

Christian Salvation

Its Doctrine *and* Experience

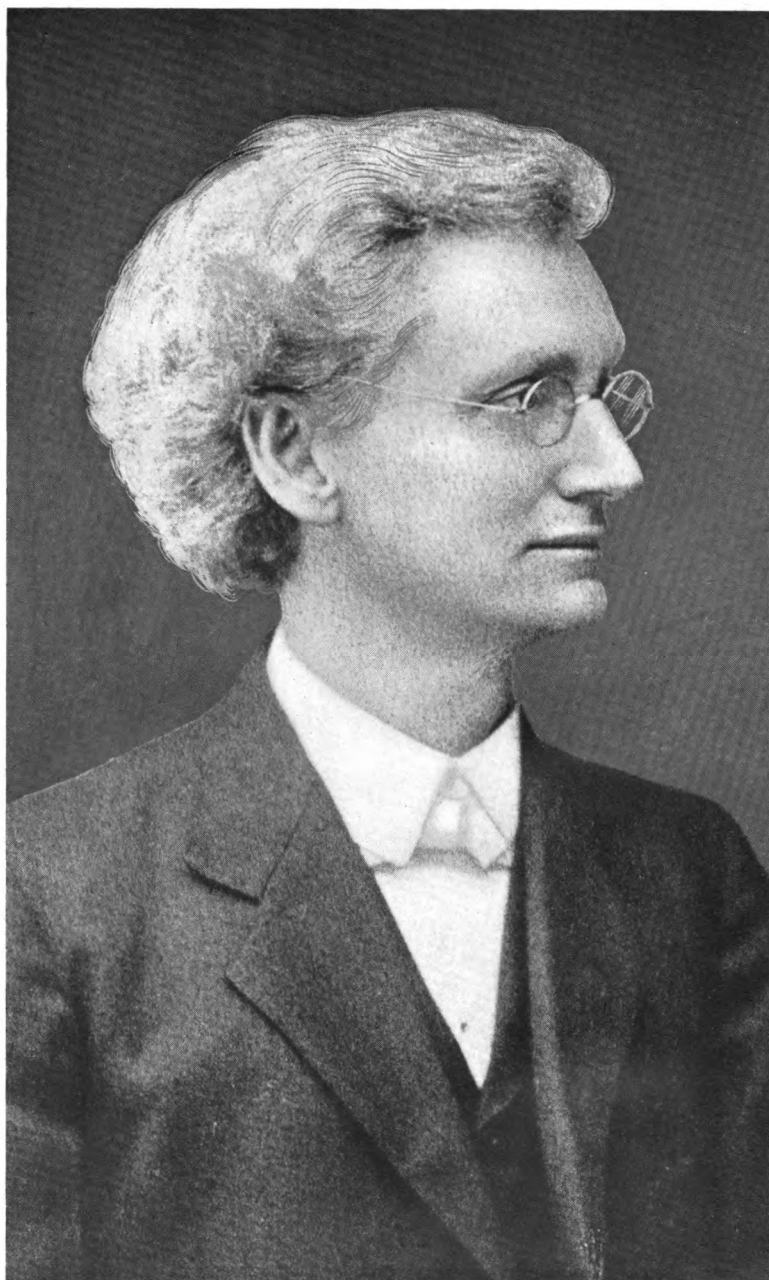
By

ROBERT ALEXANDER WEBB, D.D., LL.D.

*Late Professor of Apologetics and Systematic Theology in the
Presbyterian Theological Seminary of Kentucky
Louisville, Kentucky*

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Robert Alexander Webb, D.D., LL.D.

A Sketch

BY REV. CHARLES R. HEMPHILL.

Robert Alexander Webb, the son of Robert C. Webb and Elizabeth Dortch Webb, was born on the 20th day of September, 1856, at Oxford, Mississippi, and fell asleep in Louisville, Ky., May 23, 1919. He spent the first fifteen years of his life on the plantation of his father, and enjoyed the sports and out-door life of a boy on a Southern plantation. He always cherished the happiest memories of his boyhood days. When he was fifteen years of age the family removed to Nashville, Tennessee, and at seventeen he became a student in the Webb School at Culleoka, Tennessee, noted for its high quality as a training school. From this institution he passed to the Southwestern Presbyterian University at Clarksville, Tennessee, from which he was graduated with highest honors in 1887. At the closing exercises that year the Baccalaureate sermon was delivered by the Rev. John L. Girardeau, D. D., Professor of Theology in Columbia Seminary, one of the most eloquent preachers and orators our country has produced. The ardent spirit of the young man was so profoundly impressed by the preacher that he determined to pursue his theological studies in the Seminary at Columbia, in which he matriculated the following September. The Seminary had an able faculty and young Webb appreciated all of his professors and zealously performed every task, but it was Theology that engaged his deepest interest and it was Dr. Girardeau whose Christian character most attracted him, whose eloquence most charmed him and whose profound thinking and inspiring instruction most excited his intellectual powers. The older man took the younger into companionship with himself, and many were the hours they spent together in discussion of profoundest themes of theology,

and this companionship became the more intimate when, after graduation, the young man became one of the household through marriage with Miss Sally, second daughter of Dr. Girardeau. Death soon dissolved this relation, but the two men were always father and son. It was a frequent counsel of Dr. Girardeau to the Seminary graduate to accept a call to a church in the country rather than in a town or city. His reason for this advice was that the young minister forms his intellectual habits in the first three or four years and that the country offers the best opportunity for continuous and systematic study and for the formation of studious habits. Dr. Webb, acting upon this counsel, became the pastor of Bethel Church, in York County, South Carolina, one of the oldest and largest country churches in a region originally settled by Scotch-Irish and dotted with Presbyterian churches. In his case Dr. Girardeau's judgment was fully vindicated. The young man gave himself with complete devotion to the study of great themes in theology and to the Christian Scriptures, and it was in the five years spent in this country church that he consolidated the results of all his previous studies and laid the foundation for his intellectual achievements in later days. From Bethel Church Dr. Webb went to Davidson College, North Carolina, as pastor, and a year later became pastor of Westminster Church, Charleston, South Carolina. In 1892 he was called to the Chair of Theology in the Divinity School of the Southwestern Presbyterian University, which had been filled since the opening of the Divinity School in 1885 by the Rev. Joseph R. Wilson, D. D., father of President Woodrow Wilson, and from which Dr. Wilson had resigned. The University was favored at this time in adding to its faculty of older men several able young men, and the Divinity School sent forth a succession of graduates who proved themselves most effective ministers and not a few of whom have risen to distinction in the church. From the outset Dr. Webb displayed all the qualities of a great teacher, and in these early days, as in all after years, he left an ineffaceable mark on every man who passed under his hand. His students spread his fame as a teacher and a Christian theologian and he speedily attained a reputation which increased with every passing year. In 1908, Dr. Webb, in response to a unanimous call by the Board of Directors, became Professor of Apologetics and Systematic

Theology in the Presbyterian Theological Seminary of Kentucky, at Louisville. This most important Chair had been vacant since the death in 1906 of the eminent theologian and teacher, Francis R. Beattie. Dr. Webb soon made a place for himself in the Seminary circle and the community, and though he lived the somewhat retired life of the teacher, he won many warm friends here as everywhere, and in and out of the churches there were many who admired the great scholar and the courteous Christian gentleman.

It would be pleasant to enter into personal details and recollections of Dr. Webb and to speak of him as preacher and pastor and ecclesiastic, but the limits of this sketch forbid, and there is opportunity only for an effort to estimate him in the office of a teacher of theology in which he served for twenty-seven years. For this office he was fitted by natural endowments, by bent of mind, by an almost perfect intellectual discipline, by deep Christian experience and by broad attainments. He commanded the whole field of theology and had thoroughly mastered all the historical systems of theology and the philosophies underlying or akin to them. He was not, however, a mere expositor of theological systems, but, on the ground of both Scripture and reason, a convinced and thorough-going adherent and advocate of the Augustinian or Calvinistic system of theology.

He had a keenly analytic mind, and with this power of analysis was united an equal power of logic which marched with unbroken step from premise to conclusion. Added to these was an unusual capacity for profound, clear and patient thinking which explored every recess of a subject, and an ability to set forth the results of study and thought in a style simple, clear, pungent and often flashing out in all the colors of rhetoric. These intellectual qualities were transfused with an ardent love of truth, an absolute submission to the teaching of the Holy Scripture, and an adoring devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dr. Webb's method of instruction was the combination of text-book and lecture, along with daily inquisition of the student. In his questions he was very skilful, and while he would sometimes play the student as the fisherman plays the fish, it was always in kindest spirit. He threw his whole soul into his teaching and often the professor's chair became the preacher's pulpit

and he bore down on the heart and conscience of the student with powerful appeal. His students were deeply attached to him and gave him the warmest affection and the most unstinted admiration. They knew him to be their friend, wise in counsel and sympathetic with them in their doubts and difficulties. In all their ministry they remained loyal to him, and through them he has had an incalculable influence in holding the Church steadfast to her faith and to her mission.

It was the often expressed wish of Dr. Webb's students and many other friends that he should publish his lectures, or reduce them to the form of a usable text-book in theology. Had his life been prolonged he might have been induced to undertake this. The wish is met in part by the present volume.

While at Clarksville Dr. Webb published a treatise on the Theology of Infant Salvation, in which he convincingly shows how the Calvinistic system provides, on the basis of the Scriptures, for the salvation of all persons who die in infancy. Some years later he delivered a course of lectures on the Smyth foundation at Columbia Seminary, which were repeated at Jackson, Miss., and published under the title of *The Christian Hope*. At various times articles of his appeared in the *Presbyterian Quarterly* and in the religious papers. The two volumes and the occasional articles alike exhibit the ability, knowledge, and conscientious work always characteristic of his strong and disciplined mind.

Dr. Webb was taken away in the maturity of his powers, and at a time when the Church needs his steadying influence, and his unsurpassed ability in training young men for the ministry. He lives in the characters and teachings of his hundreds of students, who in this and other lands are preaching the glorious Gospel of the blessed God.

On October 23, 1888, Dr. Webb was married to Miss Roberta Chauncey Beck, of Columbia, S. C., who with their two children, Miss Annie Webb, of Louisville, and Robert A. Webb, Jr., M. D., of London, England, survives him. A great multitude throughout the Church share their sorrow in the loss they have suffered, and are grateful to God for him and for the grace by which he wrought so much for the Church and the world.