mere mortal life held in common by man and brute” is full of exhilaration. It responds to the great, happy life of Nature with vivid and quick response. No healthy young brain and heart but have known something of this mere joy of living, when manhood is yet in its prime and “not a muscle is stopped in its playing.” No restrictions can crush it altogether, and no asceticism kill its uprising force in the boy or girl as they look forth from the seclusion of un wasted powers on what is always to them the spring-time of an unworn world. And as there is no joy more true, so there is none at first more innocent than this. There have been natures, indeed, that have shrunk from it—or so we read sometimes in books of devotion and biographies of the saints. There has seemed to such natures a touch of sin in the very overflow of youthful health and elation. The responsibilities of life have cast a darkening shadow over its youthful opening. The feeling is not so common as to be deprecated in a time like ours; but nothing, surely, can be more free from sinful alloy than the mere gladsome activity of the young heart. It lies near to God in the very freshness with which it owns the

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sweet attractiveness of the life which He has given it, and the bountiful earth on which He has made it to dwell.

But I need not dwell on this charm of the natural life. It needs no preacher to describe it. There is no fear in the present age that it will be undervalued or despised; rather the contrary fear that we make too much of it, and place the mere forces of nature before the laws of the spirit. It is more my business and more my subject to point out how the activities of nature, so joyful in their first exercise, soon begin to lose their freshness and vigour. They waste in the using, and the glory of the mere natural life dies down as it runs its swift course from morning to noon and evening. Unless recruited from a higher source, or sustained by a happy temperance, it wastes away with a fated rapidity. The senses lose their zest, the spirits their spring, the passions their elevation. "Mere mortal life," the joy of grateful activity, is never to the man what it was to the boy. It may still bring delight, but seldom the old rapture. It may be still as "good wine," but it has lost the former relish. The "wild joy of living" vanishes with youth, never to be recalled; and the pulse beats more feebly, even though the arm be strong and the frame vigorous as ever. If we gain in experience, we lose in enthusiasm; and though both life and nature may speak to us in deeper tones, and move us with a more solemn gladness, we miss something we can never have again with the lapse of years. The leaping delight which once came from fresh fields or mountain-side is no more. There is no longer the same "splendour in the grass or glory in the flower." The old thrill of passion comes not. We sigh over a vanished joy and a rapture that is dead; and court it as we may, the rapture never comes back again.

But "leaving the flesh to the fate it was fit for," it may seem that the joys of the intellectual life grow rather than decay with advancing years. There is a certain truth in this. As the intellect gets older, it gets wiser up to a certain point. It learns its own measure and powers, and no longer frets itself, as in youth it often does, over impossible achievements and ideal aims. It gets more masterful within its own sphere, and does its work with less strain, and often a more conscious enjoyment. Happily there is this ever-recurring spring of pleasure in the intellectual side of our being. The joy of exercise, of mere life and activity, survive here when it has run to waste in the lower sphere of our sensitive and passionate existence. But if this be true, it is also true that the intellect loses while it gains. Its stores accumulate, its work goes on more easily; but here too, as elsewhere, enthusiasm vanishes. The mere delight in knowing passes away. The passion of knowledge for its own sake survives in but a few breasts. What seemed once within reach—the joy of discovery all the more tempting by its difficulty—is found inaccessible. The vision is proved to be a dream. The radiance which was once so bright dies down or disappears. Truths whose early dawning was as the exhilarating flush of morning, become commonplace. Perplexities grow more painful; problems more desperate. To the youthful intellectualist the world seems an open secret.

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He has only to pierce more deeply than others, and its meaning will lie plain before him. The veteran who has gone farthest afield, and sought most strenuously for wisdom as for hidden treasure, compares himself to a child who has gathered a few pebbles by the shore, while the great ocean of truth lies unexplored. He chiefly knows how little, after all, there is to be known. And so the life of intellect, infinitely greater as it is than any other sphere of our natural life, is seldom a very sanguine or hopeful life. The burden of thought saddens as it grows. Experience brings mastery; but it brings also difficulties and the consciousness of limits unfelt before. Here too, therefore, there is a sense in which the good wine is set forth at the beginning; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse. The glory and the freshness fade. The shadows deepen as the night cometh; and “turn whersoer we may,” there is no longer the same intensity or buoyancy of intellectual sight. “The things which we have seen, we now can see no more.”



And it is to be borne in mind that in all this view of the natural life I have taken it at the best. I have not identified it with the mere worldly or carnal life, into which it necessarily passes unless animated and controlled by some higher principle. I have not spoken of the world's deceitful promises; or of the allurements of sinful passion, “carrying light in the face, and honey on the lip,” but, when men have well drunk, “fears and terrors of conscience, and shame and displeasure.”⁵¹ I have not done so, because it seems to me unnecessary to draw the picture in any darker colours than it sometimes presents. The natural life, if divorced from God, must always be a sinful life; but beyond doubt it may also be, in many things, a great or a beautiful life, with many springs in its mere healthy activity. But taking it thus at the very best, in its brightest fulness, it contains within itself the elements of decay. Its highest activity is a process of exhaustion which finds no renewal. When the wine is drained, there is only the lees of its former strength and brightness.



II. But is it different and better with the spiritual life? Some will tell us, in the first place, that we have no such evidence of a spiritual life at all as we have of a natural life—that at least the one is here and now, a living experience to make the most of; and the other a shadowy realm which we can neither test nor verify. On such a question we cannot enter into argument here. I am speaking to a Christian congregation, all of whom profess to hold the reality of the spiritual life, and the great unseen verities on which it sustains and nourishes itself. But surely we may say of the spiritual life, no less than the natural, that it appeals to a living course of experience. It is also here and now—a series of facts—as well as the other,

51 J. Taylor's *Life of Christ, in loco.*

if also reaching beyond the present to a higher and unseen sphere of being. The spiritual side of human life is a reality felt and enjoyed quite as truly as the natural side. To thousands it is the deepest reality, the true point of connection with the great Life of the universe, the enduring Power of which all forms of life are but the manifestation. We cannot get quit of religion by mere denial. Materialism itself, in order to make any show of meeting the mystery of the world, is found to clothe itself with spiritual meanings and to assume a religious voice.

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The character of the spiritual life is equally verified in experience. In varying degrees and with casual reversions, it is yet essentially a life of growth—of growth from darkness to light, from weakness to strength, from dimness and poverty to beauty and hope and richness. This is the law of the higher life. There may be exceptions in individual experience. The law may be obscured by contradictory influences. But it remains true that when the spiritual life survives in any healthiness at all, it adds to faith knowledge, and to knowledge virtue, temperance, and patience, and to all these the “love which hopeth all things, and never faileth.”

(1.) The commencement of the spiritual life is frequently spoken of as a transition from darkness to light. The newly-born Christian, beginning to realise his priestly dignity and holy privileges, is called upon “to show forth the praise of Him who hath called him out of darkness into His marvellous light.”⁵² And this access of light always attends the higher life. It is as the opening of eyes to the blind. It is a new gift of sight, so that we see a higher meaning in duty to God, in the work and sacrifice of Christ, and the gift of the Holy Ghost. Christ becomes the “master-light of all our seeing.” A new glory, other than the glory of nature, falls upon life and thought. The sacrifice of the Cross may have seemed before an unintelligible or repellent mystery. As in the early time it was “to the Jews a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks foolishness,” so there are still, in divers forms, the Jewish and the Greek types of mind—the one unable to see the divine dignity of the great Sufferer, and the other unable to see that there was any need for the suffering at all. And all human theories and analogies help us but dimly to understand the great mystery. None read it, or can read it, fully. But there grows from the depth of sinful experience, and the hopelessness of our own mortal struggle with evil in our hearts and in our lives, a meaning in the Divine sacrifice which nothing else can give. The love and wisdom of God shine from the Cross on our struggling souls, and the power of God reveals itself in it as alone able and mighty to save. And as our spiritual insight grows, and we feel ourselves continually so weak and yet so capable, so grovelling and yet so aspiring—there comes an ever deeper meaning into that Life which was lifted up that all men might be drawn to it. The ideal of all higher life is seen to be there—self-sacrifice for the good of the others; and not only the ideal, which we may

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52 [1 Peter, ii. 9.](#)

contemplate, but the strength which we may appropriate, and so receive help, that as He loved us and gave Himself for us, we should also walk in love, and live no longer unto ourselves, but unto Him that died for us and rose again.

This life of self-sacrifice in Christ—into which we have been redeemed by His suffering, of which we are made capable by His grace—sheds for us a higher light on this world of evil and suffering than all the theories of philosophy, or the generalisations of science. What our minds may fail to understand, our hearts enable us to realise. In all higher natures there is a subtle interchange betwixt the reason and the affections—a growth of intuition, partly intellectual and partly moral, which gives a new eye to the soul, and a better interpretation of the world’s mystery than aught else. More and more this light of the Divine brightens within us and suffuses the intelligence even in its subtlest questionings. Difficulties may remain. The hardness of external fact, and the pitiless logic of scientific induction, may sometimes seem to leave no foothold for our grasp of the Spiritual. There will come Jewish moods of mind, in which the idea of a Divine sacrifice seems a “stumblingblock;” and even more frequently Greek moods of mind, in which it will appear “foolishness;” and the strength and claims of the present existence will seem all that we can ever know. But if we remain true to our higher self—to the deeper elements of our experience—the thought of the Cross will become an increasing source of illumination and comfort. It will brighten our darkness as no other thought can. It will uphold in moments of anguish, when the strongest ties of the natural life are broken asunder, and there remains for this world only weakness and despair. It will become “the light of life” the more we dwell upon it, taking hold of our higher reason as well as our more tender sympathies. Christ Himself will be seen ever more clearly as “the way, the truth, and the life”—in whose perfect mind and character are hid all treasures of wisdom and knowledge. From the dreams of modern philanthropy, and its schemes of religious humanitarianism—from the prophets of experience and the preachers of negation—we shall turn to Him with a deeper rest, as the true Light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world—as the highest fulfilment of conscience and of reason—the greatest reality of thought and of life.

(2.) But the spiritual life is not only a growth in light—it is a growth in practical strength and capacity of duty. When man first awakens to its reality, and begins to recognise a higher, divine voice, calling him to nobler work than he has ever done, he finds all his endeavours after the higher life weak and hesitating. The sense of a Divine ideal has been quickened within him; and “to will is present,” but “how to perform that which is good” he finds not. The old nature of selfish affection and action cannot be killed at once. Nay, it



frequently asserts its power; and the new nature, the higher impulses of self-sacrificing love and duty, are driven under by the overmastering sway of evil habit and desire. And so it is that the beginnings of the religious life are so often hard, and even convulsive; and many good men are found to tell of the struggles which they went through in entering upon its “narrow way.” That which was worse was given at the first—despair and hopelessness of the good which had yet laid hold of them and would not let them go. The cry of conflict betwixt the Divine ideal in the heart and the love of sin which fights against it and beats it back is heard in many a struggling soul. “wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?”⁵³

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But gradually this element of conflict and oppression disappears with the cherished love of the good. The grace of Christ becomes sufficient, and strength is made perfect in weakness. The will gets stronger to do that which is right and good, and to resist that which is wrong and evil. Temptation grows powerless, the sense of duty more clear and earnest, and the fact of duty therefore more easy and continuous. The evil no longer overcomes the good, but the good the evil. The higher attributes of our nature gather unity and force against its baser tendencies, and displace them with a steady consistency. Our complex being, disordered by sin, becomes righted through the indwelling harmony of the Divine Spirit; so that all its activities go forth in a higher union of love and self-sacrificing obedience. The law of the members ceases to invade the law of the mind; and “we present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God, which is our reasonable service.”⁵⁴ We are no longer “conformed to this world,” but “transformed by the renewing of our mind, that we may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God.”⁵⁵

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And all this growth of spiritual strength is at the same time a growth of happiness. It is a better state in all respects. As our endeavours after the higher life become more successful, they become less difficult—nay, they become full of felicity. As we gain step by step on the upward path, the remaining steps are not only less toilsome,—there is a divine exhilaration in the progress—a joyful sense of victory. There may be descents—and deplorable and painful ones—after we have reached a fair height; but unless we lose hold of the good, or banish it from our hearts, it will never lose hold of us, but still bear us upwards. Unless we quench the Spirit, He will still dwell within us, strengthen us in the inner man, and carry us forwards in the divine life until we attain the measure of the stature of the perfect man in Christ. With every advance comes an increase of good. The “good wine” seems still kept “until now.” The enjoyment grows with the growth of spiritual strength and grace. The yoke

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53 [Romans, vii. 24.](#)

54 [Romans, xii. 1.](#)

55 [Ibid. xii. 2.](#)

of self-sacrifice, as it is fitted to every point of the spiritual nature, is no longer felt to be a yoke. The sense of burden falls away as the pilgrim mounts higher on his heavenward way. Here, as in so many other points, the great Puritan parable is true to the best spiritual experience. The life of holiness is from “strength to strength”—no mere toil of duty, but the perfection of being—at once the highest activity and the highest happiness.

(3.) But especially with increase of grace there is an increase of moral beauty and hopefulness. In these respects, perhaps, the natural and the spiritual life contrast more than in any others. The one sinks to the decay and weakness of old age; the other rises to a perennial and more perfect bloom. The one gets less hopeful; to the other hope is as “an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the vail.”⁵⁶

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Undoubtedly there is a process of moral decay in all merely natural lives. As they get older, they seem to harden. The confident fulness of youth and of manhood disappears. The natural virtues that seemed to cover or compensate for the inner selfishness are less prominent. A growing meanness of character comes forth. This is the inevitable fate of all self-love that is not supplanted by a higher motive, or killed at the root by that love of Christ which raises us to a higher sphere. On the other hand, the higher life, once begun, not only advances in strength, but in beauty. It takes to itself more comeliness and harmony, and grows more thoughtful, tender, gentle—and wise in its gentleness. Who has not known lives in whom these “beauties of holiness” have shone with a widely-diffusing lustre, whose “conversation,” already “in heaven,” has been to many an inexpressible good? When the eye saw them, it gave witness to them; and if we had ever doubted of the reality of a spiritual world, and its higher worth and meaning, such lives, we felt, were as “living epistles,” telling of its power and verity.

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Again, as the natural life advances, how poor its prospects! Here more than anywhere—in its outlook on the future—it may be said to break down. When the spring and summer are gone, and autumn advancing, there is only a wintry weariness and gloom before it. The strength of former hope dies out; the affections on which it has fed grow sapless, or are pitilessly rooted out. There is no light beyond, and the darkness of the shortening years falls fast. It may have been a strong and beautiful life while it lasted; but its course is done, and death awaits it. The evil days have come in which it has no pleasure in them.⁵⁷ There is an inexpressible sadness in this inevitable fate before the strongest and happiest mortal existence. The good wine has all been drained. It has sunk to the lees: that which is worse has come to it at last, if not long before.

56 [Hebrews, vi. 19.](#)

57 [Ecclesiastes, xii. 1.](#)

The spiritual life, on the contrary, not only grows strong in higher holiness, but in higher hopefulness. The light burns brightly within, while darkness deepens without. For the soul has taken hold of an eternal life beyond death and the grave; and from the very sense of mortality, and the falling away of all earthly hope, there has sprung the consciousness of a higher hope, which entereth into that within the veil. The sure Foundation which underlies all the shows of life is felt all the more sure when these shows are vanishing. They perish, but He endureth; and from the very experience of change around and within, the soul cleaves with a more living hold to Him who is “the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.”⁵⁸ As the shadows fall and darkness gathers in the mortal eye, within the life that is hid with God in Christ the day is breaking and the shadows are fleeing away. There is a streak of dawning light in the higher heavens as the night rapidly shuts from view this lower earth.

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What is the secret of this heavenly hope, as of all spiritual growth? Above all things, trust in God—the assurance that there is an Eternal Love embracing us and educating us to its own likeness. The roots of all religious strength and peace, and hope and joy and patience, seem to me personal. If I am only to grow stronger or better by increase of knowledge—by growing clearness and certainty of conviction—then my progress must be very halting; I may go backward rather than forward. For youth, and not age, is the season of dogma; and as men ripen in experience, they cease to be opinionative. They become less sure than they once were of many things. They leave the issues of the future to God, and the fear of hell may hardly mingle in their thoughts. If able to hold an authoritative creed for themselves, they are thankful; but hesitate to apply it to others, or to judge those who differ from them. True spiritual growth is certainly not in sharpness of opinion, but in largeness of trust—higher, more beautiful, and more embracing thoughts of God and of Christ—thoughts born not of the authority of any school or any Church, but of humility and charity and holy obedience.

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The conclusion of the whole therefore is, that we look well to the springs of spiritual life within our own hearts—that we give all heed, by God’s blessing, to grow in grace and humility, in mercy and self-sacrifice—that we put off the “old man” with his selfish desires, and “be renewed in the spirit of our mind,” and put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness. Oh let us not waste the days of our strength in the service of evil, hoping that at last we can take up the higher life as an easy task! The thought is impious, as it is unwarranted. If there be a higher life at all, it must always be our duty—it can only be our happiness. All else must be vanity—must be sin—however fair it may look. Let us not deceive ourselves. The brightness of the natural life is vanishing while

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58 [Psalm cii. 27](#); [Hebrews, xiii. 8](#).

we look upon it. The glory of the spiritual is alone eternal. Let us choose the better part while God is waiting to be gracious; and all that is good in us the voice of conscience—the summons of grace,—invite us to give ourselves to the divine service.

“Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the Lord: His going forth is prepared as the morning; and He shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the earth.”⁵⁹



59 [Hosea, vi. 3.](#)

VI.

DIVINE GOODNESS AND THE MYSTERY OF SUFFERING.

[Romans, viii. 28.](#) “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God.”

THE idea of God is the root of all religion, and the love of God its great strength and comfort. Is there One above us who cares for us, who orders all things for our good, and who is therefore the object of our love?—this is the question of questions. Religion cannot stop short of such personal relations, however we may try to fill our minds with vaguer, or what may appear to some grander, thoughts. The idea of order is not enough, magnificent as we may make it. Behind the order we long to grasp a Will—a moral Life answering to our life—a Love at once near to us and supreme. Nor is there any contradiction in the ideas, contradictory as they have been sometimes made to appear. It is nothing but the narrowness of human logic that supposes order—or evolution, if we prefer the word—at variance with Providence or the operation of a Supreme Love. Rather, order is Providence, and the law which rules our lives is at the same time the Love which guides them—the working together of all things for good to those who recognise the good and own it.

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There is no thought more familiar in Scripture than the thought of an Almighty or Sovereign Will, into whose grasp is gathered the control of all things. The God of Scripture is a Supreme Person, who “doeth according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay His hand, or say unto Him, What doest thou?”⁶⁰ He directs equally all the mightier movements of nature and the minuter changes of life. His omnipotent governance upholds the course of sphered worlds; and at the same time the very hairs of our head are numbered by Him, and not a sparrow falleth to the ground without His permission. “He telleth the number of the stars; He calleth them all by their names.”⁶¹ He also “healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds.”⁶² “He divideth the sea with His power, and by His understanding He smiteth through the proud. By His Spirit He hath garnished the heavens; His hand hath formed the crooked serpent. Lo, these are parts of His ways; but how little a portion is heard of Him? but the thunder of His power who can understand?”⁶³

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60 [Daniel, iv. 35](#)

61 [Psalm cxlvii. 4](#)

62 [Psalm cxlvii. 3.](#)

63 [Job, xxvi. 12-14.](#)

We read much nowadays of the anthropomorphism of the Old Testament, and of the manner in which science has extended our conception of nature, and of the universal order which reigns throughout it, binding all things into one. We can never be too grateful for the real results of science—for everything that expands our intelligence and at the same time sobers it; and that larger and truer philosophy, which has planted the great cosmical idea as almost a commonplace in the modern mind, is to be accepted as a blessing. It is impossible to exaggerate the good which has come to popular religion from the growth of scientific thought and the expulsion of those spectres of arbitrary personality which were wont to lurk in the obscurities of nature. But it may be doubted how far the Bible was ever responsible for such imaginations, or whether even modern thought can conceive more grandly of the inscrutable Power of which it speaks—which it everywhere recognises—than the psalmist or the divine dramatist whose language I have quoted. What march of cosmical Force through endless aeons is more sublime than the rule of Thought, alike in the courses of the stars, the waves of the sea, and the pulsations of the heart? And if this conception is anthropomorphic, are not all our conceptions equally so? Man can only think at all after his own likeness on any subject; and whether the conception of mere Force, or of an intelligent Will, bears least the stamp of human weakness, may be safely left to the rational judgment of the future. It is the savage who, when he hears the thunder amongst his woods, or looks upon the riot of nature in a storm, trembles before a mighty Force which he fails to understand. It is the Hebrew poet or Grecian sage in whose own mind has risen the dawn of creative thought, who clothes this mystery of Power with intelligence and life.

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But the idea of the Divine which meets us everywhere in Scripture is not merely sovereign and intelligent; it is essentially beneficent. “The Lord is good to all; and His tender mercies are over all His works.”⁶⁴ “Thy mercy, Lord, is in the heavens; and Thy faithfulness reacheth unto the clouds. . . . How excellent is thy loving-kindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Thy wings.”⁶⁵

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It is needless to multiply quotations of this kind. The God of Scripture is, beyond all question, not only supreme, but supremely good. He not only performs all things, but He performs all things well. There are many dark things in the divine government—things that transcend our comprehension, and in which we may be unable to see a consistent meaning; but the ideal of the Divine in Scripture is never at variance with our highest thoughts of what is right and good. I am speaking now, of course, not of incidents in the divine representation, or of all actions attributed, or supposed to be attributed, to God. It is no part of an intelligent criticism to deny the progress of moral any more than of intellectual thought

64 [Psalm cxlv. 9.](#)

65 [Psalm xxxvi. 5, 7.](#)

in Scripture. The Divine ideal, as unfolded in its pages, is not to be judged by the imperfect manner in which the early Hebrew mind sometimes interpreted its meaning, or conceived of it as acting. Its true representation is the highest thought of Hebrew psalmist and prophet in their highest moments of inspiration. And here there is nothing at variance with our Ideal of all that is true and right and good. Nay, rather, is not our thought continually falling below the Biblical thought, and needing to be refreshed by it? Is not the very ideal which some men now seek to turn against Scripture mainly the product of Scripture, and only living where the Bible is still a power in the education of the popular conscience?

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Not only so, but our brightest dreams of human progress do not outreach the Biblical conception of a kingdom of righteousness and peace yet to be established. Obvious and grave as are the disorders of the present world, there is everywhere, according to this conception, an underlying plan of good. The fulness of the Divine thought only gradually unfolds itself in action. There is a potency of good amidst all the signs of evil. "Clouds and darkness" may surround the Divine Governor, but "justice and judgment" are the habitation of His throne, and "mercy and truth" go before His face.⁶⁶ His ways may be inscrutable, His footsteps not known;⁶⁷ but His mind is ever good towards all the creatures He has made, and who do not disown His care. "All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth unto such as keep His covenant and His testimonies."⁶⁸

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Such an optimism is everywhere taught in Scripture. The darkest enigmas of life and of history are conceived only as shadows resting on an upland which is stretching towards the clear day. The higher levels of the Divine kingdom are all luminous, and even those lower shadows which now fall so heavily over many human creatures are not spots of hopeless darkness. They will be finally cleared away, and made to disclose their meaning in the Divine plan for all. The characters of evil which are now hardest to read may yet be seen to have a purpose of good. For we are but "the creatures of a day." It is but a span of the great cosmical life that is disclosed to us; and could we see the end from the beginning, all would be found in order. The enigmas which we cannot explain may be intelligible to a larger faculty and a wider horizon of knowledge. The complications in which we can see no meaning, or only such a meaning as seems to fall below our own highest thoughts of the Divine, may expand into issues of beneficence that will gladden the angels, when the great plan is complete and the glory of final victory is poured backward through all its ascending developments and darkly-lying shadows.

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66 [Psalms xcvi. 2, lxxxix. 14.](#)

67 [Psalm lxxvii. 19.](#)

68 [Psalm xxv. 10.](#)

Is this not, after all, a higher optimism than that of any mere stoicism, which sees in all around us the mere movement of fate, and which construes the evils of the world not as accidents which may bear in the end some divine meaning, but as essential parts of the whole—necessary steps in the cosmical development? It may or may not be possible in such a view to hold that the plan of the world is good after all, and to reverence and admire, and even worship after a fashion, all the outgrowth of its activities, as the only Divine we shall ever know. But I confess that the world seems hardly good to me apart from the thought of a great Mind moving through it all, and bringing good out of evil. This may not help me better to understand the amount of evil that I see. The existence of evil is as hard upon one hypothesis of cosmical origin as another. It at least helps me to bear with the evil, and to strive against it—to think that there is One to whom all evil is hateful as it can be—nay, more than it can be—to the purest human intelligence, and whose aim is to reconcile an evil world to Himself, by forgiving men their trespasses, and sending a new Power of good into the world for its redemption. Let me have no higher thought than the cosmical life of which I am a part. I may not despair under the burden of this thought; but I can hardly be cheerful. I may accept the world and my own part in it as so far good—good because it could not be otherwise in the nature of things. And it is not the part of a wise man to quarrel with the inevitable for himself or others. But why should I believe in good as an idea at all on such an hypothesis? Whatever is, is and must be best in such a case. It is the fittest in the circumstances. It is the point in the eternal order which the cosmical life has reached; and I know not on what ground I or others can pronounce any actual point in this development evil, save on the ground that there is a *Divine Idea* behind the order and higher than it. Whatever falls below this Idea, or is at variance with it, is therefore evil. This is surely the higher philosophy as well as faith—to believe that all *things are working together for good*; not merely because things are as they are, and could not be otherwise, but because they are everywhere more and more unveiling a supremely beneficent Mind—a God who “is Light,” and in whom “is no darkness at all”⁶⁹—who is Love, and before whose presence evil cannot dwell.

II. But turning to the more special view of the subject, it may be asked, Is this, after all, a true view on the Christian any more than any other hypothesis? Is it consistent with facts that “all things work together for good to them that love God”? It would be endless and useless to argue the general question of optimism. The question has little practical value, and, besides, is hardly that which is in view of the apostle. When he says in the text, “and we know that all things work together for good to them that love God,” he assumes all of which we have been not unnaturally led to speak in the present atmosphere of thought around us. He at least has no doubt of a God who is over all, who doeth according to His

69 1 John, i. 5.

will, and who directs all creatures and things which He has made for His own glory and their good. It may be doubted how far the optimism of St Paul would correspond to our modern notions of a beneficent progress of the world, and of the evolution here—on this earth—of a kingdom of divine righteousness and peace. But it cannot be doubted that he believed in the reality of such a kingdom; and that he and his fellow-believers were members of it; and that all things in his life and theirs were working together for their good as such. He felt himself in the hands of One whose servant he was—whose will he was bound to obey; and it is his consolation that in doing this he was not only doing his duty, but securing his happiness. He had no doubt of God's good purposes with him, and that amidst all the sore perils of the Christian life which he had so heartily embraced, there was a divine plan of good for him, and for all who with him had entered upon it. The only question, therefore, is as to the fact of this experience amongst Christians generally. Do we know that all things that make up our lives—that whatever happens to us of apparent good or evil—is really for our good? Do we find this true, as St Paul did? It must be admitted that it is hard sometimes to realise this. Much in life, on the contrary, seems difficult to understand and to bear—nay, at times seems too perplexing and darkened to have any good in it, or at least any good which we can ever know. There are probably such moments of depression in all lives, and not least in the best. St Paul himself was not free from them when the thorn in the flesh was given to him, the messenger of Satan to buffet him.⁷⁰ Even his strong faith sometimes drooped, and he passed under the shadow, weak, forsaken, and afflicted. Yet even then he rejoiced in tribulation, as “working patience, and patience experience, and experience hope.”

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It is sufficiently obvious that the good of which the text speaks is not any form of mere earthly good. There is no assurance here or anywhere of prosperity to them that love God. Rather it is true that “whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth.” In all true natures there is a deep consciousness of suffering. The evils of life bear upon them with equal force; and in their case there is more tenderness under the pressure. The very capacity of loving God implies a capacity of loving others, and a susceptibility of feeling which may be bitterly wounded amidst the strifes of life or by the strokes of bereavement.

It can hardly be questioned that in modern times, and amidst the indulgences of our modern civilisation, human nature has become more sensitive. Suffering smites it more acutely. Death casts a deeper shadow. The early Christians were a stern if also a tender race. Especially they felt and moved in the unseen world as few men and few Christians now do. They saw God and Christ and the blessed angels as the companions of their trials in a way it is now hard to imagine. If their dear ones were taken away, even by cruel suffering, they could rejoice in the assurance that they were taken from an evil world, and were with the

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70 [2 Corinthians, xii. 7.](#)

Father and the Saviour in an eternal kingdom, where no hurt would evermore come to them. This world was to them very evil, “a world lying in wickedness,” from which death was a happy escape. And so, with their hold of the invisible, and their indifference to the visible, they came with St James to “count it all joy when they fell into divers temptations.”⁷¹ They passed to the very opposite pole of experience which had characterised the ancient world. To the Greek, and even to the Hebrew, death had been the realm of darkness. To the Christian it became the passage to a realm of endless light and life. Facing it in the clear dawn of the resurrection, many as well as St Paul could boldly say, “death, where is thy sting? grave, where is thy victory? . . . Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁷² Nature and this mortal life sink out of sight. The living Christ and the unseen Heaven whither He had gone were for ever in their spiritual vision.

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This feeling pervades the New Testament. It looks out upon us from the peaceful and beautiful emblems of the catacombs, and more or less lives in all Christian literature. In many of the mediaeval lyrics it deepens to an intensity of passion which throws the present world into a shadow of constant gloom, and casts the light of all joy and hope and rapture upon “Jerusalem the golden, with milk and honey blest.”

But nature and life are far too grand realities in themselves to remain at this point of depression. The world is not to be measured by the narrow gloom of the mediaeval poet, who looked forth upon it from his cloister, and had tasted little of its excitement. It is too real and too near to us, and in many things too noble and beautiful, to be thus despised. It is not to be thought of as merely full of evil to be got rid of to be changed by some sudden glory revealed from heaven, “with the voice of the archangel and with the trump of God.” The imaginative supernaturalism which made of our earthly life a mere painful transit to the invisible, is no longer a working faith to the modern mind, which loves nature and science, and art and civilisation. And the change has followed—that men are apt to be less patient under the trials of life. The less distinctly they see into the future, the more they prize the present. The less heaven is realised by them, the more they love earth, and the more bitterly do they feel the rupture of all those ties which make their earthly home less sweet to them, or darken it with ineffaceable shadows.

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It may seem to some as if I were merely describing the growth of an unchristian temper, with which the language of St Paul has nothing to do. Of course, if men love the present life, and prefer earth to heaven, they cannot expect to find the good of which the apostle here speaks. This is true; and yet we must be fair to the modern no less than the ancient spirit. The materialistic temper is always unchristian; and words which have their root only in the

71 James, i. 2.

72 1 Corinthians, xv. 55, 57.

vivid apprehension of a spiritual life can have no meaning to it. St Paul has himself admitted that if the future life were cut off, the trials of the present would be insupportable. It is only the glory of the one that lightens the darkness of the other. It is only the faith of immortality that gives hope in bereavement, or comfort in death. Let this be admitted. Yet there is truth, and even Christian truth, in the higher appreciation of nature and life which has sprung up in the modern mind. This earth and our being in it are rightly valued at a higher rate than they were by the mediaeval or the early Christian. The change of consciousness which has transformed both, and made them more dear and beautiful to us, is really a change after the mind of Christ, so often higher than that of the Church. The modern spirit has so far here returned to the Divine ideal instead of having departed from it. There is no necessary materialism in loving the fair earth which He loved, and clinging closely to those human ties which He Himself consecrated.

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The difficulty is to love life and yet not fear death—to bear all the burdens of life, and find a divine meaning in them all—to count it all joy when our health is good and dear ones are spared to us, and yet also to count it joy when we fall into divers trials. In other words, the difficulty is to see a deeper reality in life than appears upon the surface—to believe in a divine education for ourselves and for others, even when there is confusion in our hearts and the smart of an intolerable pang.

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It is useless—it may be cruel—to say to smitten and bereaved ones: Be composed. Look beyond the present to the future. Think of how St Paul endured steadfastly unto the end—of his joy in tribulation. It is the will of God that you should be left alone, and His assurance that this and all other things will work together for your good. This is true; and yet for the moment the mere fact of suffering, and its inconsolable bitterness, is even truer. It so fills the heart that aught else cannot get near to it. And there is nothing wrong, in such awful moments of sorrow, when the soul wraps itself in the garment of misery and sits aloof, and the voice of the preacher—even a preacher like St Paul—sounds hollow in the ear. There never can be anything wrong in the mere utterance of nature—the forlorn cry of the wounded life which God has so made that it cannot but cry when it is stricken sore. It is needless to attempt explanation. “Words fail of meaning before the dumb image of a sorrow that has itself no words. Its stony silence is more pathetic than any voice.

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But while we can explain nothing, and may hardly obtrude consolation, the stricken soul may at length find a meaning and comfort for itself. God may speak to it with a deeper force than nature when this force has spent itself, and the silence of sorrow has left a sanctuary where the Divine may be heard. The consciousness of mercy may rise through all the overwhelming consciousness of pain. The light of love may break from behind the cloud of judgment, or what seemed judgment. The Divine thought for ourselves and for others may

take a larger and more beneficent shape than we had dared to suppose. Good of the highest kind has sometimes come from what seemed the most painful evil. From the very bitterness has sprung sweetness; and the wound which seemed to kill has grafted new shoots of character, which have grown into everlasting life.

What fresh depths of feeling and trust and sympathetic love—what tenderness and gracious helpfulness, and patience and courage—have found their soil in what seemed a hopeless sorrow! The weeping of the night has been turned into the joy of the morning; and the soul that has lain low has risen higher than before to altitudes of virtue. For heaven has been about it in its sorrow, and it has come forth from its chamber of loneliness a better, purer, and stronger being. We may fail to realise it, yet

“All sorrow is a gift, and every trouble
That the heart of man has, an opportunity.”

We may not feel this consciously. Through the blinding mist of our tears we may not see the purpose of divine mercy. In the sense of understanding it, we may never see it. But the purpose is, nevertheless, sure, and the opportunity of good given. And the good may come to us in many ways we little know, moulding for us new life and higher aims—breathing into our whole being higher activities and a richer strength of self-sacrificing duty.

It may be hard after all, I do not question, to find the good worked in some lives by suffering. There are those that seem to harden rather than soften when the world goes wrong with them, or some mystery of bereavement enters into their lot. It would be wrong to form harsh judgments of any such. It is enough that we can trace the thread of the apostle's meaning in our modern experience, and see how the chosen purpose may work in many ways beyond our first knowledge and feeling. We are bound, besides, to remember the condition that is attached to the experience of the text. For all growth of good there must be a fitting soil. There must be a capacity of love in us in order to recognise love in God and a purpose of divine love in life. If we narrow our hearts instead of opening them, and so shut ourselves within the walls of our suffering that we cannot see beyond, we may get only moroseness, and evil temper, and impatient defiance from those strokes which have smitten us, yet not that we should for ever dwell in darkness. The light may never arise on us, because we will not lift our eyes towards it, although shining in the heavens. Such selfish concentration is the very opposite of love; and there is no good in it to any soul. It hardens alike in prosperity and adversity. In adversity it tortures as well as hardens. In order to find good anywhere, we must look beyond ourselves. In order to find the highest good we must look towards God, and let our hearts go forth to Him with unfailing trust. We may not be able



to say with the patriarch, “Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him.”⁷³ It is of no use repeating the language of Scripture if our thought cannot rise to it. But we must feel that it is not God’s good purpose to slay us in any evil sense, or to bring our lives down to the ground, only that He may raise us up again and give us peace. “Though He cause grief, yet will He have compassion according to the multitude of His mercies. For He doth not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men.”⁷⁴ We must believe in Him as our Father, and not merely as our Sovereign and Lord, assured that “He knoweth our frame,” and that He will not make us to suffer above what we are able to bear, but with every temptation will find a way of escape.

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There is no other hope for life—there can be no other joy in death—than the assurance of a God above us, who is Love, and who has no thoughts but thoughts of love for all the creatures He has made—who has appointed our days, and the means of training us to His own service and glory. If we lose the conception of a Divine Benevolence, supreme over all, making all things work together for our good and the good of all, we lose all that can lighten the burden of life, or even render religion itself to a quickened heart anything but a misery. We can only love a God who is Love—whom we know seeks our good and the good of all. And if there is such a God—as Christ declares there is—in whom there is no darkness at all, no hate or evil at all, but only love and order, which is the soul of all love, how can we help loving Him? What fear need there be in our hearts? Evils may befall us—suffering and the bitterness of wrong or shame await us. We may look for light, but, behold, there is only darkness and the shadow of death! Yet we are safe in the arms of a Divine Love that will bear and carry us through all. Nothing in such a case can be truly adverse to us. Troubled on every side, we are not yet in despair; cast down, we are not forsaken. “To love God in Christ,” as Bunsen said when dying, “is everything.” All else God will care for if we only love Him. He will make light to arise in the midst of darkness. He will make the crooked places straight, and the rough places plain. And, finally, He will bring us to that eternal home where we shall rest from our labours, and the wounds of the stricken heart shall be for ever healed; “and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”

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“Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.”

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73 [Job, xiii. 15.](#)

74 [Lamentations, iii. 32, 33.](#)

VII.

DEATH, AND SORROW FOR THE DEAD.

1 *Thessalonians*, iv. 13, 14.—“But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died, and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him.”

THE most tremendous fact before every man is death. “It is appointed unto men once to die.”⁷⁵ The shadows of an unknown future lie upon the brightest activities of existence, and the stillness of “night” awaits all the healthful vigour of the “day.” It is not to be wondered at that men have been fascinated by the fact of death, and that they have sought to idealise it in many forms, some dark and gloomy, others cheerful and hopeful; some mirroring their sadness and terror, others their faith and aspiration.

It is by no means true that the brighter forms of imagery by which death has been depicted have been confined to Christianity. The winged genius brooding over the dead with thoughtful gaze—the inverted torch—the soaring butterfly,—are all creations of pagan imagination, designed to illuminate the future or to soothe the sorrowing. Euphemistic expressions such as those in the text are as old as literature itself. Sleep and death are twin children both in Greek and Latin poetry.⁷⁶ Yet it will hardly be denied that it is only in Christian literature and art that the full idea of death as one of hopefulness and not of despair—of joy and peace, and not of darkness and terror—has been realised.

Pre-Christian genius rose above the mere gloomy externals of dissolution. It was able to look away from the lifeless body and the darkened sepulchre. It had no love for those insignia of decay which have been rife at various times in Christian sepulture, and pervaded many ruder forms of Christian art. Ideas of rest, and in some degree of welcome, were associated with the grave. To the ancient Hebrew it was the meeting-place of kindred—the last home of fathers who had gone before. Abraham died full of years, and was gathered to his people.⁷⁷ Jacob was buried in the place of his fathers Abraham and Isaac, and where he had buried Leah.⁷⁸ Of David and others it is written that they slept with their fathers.⁷⁹ The

75 *Hebrews*, ix. 27.

76 *Hesiod*, *Theog.*, 212; *Æneid*, vi. 278.

77 *Genesis*, xxv. 8.

78 *Ibid.* xlix. 31.

79 *1 Kings*, xi. 21.

same ideas occur in classical writers—the same thought of a final rest where trouble shall no more come, and of a sleep in which there shall be no dreams.⁸⁰

But withal, the pre-Christian conception of death was joyless and unhopeful. It embraced rest, but mainly as a negation of existing unrest. There was no brightness nor assured happiness in the prospect. Hades was an abode of desolation, clothed only with the dreary poplar and stunted asphodel, where thin ghosts wandered in misery. The future life of the Hebrews, if it was clear to them at all, was hardly more cheering. “In death,” says the Psalmist, “there is no remembrance of Thee: in the grave who shall give Thee thanks?”⁸¹ “The dead praise not the Lord, neither any that go down into silence.”⁸² “The grave cannot praise Thee; death cannot celebrate Thee: they that go down into the pit cannot hope for Thy truth.”⁸³ There is not much to comfort or to inspire with hope in such words as these. It is only in the light of the Christian resurrection that the idea of death becomes transfigured, and the image of that sleep to which our mortal life sinks at last becomes significant not merely of relief or insensibility, but of a higher life of blissful activity to which it is destined to awaken.

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I. There is nothing more marvellous in the history of Christianity than the change which it wrought in men’s consciousness of the future. The change is one stamped into the very life of humanity, however it may be explained. Whereas men had previously thought of death as only a great darkness, or a dreamless and perpetual sleep, they began to think of it as a change from darkness to light, and as a sleep with a glorious awakening. The brightness and joy were no longer here. This was not the true life from which men should shrink to part. All was brighter in the future; the higher life was above. Death was not only welcome, but joyfully welcome. To die was gain. It was “to depart, and be with Christ; which is far better.” This was not merely the experience of an enthusiastic apostle. It became the overwhelming experience of hundreds and thousands. Death was swallowed up in victory. “death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” was the triumphant echo from Jerusalem to Rome, and from Antioch to Alexandria, in thousands of hearts, that had but lately known no hope and shared no enthusiasm,—not even the enthusiasm of a common country or common citizenship.

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What is the explanation of all this? What was it that sent such a thrill of hopeful anticipation through a world dying of philosophic despair and moral perplexity and indifference? Was it any higher speculation? any intellectual discovery? any eclectic accident or amalgam

80 Plato, *Apolog.*, xxxii.

81 [Psalm vi. 5.](#)

82 [Psalm cxv. 17.](#)

83 [Isaiah, xxxviii. 18.](#)

of Jewish inspiration with Hellenic thought? Men had everywhere—in Greece and Rome, in Alexandria and Jerusalem—been trying such modes of reviving a dead world, of reawakening spiritual hopefulness; but without success. No mere opinion or combination of opinions wrought this great change. Men did not learn anything more of the future than they had formerly known; no philosopher had discovered its possibilities or unveiled its secrets. But there had gone forth from a few simple men, and from one of more learning and power than the others, the faithful saying that “Christ is risen indeed.” “Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first-fruits of them that slept.”⁸⁴ And it was this suddenly-inspired faith that raised the world from its insensibility and corruption, and kindled it with a new hope—and the joy of a life not meted by mortal bounds, but “incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away.”⁸⁵

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It was on the strength of this assurance that St Paul sought to comfort the Thessalonian brethren. They had been—from what causes are not said—in anxiety as to the fate of their departed friends. They seem to have doubted whether these friends would share with them in the resurrection of the dead and the joy of the second coming of the Lord. The apostle assured them that they had no need to be in trouble. The departed were safe with God, and the same great faith in the death and resurrection of Christ which sustained themselves was the ground of confidence for all.

There is no other ground of confidence for the future. In the light of Christ’s resurrection alone does death assume or retain for us any higher meaning than for the ancient world. Apart from this faith, it is merely the cessation of being. We may call it a “sleep,” as of old, and welcome it as grateful rest after the long or hard work of the day. We may be able to look upon it with resignation; it may not have for us the shadowy horror that it had for the youthful world—for this reason, if no other, that life is hardly so fresh and beautiful to us as it was to those earlier races which have given us our highest literature. As the world has grown older, it has grown more perplexed and thoughtful. Ours is neither the bright serenity of Hellenic genius nor the exuberant satisfaction of Hebrew prophecy. We do not spend our life in the same sunshine of eager enjoyment. The world is less a scene of content, except to the very young; and this is in some degree owing to Christianity itself, which has wrought deeper, and tenderer, and more pathetic chords of experience into human life. It may be easier, therefore, for us to die—to part with this present life, and go down to the grave wearied with its cares or tired of its perplexities. It is a mistake to exaggerate in the interests of religion the feelings with which men are supposed to meet death, as if it must always wear to them apart from Christian faith an aspect of terror. This is not verified by experience. As

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84 [1 Corinthians, xv. 20.](#)

85 [1 Peter, i. 4.](#)

mere rest—mere cessation from sensibility—it may be welcome. In anticipation terrible, it may yet in its occurrence be without alarm. As we look towards it from the opening gates of life, or the full enjoyment of healthy activity, we may shrink from it; and it has aspects which no philosophy can ever brighten. It is always painful to part with friends and children, to break up the clustering ties of sweet affection and the home of family love. But the dying one is often strangely prepared by natural fitness for the coming event. The decaying physical system adapts itself to its end, and the ebbing life goes forth peacefully on its unknown way. In itself, and merely for itself, death need not be terrible, and often is not.

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But it is the light of the higher life in Christ which alone glorifies it. And unless this light has shone into our hearts, I know not whence hope can reach us. We may be resigned or peaceful. We may accept the inevitable with a calm front. We may be even glad to be done with the struggle of existence, and leave our name to be forgotten and our work to be done by others. We may be able to say to ourselves, if not in the sense of St Paul—"I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course"—I am ready to lie down and die, and cease to be, if this is my fate. But in such a mood of mind there is no cheerfulness, no spring of hope. With such a thought St Paul could neither comfort himself nor comfort the Thessalonians. Nay, for himself he felt that he would be intensely miserable if he had only such a thought. "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable."⁸⁶

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Hope in death can only spring from the principle of personal immortality; and this principle has no root save in Christ. It is not enough that we shall live in the memory of our friends, or that humanity shall live and flourish when we are gone. I do not say that there is no dignity in such thoughts, or even no consolation in them to some minds. It is better to have faith in the progress of humanity than no faith at all. It is better to be remembered than forgotten, and to have the immortality of a good name if no other. But men cannot find strength or comfort in such generalisations. They crave for a personal life—for communion with other lives—and with Him who is life, and whose life is the light of men. This, and this alone, is the faith which makes men patient in trouble and hopeful in death, which sanctifies bereavement and illumines thought. Nature tells us nothing of the future. Science knows, and can know, nothing of it. On this side, no voice from behind the veil ever reaches man. No sparks of immortal presage rise from the ashes of scientific analysis. All its suggestions leave us where we are, or mockingly sift the sources of life only to hint our mortality. If we quit the living Christ, we quit all hold of the higher life. "If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain."⁸⁷ Heaven becomes a dumb picture; and death—euphemise it as we may—merely blank annihilation. We may say of our dear ones,

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86 1 Corinthians, xv. 19.

87 1 Corinthians, xv. 14.

as we lay them in the dust, that they have fallen asleep; but the gentle words have no true meaning. The sleep is without an awakening. The higher and hopeful side of the image is cut away. The night becomes a perpetual slumber,⁸⁸ on which no morning shall ever arise. It is only in the light of the resurrection that the phrase represents a reality, and the idea of death is transfigured into a nobler life. Let us believe that behind the veil of physical change there is a spiritual Power from which we have come—one who is the Resurrection and the Life—in whom, if we believe, we shall never die,—and we may wait our change, not only with resignation, but with hope, and carry our personal affections and aspirations forward to another and a better being, in which they may be satisfied and made perfect.



II. In this belief, also, we may have comfort for the loss of our friends. Nay, “if we believe that Jesus died, and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him.” This is the sure conclusion from our higher faith—our dead ones are resting in Jesus. The life of affection and of faithful duty which has gone from us is with the Lord. The vesture has been changed, but “the mortal has put on immortality.” The faith, the hope, the love which lived for us is no longer incarnated in visible form beside us; but their spiritual quality is imperishable, and they have only been transferred to another sphere of manifestation and activity. They have gone from our sight; but they not only exist in our memory—although they also do this, shrouded in its most sacred niche; they are with God. They have passed into glory; and their personal lives subsist in immediate communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and all the saints of God who have gone before them into bliss. There is nothing for which there is less warrant in Scripture than any speculation as to the state of the departed—their occupations or special modes of activity; but it is everywhere implied that their personality continues. They are in heaven the same personal spiritual beings they were on earth, only made perfect in holiness. They are beyond our care and service; but they are with the Lord, “which is far better.” He knoweth them that are His, and God will bring them with Him.



It is this safety of the departed with God which the apostle urges as a reason why we should not sorrow for them as others “who have no hope.” This is our faith, that our dear ones are secure in God’s keeping; and it is unreasonable, therefore, that we should lament them as if we had lost them for ever. Lament them we cannot help doing; and no words of Scripture forbid our doing. Neither here nor anywhere is Christian teaching untrue to nature. And when friends or loved ones are taken away, the cry of nature cannot be restrained. The faithful and fond heart bleeds beneath the stroke. The blank may be felt irretrievably. The sense of loss, and of wistful, unhealed regret, may never pass away. The shadow of a great

88 Catullus, v. 4.

bereavement may lie ever after on our lives. There is not only nothing wrong in this—such a shadowed experience may work as a hallowing influence, and deepen within us many veins of tenderness and sympathy and love, yielding “the peaceable fruits of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.” Let us not suppose for a moment that the apostle would have us to deal harshly with sacred memories, or to banish from our hearts a chastening and holy sorrow. By no means. He would only have us not to sorrow as if we were without Christian hope—as if we doubted or despaired that our dear ones were with God, and safe with Him.

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A sorrow which either refuses to accept facts, or to cease from anxieties and regrets which are no longer practicable, is an unchristian sorrow—for this reason, amongst others, that the duties of life await those who have suffered most. And these duties we can never put away from us. They are ours, and they cling to us whether we will or not. The dead have gone beyond our solicitude. Nothing we can ever more do can affect them. Let us cherish their memory, and weep beside their tomb, and recall their virtues. But let us also take comfort in the thought that they have entered into their rest, and are beyond all our trouble. Moreover, let us remember that the living remain to us. They are our care. They may be our anxiety. While dear ones gone before are with the Lord, dear ones who survive may be wandering away from Him—wounding Him by their lives, or putting His cause to an open shame. Our main business is not with the dead, but with the living, whom we may succour and help and guide. Let the love of the past be enshrined in our heart, and the thought of the departed live in our memory—a sacred fire, consuming all frivolous and unworthy affections; but it is the work of the present hour, and the care of those who need our care, which should engage our anxiety and task our energy. Our concern is not for the child resting on his father’s bosom and sheltered in a happy home, but for him who is entering into the world with its temptations, or who may be astray in darkness and unable to find his way. Our thoughts follow not the return home, but the uncertain outset; not the peril that is over, but the danger that still threatens; not the soldier who has fought a good fight and brought home the spoils of victory, but him who may be still in the midst of the battle wrestling for very life. And so it is always where there are still difficulties to be overcome and duties to be done—good to be wrought either for ourselves or others—that our concern should lie. It is not sorrow in itself, but sorrow with anxiety, that the apostle would have us cease to cherish for the dead. They are happier in God’s care than in our own. We cannot touch them by our solitudes, nor soothe them by our ministrations, nor move them by our prayers. So far from repining, we should therefore be thankful, if we cannot rejoice, that they are beyond our feeble keeping—that God has taken them to His own everlasting arms, and set them in one of those “many mansions” where He has prepared a place for them, and whence they shall “no more go out.” “And I heard a great voice out of heaven, saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be

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His people, and God Himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”⁸⁹

Such a prospect is not one to make us sorrow as others which have no hope. Should our eyes no more behold loved ones who have left us, and upon whom our lives leaned more than we ever knew before their arms were finally unclasped from ours, and the shelter they made was for ever taken away,—let us not yield to weakness or despair. But let us look beyond the darkness to a higher light. Let us carry our thoughts from earth to heaven; and again, when the darkness is past, let us remember the duties of the day—assured that in due season we, too, shall reap if we faint not, and enter into our rest. “And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them.”⁹⁰ “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.”⁹¹

Such worthy aims and hopeful aspirations should especially mingle with our sorrow when, as now, we are led to recall the departure of the wise and good; and our thoughts for the dead are thoughts not only of love, but of reverent affection and of deep respectful tenderness. The late Princess,⁹² sister to our gracious and beloved Queen, was one whose memory is justly blessed, as her life was not merely blameless, but in a rare degree a true and beautiful life,—studious of all things high and pure, lovely and of good report, thoughtful not only for her own things, but for the things of others also. It is the presence of such genuine and noble natures, faithful to duty, firm in good, ever aspiring through all weakness and imperfection, that helps us more than aught else to realise a higher and more enduring being, a spiritual sphere above and beyond us, where the unfinished good will be complete, and the aspiration become a fact; where, moreover, hearts that have taken counsel together here how to live well and do their duty fitly, shall be joined in bonds never more to be broken, and in yet loftier endeavours after all that is true and right.

Let us not fail to be followers of so Christian an example. Let such a loss, and every thought of dear ones who have passed away, inspire us with hope yet unattained, as well as

89 [Revelation, xxi. 3, 4.](#)

90 [Revelation, xiv. 13.](#)

91 [1 Corinthians, xv. 58.](#)

92 The Princess Hohenlohe-Langenburg, who died at Baden-Baden, Sept. 23, 1872. The remarkable character of the Princess, “her fine intelligence, and sweet, serene nature,” will be found noticed in Mr Martin’s *Life of the Prince Consort*, ii. 478.

with regret for a past that can never be regained. Let us awake from all indifference, and laying aside all pride, vanity, or self-indulgence, give ourselves faithfully and heartily to Christian work. All have work to do, trusts to be discharged, aims to be fulfilled, evil to be overcome, good to be realised. Let us not weary in well-doing. How often, alas! do we spend our days in idleness and our nights in vanity. What small occupations engross us, what poor anxieties and ambitions torment us, what paltry pleasures absorb us! The time is passing away, and we are not redeeming it; the hour of death is drawing near, and we are not preparing for it. Let us take care lest, a promise being left us of entering into rest, any of us should come short of it through unbelief or negligence. Let not science nor the world steal our hearts from God; but humbly feeling how little we know, and how much we need, may we look upward both for light and help. May we “hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering,” and run with patience the race that is set before us, so that at last we may lay hold of eternal life, and through the grave and gate of death may pass to the inheritance of the saints in light, and dwell for ever with the Lord, that where He is, there we may be also. The departed saints shall welcome our faithfulness for they await our coming, and without us they shall not be made perfect.

“Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do His will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

Preached in Balmoral Castle,

Sunday, Sept. 29, 1872.



VIII.

LIGHT IN THE FUTURE.

Revelation, xxii. 5.—“And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light.”

THE future is to us the unknown. We speak of it as dark and inscrutable; and so in a true sense it is. We know nothing in detail of that future life which is promised us in Christ. We cannot conceive it, or bring before our minds any true image of it. The more we may try to do so, the less do we probably realise the Divine ideal. The picture may be splendid and attractive; but it is our own device. It is the reflection of our own imagination. It tells us nothing which it has not borrowed from our own thought. And it may be doubted whether all the pictures of this kind men have formed do not rather tend to lower than heighten the reality. They have clothed and vivified the unknown; but they have at the same time reduced its sublimity and carnalised its joys. There are minds in a time like ours which, in order to keep the idea of a future life before them at all, find it necessary to unclothe the picture, and to sink all its details in the conception of an illimitable good.

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But it may be said, Does not the language of such a chapter as this and the foregoing give us some definite picture of the future celestial life? I cannot think that it does, or that it is meant to do so. We read of a new heaven and a new earth—of the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God as a bride adorned for her husband, having the glory of God, and her light like unto a jasper stone most precious; with three gates on the east, and on the north, and on the south, and on the west, and its walls having twelve foundations, garnished with all manner of precious stones; with a pure river, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb; and on the other side of the river the tree of life, bearing twelve manner of fruits, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. But the very accumulation of this imagery, and its parallelism of numbers, is enough to show us that it is not so much designed to convey any clear image as to excite and stir our imagination to an indefinite wealth of excellence exceeding all our vision and grasp. It is rather of the nature of a child-picture, suggesting a transcendent reality, than any indication of what that reality is in itself. The colours are glowing and splendid; but the true heaven—“the tabernacle of God with men”—is behind all the colouring and material imagery. The glory of the Divine presence is not in precious stones, nor crystal streams, nor fruitful and life-bearing trees, whose leaves are for healing—beautiful and consecrated as are all these emblems of the higher life. It is something transcending our most glorious imaginings. For “eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath

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prepared for them that love Him. But God hath revealed them unto us by His Spirit.”⁹³ The heavenly Future is a spiritual reality answering to a spiritual faculty in us, as yet imperfectly developed. It may be somehow foreshadowed by these material pictures—we can hardly tell; but it does not itself consist in any of them. They cannot adequately or even truly express it. As we pass them before our minds, we may get some impulse towards a larger or more fitting conception—and there are minds that can rest on such pictures, and delight in them; but we are never to forget that they are only pictures, and that the reality is something more than all—it may be, something very different from them all.



But can we then know nothing definitely of the future life? Is it to the Christian, no less than it was to the pagan, a formless vision? Are there no voices from it ever reach us? Cannot we say what it will be to the longing soul that looks towards it, or the weary spirit that sighs after it? This, at least, we can say, first of all, which is more than the pre-Christian mind could say with any certainty, that it is. If we are Christians at all, we cannot doubt that there is a future life. Or if it be too much to say that we cannot doubt this—for there are moments of intellectual perplexity in which we may doubt anything—yet we know that it is a clear point of Christian faith that Christ hath made known to us eternal life in Himself. He hath assured us of an abiding existence beyond the present. He “hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”⁹⁴

But not only do we know that there is a future life in Christ—we know also that it is a life of promised happiness. There are certain things said of it which admit of no question. The language of Scripture—if necessarily material and inadequate, as all language descriptive of spiritual facts must be—is yet so far unequivocal. If it does not show forth all the reality of heaven, nor even touch its purest essence—if it be always loftily reticent of its employments—it yet leaves no doubt as to many of its incidents. There shall be no darkness nor evil, no harm nor sin nor uncertainty, in the higher life. There shall be an enduring felicity and clearer insight in the presence of God. There shall be, in short, “light in the future.” Dark to us now as we look forward to it, it is yet in itself a sphere of light. It is “the inheritance of the saints in light.” The veil of darkness rests on it to our mortal vision, and we can never get behind this veil. We can never see the glory that is within, however we may strain our highest sight. But the darkness really is not there, but here. The shadows lie around us now. The image of night is for the present, and not for the future. There is effulgence within the



93 [1 Corinthians, ii. 9, 10.](#)

94 [2 Timothy, i. 10.](#)

veil. "There shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light."

Both the negative and positive statements of the text suggest a few remarks.

I. The idea of night may not at first seem something to be specially got rid of. There are many beautiful and peaceful associations connected with it, as it invites us to relax the work of the day, and to lie down beneath its shelter in grateful rest. But all such imagery is to be taken in its broadest meaning. And night is in common speech the synonym of evil. It is the season of uncertainty and fear, of perplexed and timid wanderings, of weariness, sorrow, and danger. Even when we lie down to rest, and try to forget our daily cares, if there is any sin or trouble or misery in our lives, it then finds us out, and weighs most heavily upon us. Dark thoughts come nearer in the darkness, and stretch pale fingers of terror towards us in the watches of the night. Men shun it as they shun apprehensions of evil, and mix it up in their thoughts with ideas of privation, calamity, and suffering.

For this, of course, is the meaning of the figure. In saying of heaven that there shall be no night, it is implied that all the darkness and evil of our present lives will be done away. Here we are encompassed by many uncertainties, and the mystery of suffering is never far from any of us. The strongest, brightest, and happiest lives may be prostrated any moment by some swift inroad of disease, or shadowed by some sudden cloud of misery. How often is it the darling of a family, the best-hearted and the most helpful—how often the most self-sacrificing in a community, or the most wise and beneficent in a State—who are taken away! It is well that, when life is advanced and work done, there should be an end. But the uncertainties of our present state are strange beyond all thought,—youth in its bright promise suddenly smitten down to the ground—work which none else can do left unfinished—the thoughtful and radiant intellect in a few hours of suffering silenced—the maiden in her bloom, the wife in the morning of her love, the husband or father, the stay of many other lives, removed as by a stroke. Our beauty is made to consume away like a moth; verily, man at his best estate is vanity.⁹⁵ "We wait for light, but behold obscurity; for brightness, but we walk in darkness. We grope for the wall like the blind, and we grope as if we had no eyes: we stumble at noon day as in the night; we are in desolate places as dead men."⁹⁶ A dreadful irony seems to mark the world's dreams of happiness. The most radiant sky suddenly fills with clouds. We are dumb, we open not our mouths. Words are vain to measure our bewilderment or make known our suffering. We can find no clue to the darkened mystery. We gaze around, but there is no gleam of light. We lift our heart on high, but there is no voice

95 [Psalm xxxix. 5, 11.](#)

96 [Isaiah, lix. 9, 10.](#)

from the calm heights. Nature smiles upon the breaking heart, and heaven is dumb to the despairing cry.

This is but a poor sketch of the pain and uncertainty that enter, more or less, into all human life, and make so much of its experience. It is little any one can say of that which all who have any heart must often feel. The commonplace of life is its deepest tragedy, and its darkest mysteries look out upon us from its most familiar scenes.

In the future heavenly life all this pain and perplexity will be no more. If we know anything at all, we may be said to know so much as this. In the city of God—the new Jerusalem—there shall be no more suffering. Whatever now enters into our life, as dread, or anxiety, or misery, shall have for ever gone. They that dwell therein shall be secure with God Himself, and abide in perfect peace. “God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain.”⁹⁷ Everything characteristic of our present frailty shall have vanished. No bodily ailment or mental anguish shall any more be known—neither the lassitude of exhaustion, nor the weariness of despair, nor the madness of a misery which can neither be borne nor put away. Only try to realise what a life that will be in which there will be no suffering, in which the energies will play without fatigue, and consciousness never be enfeebled or darkened. We try in vain to realise it fully; and we fall back again upon the language of this book, as answering better to our imperfect conceptions than anything else. “What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence come they? And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple: and He that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb, which is in the midst of the throne, shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of water; and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.”⁹⁸

II. It is much that we know that the future life will be thus free from suffering. It will, as such, be an infinitely higher life than we can now anticipate. But cannot we be said to know something more of it than this? The text, and other texts, assure us that it will not only be free from darkness, but full of light. The night shall not only have passed away, but the sun of righteousness shall have arisen. There shall be no need of our feeble lights of candle, or sun—for the Lord God Himself shall give even of light. Can we understand any-

97 [Revelation, xxi. 4.](#)

98 [Revelation, vii. 13-17.](#)

thing of what is here meant? What is the higher insight and knowledge that thus await us in the future?

Some have pleased themselves with the thought that there will be a higher science in the higher life—that “one of the great joys and glories of heaven will consist in the revelation of the marvels of creation by Him by whom all things were made.” We can hardly tell as to anything of this kind. It is a fair presumption that man’s perfected powers in the higher life will find scope and success in all directions. The curiosity of knowledge can never be supposed to die out of the human mind, but to grow and expand with every increase of power and an enlarged field for exercise. We cannot doubt, therefore, that among the blessings of heaven will be an augmentation of higher knowledge. But as to its special character, we learn nothing; and there is no reason whatever to believe that such knowledge will come to us in any way essentially different from the processes of labour and patience by which it is acquired on earth. In order not to degrade rather than heighten the idea of the future life, we must always carry into it a true idea of humanity—a humanity, that is to say, not merely passive or mystical, but also rational and inquisitive. We can conceive of no state as one of happiness in which man should cease to search for knowledge, and by his own intellectual activity to add to its stores. A state in which revelation superseded inquiry, or light came flooding all the avenues of mind without exertion or research, would be a very imperfect heaven.

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We must remember, also, that heaven is everywhere in Scripture a spiritual rather than an intellectual conception. It is an idea of excellence, and not of mere superiority. A higher knowledge must enter into it—because man, as an intellectual being, loves and enjoys knowledge, and we cannot think of any element of true human enjoyment apart from it; but the supreme idea of the future as of the present life set forth in Scripture, is always moral and spiritual. Man is estimated according to goodness or badness, and not according to wisdom or ignorance. A man is said to be fitted for heaven not as he has grown in knowledge, but as he has grown in spiritual insight and self-sacrifice—in faith, hope, and charity. And it is the special characteristic and highest blessing of heaven that the education which is begun here is perfected there. When it is said, therefore, that “the Lord God giveth them light,” it is the light of a higher spiritual experience and excellence that, above all, is meant. In short, the revelation of heaven, we may be sure, will be a revelation of spiritual insight rather than of intellectual discovery—an illumination of life rather than of thought—a glory of character rather than of science.

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Those who have studied the lives of religious men—of the higher and more spiritual order—must have noticed how frequently they are able to rest in God when all seems restless and disturbed around them; how they seem to have a clearer vision and a calmer strength in moments of peril. This is because they abide with God, and in His presence find light

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and peace. They have got near to a Divine centre, in which they have a source of light which is not darkened although all else may be darkened around them. It is easy to discredit this strength and clearness of the religious life, because in their very nature spiritual qualities are incommunicable. They cannot be passed from mind to mind, like gifts of external knowledge. They are from above—from the Father of Lights; subtle communications of the Spirit rather than processes of thought. But they are beyond all doubt a real experience and a real power in the world. Men and women know that God has made to shine into their hearts “a marvellous light”—that He has given them to understand, if not the secrets of their lives, or of the lives of others, yet that in and by all that they suffer and all that befalls them, they are being educated and blessed. Life may be often dark to them as it is to others, and the shadows may lie so thickly around their path that they stumble and know not their way; but there is also in their experience something more than in that of others—a consciousness of Divine guidance and of a Divine end—a ray of light, it may be only a single ray, let down from heaven, which saves them from hopelessness and assures them that love has not forsaken them.

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Now, all this is from the spiritual side of our being—from the silent increase in us of faith and humility. We cannot force it; we cannot create it. No struggling with the problem of existence will ever give it to us. It comes to us in quiet moments. It comes from an unseen Source. It is with us, and we know not how, when with patience we wait for it, and from the depth of a darkness in which we ourselves can see no light the day dawns, and the day-star arises in our hearts. Light thus grows even here from spiritual life, and in the heavenly state we may infer that this accession of light will be greatly augmented. That abiding with God, which is the strength of religion here, will be there perfect. Faith will be realised, hope fulfilled, and love unbounded. God Himself will be with us, and be our God in conscious vision. Out of this higher richness of spiritual being, and this nearness to the Divine, there must come a fulness of light which is now inaccessible. God Himself will impart to the saints in light from His own stores. “The Lord God giveth them light.”

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There seems reason to think that we shall then not merely rest in God, free from all suffering and pain—our mortal life stretching behind us as a toilsome way along which we have come to a blissful end—but that we shall get from the great Source of light a higher insight into all the meaning of life. We may not be able more than now to read all its mysteries, even on their practical side, or to understand how we or others have had to pass through great tribulation. How far the history of the moral discipline of humanity may be revealed to us, or whether we may ever, from serener heights, see therein a divine philosophy now uncomprehended, we cannot tell. But so far we may infer, that the discipline and plan of our own life, and therefore also of other lives, will be made clearer to us. We will come

to understand the reality of a loving Will in all our trials, the presence of a Divine Purpose encompassing us when we knew it not, and working for our good when we had least thought of such a boon. And this higher insight, we may be sure, will not be there, any more than here, a mere intellectual gift—a power to understand all mysteries and all knowledge; but a spiritual endowment—a light of life, radiating within us from the Divine Father, near whom we dwell, and from whom cometh, there as here, “every good and perfect gift”

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Need I say, further, that as all our worst darkness here comes from sin, from the wilfulness with which we too often turn away from good and choose evil, so it will be the absence of sin in heaven which will make us open to the light, and more than all intensify our spiritual vision. Who amongst us has not felt the confusion that is born of sin—how it entangles our motives, ensnares our hearts, and prevents us from seeing our highest good? Who that is true to himself does not know that there are times when even the best draw a veil over their consciences, and are content to rest in some delusive form of selfishness that obscures from them the Right and the True? This darkness of self-will lies close to all here—a hidden spectre embraced too often as an angel of light—our own ignorance, fanaticism, or religious pride, glorified as the truth—our own pleasure as the Divine will. And who can tell the grades of darkness from which many Christian people are in consequence never delivered in this world? Their very spiritual sight is blurred; and the light that is in them being darkened, how great is that darkness! But in heaven there shall be no sin—no self-deceit of the conscience, no impurity of the affections, no perversity of the will;—the “old man” will have perished in death, and the new man alone survive, “which is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created him.”⁹⁹ Think what a flood of light will come from this cause alone, when the spiritual sight has been purged from every film of self-delusion, and the vision of the Divine falls with unbroken strength on our purified souls. Then indeed shall we see face to face, and know even as we are known.

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Let us then, as we would rise to the light of heaven, put away from us now all the works of darkness. Let us live as children of the light and of the day. If the future is to be to us a future of light, the change must begin in us here. God must dwell in our hearts by faith. We must walk in light, “as He is in the light.” “If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth.”¹⁰⁰ The light that is to grow into the perfect light of heaven must be kindled in us now. It may still be but a feeble spark, hardly glowing amidst the more active embers of selfish desire, but the breath of heaven is waiting to fan the feeble flame into a glow that shall shine more and more unto the perfect day. “Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the

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99 Colossians, iii. 10.

100 1 John, i. 6.

power that worketh in us, unto Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.”



IX.

GRACE AND FREEDOM IN CHRIST.

[Galatians, iv. 10, 11.](#)—“Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.”

HERE, as so often, the aim of St Paul is to exalt the idea of religion, and to fix it in its essence—to carry the mind away from mere form and ritual to the reality of spiritual truth and life. There is not only an unwonted force, but an unwonted irony, in his words. Not that irony is unfamiliar to St Paul; on the contrary, it plays an important part in his writings, as all who read his epistles with attention must know. But there is something almost harsh here in his tone. The Galatian perverts—to use an expressive modern term—had kindled his indignation. The very strength of the love which he bore to them, and which had once been so warmly reciprocal, flashes forth in the changed circumstances with a scorn which has a scathing touch in it, which wounds while it pierces.—“Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.”

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The words, even if they stood alone, would well deserve attention from their emphasis and point. They come straight from the apostle’s heart, and leave no doubt of the intensity of his feeling. But similar words, although without the touch of scorn that marks these, occur more than once in his epistles. In the great Epistle to the Romans, for example, which presents so many points of resemblance to that to the Galatians, he says, in the fourteenth chapter, “One man esteemeth one day above another; another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it.”¹⁰¹ And again, in the Epistle to the Colossians—a much later epistle in the series—he says further, “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holiday, or of the new-moon, or of the sabbath days; which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.”¹⁰²

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It is impossible not to feel that there was something vital and important in the thought of the apostle which underlies these sayings. They are quite as emphatic and authoritative as some others upon which we build large conclusions of doctrine. They plainly point to some temptation to which religious people—for the Galatians, even in their perversion, were strongly religious—are liable; some principle to which they would do well to take heed.

101 [Romans, xiv. 5, 6.](#)

102 [Colossians, ii. 16, 17.](#)

It is our present business to inquire after this principle and the temptation connected with it, and to see what good we can get from the apostle's words. Here, as always where they are marked by such a straight personal reference, we will best reach the general principle, and the lesson which it bears to us, by a consideration of the circumstances in which the words were uttered, and the original meaning they were intended to have. What did St Paul mean for the Galatians when he spoke to them with such indignant scorn of their observance of days, and months, and times, and years; and added that he was afraid, in consequence of this, that all his labours amongst them in turning them to the love and service of Christ might prove in vain?

I. Now, first of all, we may be sure St Paul did not mean to reprove the Galatians because they merely observed certain days and times—because they esteemed certain seasons as more sacred than others. We may be sure of this, because we know that St Paul himself observed days and times. One of the earliest intimations of the first day of the week being consecrated and set apart for Christian worship is found in connection with the apostle, as when we read in the twentieth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles as follows: “And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them.”¹⁰³ There is every reason to conclude that, so far as Sunday was observed as a day of special worship in the Christian Church, St Paul joined in its observance. From a very early time, although we have no means of tracing clearly the usage, the first day of the week was marked by the Christian Church with unusual solemnity—the solemnity of rejoicing thanksgiving—as associated with the resurrection of our Lord from the grave. It was the memorial of Christ's great work finished, and of the crown of success put upon it, when He was “declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead.”¹⁰⁴

But St Paul not only observed the first day of the week, or Sunday; no doubt also, when he had opportunity, he observed the Jewish Sabbath, or Saturday. Here, again, we have no very distinct details; we must be content to draw inferences from general facts. But these facts are quite adequate for our purpose. St Paul, in becoming a Christian, did not, any more than the other apostles,—although he advanced in many things beyond them,—cease in outward things to be a Jew. His whole life and his whole mode of thought were an unceasing protest against the necessity of Christians generally being at the same time Jews. But he himself knew when to protest, and when to observe. On his very last visit to Jerusalem, after all his new convictions were thoroughly formed and enlarged, we are told that he went into the temple with other four men to purify himself,¹⁰⁵ Now, this was a far more definite

103 [Acts, xx. 7.](#)

104 [Romans, i. 4.](#)

105 [Acts, xxi. 26.](#)

Jewish act than the ordinary keeping of the Jewish Sabbath; and there is no reason, therefore, to suppose that this observance was obnoxious to the apostle.

It would have been very strange, indeed, if it had. For it is beyond doubt that the “Twelve,” as they are often called in contrast to St Paul—the original apostles of our Lord—all remained Jews while they became Christians; they never thought of abandoning their old form’s of worship. The first great struggle of the Christian Church was not respecting the retention of such things by those who had been Jews, but respecting the necessity of their imposition on those who never were Jews. The question, in short, was not as to whether a Jew could at the same time be a Christian and retain his old religious habits—no one ventured to doubt this—but as to whether a Gentile could become a Christian without first becoming a Jew—a quite different thing.

It was this latter point that formed the great struggle of St Paul’s life—in reference to which he withstood St Peter¹⁰⁶—and which is the key that opens his meaning here, and enables us to see to the clear depth of the thought which now, as often, animates him in his epistles. The Galatian Church was not a Jewish, but a Gentile Church. There may have been Jews in Galatia, as there were certainly Judaisers after the apostle’s first visit. But the first Galatian converts were evidently Gentiles. They were, in fact, as the name bears, *Celts*—a Celtic colony which, during the migrations of this nomadic and aggressive people, had settled in the district then called Asia, and which we commonly call Asia Minor. They had received the Gospel from the apostle himself; they had welcomed it with great eagerness, with something of that enthusiastic and unintelligent zeal which is a characteristic of the Celtic race to this day, in religion as in other things. They were fired by the apostle’s earnest passionateness in proclaiming a crucified Saviour. They were carried away in the excitement of a reciprocal earnestness. They received him, he says, as “an angel of God,”¹⁰⁷ and they would have plucked out their very eyes and have given them to him.¹⁰⁸ This enthusiasm seems to have been all the more that the apostle was evidently labouring under some bodily infirmity at the time when he first carried to them the Gospel. “Ye know how, through infirmity of the flesh, I preached the gospel unto you at the first.”¹⁰⁹ Plainly the conversion of the Galatians had been a striking event in the apostle’s experience, as well as in their own—one of those powerful waves of enthusiasm which are seen at times to mark the rise and progress of all real religion. Nothing had come betwixt them and the dear Saviour whom St Paul had exhibited before them, crucified for their sakes. They had been swept right away

106 [Galatians, ii. 11.](#)

107 [Gal. iv. 14.](#)

108 [Ibid. iv. 15.](#)

109 [Ibid. iv. 13.](#)

from all the accidents of religion to its very heart and power in Christ. They were running well,¹¹⁰ having entered into the full freedom of the Gospel, and found their joy and strength in this freedom.

But suddenly a change came over them. False teachers had gone amongst them and perverted their minds from the simplicity that is in Christ. As quickly almost as they had responded to the apostle, do they seem in their ignorant enthusiasm to have responded to the new teachers. “I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ.”¹¹¹ Their gaze was averted from the crucified One as by a new fascination. “O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you?”¹¹² They began with the spirit; they had sunk to the letter, and hoped to be made perfect thereby. Having known God, or rather been known of God,—having felt the nearness of the heavenly Father in Christ—they had turned again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto they desired again to be in bondage.¹¹³ How could they do so? the apostle expostulates with them—the affectionate ardour of his heart after them in Christ almost forgotten for the moment in the depth of his contemptuous indignation at their apostasy. “Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.”

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The apostle felt for the moment as if his whole mission amongst them was lost. Had they been Jews, it would have been nothing to have retained the rites of Judaism. They would then probably have realised, as the apostle himself did, that while these rites had a claim upon them from many sacred memories and associations, they were yet, after all, non-essential. They could not really help their higher religious life. They might not have gone the length of saying, with the apostle, that they were “weak and beggarly elements.” Neither St Peter nor St James would have gone so far, nor perhaps have approved St Paul’s language. They did not see so far as he did, and possibly they thought there was danger in his latitude. But their position was withal as honestly Christian as his was; and while he withstood St Peter to the face, when guilty of the intolerance as well as the discourtesy of not eating with the Gentiles at Antioch (an act which was essentially unchristian in spirit, and which could only be justified on an unchristian basis of thought)—while he did this, he would not have interfered with Jewish compliances, so far as they were practised by Jews. This would have

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110 [Galatians, v. 7.](#)

111 [Ibid. i. 6, 7.](#)

112 [Gal. iii. 1.](#)

113 [Ibid. iv. 9.](#)

been inconsistent with his own standard of toleration, "Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind."¹¹⁴

But it was quite a different thing for Gentiles, after having once entered into the freedom of the Gospel, to turn back to the beggarly elements, which could be nothing to them unless supposed essential to their salvation. Why should a Galatian keep Jewish days or observe Jewish rites, unless he had raised such rites and the observance of such days to the level of Christ Himself? Why should he occupy himself with "works of the law," unless these works had come to assume for him a vital religious meaning, and his spiritual life been made to depend upon them as well as upon the grace of Christ—or even more?



Now, to do this was in the apostle's view, or in any right view, to abandon the Gospel altogether to remove, as he says, from him that called them into the grace of Christ unto another gospel,¹¹⁵—a gospel of formal observance which could really bring them no spiritual good. This was why the apostle addressed them so harshly. They had degraded Christ and His grace. His blessed sacrifice, which had so moved them at first, and into whose quickening and consecrating power they had entered with such glad enthusiasm, they had put comparatively out of sight, and sunk to the old Jewish level. Christ as the sole source of salvation—the idea of grace as the supreme idea of religion—this was the great principle which lay beneath the apostle's thought; and the neglect of this was the heresy and sin into which the Galatians had fallen.

II. And here also is the great lesson of the subject for us. The apostle by these sharp words would fix our thoughts upon the essence of religion as found in Christ, and in Him alone. It is the inward reality of religion in contrast to any of its external adjuncts—the justification of the individual soul before God through the sacrifice of Christ—which always, more than aught else, kindles his enthusiasm. As he says in the Epistle to the Romans, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" hath made us free from all other law—the law of works as well as "the law of sin and death."¹¹⁶ Or, as St John has it in his Gospel, "This is life eternal," that we know "the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom He hath sent."¹¹⁷ For us, in short, no less than for the Galatians, the heart and power of religion is Christ; and the true religious life is to be found, not in any accident of rite or keeping of days, but in union with the heavenly Father in Christ, and in the sacrifice of our own will to do His will. Before our eyes, as before the Galatians, Jesus Christ has been



114 [Romans, xiv. 5.](#)

115 [Galatians, i. 6.](#)

116 [Romans, viii. 1, 2.](#)

117 [John, xvii. 3.](#)

evidently set forth crucified, to the end that we might be moved by the sight of Divine love, and have fellowship with His sufferings, and be conformed to His death. Christ Himself—nothing more and nothing less—is the power of God and the wisdom of God for our salvation. In Him “we have redemption”¹¹⁸—at once the forgiveness of our sins and the strength in our own life to die unto sin and to live unto righteousness. By His grace—and by no other means—can our evil natures be subdued, our hard hearts softened, our wills rescued from the bondage of sensual appetite and frivolous desire, and made vigorous for duty. Nothing short of Christ can do all this, and nothing else than Christ is needed to do it. This was what the apostle himself had felt in passing from Pharisaism to Christianity; and he is jealous, therefore, of anything being placed above the grace of Christ, or even near to it. To fall back on anything besides this grace or lower than it, is to run the risk of losing all—of removing unto another gospel.

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It is true that religion in us, as in others, may be helped by many accidents—by great doctrines which we cherish reverently, and by divers rites and forms which we keep stately. These—doctrines and rites alike—may seem to us so closely identified with Christ that we can hardly separate them. And to meddle with them may seem to be meddling with the very essence of religion. There may be much that is good and right in such an attitude of mind. Neither here nor anywhere does St Paul, any more than his Master, say anything against an intelligent devotion to religious forms; a Sabbath-keeping which is reasonable, however punctilious—or a ritualism which is without superstition, however elaborate. These things have their appropriate sphere in religion—if only we remember that they are not of its essence. They do not, any of them, make religion. They may greatly help it; and some may be more helpful to us than others, and therefore better for us, more prized by us, than others. But none of them so belong to religion that unless we have them we cannot be religious, or unless other people have them they cannot be religious. So soon as we begin to discriminate religion by any such formalities, we are in danger of sinking from the true evangelical position. To take up the words of the apostle once more, we are in danger of removing “from him that called us unto the grace of Christ unto another gospel.” We come under his merited rebuke, “Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.”

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With a view of bringing out the lesson more clearly, let us take by way of illustration the case, immediately suggested by the text, of keeping Sunday. We have seen already that the apostle could not mean to disdain such an observance. He himself kept Sunday. There is reason to think he kept the Jewish Sabbath besides. He did the latter because he had been bred a Jew—and Jewish rites had had a strong hold of his religious life; and it is not easy,

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118 [Ephesians, i. 7.](#)

and can seldom be a good thing, for a man to separate violently between his former and later religious life,—to break off sacred associations and try to dwell in an entirely new atmosphere of feeling and thought. So in part St Paul remained a Jew. But he had learned of Christ to regard all he did as a Jew in a right spirit. He knew that he had “received the Spirit,” not “by the works of the law,” but “by the hearing of faith;” and having begun in the Spirit, he knew that he could not be made perfect in the flesh. St Paul’s Sabbath-keeping, therefore, was to him, as a Christian, no longer an essential part of religion. He did not suppose that keeping the Sabbath, any more than the Christian Sunday, made him righteous or acceptable before God—which the Jews did, and he himself had formerly done. He had the true righteousness “which is of God by faith of Christ;” and what was to him, therefore, the keeping of a day?

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And is not St Paul’s way in this matter a good guide to us? Let us be assured of our higher ground,—let us take care that we are one with God in Christ—that the love of God and of our brother is in our hearts—and then our Sabbath-keeping will take care of itself. We may keep the day more strictly, or we may keep it less strictly, but we will keep it to the Lord. The higher Spirit in us will suffuse itself through our whole life. And whatsoever we do in word or in deed, we shall do it in the name of Christ, “giving thanks to God and the Father by Him.”¹¹⁹ But let us come down from this higher ground and attach importance to special modes of keeping the Sabbath,—let us speak of any outward ordinances, any specialties of observance, as absolutely divine law—our own view of which is not only good for ourselves, but compulsory upon others, without which they cannot be religious—what is this but to fall to the level of the Galatian apostates—to remove unto another gospel—to mix up the life of religion with beggarly elements; in other words, to materialise and dishonour it? What is it but to sink the life in the form, the essence in the accident—to turn away from God and the soul’s rest in Christ to the bondage of burdens which neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? What is it but to confuse men’s sense of religion—to falsify their ideas of sin, and hence their ideas of righteousness; and so to leave them a prey to the first form of superstition which may be powerful enough to lay hold of them?

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But let us take a still more general illustration, no less in the spirit of our text. St Paul, we have seen, when he became a Christian, did not altogether cease to be a Jew; and this was still more true of the other apostles. In this very Epistle, as already adverted to, there is unhappy evidence of the extent to which St Peter allowed the old unsoftened Jewish spirit to assert itself in his conduct, and of the manner in which St Paul was forced to withstand

119 [Colossians, iii. 17.](#)

him. “I withstood him to the face,” St Paul says, “because he was to be blamed.”¹²⁰ Of St James, the author of the Epistle known by his name, and the head of the Church in Jerusalem, there is reason to think that he never ceased to be a Jew at all, and that he only imperfectly understood the freer Christian views of St Paul.

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What a lesson is there in all this for us, who have sometimes difficulty in recognising each other to be Christians because we do not belong to the same Christian communion or Church, as it is called! What a monition as to the right way in which we should regard all such outward distinctions! These distinctions may by no means be unimportant—they may have much value for the life of religion in some; but they are all of its accidents—none of its essence. And so soon as we begin to look upon them as essential—as marking religion in men, instead of merely denoting the sections of the religious community—we begin to fall to the Galatian level. We come to think of our denomination—Presbyterian, Episcopalian, or something else—more than of Christ, and of the keeping of rites more than of the hearing of faith. We leave the Gospel of St Paul, and sink to that of St Peter in the moment of his temporary aberration at Antioch.

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Suppose, for example, I am a Presbyterian. I am so because I attribute importance to its simple forms and ancient heroic spirit of religious independence. Besides, I have probably been bred a Presbyterian, and become accustomed to its ways, and therefore I remain attached to it reasonably on those grounds of good sense which are really the highest grounds in such matters. This is in the spirit of St Paul. But suppose I am not merely myself a Presbyterian, but insist upon others becoming Presbyterians, because, forsooth, I have settled that Presbytery is a divine law—something without which a man’s salvation is in peril; then I sink to the spirit of St Peter, which St Paul rebuked. I lose sight of the reality of religion in its accidental manifestation, and am on the verge of superstition, if I have not already passed it.

And if the illustration is reversed, it is equally true. I may be an Episcopalian, heartily attached to Episcopal order and worship. This is well. I may see advantages in this order and worship which the Presbyterian Church does not seem to me to offer. The preference rests on a reasonable basis. St Paul would have had no quarrel with it. But suppose I am not content with this ground, but take what religious organs are fond of calling higher ground—but which is really infinitely lower—and contend that my Episcopacy is not only good for me, or in itself reasonable, but something vital for all—without which there cannot be a Christian Church or the logical courtesy of Christian recognition; suppose I begin to make much of consecration and succession, and the grace of rightly-administered sacraments, as if apart from these the soul were in danger,—what is this but to invert the true religious

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120 [Galatians, ii. 11.](#)

order not only to fall away from the true evangelical spirit, but to substitute the very letter for the spirit, and change the substance into the form? What would St Paul have said of those who do such things? “Ye observe festivals—ye prate of succession—ye wear vestments. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.”

The conclusion of the whole is, that we should aim by the divine blessing to have always a more inward sense of religion, a more living hold upon God Himself and Christ our Saviour. This is the root of the matter, that we know God, and Jesus Christ, whom He hath sent. If only we have this, all else will fall into its place. We will know how to prize our religious forms, our sacred seasons, without putting them for a moment in the place of Him whose presence alone consecrates any form, or makes sacred any season. We will prize our own Church and our own modes of worship without disparaging others, or thinking that they are necessary conditions of salvation without which men cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Above all, we shall be strong for duty, and patient in trial, and earnest in every good work. It is only the inward reality of religion that can sustain and help us in the stress of life. It is only Christ Himself that can bless us when the world fails us. It is only the living God who can be our refuge when darkness enters into our lives, and the stroke of unaccountable trial may wound our affections and embitter our experience. It is the simplest religious thoughts that then help us most; and we feel that if God be with us, we need none else. He is the health of our countenance and our God. Let us, then, strive to be ever nearer to God, to have more of His love and grace in our hearts; so shall we find Him more in every accident and accessory of worship, and so shall we have more strength for duty, more patience in trial, and a more assured hope that we shall at last enter into His rest and be made partakers of His glory. Amen.



X.

RELIGION—CULTURE—RITUAL.

[John, vi. 63.](#)—“It is the Spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing; the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.”

HERE are few words used more vaguely than religion: and there are good reasons why the word should not be restricted to any narrow use; for there are few things of broader meaning, or which cover wider spaces of human life and history. Religion is not only personal, but social and national. It not only touches man in his divinest moments, but it touches human nature in all the higher phases of its activity—takes expression in great doctrines and great institutions, and re-creates itself continually in many beautiful forms of art and worship. It is the most pervading element of all civilisation; and even those who disbelieve or contemn it in its ancient idea, bring it in again in some new and altered sense. So long as human life and society retain any sacredness or worth, we may be sure that they will never dispense with religion.

Yet it is well for us also to get behind the more general meaning of the word, and to ask ourselves what is the distinctive character and essence of religion?—what it is to be religious, and how we can become religious? How may the Divine be brought home to us, and made a living power within us, so that we shall not cheat ourselves or others with the shadow, but enjoy the substance, and be quickened unto eternal life?

The words of our Lord, more frequently than any other words, let us into this secret—open, as it were, for us the very door of heaven, and bring us close to the Divine. They take us away from all the accidents of religion to its essence, and from all its shadows to its substance and reality, so that we can never have any doubt as to wherein it consists, and what is the true source of its life and power. The words before us are full of meaning in this respect; and this meaning will be more apparent when we consider them in their connection, and in the light which they gather from the circumstances in which they were spoken.

Our Lord had just performed one of His greatest miracles. The effect of his miracle-working upon the Galilean multitude was sudden and decisive. They saw in Him the long-promised Messiah. They said, “This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world.”¹²¹ Plainly this was not the result of any spiritual vision in them, or of any aspiration after the diviner gifts of Christ; but their imagination had been kindled by the miracle of

121 [John, vi. 14.](#)

the loaves and fishes. Their sense of power was excited, and of what they could do, with Jesus at their head. And so they desired to “take Him by force and make Him a King.” But our Lord was grieved by their dull-heartedness and carnality. He had wished to awaken their higher longings, and to lead from the “meat which perisheth” to the “meat which endureth unto everlasting life.”¹²² Their minds clung to the loaves and fishes, of which they did eat “and were filled.” They had no higher thoughts, and did not care for any. And so our Lord left them, saddened; and on the following day He was found at Capernaum, having crossed over the Lake of Galilee during the night. Thither the people came seeking Him, but still with no higher aims than before—inspired not by the spiritual power of His teaching, nor even by the Divine aspect of the miracle which they had seen, but only because they had been fed in a wonderful manner. Our Lord, moved by their dulness, enters into a long explanation of His mission; of His relation to the Father and to them; of His character as the true bread, “which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world.”¹²³ He tried to make them realise the great fact of Divine revelation in Himself, as having come not to do His own will, but the will of Him that sent Him; and to quicken within them that gift of faith which sees for itself the beauty of the Divine, so that, seeing the Son and believing on Him, they might have everlasting life.¹²⁴ But they understood Him not—they murmured when He said, “I am the bread which came down from heaven. And they said, Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? how is it then that He saith, I came down from heaven?”¹²⁵

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Obviously our Lord’s higher teaching was of little avail in such a case as this; and the more He spoke to these Jews of the Bread of life, and symbolised the Divine food of the soul by His own flesh and blood—His own incarnate and living presence amongst them the more hopelessly did they wander from His meaning, and catch at the mere vesture instead of the living substance of His thought. Many even of His disciples—of that inner circle which had gathered around Him with some appreciation of His spiritual mission and character—were astonished at His doctrine, and said, “This is an hard saying; who can hear it?”¹²⁶ And “when Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples murmured at it, He said unto them, Doth this offend you? What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where He was before?”¹²⁷ Do my words now offend you? Do they present a difficulty to your faith? The time is coming when your faith will be more tried by my removal from you, and my resumption of that celestial

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122 [Ibid. vi. 27.](#)

123 [John, vi. 33.](#)

124 [Ibid. vi. 38, 40.](#)

125 [Ibid. vi. 41, 42.](#)

126 [John, vi. 60.](#)

127 [Ibid. vi. 61, 62.](#)

state from which I have come to abide with you for a season. You must rise above the mere visible and carnal to the Spiritual everywhere—and in the life of Divine communion with me, through my words, enter into that higher sphere in which truth is discerned and life is quickened. “It is the Spirit that quickeneth” or maketh alive; “the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.”

I. The great principle here expressed is, that the sphere of the spirit is the only sphere of religion in the highest sense. All outside this sphere is unprofitable for divine quickening. That we may become religious, or enter into communion with the Divine, we must be made alive. Life within us must be quickened by a higher Life above us. The spring or essence of all life is in the Spirit, and spirits must touch before life can be awakened. No mere contact of form—no mere community of opinion—no effort of self-culture—no devotion to ritual—nothing whatever that is outside, material, or intellectual merely,—can make a soul alive, and reveal to us God, or even the depths of our own nature. The Divine Spirit alone can do this. The spirit in us alone responds to a Spirit above us—to a new Power of affection and will that goes right to the heart, quickens it, and makes it living—or, as it is said, revives it. There is a real process of revival therefore at the root of all religion. And it is the common instinct of this which gives such power to what is called *Revivalism*. Men feel that quickening must come to them—that it is not enough that they do this or that—that they cease to do evil and learn to do well—that they raise their eyes towards a distant heaven which they long to enter. They must be turned from death to life; they must be seized by a force which is not their own. A strong wind must breathe upon the dry bones of their own best endeavours, and make them live. The Spirit of God must come and lay hold of their heart, and infuse His own living presence everywhere, till the quickening has gone beneath all the surfaces of character and all the motions of will, and started within them a new power of good, which has its fruit unto eternal life.

No one who accepts our Lord’s teaching, or the teaching of the New Testament, can doubt the reality of this Spiritual influence or that it is the source of all genuine religious life. The Gospel is thus always a Gospel of revival. It is the power of God to awaken us out of sleep, and to quicken us to newness of life. The Divine Spirit is alone able so to change and move the human spirit as to make it alive with the pulses of a new and nobler being.

But all-essential as this transcendent and Divine side of religion is, we need not therefore exaggerate it. It can never do good, but evil, to isolate religion from the other forces of life within which it works. The Divine Spirit is the only source of religious life; but the Spirit works in many ways. It never ceases from working. It is higher than nature; no mere processes of nature can ever produce it; but it works through every element of nature and of education. It is distinct, and always to be emphasised in its distinction; but it refuses to be noted and

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measured by itself. “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.” Religion is a mighty power in human life. It is a power from on high; and the dark chaotic depths of human selfishness and sin are only moved to their centre and reduced to order by this rushing mighty wind. But it is nevertheless a force in close harmony with all that is noble or reasonable in human life. It is no insanity of intellect, or of fear, or of passion, such as many make it. It is, on the contrary, the “spirit of power,” but also “of love, and of a sound mind.”¹²⁸ A man’s religion is not something to be separated from himself, or added as an artificial product to his nature. The Divine capacity is always in him, waiting to be quickened, educated, and strengthened into a richer blessing; and religion is the spiritual flower of his whole nature, the sanctification of all his activities both of mind and body. Springing from a Divine impulse, it is yet never a mere impulse or seizure from without, but a power within, diffusing itself through his whole being.

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It is all the more necessary to bring out this comprehensive aspect of religion in its development that we are now dealing with its Divine source. Let us not exaggerate on the one side, nor diminish on the other. Religion is never to be conceived as mere superstition or Puritanism, isolating itself in what are believed to be purely Divine acts, apart from the realities of common life and duty.—But neither is it in any case a mere natural or humanitarian development. The “flesh” cannot profit it. Always it springs from God,—from no lower source. No combination of mere natural or educative influences is able to produce it. In order to be religious, it is never enough to try to be good—to keep our hearts and our lives right if we can. This is a great deal, and none who are trying honestly so to do can be far from the kingdom of God. Still, it is God Himself who alone can bring us within His kingdom, and give us a share in it. His Spirit must quicken and make us alive. Let us think of religion as broadly as we may, and interpret it as rationally as we can, yet it is always something more than reason or education or good conduct. It is a *Divine life within us*; and nothing short of this Divine life can make man really good, or raise him to a true spiritual ideal.

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This will appear more clearly if we glance for a little at two other sides of our higher life sometimes confounded with religion.

II. There has been much said of culture in our day as a power of good in human life. It is such a power, beyond doubt. It is much for a man to hold before himself some ideal of life after which he strives, whether this ideal be more intellectual or more aesthetic—more of the nature of a scientific vision to whose severe order of fact he conforms himself—or more of the nature of an artistic harmony to whose finer tones he strives to subdue his

128 2 Timothy, i. 7.

spirit. Whether we aim to model our lives by the lessons of science or of literature, we may model them to much good effect. No life through which there shines the light of reason or of art is likely to be an entirely ignoble life. A man who has any thought at all, and still more a man who has high thoughts, may do much to improve his character, to educate, refine, and elevate his aspirations and tastes, and to give his life that touch of nobility which redeems it from the common mass. Those instincts of truthfulness and fairness, of sweetness and courtesy and toleration, which lie so deep in the best characters, are sometimes, it must be confessed, more directly evolved and more strenuously trained in the schools of science and humanity than in the schools of religion. The hardier virtues which make men confide in one another, and the sweeter graces which make life charming and beautiful, are seen to flourish in some who make no pretence to piety. The strength of human friendliness—the directness, simplicity, faithfulness, so often the stay of human souls in dire hours of peril—are to be found in those who, if their lives really rest in the Divine, have no conscious or desired resting there.

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We must frankly allow all the good that may thus come from self-culture. Probity, righteousness, verity, courtesy, charity, wherever they are found, are good. Let us never entangle ourselves in the sophistries of an older theology, and throw any veil of doubt over moral qualities wherever they appear. Virtues can never be splendid vices. So far as they are real, they are always good, and not evil. They are really of God, although there may seem no traces of their roots in Him.

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But first observe how very limited any such good must be. It is only the few anywhere who are in a position to contemplate the idea of moulding to themselves a noble or beautiful character. It is still fewer who, having possibly risen to such an idea, are able in any degree to carry it out. Life does not wait for our higher moments. Many are deep in it, with all its difficulties and temptations, before the ideal has arisen in the heart. And even when it rises, and the light which is more than that of common day flashes across our horizon, how suddenly does it often sink down again, and leave us where we were, in darkness and moral struggle! How often, moreover, is the ideal and the real in our own lives and the lives of others a mournful contrast—the performance mocking the promise, and by the humiliating spectacle of inconsistency so discouraging us, that we rise with an always weaker effort to the task of self-culture! For one man in whom the moral will is strong, and capable of a strenuous and aspiring self-education, there are hundreds in whom it is weak and vacillating. And how often is it sadly the case that the artist-nature to whom dreams of heaven are familiar—within whom the ideal lives with an ever-freshening morning-life—is specially incapable of translating dream into fact, or incarnating poetry in life?

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Ah! it is easy to speak of culture, and it is never untimely to preach the higher life: but if the preacher cannot look away from the feeble wills before him, so often trembling between good and evil, to a higher Will, and from men who dream of heaven, but too often grovel in the earth, to a Divine Spirit that quickeneth, and out of weakness perfects strength, his hopes for humanity must be clouded indeed. There may be much in the progress of religion and of the Church to excite distrust and even despair; but how much slower still is the progress of culture, and how constantly are we reminded that the most smooth and smiling surfaces of modern society, and what have seemed the most high and honourable characters, cover depths of unsuspected baseness! In all men, more or less, there is an evil spirit, ready to ripen into an evil power, of which no theory of culture takes account, and which no gloss of culture can ever eradicate. Circumstances may never call it forth, convention may decently veil it, social and intellectual influences may restrain or disguise in fair colours the demons of lust and selfishness; but all experience shows that they remain unsubdued under the most favourable appearances, and that they are ready to burst forth amongst the most polished, no less than the least polished, members of society. There is one Power which alone can kill the power of evil that is in every man, and that is the Power of good. The Divine Spirit can alone touch and change our spirits, and make those dead in sin alive unto righteousness. Culture may work marvels in a few favoured natures; but it is powerless alike to kill the deepest evil there is in the world, and to evoke the highest good. It is unable either to destroy the badness of common natures, or to reach to the spiritual depths of the finest natures. It leaves even a Goethe—its highest type in many respects—but a refined sensualist.

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But supposing that culture could do more than it can to raise and purify man's nature, it is still, on any Divine view of the world, a most inadequate discipline. If there is a Divine Power behind the world, and man be the offspring of that Power, he cannot have his full and perfect life save in harmony with it. In other and well-understood words, if there be a God, it must be the "chief end of man to glorify God, and to enjoy Him for ever." Apart from the Divine, man's life cannot grow into any healthy, active, or permanently happy form. If we are the children of a Father in Heaven, our hearts can only rest in Him who made us and formed us for Himself. In short—for it comes plainly to this—if there be religion at all, culture can never be a substitute for it. Our highest life can never be evoked save in full harmony with the highest Life of the world. And is there not evidence of this even amidst all the present imperfections of the Christian life? Is it not after all the "image of God" in humanity which is the noblest and most beautiful expression of humanity? There may be virtues of power and traits of nobleness which flourish apart from this image, or which seem to do so. The Church may not always excel the world. It may sometimes seem to fall below

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it. For the divine treasure is everywhere in earthly vessels strangely marred and broken. But withal, are not the finest types of human purity and goodness—of moral and spiritual excellence—found within the Church? “Love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance”¹²⁹—are not these the special fruits of the Spirit? Is it not the thought of God, and of Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, that alone calls forth in a man *all* that is good in him? Is it not the Cross of Christ that alone melts him to devout humility or touches him to holiest tenderness? When the soul, long wandering in darkness, has turned into the light of the Divine love—when, amidst the confusions of the world and the conflicts of sin, it has sought and found rest with God and peace with Christ,—is it not from such a centre of Divine strength that there grows the most perfect beauty and strength of human character—such *sweetness* and *light* as are found nowhere else in this world? Otherwise there may be much excellent and even splendid growths of character; but only out of this fulness of Divine sympathy, and this oneness with God in Christ,—an atoning strength lying at the heart of our lives, and ever renewing it with fresh grace,—comes the full maturity of the “perfect man.”

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III. But there are others who, having no faith in culture, would have us look to ritual. They admit readily the inutility of all that man can do for himself. They have no sympathy with the self-aspiring efforts which many are making to find a religion for themselves, or something which will serve instead of religion. But what man cannot do for himself, the Church, they say, will do. Come within the fold of the true Church, and all will be right. The Church, with its holy sacraments and offices, is the source of all spiritual life. Of course, there is a sense in which this is true. The Church is the body of Christ, the temple of the Divine Spirit; and wherever the true Church is, there spiritual life must be. If only we come within the reach of the Divine influence, we must share in that influence. If we come into the House, we shall share the Father’s blessing and the children’s portion. And, on the other hand, we have no right to look for spiritual blessing if we refuse the ministration and offices through which the Spirit works. A man can hardly fail to lose much good by standing outside the Church.

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But then, not to speak of infinite difficulties about the Church, which no candid mind can refuse to acknowledge, we must never confound the Church with the life of which it is the embodiment. It is impossible to begin religion with ritual, or, at least, to centre it there. We cannot quicken or cleanse a soul by ceremony. This would be to reverse the Divine order, and to make the outward more than the inward, the form more than the substance. It is “the Spirit that quickeneth,” and no mere semblance or even sacramental sign of the Spirit. “God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.”¹³⁰

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129 [Galatians, v. 22, 23.](#)

130 [John, iv. 24.](#)

Primarily, we must seek God and find Him. Our souls must thirst for God—for the living God—to see His power and His glory. Even if we could be assured as to the Church, and the true order of Divine worship, we may have the symbol without the substance, the letter without the spirit. It is impossible for any to deny this without denying obvious facts of experience, and even detracting from the supremacy of the Divine altogether. For if the Divine is only to be found in this or that outward form—if it is inseparable therefrom, and is present or absent according as the form or rite is present or absent—then, plainly, the very idea of religion is altered. It is not a spiritual quickening, or it may not be so. Devout seeming or ceremony may be enough. And this is the latent danger of what is known as Ritualism, that it draws men's thoughts away from the inward power of religion to its outward expression. It makes the vesture to be taken for the substance. But the most elaborate ritual, no less than the simplest form, dissociated from the Divine, are of no value. They can work no good. They can change no heart. They can turn no will from evil to God.

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But it is not necessary for us to disparage ritual, or pass any judgment on what is commonly known as Ritualism. There may be as much materialism, and of a coarser kind, in objection to Ritualism as in devotion to it. And wherever there is an enthusiastic spiritual life, there will always be a renewed interest in religious forms, and often an exaggerated feeling regarding them. It is always well to have a respect for religious forms, and to desire that these forms should be as comely and beautiful as may be in harmony with the best feeling and taste of those who use them. Do not suppose that spiritual religion is necessarily shown in a bald Puritanism, any more than that it is necessarily present in the most elaborate ritual. This is a mistake, we fear, many commit. They think their religion is spiritual because it has few or no forms; and the ceremonial which is dear to others is an abomination to them. This by no means follows. It is quite possible to be ritualistic and yet spiritual, and it is equally possible to be opposed to Ritualism and not to have a spark of the Divine Spirit within us. All that we say, and that our text implies, is, that ritual itself is never life—that form cannot produce spirit, however it may modify and cherish it. Spirit is alone born of Spirit, as Life alone springs from Life.

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But this life is always ours if we will only have it. The Divine Spirit is never straitened in its work. It is with us now as always, waiting to be gracious, encompassing our life, addressing our intelligence, soliciting our affection. It is nigh to us, even in our heart—save in so far as we do not banish it by sin. Only receive it—welcome it. It will come in and abide with you, and you will arise from the death of your sins and walk forth in newness of life.

Now unto Him who is able to save us—not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His power, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy

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Ghost, which He shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour—unto Him be all glory and power ever more. Amen. _____



XI.

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

[John, viii. 12.](#)—“I am the Light of the world.”

THIS is one of those short, pregnant statements of our Lord characteristic of this Gospel, which impress us at once by their brevity, their beauty, and their largeness of meaning. Statements of a similar kind—of equal terseness and force—occur to every one: “I am the Good Shepherd.”¹³¹ “I am the Resurrection, and the Life.”¹³² “I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.”¹³³ What divine audacity is there in such sayings! and how little can we suppose them to be the sayings of a mere teacher or prophet! They have no parallel in the words even of the greatest teachers. One and all imply something which the most powerful and enlightened, conscious of their own capacities to communicate truth or to do good, would scruple to arrogate to themselves. They might claim respect for the truth they speak, and summon man to attend to it with a voice of authority. But no human teacher merely would dare to make himself the centre of all truth, and the centre of the world. Yet this is what Christ expressly does. Not merely what He says is true or good—not merely are His words, words of authority. But He is Himself the source of all Divine knowledge and blessing. “No man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal Him;”¹³⁴ “No man cometh unto the Father, but by me,”¹³⁵—texts from the first and the fourth Gospels which we have purposely brought together in order to show that whatever differences may otherwise characterise the Christ of St Matthew and the Christ of St John, in this respect they are alike, that they equally claim to stand before all others with God. They arrogate a pre-eminence which, if it has any meaning at all, is superhuman and exclusive. It is the same Divine voice which speaks in both—the voice of no mere Teacher, but of a Revealer—one who is in Himself Light and Life. “I am the Light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.”

Not only is the manner of the text peculiar—having in itself a divine emphasis—but the image of light employed in it is specially made use of in this Gospel to characterise our Lord’s work and mission. In a subsequent passage in the twelfth chapter,¹³⁶ He Himself again says,

131 [John, x. 11.](#)

132 [Ibid. xi. 25.](#)

133 [Ibid. xiv. 6.](#)

134 [Matthew, xi. 27.](#)

135 [John, xiv. 6.](#)

136 [John, xii. 46.](#)

“I am come a light into the world.” And in the opening of the Gospel the mind of the Evangelist seems to dwell with a lingering fondness on the same conception of the Divine Logos of whom he speaks so grandly. “In Him was life; and the life was the light of men.”¹³⁷ “That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.”¹³⁸

We may be sure that there is a fine propriety in the use of this language. It is not merely that light is the most beneficent element of nature, and therefore one of the most striking symbols of Divine goodness. This, no doubt, it is; and this general meaning is also summed up in the use of the figure by St John. Men have always acknowledged with thankful reverence the glory and the freshness of the dawn, and the bright circuit of the sun, “rejoicing as a strong man to run a race.” The rise of religious thought in its higher forms is everywhere associated with the clear heaven stretching in brilliancy or calm beauty over the earth, and quickening its bosom with life and movement and gladness. It was the splendour of the sun shining in his strength, and the moon walking in her brightness, which more than anything else in the early years of our race awakened the depths of wonder in the human imagination, and the secret of trust in the human heart; and while we deplore, we can understand the special worship of which they were the objects. All that man imperfectly or ignorantly signified by this worship, is no doubt present in the thought of the Gospel when Christ is spoken of as the “Light of the world.” All ideas of beneficence, of hope, of life, and of happiness in nature which had gathered around the great source of light, to the Jewish and other minds were embodied in the application of the symbol to Christ. He was thought of as an illuminating centre for the world of nature as of men—as the “day-spring from on high,” whose advent was to bless all creation.

But here, as everywhere in Scripture, it is the moral meaning that is uppermost. Even the most beautiful conceptions of Nature-religion have little relation to the great realities with which the Gospel deals. The idea of light, long before the time of St John, had become spiritual in its religious application; and when Christ speaks of Himself as the “Light of the world,” it is no darkness of nature that He has in view, but the darkness that rests on men’s thoughts and life—the darkness that all true men feel more or less in themselves. Wherever men have risen to the power of thought, and are capable of looking “before and after,” there comes home to them a deep sense of their ignorance. Their outlook is fast bound on all sides; and “more light” is their instinctive cry amid encircling darkness, or a twilight of uncertainty more perplexing sometimes than darkness itself. They look upwards, and long that the day may break on their mental struggle, and the shadows flee away from their hearts. The outward light is not enough. The eye is not satisfied with seeing. There is the conscious

137 [Ibid. i. 4.](#)

138 [Ibid. i. 9.](#)

need of a higher light than ever lit up sea or shore. The darkness of the world, in short, is a moral darkness, in which man is often unable to see his true way or choose his own good.

The words of Christ all refer to this spiritual circle of thought. If we ourselves know nothing of this deeper experience; if we are living the mere life of nature, and pleased with this life; if the darkness of sin and of doubt be no distress to us,—then we will find His words without meaning. The whole atmosphere of the Gospels will be strange to us; because everywhere in the Gospels His life stands as a light against a background of darkness—a strength and hope amidst weakness and misery. Men are pictured as ignorant, yet inquiring—as helpless, yet aspiring—as searching for a higher life, while unable themselves to find it. He is all they seek, and all they need. He is the answer of God to all hearts, moved by the unrest of sin or the search for truth,—upon whom there has come the burden of thought, or the self-sacrifice of duty, or the tenderness of sorrow, or the awe of death. It is this inner world of thought and of spiritual aspiration which Christ addresses,—a world where the vision reaches below the outward sense, and takes, in the mysteries of human existence—its pathetic blendings of failure and effort, of knowledge and ignorance, of joy and suffering—its hopeless yearnings, despairing cries, and baffled aims. To all who know anything of this world of spiritual longing, the voice of Christ is a voice of welcome and of unutterable meaning. “I am come a Light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness.”¹³⁹

There was a special truth in our Lord’s words for His own time. Then the thoughts of men, both Jews and Gentiles, were deeply stirred by a spirit of unrest and inquiry. There were those “waiting for consolation” in many lands, and raising their eyes with a dumb or articulate earnestness to the heavens above them. The advent of Christ came as a response to this desire of all nations—as a burst of light amid prevailing darkness. Human thought was raised above itself, and moved forward in a path of clearer and higher knowledge. As the prophetic Scripture had foretold, speaking of our Lord’s coming, “The people which sat in darkness saw great light.”¹⁴⁰

It is not meant, of course, that there was no knowledge of Divine truth in the world before Christ. Apart from the fact of Old Testament Revelation, and the spiritual life which flourished within its circle, Christianity has no interest in depreciating the advances which men had elsewhere made in spiritual knowledge. Our Lord says nothing of these advances. His life nowhere touches at any clear point the tendencies of moral speculation, rife in His own day, or which had descended from an earlier age. Even those who take a purely human view of His character, and in this light have examined it most closely and brought its external

139 [John, xii. 46.](#)

140 [Isaiah, ix. 2;](#) [Matthew, iv. 16.](#)

features into the sharpest relief, have failed to connect Him definitely with any of the teachers in His own land. The wildest imaginations have not sought any point of connection between Him and Hellenic or Roman culture. He has nothing to say therefore of former philosophy or science or art. He lived and taught as if for Him these were not. Yet He has nothing to say against them, and His genuine doctrine is nowhere inconsistent with the fullest admission of their true claims.

Beyond doubt, men had learned much both of God and of duty before Christ. The higher literature of the ancient nations contain many glimpses of the Divine—many scattered truths which are of sacred meaning still, and which in many hearts may have served to lighten the darkness of the world's mystery and sorrow. It is a poor piety which cannot afford to be generous to all truth-seeking souls, and to welcome light, from whatever quarter it may come. It is a true view which regards Christ as above all other teachers—standing alone in His simplicity and grandeur. Far more eminently than any other, "*His soul was like a star, and dwelt apart.*" But it is also a true view which regards Him as the fulfilment of all previous aspiration and spiritual quest,—in whom the thoughts of many hearts were revealed.¹⁴¹ His star was seen not only in Bethlehem, but afar off in many lands. Many dreams of unconscious inspiration pointed to Him. He was "a light to lighten the Gentiles," as well as the glory of Israel,¹⁴² He gathered into one focus not only the converging rays of the older Revelation, but the dispersed and vague hopes of God and of a higher life which had been brooding in many minds beyond its pale.

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Let us admit to the full the value of all previous religious thought. This can hardly affect our estimate of the teaching of Christ. It remains, withal, singular in its power of illumination. If Philosophy raised its voice, summoning men to divine contemplation and heroic duty—if Alexandrian and Graeco-Roman culture sought to woo men to the practice of many forms of virtue—if Pharisee and Essene alike had their special ideal of the religious life,—yet how inadequate was the result! Nay, how inadequate was the ideal of one and all! To the common mind, which peculiarly requires the impulse and the strength of religion, the most aspiring culture was and could be nothing else than a dream. It remained unintelligible. It inspired no sustaining enthusiasm. It gave no life, and men were dead in trespasses and in sins. It gave no light, and men sat in darkness. It awakened no hope, and men were in the shadow of death. Then, as always, philosophy was for the few, and not for the many. It was eclectic, and not catholic. It was intellectual, and not spiritual. It was a speculation, not a life. Even if its light had been worth more, it had no power to reach the universal heart, and quicken it into spiritual movement. Say what we will for the highest forms of ancient thought—and

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141 [Luke, ii. 35.](#)

142 [Ibid. ii. 32.](#)

the mind is dull or uneducated that is not moved by their sublimity, or touched by their insight and tenderness—yet it was a darkened world upon which the light of Christianity arose.

It is a strange and grand retrospect, to look back on that second morning of the world, when there was proclaimed by angelic voices, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.”¹⁴³ “The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.”¹⁴⁴ After long preparation, yet with apparent suddenness, the Divine Teacher and Son of God came forth. From the quiet home of Galilee, and the streets of Jerusalem, the voice which “spake as never man spake” was heard in accents of celestial meaning. The light shone in darkness, “and the darkness comprehended it not.”¹⁴⁵: There was no immediate response to the Divine message. There never has been. But the power of a new Revelation had gone forth into a few faithful hearts, and gradually its kindling fame spread till it became a visible lustre in the earth. Men and women felt moved by a fresh illumination of duty and of Divine impulse. God and life were set in a new meaning, and seen in a radiance of clearness. The “Sun of Righteousness” which had arisen in Judea shone forth in the east and in the west, quenching in its living light opposing darkness, and filling the world with a spiritual beauty, and a strength of triumphant goodness, unknown before.

How are we to explain this? What was there specially in Christ’s teaching that gave light to men’s minds and life to their hearts? To answer such questions fully would require many sermons. We can merely indicate now two comprehensive points of view in which the teaching of Christ has proved a light to human souls beyond all other light.

(1.) Christ revealed to us God in a new or at least more complete sense. He made clear in His own life and words the Divine idea, as no one had done before, and no one has ever done since. Men had been struggling with this idea from the first efforts of religious speculation. It was still unformed and imperfect. Outside of Revelation it fluctuated and took many shapes, now presenting itself as a multiplicity of Divine energies, with more or less coherence; and now retreating into a vague Absolute or Necessity, encompassing all being, but without thought or love for any. Polytheism more refined or more sensualistic, and Pantheism more or less abstract, divided the thought of the Gentile world. On the other hand, the idea of God had been to the Hebrews one of growing clearness. He was the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob—the God of Israel, who had given the covenant on Mount Sinai, who had led their fathers by the way of the wilderness into the promised land—a

143 [Luke, ii. 14.](#)

144 [John, i. 14.](#)

145 [Ibid. i. 5.](#)

“jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation”¹⁴⁶—and yet also “the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin”¹⁴⁷—a holy God, “of purer eyes than to behold evil,”¹⁴⁸ even a Father whose pitying mercy was able to measure all the depths of our weakness. “Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him. For He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust.”¹⁴⁹

This sublime conception of the Hebrew mind was perfected in Christ. Every attribute of spiritual excellence was brought out into clearer distinction, and every element less exalted enlarged and purified. Hitherto the God of the Hebrews had remained too isolated and apart. With all their growth of religious intelligence—the voice of the Divine always breathing more clearly as we descend the course of their prophetic literature—there still clung certain restrictions to their highest conception. Jehovah was their God in some special manner—the Giver of their Law—the God of their Temple—who was to be worshipped in Jerusalem. They had difficulty in enlarging the Divine idea so as to embrace the human race,—in rising above local privilege and national prerogative to the thought of God as the spiritual Source and Guide of all men alike. Christ fixed for ever this great thought. “God is a Spirit,” He said; “and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.”¹⁵⁰ “Neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem,”¹⁵¹ was there any special virtue, so far as the Divine presence was concerned. This presence was universal and universally spiritual, embracing all life, claiming the homage and devotion, the faith and love, of all moral intelligence—the presence of the Father as well as the Sovereign of men.

The Divine idea was not only exalted in spirituality and comprehension, but moreover in moral beauty and tenderness. It had been especially hard for men to realise the idea of Supreme Goodness. There was so much evil and wrong in the world and in themselves, that they instinctively carried some moral as well as local limits into their conception of the Divine. Such limits appear more or less in the representations of Old Testament history. But in Christ they fall utterly away. All elements of vindictive jealousy, or of mere local protectiveness, disappear; and God, as at once Law and Love, Truth and Grace, shines forth with a lustre never to be dimmed. He is a just God *and* a Saviour—a God of Salvation by the very

146 [Exodus, xx. 5.](#)

147 [Ibid. xxxiv. 6, 7.](#)

148 [Habbakuk, i. 13.](#)

149 [Psalm ciii. 13, 14.](#)

150 [John, iv. 24.](#)

151 [Ibid. iv. 21.](#)

fact that He is a God of Justice—redeeming us because He loves us, but also because His righteousness demands our righteousness. Sinful and weak and miserable, we can not only fly to His pitying bosom, assured that we shall find “mercy to pardon and grace to help,” but “if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”¹⁵² In this combination of spiritual perfection, the God of Christ is unapproached and unapproachable—the Sum of all truth and purity and love—perfect in goodness, because perfect in righteousness—the supreme religious Ideal, whom all hearts may at once adore and love. As St John says elsewhere, speaking of the message transmitted to him by his Master, “God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.”¹⁵³



In all this clearer Revelation of the Divine, Christ proved Himself the Light of the world. Men’s thoughts were raised to God with a new confidence—with a clearer and brighter faith. The supreme Life became luminous to them as it never had been before—as it never is where the teaching of Christ is unknown or rejected. Let us cast aside His teaching, and the idea of God speedily again becomes obscure. Once more we sink into the old Pantheistic abstractions, or fall away from the conception of the Divine altogether, and seek to replace it by some ideal of the Cosmos or of Humanity itself. If Christianity is worn out, as some tell us, there is certainly no prospect of anything higher or better taking its room. Neither the audacities of Science nor the dreams of Positivism, nor the renaissance of a paganised culture, have been able to suggest any Ideal of comparable force or beauty to that with which Christ inspired the world more than eighteen centuries ago. No spiritual vision has ever equalled His, or is likely to do so. No light has since come to man before the splendour of which His is pale.



(2.) And this leads to the second aspect of this surpassing Revelation. Christ has not only made clear the idea of God, but the idea of man. The two ideas everywhere interchange, and react the one upon the other. The glory of Christ is, that He seized so clearly the spiritual essence of both, and set the great realities of the spiritual life in man in front of the Supreme Spiritual Reality, whom He revealed. There is nowhere for a moment any doubt in Christ as to what the true life of man is. He is here and now, a creature of Nature, like all other creatures; but his true life is not natural, like that of the fowls of the air or the lilies of the field. He is essentially a moral being, with relations beyond nature, and wants and aspirations and duties which connect him with a Divine or Supernatural order. From first to last this spiritual conception underlies the Gospels, and makes itself felt in them. There is no argument, because there is no hesitation. “Is not the life more than meat, and the body than

152 [1 John, i. 9.](#)

153 [1 John, i. 5.](#)

raiment?”¹⁵⁴ The possibility of a negative answer is not supposed. The claims of the natural order, some have even thought, are unduly depressed. The spiritual life seems to overshadow and displace them. But this is only by way of emphasis, and in order to rouse man from the dreams of a mere sensual existence. “After all these things do the Gentiles seek”¹⁵⁵—those who know no better, to whom the meaning of the spiritual and Divine order has not come. “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”¹⁵⁶ The spiritual must be held in its true place as primary; after this the natural has also its place, and to be recognised in addition.

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But the great thought is, that man is the dependent of a Divine kingdom, everywhere transcending the visible and present world. God has made him in His own image, and loves him, however far he may have degraded that image and wandered away from Divine good. He claims man as His own—as rightfully belonging to the higher world of spiritual intelligence, of which He is the Head. And so Christ came “to seek and to save that which was lost.” Surely this is a higher conception of human life than that of either ancient or modern secularism—a conception truer to the radical instincts of human nature, ever looking beyond the present, and owning the power of more than earth-born thoughts. From the fact of sin itself and a sense of wrong there comes a voice which speaks of something better—of a life akin to angels and to God. The very misery of man attests his greatness,¹⁵⁷ and that there is more in his life, which “appeareth for a little moment, and then vanisheth away,” than the experience of a day. Towards this thought the yearnings of all larger hearts, and the searchings of all higher minds, had pointed for centuries. It was the dream alike of Plato and of Cicero—of Egypt and of Persia. Hebrew Prophecy and Psalmody had grasped it more firmly as the Divine shone upon them more clearly. Yet withal it remained a comparative uncertainty before Christ. He, as no one before Him had done, held forth before men the conception of a higher life, greater than all the prizes of earth, and more enduring than all the accidents of time. That which was but faintly apprehended by Gentile philosopher, or even Jewish seer, was made manifest by the appearing and resurrection of our Lord, “who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”¹⁵⁸ Or, as St Peter says in his first Epistle,¹⁵⁹ “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which, according to His abundant mercy, hath begotten us again unto a lively hope,

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154 [Matthew, vi. 25.](#)

155 [Matthew, vi. 32.](#)

156 [Ibid. vi. 33.](#)

157 Pascal, Faugère’s ed., ii. s. 2.

158 [2 Tim. i. 10.](#)

159 [1 Peter, i. 3, 4.](#)

by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away.”

If light ever shone upon a darkened world, it shone in this clear revelation of immortality, in the assurance and strength of which a corrupt and dying world rose to life again, and a new glory was shed upon human thought and history. What heart, upon whom the shadows of the world have fallen, that has realised the transitoriness of earthly joys—the depth and sacredness of human affection too often vanishing when wrought into the very substance of our happiness,—does not warm into a nobler being, in hope of an eternal life, where the weaknesses of the present shall be perfected, its broken ties reunited, and its wounds for ever healed? Apart from this hope, what is there but darkness around and before us—the closed grave within which our dear ones are laid, and a heart breaking with the memory of a love that can no more reach us? But if we believe that Christ died and rose again—that He is, as He Himself said, for us, and for all who believe in Him, “the Resurrection and the Life,”—then the light shineth for us even in the dark places of our pilgrimage, until the eternal day dawn, and our poor life, too—so marred and soiled with the weakness of the flesh—shall be glorified together with those who have gone before, and be for ever with the Lord.

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The Divine Teacher who proclaimed and realised this undying hope for man, and fixed for ever the consciousness of a spiritual life—did He not truly say of Himself, “I am the Light of the world”?

Let us close with two remarks.

If Christ is the “Light of the world,” Christianity is always a religion of light. Obscurantism of any kind is foreign to it. It shuts out no real knowledge, no light of science, no beauty of art or grace of literature. It welcomes all truth. While we hold fast, therefore, to its living principles, let us never confound it with any mere scheme of human thought, or institution of human order. These schemes or institutions may have many claims upon our respect: so far as they commend themselves to our rational assent, let us refuse them no honour. But even the best ideas, and the best forms of the Church, of past ages, are not to be identified with Christianity itself. Opposition to them is not necessarily opposition to the Gospel. The abandonment of them is not necessarily abandonment of the truth that is in Christ. It is no part of an intelligent faith, therefore, to resist new ideas, or to shut itself obstinately within the enclosure of ancient traditions. Such a faith will respect the old, but it will be open to light from whatever source. So far as Christianity is true, it must be consistent with all other truth. It must accept all facts, whether these come to it from within or from without. It need fear no hostility from real science, and it will rejoice that the thoughts of men grow more luminous as to the Divine order of Nature or the growth of human opinion and history. If

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there are ancient dogmas at variance with the genuine advance of knowledge, the enlightened Christian will be ready to part with these dogmas. But having the witness of the higher life in himself, he will never let this witness go. He will hold to the consciousness of a Divine order made clear in Christ. All that is beautiful and heroic in humanity, all the lights of truth and duty that have shone in it from the first, are here brought together. Any higher light that is in me witnesses to the "Light of the world." And looking backwards on the past and forwards into the future, who can see anything so capable of blessing man truly or guiding him wisely and well?



And let us, finally, remember that a religion of light should be always a religion of living earnestness. If Christ is "the Light of the world," "he that followeth me," He adds, "shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." Have we, then, this light of life? Does our light shine before men, that others, seeing our good works, may glorify "our Father which art in heaven"? Do we not rather, some of us, walk in darkness, and love it, because our deeds are evil? Let us not deceive ourselves. We cannot have the light and yet abide in any darkness of sin. Let us, therefore, cast off the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light. Let us show the reality of our faith by the devotion and fruitfulness of our love. Then the truth of the higher life will need for us no argument. It will be seen in the power of goodness working in us, and in the beauty of a holiness that subdues all hearts. Amen;



XII.

THE CONTRASTS OF LIFE.

[Ecclesiastes, xi. 7-9.](#) “Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun: but if a man live many years, and rejoice in them all, yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many. All that cometh is vanity. Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.”

LIFE is full of perplexing contrasts. Its lights -^ and shadows intermingle in many a strange and pathetic picture, and it is difficult sometimes to catch its full meaning, and whither all its changes tend. They seem the sport of accident rather than the evolution of law. The tangled spectacle baffles comprehension and hope, and the spectator looks on amazed and distrustful. Is there a moral purpose beneath it all? Do not “all things come alike to all,” however they may live—“one event to the righteous, and to the wicked; to the good, and to the clean, and to the unclean.”¹⁶⁰ time and chance to all alike? “There is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever.”¹⁶¹ Nay, is man better than the beast? “That which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; . . . they have all one breath: so that a man hath no preeminence.”¹⁶² The wheel of life goes on in endless maze; and our portion in it of good or evil, of happiness or misery, is beyond our control. “The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done, is that which shall be done.”¹⁶³ Nature is a ceaseless routine,—duty, a laborious repetition—study, a wearying toil—pleasure, an exhausting excitement. Who will show us any good? and why should we not take life as it comes, without any high thought or anxious aims? “Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?”¹⁶⁴

This is not a high tone; but it is not always an unnatural one in the face of many perplexities. A certain cynicism may lie near to broad and sympathetic thoughtfulness; and the Preacher seems not to have been free from traces of such a feeling, as he surveyed the course of his experience, and tried to interpret it. At times the interpretation baffles him, and he sees nothing in life beyond its incessant alternations and the wearying round of activities which

160 [Ecclesiastes, ix. 2, 11.](#)

161 [Ibid. ii. 16.](#)

162 [Ibid. iii. 19.](#)

163 [Ibid. i. 9.](#)

164 [Ibid. i. 2, 3.](#)

lead to nothing, and have no meaning beyond themselves. We begin to wonder if he has anything to tell us beyond the vanity of desire, the disappointment of hope, and the negation of all noble ambitions as well as lower enjoyments.

But there is a higher spirit also running throughout the book, and rising into a clear and consistent meaning. In all the changes of life there is a purpose, obscure as it may often seem. In the day of health man needs to be reminded of his weakness. The mere enjoyment of life should never terminate in itself, for there is always more in life than the passing hour. It is running on, and taking new shapes before we are well aware. "Truly the light is sweet, and it is a pleasant thing for the eyes to behold the sun." But clouds may follow the sweetest morning, and days of darkness will come in the most rejoicing life. A man may live many years and rejoice in them all, and his heart cheer him in his youth. He may fondly take pleasure as it comes, and find happiness in many happy objects. But he is always to remember that there is another side to life than that of enjoyment. And he should keep before him not the half, but the whole of the picture. This of itself will give a meaning to life which the mere experience of its transitory moments will never give, and still less the abandonment of thought, in which many pass their lives, taking what comes of good and evil without ever trying to unite them into a consistent picture.



But more than this. Life is not only to be looked at on its darker as well as its lighter side. It must further be regarded on its moral side. It is not enough to be reflective, and to remember the days of darkness. We must get beneath all the superficial changes of life to the great fact of responsibility which underlies it, and alone gives it a complete meaning. It is this fact, above all, which is to be set against the fact of enjoyment as its great counterpart, and the conjunction of which with the other serves to glorify it and raise it into an ideal. The moral element is never absent from life. We must read it everywhere if we would not fall below its true end and purpose. Our highest moments of exhilaration should never dispense with it, or put it out of sight. For it is always there, whether we heed it or not. The handwriting is on the wall while the feast is advancing, and the characters of judgment come forth when the wine-cup is drained, and the guests are disappearing from the board. "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment."



Let us dwell shortly on the thoughts suggested by the text, so striking in the picture of contrasts which it sets before us.

I. And first, it may be well to recall the *reality* of the contrasts presented in life. Nothing might seem less necessary, seeing how these contrasts meet us everywhere in the world, and in our own experience. But, full as life is of pathetic meanings, we are often strangely insens-

ible to them. We may not regard them with indifference, but we fail to realise them. We may be free from the ignorant contempt which looks on all life as a chance, and its good and evil as alike contingent and worthless; but how few are able to enter with a sympathetic intelligence into phases of life of which they themselves have no experience! If we are well and happily circumstanced, we have difficulty in putting ourselves in the place of others who are otherwise. We know that life is full of misery, but we may have never known its burden, nor the days of darkness, which are many. Instinctively we put away all thought of pain and wretchedness, and sometimes even our imagination can lay but feeble hold of them. When we stand in the calm strength of morning, with radiance flooding the awakened earth, and “all nature apparelled in celestial light,” we have difficulty in recalling the night which has fled. Or when in summer-time the sunshine broods in every hollow of the hills, or sleeps in softness on the sea, we can barely imagine the wintry storm or the dreary gloom of an unlifted sky. So the man who rejoices in health and strength, with all his faculties of mind and body in full play, can hardly imagine sickness and weariness, languor and depression nigh unto death. The young man, in the pride of his youth and eager hopefulness—how little can he understand the old man, full of years and cares, and looking backwards rather than forwards with burdened eyes! The rich man, walking in the ways of his heart, with no material want unsatisfied and no wish unanticipated, may know that there are not far from his door poor and miserable wretches without bread enough to eat or raiment to cover them—but how little can he enter into all the difference between his own fulness and their poverty! The well-born and happy girl to whom no harm has ever come, who has been shielded by domestic care and social convention from the evil that is in the world—how little is she able to know the very name of the misery under which thousands of her sisters are perishing day by day! The horrors of war are a byword; but how little can any that dwell at ease realise them truly—the agonies of the wounded, the desolated homes, the bleeding hearts, the outraged sanctities, the inexpressible terror and horror and suffering which follow in its train!

And yet these are all facts in life. Everywhere weakness mingles with strength, sickness with health, poverty with riches, war with peace. The darker colours are everywhere wrought into the picture, and form a part of it as real as the other. Whatever be our experience, we are never to forget this. Especially if we are rejoicing in the light, we are to remember the darkness. This is the special caution of the Preacher, because it is that which is specially needed. The experience of pleasure is more selfish than that of sorrow—not always so, perhaps, yet commonly so. The strong man is apt to be insensible to weakness. He looks abroad upon life as if it were all his own and he has only to gather its ample treasures into his embrace. But all the while, even in his own case, dire change may be at hand. The springs of his strength may be sapping, and many days of weakness before him. The rich man may be near to poverty, while his gains seem growing and his spending lavish. The name of stainless

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honour may be gathering an unheard-of shame; the pride of innocence may be near to a fall; the light which has lightened others may sink in darkness.

Life is made up of this endless play and vicissitude of circumstance, often rising into a tragic pathos. The artist finds in it his materials—the preacher his moral. The one gives the picture—the other shows its lesson. Both help us to realise it; and the work of imagination lies nearer to the work of religion than is often allowed. No doubt it is possible to have the imagination quickened, and even the heart touched, without Christian sympathy being kindled into action, or any labour of self-denial for the good of others being ever undertaken. It is marvellous how little what are called softhearted people sometimes do for the world, while fond of talking of its wrongs and miseries; how much, on the contrary, is sometimes done by rough and plain people, who say nothing of their sympathies or affections. All the same, the imaginative and reflective elements lie close to the religious in our nature; and undoubtedly one of the greatest obstructions to spiritual culture and progress everywhere is incapacity or deadness of sympathy. Men and women are apt to be engrossed with their own little share of life. They are unable to conceive life as a whole even in their own case; its breadth of shadow as well as of light—or how the one is meant to fit into the other, and harmonise the whole to a higher meaning than it would otherwise have. They are content with the passing hour, especially if it be an hour of enjoyment. They would put away reflection, or sometimes it never comes to them. They feel that the light is sweet, and that it is pleasant for their eyes to behold the sun; and beyond this their thoughts do not carry them.

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It is needless to say that this is an essentially irreligious frame of mind barely a rational one. One of the first instincts of religious reflection is to realise the possibilities of life, and how perishable are all enjoyments, even if they last “many years.” The Preacher warns us to look ever from the present to the future,—from the light to the darkness,—and even from the opening portals of life to a judgment to come.

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II. And this points to the second and still higher view of life suggested in the text. It is not merely full of vicissitudes which should always awaken reflectiveness; but below all its vicissitudes, and behind all its joys and sorrows alike, there lies a law of retribution which is always fulfilling itself. It is only when we rise to this view of life that we rise to a truly moral or religious view of it. It is something, indeed, to have any serious thought at all, and to remember how frequently the darker colours are woven into the mingled web. No one who knows anything of the world, and the careless and selfish lives that many live, will undervalue any degree of thoughtfulness. For from the soil of a thoughtful sympathy much good by God’s blessing may grow. But as there may be thoughtfulness which runs out into cynicism, so there may be thoughtfulness which refuses to lift its eyes beyond the mere round of human experience of joy and sorrow, or which is even sceptical that there is anything

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beyond this round of experience. The darker side of life may be sufficiently felt, but the moral use of it all may be dimly seen or not seen at all.

It is the teaching of the passage before us, however, as of all Scripture, that life is only truly understood when realised as a moral development. It is not enough to rise above the passing hour, or to take a reflective view of the world and our own share in it. We must especially realise that all the moments of life have a divine meaning—that they are linked together by spiritual law—and are designed to constitute a spiritual education for a higher sphere. This is the true interpretation of the judgment which God has everywhere set up against life, and especially against its festive moments, as the most dangerous and self-absorbing. And therefore, while the young man is invited to rejoice in the days of his youth, and to walk in the sight of his eyes, he is to know at the same time *that for all these things God will bring him into judgment.*

It is wrong to forget the graver aspects of life in its lighter enjoyments; it is the mark of a poor, unimaginative, and selfish nature to do so. But life has more in it than any superficial moments of good and evil. It is essentially a spiritual order, or development of spiritual principles, always at work, and under the operation of which we are either growing into a higher good or sinking into a deeper evil. How many forget this! How do some views of religion even disparage it, in the manner in which they suppose life capable of dislocation, and delight to set one side of it against another! While in the world there is no more common delusion than that we may give our youth to vanity and rejoice with thoughtlessness, and yet catch up the duties of life at some onward point more vigorously than if we had not known youthful madness and folly. All such imaginations are broken against the great retributive law which runs throughout life and pervades every phase of it. If we give the rein to our pleasure-loving tendencies, and walk in the ways of our heart, unmindful of higher things, the “lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life,” will take hold of us till we not only do not think of higher things, but do not care to think of them—or even despise them as dreams of an impracticable Puritanism. There will grow from self-indulgence, deadness of heart; and from the love of pleasure, atheism of desire; till the very beauty of the natural life is worn away, and we fall into a selfishness which is capable neither of satisfaction nor of hope. Of this we may be very sure, that there is no unlawful gratification which does not bring sooner or later its own punishment—that there is no enjoyment which we have sought at the expense of temperance or purity which does not enclose a sting ready to burst forth and wound us in the hour of reaction, if not in the very hour of intoxication. This is an experience which never fails in some shape or another—an essential element of moral existence always asserting itself against every attempt to crush and destroy it—the undying witness of a higher meaning and a diviner end in life, even when it has fallen below all trace of a Divine ideal, and the Devil seems to have taken it as his own. So long as any



vision of good survives, it will torment the evil-doer; and when all self-torment ends, and the vision vanishes, surely this is the most frightful retribution of all. The dead soul is already given over unto judgment, and only fit to be carried to the place of darkness.

Moreover, it is to be borne in mind that life is infinitely related to, as well as bound fast in, moral law. Impulses to good or evil—above all habits of good or evil—work outwardly, as well as inwardly—work often through many lives, as well as the one life, which has its own education to make or mar. The retribution which may seem delayed in the individual, is seen to assert itself in the family, or in surrounding society. This, indeed, is one of the darkest aspects of that law of judgment under which all human life lies, when in its inevitable operation it overwhelms the innocent with the guilty, and stretches its long-delayed penalty over victims who knew nothing of the wrong. The evil seemed escaped, but its curse was only wrought deeper than at first appeared.

The voice of the Preacher, therefore, is no empty voice, as he summons us in the days of our youth, or of our riper age, to know that for all these things God will bring us into judgment. If it be a higher message, which summons us to receive the good news of a higher life in Christ, and to pass from all the weakness and helplessness of our own moral strivings to the fulness of Divine grace and strength in Him, yet there is also a true warning and message in the lower and sterner key of the text. The one voice is truly as much needed by us as the other. Nay, there are those within the divine circle of faith who would do well to remember it, and the whole lesson of our passage—so tender and yet so solemn—so discriminating in what it allows as in what it condemns.

The light is acknowledged to be sweet, and life pleasant. A man may live many years, and rejoice in them all. There is no harm in that. It is good for a man: the Preacher goes the length of saying, in another passage, that there is “nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour.” A healthy naturalism is nowhere condemned in Scripture—is nowhere at variance with the demands of Divine law, or the impulses of Divine grace. Neither are we required to measure everywhere our share of enjoyment with a scrupulous caution, lest we pass bounds. The young man is acknowledged in his natural freedom. His heart is allowed to cheer him in the days of his youth, and he may walk in the ways of his heart, and the sight of his eyes. There are no tones in the passage of ascetic Puritanism, any more than of mere cynicism. Life is good, and to be enjoyed; yet it is always grave, and the account is always running up against it.

The cynic is wrong who undervalues life either in its joys or sorrows. The Puritan is wrong who would stretch over it the shadows of an artificial religion, and follow all its steps with eyes of jealousy. The true view is at once earnest and genial, bright yet always

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thoughtful, looking to the end from the beginning, and forecasting the future, yet without anxiety in the experience of the present.

And this thoughtful insight, which is the best guide for our own lives, suggests also the highest view of life around us. The great advantage of looking below the mere surface to what has been called the “moral granite” beneath, which really makes the substance and power of human experience, is not merely that it makes us mindful of our own ways, and critical over ourselves lest we fall into condemnation, but that it helps us better to understand others. It feeds in us the springs of sympathy, and helps us to imagine difficulties other than our own. There may be good below many a surface where we see only evil. Wrong, no doubt, is always wrong, and selfishness we are never in ourselves or others to dignify with the name of amiable weakness. But every full-hearted man knows that there are forms of good more than his own—it may be better than his own—and that there are often higher thoughts and higher aims where he may fail to trace them.



A large and thoughtful view of life nourishes this tolerance towards others, as well as watchfulness over ourselves. Tenderness, charity, hopefulness—all spring from it. It is the man who grasps the deeper realities of his own life most wisely who will be most loving, and hopeful, and helpful towards others. As he knows how near weakness lies to strength in himself—failure to aspiration—selfishness to generosity—how inextricably the roots of sin and the shoots of virtue are entwined in his own heart,—so he thinks what good may lie near to what seems to him evil in other lives, how strength may come out of weakness, and God be glorified in ways that he knows not of. Let us be hopeful for others, while careful over ourselves, and leave lives around us to the judgment of God, while seeing always the awful finger of this judgment pointing to our own.

And now, unto Him who hath given us the promise of the life that now is, as well as that which is to come, and whose grace can alone strengthen us to live now so that hereafter we may abide in His presence unto Him be glory for ever. Amen.



XIII.

CHRISTIAN WORSHIP.

1 *Corinthians, xiv. 15-19.*—“What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also; I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also. Else, when thou shalt bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest? For thou verily givest thanks well, but the other is not edified. I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all: yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.”

THIS chapter, and particularly the verses we have read, give us something of a real insight into the character of the earliest Christian times. They carry us back, across more than eighteen centuries, and help us to see, as in a mirror, the Corinthian Church, and what its worship was, less than thirty years after the death of our Lord. I say this with confidence; because the Epistles to the Corinthians are admitted beyond all question, by all critics, however sceptical, to be the genuine writings of the Apostle Paul. They give us therefore, so far, a real picture of the thought and life of their time. The Corinthian Church, planted by the apostle, with its strange enthusiasms and mingled beliefs, stands revealed in them. And how very valuable and rare such a picture is, may be estimated by the difficulty we have in calling up before our minds any true image of facts or institutions only one or two centuries past. There are few things more difficult to do. Let us try, for example, to recall our own Scottish Church of the seventeenth century—to bring clearly before us its mode of worship, the attempt to displace which, in the summer of 1637, gave rise to the memorable tumult whose force spread through England as well as Scotland, and changed our whole history—how little would we be found agreeing in our reproduction of that worship, and the famous scene connected with it; how scanty the materials for their reproduction! How much harder still is it to realise the form of that ancient Celtic Church which prevailed in these islands before it was supplanted by the Latin or Roman Ritual—the Church of St Columba and of St Giles!¹⁶⁵ Apart from the difficulty which always exists of true historic insight and appreciation, we cannot be said, in either of these cases, to have adequate means of recreating the image of the past. Facts are wanting. But here at least we have before us a series of undoubted facts. All that the primitive Church was is not told us here. But the features which are given are clear and unmistakable. The picture may not be complete; because

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¹⁶⁵ This Sermon was also preached at the reopening of St Giles's Cathedral, or the High Church, after careful restoration, in the spring of 1873.

there was no intention of making it complete. But the lines are fresh and vivid, and they are from the hands of a master.

Let us contemplate the picture *first* in its details; then as a whole; and, lastly, draw from it the meaning or lessons which it contains for us.

I. The several details in the primitive Christian worship are here plainly indicated as four—to wit: (1.) Prayer; (2.) Praise; (3.) What is called “Giving of thanks;” and (4.) Prophesying. These all receive attention, and to some extent description.

(1.) Prayer takes precedence, if not in the chapter, in the verses we have more particularly made our text. And rightly so. For prayer is a primary instinct of all worship. Wherever there is any recognition of a Supreme Being, the heart rises spontaneously in adoration, gratitude, or supplication. The reality and intensity of this spiritual feeling is its own justification. And whatever difficulties it may involve to reason—however we may explain, or be content to cease from explaining, the relation of the Divine and the human will—the aspiration of prayer will never fail while men look beyond themselves to an invisible Power above them. Prayer was a prominent feature of the worship of the Synagogue; and thence, no doubt, passed in its customary form into the service of the Christian Church. But it took also a new spirit and mould in doing so.

As described here, it was obviously of a twofold character. “I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also.” The prayer of the “spirit” and the prayer of the “understanding” were not the same. The language points to a pervading distinction which runs through the chapter, and the general nature of which is easily apprehended, whatever difficulties its more special explanation may involve. The allusion is to the gift of tongues, spoken of at the commencement and in the close of the passage. This endowment was one of the most remarkable of the early Church. It appears to, have been common, to have been a mark of the Divine presence, and yet to have served no practical purpose of instruction or even intelligent devotion. For the apostle says, in the 14th verse, “If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful.” The prayer of the spirit was, therefore, an ecstatic utterance, somehow edifying to the speaker, but of no use to the Church. We are unable to tell more particularly what it was. Such phenomena of ecstasy have prevailed in later times, and can well be imagined as a phase of that powerful spiritual excitement out of which the early Church came. In the nature of the case, it is impossible to give any satisfactory explanation of a spiritual state which obviously transcended reason and the working of ordinary intelligence.

But the prayer of intelligence was plainly a higher gift in which all could join, and the good of which all could share. “I had rather speak five words with my understanding,” the



apostle says, “than ten thousand words in a tongue.” Great stress is laid here and throughout upon the point of intelligibility. And there can be no doubt that the prayers of the congregation—the “common prayers,” in which all participated—were understood of all. Evidently, also, the prayers of the early Church were free prayers, as yet unconfined to any set of words. The whole description implies this. Men and women are depicted as pouring forth their deeply-moved hearts before the Lord, irrepressibly swayed by the fervour of their feelings and their devout personal enthusiasm.

(2.) Praise is combined with prayer. “I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.” And in the Epistle to the Ephesians,¹⁶⁶ we read more fully of the early Christians speaking to themselves “in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs” (odes); singing and making melody in their hearts to the Lord. This language of a later Epistle¹⁶⁷ would imply that there was even thus early in the Church some traces of a Christian hymnology—or certain forms of metrical composition—for the special expression of Christian sentiments or feelings. The Psalms, no doubt, were sung or chanted as in the Synagogue; but the “hymns and spiritual songs” seem to have been something in addition.

Such a point cannot be clearly settled. We have no Christian hymns—other than those taken from the Gospels—earlier than the second half of the second century, or more than a century later than the Epistle; just as we have really no forms of prayer which can be traced beyond the same period. There are indeed liturgies, which pass under the name of St James and St Mark;¹⁶⁸ and these liturgies, although they have no genuine apostolic authority, may embrace ancient fragments of common or congregational prayers. Even so the earliest Christian hymns we possess may embody in fuller composition still earlier fragments of the Christian lyre. Some have pleased themselves with the thought, for example, that the germ of the well-known *Te Deum Laudamus*—traditionally attributed to the great Latin teacher, St Ambrose, of the fourth century may be found as far back as the time of Pliny and Trajan, in the beginning of the second century, when the former reported to the latter that the Christians of Bithynia “sang hymns to Christ as to God.”¹⁶⁹ The conjecture is not without some degree of probability; while there are other hymns, or parts of hymns, such as the *Gloria Patri*, the *Gloria in Excelsis*, and some beautiful snatches of morning and vesper

166 [Ephesians, v. 19.](#)

167 About five years later than 1st Corinthians, or about 62 A.D.

168 Neither of these liturgies, in their present form, can be traced higher than the fifth or sixth century. The Liturgy of St Mark, for example, directs that the “priest” shall repeat the Nicene Creed; and it is well known that that Creed was not generally used in the service of the Church till the middle of the sixth century. See Dr Swainson’s volume on the Nicene and the Apostles’ Creeds, pp. 133, 134.

169 In the well-known letter of the younger Pliny to the Emperor Trajan.

hymns, of very high antiquity.¹⁷⁰ Of those from the Gospels, the songs of Zacharias, of Mary, and of Simeon—the well-known *Benedictus*, *Magnificat*, and *Nunc Dimittis* of the Anglican service—I need not say anything. They had, no doubt, from a very remote period, their place in the worship of the Church. But the really significant fact is, that from the very first age there were evidently in the Church distinctively Christian hymns or songs, sung in addition to the Psalms of the Old Testament. The “new heart” given in Christ sought then, as it has always done, utterance in lyrical forms of its own. Fresh with new-born life, it was not content to confine itself to the older channels of devotion. It sought channels for itself, and consecrated anew both words and music to celebrate the ardour of its praise.

(3.) But besides “prayer” and “praise,” there is a special part of the early Christian worship described in the 16th verse as “giving of thanks” (eucharistia). It hardly admits of any doubt that the reference is to the solemn eucharistical service which accompanied the “breaking of bread”—the central service of communion round which all the other worships of the early Church gathered. To speak of this service at length, as it is depicted in the Epistles to the Corinthians, would lead us away from our subject. We remark merely on the one feature of it emphasised here. The eucharistical service was designed to be understood of all. The intelligibility commended by the apostle throughout is here specially enforced. For unless the thanksgiving was intelligible, how was it, he implies, to be responded to? It was that part of the Christian service, more than any other, meant to evoke the assent of the congregation, and to call forth their intelligent response; and its meaning would be defeated, therefore, if it partook of the nature of mere spiritual rapture or ecstasy. “Else, when thou shalt bless *with the spirit*, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest? For thou verily givest thanks well, but the other is not edified.” In short, when the solemn thanksgiving was offered, which remains to this day in all Churches so impressive a feature of the communion service, it was to be in words that all could follow, so that all with loud voice might say Amen. There was nothing in the early Christian worship more striking or beautiful than this loud-voiced Amen. “All the people,” Justin Martyr¹⁷¹ says in the middle of the second century, testified their assent to the great thanksgiving prayer “with audible voice, saying Amen”—an unerring witness of the antiquity of a beautiful usage, and of the clearly intelligible character which in the first ages characterised this most solemn act of Christian worship.

(4.) The fourth element of worship, and the prominent subject of the chapter, is “Prophesying.” We are in the habit of associating with this word the idea of prediction. But

170 See Bunsen’s *Analecta Ante-Nicaena*, vol. iii. pp. 86-90; Bingham’s *Antiquities*, Book xiv.; also *Anthologia Graeca Carminum Christianorum*. (Leipsic: 1871.)

171 1 Apol., 45.

neither the English nor the original Scriptural expression necessarily contain this meaning. They convey the idea rather of “speaking out;” and what we mean by *preaching* is nearer St Paul’s meaning, and indeed nearer the function of the Old Testament prophets, than anything else. The prophets were preachers of truth, righteousness, and judgment to come, far more than they were predictors or foretellers. “He that prophesieth,” says the apostle, “speaketh unto men, to edification, and exhortation, and comfort.” Prophesying was therefore no mere giving of an oracle, but the utterance of earnest and reasonable speech. It aimed at the mind and conscience. Those whom it addressed were intelligent auditors, “convinced of all, judged of all.” The secrets of their hearts were drawn forth, and their spiritual being awakened, so that “all may learn, and all may be comforted.” As prayer was the free utterance of devout feeling in the early Church, so “prophesying” was the free utterance of the “word in season”—the Divine message which searched the intelligence, quickened the spirit, and sought to exalt and purify the lives of those who heard it. And is not this the ideal of preaching always?—no mere formal discourse, or theological argument, or polemical or moral essay, or sentimental rapture, but a living message from speaker to hearers. If sermons were always living, reasonable, and luminous with intelligence, should we find them spoken of as they too often are? Do not men always gather willingly to listen to a true voice, and the words of free and earnest thought, animated by faith, and winged by the quickened impulses of the preacher’s own heart.

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II. But let us now turn from the details of this feature of primitive worship to contemplate it as a whole. What is the general impression which it makes? Do we not feel, as we call it up before us, how like in substance, how unlike in form, it is to later modes of worship? Here we have the several elements of worship to this day—prayer, praise, preaching, the eucharistic solemnity,—all with which we are familiar, whether as Presbyterians, or Episcopalians, or Congregationalists. In the Corinthian Church, about the year 57 or 58, we see the Divine original of our common service. We cannot ascend to a higher source. No one has a right to call upon us to descend to a lower. We are content to stand by this early fountain-head of Christian ritual, and to recognise thankfully how much there is here which the piety, hope, and sacred joy of eighteen Christian centuries have consecrated. Shall any one venture to say, in the face of this picture, that wherever men and women are seen humbly engaged in prayer, and praise, and thanksgiving in the name of Christ, there can be any doubt of the Christian character of the worship, and of its Divine sanction?

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But the Corinthian ritual is not more like in substance than unlike in form and detail to our diverse modes of modern Christian worship. The idea of an order of service is hardly found in the picture. The features have the freshness, but also something of the rudeness, of an original sketch. All the subjects are present, but they are indefinitely grouped—indistinctly, although powerfully outlined. We get the impression throughout of freedom, variety,

unsettledness—a common and strong enthusiasm pervading all hearts, and venting itself without restraint. “How is it then, brethren?” says the apostle; “when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying.”

There is plainly no trace of a formal worship, or of that “uniformity” which, in later times, has been deemed so important a note of the Christian Church. I hardly think that any existing ritual, whether Presbyterian or Episcopalian, Latin or Greek, would claim to be the counterpart of the picture here presented. No doubt they would severally say with truth that this is to be accounted for by the fact that the order of Christian worship was as yet unformed. With less truth they would probably add that *their* special mode of worship represents this order in its finally settled form. Statements of this sort hardly admit of an answer. The historical student nowhere finds anything absolutely settled in the ever-advancing growth of institutions, whether civil or ecclesiastical. All that need be said now is, that this picture of the primitive worship, however unsettled, is the only picture that, on any Protestant view, can claim a Divine original. Subsequent developments may be good or bad; but, at any rate, they are not apostolic nor primitive. This is the original whence they have grown. This is the first sketch, whoever may have filled in the picture.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing in the chapter, as well as throughout the Epistle, is the absence of any allusion to an order of clergy or office-bearers appointed for the conduct of worship. The “presbyter” or “elder” so often mentioned elsewhere, especially in the later pastoral epistles, is not even indicated. And this is the more remarkable, that the apostle here and elsewhere in this Epistle gives special injunctions as to certain disorders which had sprung up in the Corinthian Church. He says distinctly that such and such things should not be, but he nowhere says that presbyter or bishop is to take order to prevent them in virtue of his authority. No idea of presbyter or bishop, of priest or prelate, seems to cross his mind.

It is hardly necessary for me to say that this is no evidence that a Christian ministry or order of clergy is not good in itself, or even of Divine appointment. It would be unwarrantable, from the absence of allusion on the part of the apostle, to draw any such general conclusion. The real sanction of the Christian ministry rests upon that Divine necessity for order which is distinctly recognised and enforced in this very chapter. At the same time we may, we are bound to draw this inference, that an order of clergy of this or that definite type, with such and such grades of office, is not vital to the validity of Christian worship. It is scarcely possible to conclude less than this. For if the idea of Christian worship is only true or complete when a certain order of clergy conduct it, it is inconceivable that St Paul should not have let drop some hint of this in all that he says here or elsewhere as to the organisation of



the Church and its service. Not a word escapes him to this effect. Whatever he says implies the contrary. Two rubrics, and two alone, he lays down, and both are inspirations of Christian sense rather than formal impositions of authority. “Let all things be done unto edifying.”¹⁷² “Let all things be done decently, and in order.”¹⁷³

III. Let us, finally, inquire as to the practical meaning of the picture, or the lessons it bears for us.

Plainly it bears, first of all, a lesson of tolerance. If there is no existing mode of Christian worship that can truly pretend to be in all respects apostolic rather than others—if our several Churches so far preserve the apostolic lineaments in their service, while none can claim an exclusive identity with those lineaments—there is a clear duty of mutual respect and charity resting upon all. We may greatly prefer our own mode of worship, but we should have the intelligence and elevation to recognise that there may be good in other modes than our own. This may be styled latitudinarianism; but there is no harm in the word, nor, indeed, in the thing, whatever some good people may think. There is an unhappy craving nowadays after what are called decided and definite views in this as in other matters. The indefiniteness of the New Testament does not satisfy. There must be the voice of authority, and the clear-cut formula ready at hand. And, strangely, the same cry is heard with no less emphasis from the camp of unbelief. Here, also, authority is the watchword, and “uniformity” the borrowed flag flaunting once more its old lie in our face. For ourselves, we are content with New Testament freedom. People forget that to be authoritative and definite—what they call *decided*—in religious matters, where there are no data for decision, is folly and not wisdom. It is just as much our duty to hesitate when we do not see our way, as it is to advance without flinching when the path is open and clear. Suspense of mind may be painful, but it may be the only course in many cases for a wise, thoughtful, and fair mind. Plainly we are not bound to affirm—nay, we have no means of affirming—whether this or that form of worship be the true or only right form. There is no well-informed, enlightened, and candid mind but would shrink from such an affirmation. Our duty is therefore clear to use our best judgment, but to concede to others the same privilege. I have worshipped according to many forms in the West and in the East; and I have never found any where I could not find God, if my heart sought Him. Let us prize our own worship more than any other if we will, but let us never look with contempt or irreverence on worship other than our own. There is no inconsistency nor laxity in such an attitude. Nothing is further from true tolerance than indifference. When we belong to a Church, we may have—we are right in having—a special care for its worship; but let us never turn away in scorn from our Christian neighbour or his

172 Ver. 26.

173 Ver. 40.

worship, while we love the gates of our own Zion and the sanctuary where our forefathers prayed.

As to our own worship, the passage is full of instruction. (1.) This worship should be always intelligent. A ritual which is not plain and comprehensible to all minds, reaching the soul through all its forms, and flooding it with some true light or interest through all its elements of aesthetic grandeur or beauty, is so far imperfect. It is making more of the form than the substance—of the sign than of the thing signified. And this is a mark of corruption in all things, as it is a tendency against which all worship must more or less strive. When we see the mode displacing the matter, and the ritual made a substitute for the spiritual, there is always danger—and that of the worst kind—of lapsing from Christianity into a sort of paganism, and placing an idol in His room who is a Spirit, and must be worshipped in spirit and in truth.



(2.) But while our worship should be always intelligent and spiritual, it should also be always seemly or decorous. “Let all things be done decently, and in order.” While our reason and conscience are addressed, and our higher feelings evoked, our sense of order, propriety, and beauty should not be offended. Our taste and sense of art, in short, should be consulted as well as our spiritual intelligence. What really interferes with the one will outrage the other. This seems the simple and right rule in all questions of improving worship. Culture has its claims as well as reason, and we are bound to beautify our worship as well as to make it intelligible and earnest. Some of the disorders which the apostle rebukes in this Epistle were plainly the result of mere confusion and unmannerliness. Let not any think that when they are unmannerly in the House of God they are practising evangelical simplicity. Rather they are disobeying a clear apostolic precept, “Let all things be done decently.” So when we allow our worship to be unseemly in any respect; our prayers to be informal, confused, and dogmatic; our praise to be a harsh discordant noise, instead of a grave, sweet-toned melody; our communion service to be what it should not be—a series of preachings rather than a devout contemplation with solemn thanksgiving and loud-voiced Amen,—let us remember that the apostle is not for us, but against us. And let us strive to bring all things into harmony with his mind, which in this as in other respects was the mind of Christ, to which all our highest instincts, as well as our common needs, should be bound in blessed union.



(3.) Lastly, our worship should be always real and profitable. “Let all things be done unto edifying.” The aim of all Christian worship is to bring us nearer to God and to Christ—not merely to touch our heart, or soothe our conscience, or improve our minds, but to “edify” us—that is, to build us up in faith and holiness and comfort unto salvation. This is its highest end—the improvement of our spiritual character and of our daily lives. If a Christian Church be not a temple in the old sacrificial sense, neither is it a mere lecture



room or hall for discussion. It is, or ought to be, a school to bring us to Christ, that we may learn of Him whatever is true and good and holy. If it knows no altar save in a memorial or symbolic sense, all its lessons should yet point to the Great Sacrifice offered up once for all, and all its ritual lead to the Cross as the power of God and the wisdom of God for our salvation.

It is easy to think lightly of these things, or in these days to speak lightly of them. But life, for all this, does not lose its old seriousness, nor death its great awe. And there is one Power, and one alone, fitted to do battle with the evil of the one and the sadness of the other. There is one wisdom higher than all other wisdom, and which can alone save us either from old falsehoods or new follies,—the wisdom which is from above. There is one righteousness which is ours in Christ. All our worship should bring this reality of spiritual truth, and righteousness of grace and purity, more home to us, and help us more to make it our own. There is no higher life for us here or hereafter. The sacred aim that binds all Churches and the Christian centuries together, and hallows the worship alike of monk and priest and presbyter, is to make men more like Christ. What work can be so great? The Church that most owns this work—whose worship most serves it—will be most owned of God and most blessed by Him. And those who have most of the mind of Christ are most Christian, whatever be their special mode of worship. Let us not deceive ourselves with forms, when God demands of us reality; but let us humbly use all our means of grace that we may “put on the Lord Jesus,” and walk in love, as He loved us and gave Himself for us. And to His name be all the praise. Amen.

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XIV.

CHRISTIAN UNION.

[John, xvii. 21.](#) “That they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that Thou hast sent me.”

THESE has been an ever-recurring dream of a united Christendom. The dream has never been realised. Even at the first—supposed by many to be the golden age of the Church, just as men in after-years are apt to idealise the beginning of their life, and to suppose that such a glow of happiness can never return—even then there was no such union among Christians as many people imagine. On the contrary, there is the clearest evidence that there were parties then, as there are parties now—divisions of less or of greater moment—those who said that they were “of Paul,” and those “of Apollos,” and those “of Cephas,” and others—no doubt, holding all the rest as of inferior standing—who said they were “of Christ.”¹⁷⁴ So marked, in fact, were the Jewish and Pauline types of Christianity in the earliest age, that well-known theories of the formation of the Church have been based on the recognition of this great distinction; and what is called Catholicism has been supposed to be not the natural growth of the original genius of the Gospel, but the conciliation of two antagonistic Christian parties. Whatever truth there may be in such a view, there can be no doubt to any intelligent reader of St Paul’s Epistles that the Apostolic Church, no less than that of later ages, was a Church without uniformity either of doctrine or of worship. As there were diversities of gifts, there was then, as there have always been, diversities of opinion, and equally so, differences of administration and of devotional form and practice. The dream of Christian union in the first age, any more than in any other age, vanishes the more closely we are able to inspect it. The radical differences which lie in human nature, Christian or otherwise, assert themselves before our eyes in the pages of the New Testament.

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The Church of the third and fourth centuries realises the vision of Catholicism more perfectly; but to the student it is no less a combination of many parties and opinions frequently in conflict with one another. It is customary, in reviewing these centuries, to class one course of thought and of action as catholic and orthodox, and the rest as sectarian and heretical; but the more intimately all the phenomena are studied, the less tenable does such a view appear. There is, no doubt, truth on one side and error on another; but truth is not always on the same side; the so-called “heretic” has much to say for himself—has sometimes as good a standing in Christian reason, and even tradition, as the reputed champion of orthodoxy.

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174 [1 Corinthians, i. 12.](#)

Mediaeval Christendom, again—not to speak of the Eastern and original branch of Christianity then permanently separated from the Western or Latin branch—presents a picture of varied and frequently conflicting activity. The opposing colours appear the more lively, the more familiar the picture becomes—Pope at variance with Pope, prelate with priest, and monk with monk. The “variations” of Protestantism have become a byword. Long ago they were held forth, as at this day they are sometimes still spoken of, as an evidence that the true Church must be sought elsewhere than amidst such a “chaos of sects.”

What, then, are we to say of Christian union? Is it a dream? one of those illusions by which men try to escape from the hard world of reality into a world of beautiful possibilities where all falls into imaginary order, and none but voices of peace are heard. It is undeniable that some of the noblest Christian hearts have cherished this dream. Ever and again, from amidst the distractions of controversy and the miseries of unchristian strife, there has gone up the cry for a united Christian Church which should face the evils of the world, and the moral wretchedness which comes from division and unbelief. In a time like ours, which is big with all issues of good and evil—with heavenward and earthward aspirations alike with the throes both of a wider faith and a deeper scepticism—the longing for Christian union has grown in many quarters and taken various practical developments. It has sometimes seemed as if the wave of reaction from a preceding period of indifference or of bitterness would carry forward the growing enthusiasm till it issued in a mighty stream bathing all the Churches and flooding them by its onward flow.

This aspiration after Christian unity, even if it take erroneous forms, is a blessing to be thankful for. It comes always of a certain large-heartedness, mixed as it may be with prejudice or the illusion of a hope more fond than rational. Large-heartedness—even if unwise or fanciful—is more interesting, and indeed wiser, than narrow-mindedness, or that scope of heart and intellect which can never see anything but the difficulties of everything, and is rich in the multitude of its small experiences. It is a good sign of our time, upon the whole, that so many in all Churches have had, and still have, dreams of Christian union, and that the voices of peace rather than of war have been heard from so many sides of the Christian Church.

But is the dream never to be realised? and the voice of prophecy never to be fulfilled? It is surely impossible to read such words as those of my text without acknowledging that there is a sense in which Christian unity should never be absent from the Church—nay, that in so far as it is absent, a true note of the Church is wanting. What, then, is the meaning of these words? and how do we rightly interpret them? They are solemn as words can be—part,

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as they are, of the sublime prayer which our Saviour offered up for His disciples on the night in which He was betrayed. They thrill with an affectionate aspiration and awe. They contemplate a state not merely ideal in its happiness, but capable of realisation—a true condition into which all the disciples of our Lord—not only those present, but all who through them should believe in His name—were called upon to enter as a token of their discipleship. “As Thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth. Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; *that they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that Thou hast sent me.*”

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I. Plainly these words imply that a reality of Christian union is attainable among Christians; but plainly also, that the idea of union as conceived by our Lord is something different from the dreams which men have often had of it. These dreams have proved impracticable not merely because men are evil and prone to disunion, but also in a great degree because men are men, with different interests and tastes and tendencies. The picture of Christian division in the past, as in the present, has two sides. It proceeds from two quite distinct causes, one of which is a permanent, and therefore a good, element in human nature—the other of which alone is evil. Men have sought to bind the one element as well as the other. Nay, they have far more frequently sought union along the line of intellect and opinion than that of feeling and action. They have been more busy with the formation of a common creed, and the obligation of common modes of Church government and worship, than with the formation of a catholic spirit, and the obligation of brotherly concord and cooperation. So much so, that the idea of Christian union has come almost wholly to apply to the junction or incorporation of Christian Churches. Churches are specially said to unite when their ministers and members not merely join in common worship and common Christian work, but come under formal sanction to do so—to hold the same doctrines, and to follow no devious courses of opinion or ceremonial. Here, as so often, men have materialised the principles of Christ. They have been intent on doctrine, or ritual, or administration; while He was intent only on spirit and character. They have thought of uniformity, while He thought only of unity. They are proud of what they mean by uniformity as something higher than unity; whereas it is something really lower—something which is by no means necessarily a good in itself, and which can never be so if enforced from the outside instead of growing from the inside.

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In short, there are two ideas of Christian union, one of which is spiritual and essentially Christian—so that where it is absent the Christian spirit is absent—and the other of which is formal in one sense or another. It is of great importance for us not to mistake which is the true and only practicable idea. While we mourn the past divisions of Christendom, we

are at the same time bound to learn from them, and especially to learn from, them in the light of these words of our Lord. On the one hand we cannot doubt—no Christian can doubt with such words before him—that unity is at once an unfulfilling Christian obligation, and a fact of the utmost moment to the life and progress of the Church. Where it is wanting, the fulness of Divine life must be wanting, and the free course of Divine truth retarded. Only where it is present can the blessing and power of the Gospel receive their true development and attain their appropriate triumph. If in any respect our separate ecclesiastical organisations are allowed to obscure from us this great note of the Church, and to plunge us into unseemly rivalry and contention, sectarian bitterness and controversy, then they act injuriously. If not unchristian in themselves, they are put to an unchristian purpose. But, on the other hand, it is no less impossible for us to doubt that the unity of which Christ speaks is something essentially compatible with differences of ecclesiastical organisation, and even of dogmatic opinion—that the bond of Christian union with Him is not something outward, but something inward. The facts of human nature, the facts of Christian history, and specially the words before us in their true meaning, clearly imply this.

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Let us examine the words of our Lord in proof of this. His prayer is, that His disciples may be one in Himself and in the Father. “As Thou, Father, art in me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us.” The ground of Christian unity therefore, in our Lord’s view, is participation in the life of the Father and the Son. One Christian is united to another in so far as they share together the life that is hid with Christ in God. “I in them, and Thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one.”¹⁷⁵ “If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him.”¹⁷⁶ Christ, and Christ alone, is the centre of reconciliation between God and man. In Him we find God, and God finds us. And even so Christ is the only true centre of union between man and man. Out of Christ, and strangers to His grace, we are not only separated from God, but from one another—the spiritual unity of man with man is broken, the bonds of brotherhood are dissolved; and notwithstanding the ties of affection, and the sympathies of friendship, men have a constant tendency to isolate themselves, evermore within the limits of their own selfishness, and to mind only their own things. Such a spirit of self-seeking is deep in the natural heart of man, and shows itself in many ways. But whenever we touch the life of Divine love and self-sacrifice that is in Christ, the hard and selfish heart melts away. The enthusiasm of humanity—of a common brotherhood in humanity—kindles

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175 [John, xvii. 23.](#)

176 [Ibid. xiv. 23.](#)

within us at the quickening touch. The love of self dies down, or is no longer an absorbing passion consuming our higher and better feelings. The love of Christ constrains us; “because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: and that He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them, and rose again.”¹⁷⁷

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The ground of all living unity, therefore, amongst men, is Christ, and there is no other ground. He is the centre which, when we touch, all our enmity is broken and our discords healed. Alienations, divisions, jealousies, fall away from His peaceful presence. When we really come into His presence, we find ourselves at one not only with Him but with our brethren, who are also His brethren. The spring of this union is spiritual, and only spiritual. It may be helped or confirmed by external aids, but it is itself in no degree external. It may take external forms—it necessarily will do so; but it is not linked to any of these forms. It is deeper than them all, as the soul itself—communing spiritually with the Father and the Son; it is wider than them all—overflowing the whole life, and manifesting itself in the whole service of both soul and body.

But the language of the text helps us to understand still more clearly the character of Christian union. It is not merely a union in Christ as a common spiritual centre, but it is such a union as subsists between God the Father and the Son. Now, this union of Divine Persons in the Godhead—whatever else it may be—is a perfect consonance of will and affection, so that the Father hath evermore delight in the Son, and the Son in the Father. That there is more than this accordancy of will and affection in the Divine subsistence of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—three Persons in one Godhead—we believe; and that the life of the Church in its strength and harmony rises out of, and depends upon, the adorable constitution of the Godhead we also believe: but how all this is, or its reason and method, we cannot comprehend.¹⁷⁸ There is no difficulty, however, in understanding the unity of spiritual affection which subsists betwixt the Father and the Son, so that the Father Could say, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased;”¹⁷⁹ and the Son could say, “I delight to do Thy will, my God;”¹⁸⁰ “My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me, and to finish

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¹⁷⁷ [2 Corinthians, v. 14, 15.](#)

¹⁷⁸ “It is better for us to confess at once that we do not understand the mystery of the Trinity, than rashly to claim for ourselves a knowledge of it. In the Day of Judgment I shall not be condemned because I say I do not know the nature of my Creator: if I have spoken rashly of Him, my rashness will be punished; but my ignorance will be pardoned. . . . Sufficient for us that the Trinity is; we are not rashly to seek to know the reason of its being.”—Sermon in Appendix to Vol. V. Benedictine ed. of Augustine’s works; quoted by Dr Swainson in his volume on the Creeds. The author of the sermon is unknown.

¹⁷⁹ [Matt. iii. 17.](#)

¹⁸⁰ [Psalm xl. 8.](#)

His work.”¹⁸¹ Every one can appreciate such a concord of will and affection, and recognise the light which it throws upon the bond of Christian union on earth. Whatever deeper character this bond may have springing out of the organic union which we have with Christ, and Christ with us, it must at least always be a union of spiritual desire and affection. As the Son evermore loves the Father, and the Father the Son—as one holy concord binds them ever in one—so the spirit of union in the Church must be everywhere the same spirit of love and moral consent. It must be a unity of heart with heart, and will with will; a union, therefore, characteristically of action, for all affection is already action. This is the lowest conception we can form of Christian union; but at the same time it is the highest. For whatever may be higher in the unity of Christ with God, and of Christians with Christ and with one another, we can only believe that this arises from its greater spiritual secrecy—its more profound mystery of spiritual truth. It is the spiritual depth of the Trinity that we fail to comprehend. So far from its being anything more outward or tangible than the unity of will and affection which we can comprehend, it is only because it is something more utterly hid in the Divine Essence; and, therefore, more perfectly and gloriously spiritual that it evades our power of conception and expression. A unity which is in any sense less than a unity of affection, of will, and common effort, is not Christian, whatever it may be. A combination which starts not from within but from without—from any consent save the consent of hearts fused by a common love and sympathy, and rejoicing in common action—is not after the conception of Christ, nor likely to have the blessing of Christ.

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If this be the true view of Christian union, it is clear that this union is not to be sought or found in political movements or administrative changes, or alterations of doctrinal or ecclesiastical stand-points. Such things may be good or not. They have their own place and interest. It might be well that many improvements were made in our ecclesiastical arrangements, and that our several Churches were drawn into a closer union of creed and organisation; but the primary requisite is not outward but inward change—a growing desire for the blessing of unity—a growing love for all Christian brethren. This is the true line in which we must look for the realisation of our Lord’s Prayer. If our Churches were more externally united—this would probably be good; but not if union were supposed to consist in such external adjustments, rather than in the union of heart with heart, and life with life.

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It is the preference of the outward to the inward which has been the bane of many recent ecclesiastical movements, as of such movements at all times. Instead of the eternal and divine provision for Christian unity, in the redemptive life and death of the Son of God, as the common treasure of all believing souls, some feature in the constitution of the Church has been held forth as of catholic or unifying efficacy. If Scotland would only become Episco-

181 [John, iv. 34.](#)

palian—some have said—it would enter once more into the Catholic unity broken by our rude Reformers. Or, again, if all Presbyterians would come together in the national Church, on a basis of popular privilege, then we would have a united ecclesiastical power, fitted to struggle with social evils, and to stem the tide of immorality and unbelief. On the advantages or disadvantages of such an ecclesiastical union, I need not dwell. Its utility for any practical end of good would certainly depend less upon its power than upon its enlightenment and the breadth of its intelligence. What I cannot doubt is that such ideas of union are not in the mind of Christ. No teaching was ever less ecclesiastical than His. Questions of polity did not move him. The unifying principle with Him is not here nor there—not in Episcopacy nor Presbyterianism—not in this form nor that—but in Himself.



Every Christian Church, of course, is so far ready to allow this. The principle is conceded; but all Churches alike fail to work it out. Somehow Christ is always on their side. They have Christ rather than others, and they have the Church which he founded rather than others. While Christ is the admitted source of all Christian blessing, yet somehow Christian blessing is only to be really and fully found in their way—in certain forms of outward appointment which they have accepted and approve. They are not content with saying that special modes of ecclesiastical rite and government—special views of Christian truth—are best, according to their experience, for developing and maintaining the full force of Christian thought and action. This were a fair and rational position. But they say—logically, all ecclesiasticism says—that a certain definite order of thought, and worship, and government is of rightful, and only of rightful, efficacy to insure catholic truth and unity. But the Divine voice nowhere says this. Truly, this is to make the grace of Christ no longer free, and the unity which comes from Him no longer spiritual—to link the one to historical accident, and materialise the other by external adjunct.



Ecclesiastical dogmatism, instead of helping towards unity, only tends to deeper disunion. Wherever external authority of any kind is arbitrarily asserted, souls, instead of being drawn together in the love of Christ, are always drawn apart into the assertion of their own infeasible rights. The more tightly Church bonds are held, the more deeply is individual opposition excited, and the more violent are the ruptures of Christian charity.

But it will be asked, how can Christian unity exist apart from visible manifestation or “corporeity”? I answer, why should it not do so? Can I not love my brother because I do not agree with him about mysteries that neither of us understand—because I prefer one mode of worship and he prefers another? If I am much of a man—not to say a Christian—I will love him all the more because in some things we differ. I will respect his honesty, and get nearer to his heart while I do so. Unity of affection will come the more from difference of mind.



But it will be said, again, is not the state of our Christian Churches, standing aloof from one another in mutual estrangement and contention, a spectacle of offence to the Christian heart? No doubt it is so. But the real offence consists not in any intellectual, or administrative, or liturgical differences distinguishing our Churches; but solely in their moral separation—their unchristian alienations and jealousies. And what does this prove?—not the need of ecclesiastical uniformity, but of inward grace and of Divine charity. Divisions abound, and hearts are separated, not because we are aggregated in several Churches, and have different ecclesiastical usages, but because we keep away from the fulness of Divine blessing that is in the one Shepherd and Bishop of souls, and do not stand in awe and sin not—because our faith is weak, and our love cold, and our holiness but a feeble gleam amidst the darkness of sin. It is of the poverty of Christian thought that notions of uniform Church organisation are born; it is of the weakness of Christian feeling that our distinctions, as Churches, are made a ground of separateness. Did we enlarge our thought a little, we should know that men must always group themselves into distinct Churches; and did we only open our hearts to the full reality of Christ's love, and the immeasurable bounty of His fraternal pity, these distinctions would be no walls of separation dividing us—but a very river of Christian unity would overflow our souls, the streams of which would enrich and gladden the city of God.

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Why should spiritual unity, apart from uniformity, seem unattainable? Why should it be thought a thing incredible that Christian men should forget sectarian animosities and ecclesiastical traditions; and feeling that the deadly social evils around them are of overwhelming magnitude in comparison with all that divides them, unite heartily on a practical basis of Christian interest and sympathy—and with combined force give themselves to the work of the Lord? Why, indeed! But because faith in the great realities of Divine truth, among many who speak loudest of these realities, is weak beside adherence to the accidents of denominational distinction—because, to use language suggested by that of a great thinker,¹⁸² we are apt to love our party more than our Church, and our Church more than our Christianity, and our Christianity more than truth—because the Christian spirit burns in us dimly, and the love of many has waxed cold. This is why the agencies of our several Churches, with all their apparent energy, are, after all, struggling but feebly against the agencies of sin and evil. Christian men must feel more than they yet do how immeasurably greater is God's love than their own comprehension of it, and God's truth than their own dogmatisms—how even wide differences, critical and speculative, are not only consistent with, but the very condition of, a high-hearted practical co-operation. They must recognise more thoroughly the sacred freedom of intellectual conviction, and the equally sacred power of moral sympathy—the latter triumphing in the very oppositions of the former. They must

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182 Coleridge: 'Aids to Reflection,' p. 76. Pickering: 1848.

acknowledge more heartily the claims of reason and the strength of faith. And from this twofold root—and from it more than aught else—will spring forth the tree of Christian unity, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations.



Many things warn all Churches that their one power is in the fire of Christian love that animates them, and the fulness of Christian action which comes from them. These Divine realities are stronger than orthodoxy, and more powerful than privilege. In any case, they are the only weapons left in ecclesiastical hands—“As Thou, Father, art in me, and I in Thee,” Out of this nearness to the Divine came all Christ’s strength. The strength of the Church—your strength and mine—can only come from the same source. Seek the centre of Christian truth and unity, therefore, in God the Father and the Son. From this Light of light and Life of life will flow down endless blessings to yourselves and others. Amidst changes of opinion, or advances of thought, you will not be moved; amidst the inroads of doubt—and even if you should have to part with much you once cherished—you will stand secure in the love of God and of Christ, and in united action, not only for your own Christian good, but the good of many others, who will rise up to call you blessed.



Be it yours to hold the truth, but ever to hold it in love; to remember that large-mindedness is a Christian virtue as well as fervent zeal—that the love of Christ, and work in the name of Christ, are more than all ecclesiastical symbols. Let all in whom the Divine life is working—with whom the power of good is strong—receive your hearty welcome and sympathy. And whether they think with you or not—whether they worship with you or not—let your prayer for them be, that they share with you the love of a common Father and the grace of a common Saviour,—“that they may be one with you, as you are with Christ,”—that the world may believe not only that the Father hath sent Him, but that He dwelleth in you in all love and good works, to the praise and glory of His great name. Amen.

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