

HOW SHALL WE REVISE?

A BUNDLE OF PAPERS

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THE WESTMINSTER CONFSSION
OF FAITH ?

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NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

1890

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V.

DIVINE MERCY MORALLY OBLIGATORY.

BY THE REV. CHARLES H. PARKHURST, D.D.

IT is one of the peculiarities of Scripture that it brings into easy, harmonious relation elements of divine character that to uninspired view seem discrepant and antithetic. An interesting instance of this occurs in the comprehensive and conciliatory view of God's justice and mercy as expressed by St. John when he says: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins." Just to forgive us, which is to say that God's mercy is not the rival of His justice, but involved in His justice; that mercy is one of the aspects under which justice shows itself; that divine justice is not imperilled by being merciful, but abrogated by not being merciful; that mercy is not a quality that by its presence adds to God's glory, but a quality that by its absence would leave God without any glory.

One of the impressive features of the controversy that is now being waged within the Presbyterian Church is that it is not a Presbyterian controversy at all, but the local manifestation of a struggle that virtually ranges among the combatants every man in or out of the Presbyterian Church or any other church who has an interest in the character of God and in the relation of God to the beings that He has created in His own image. Every man is essentially a little theologian with ideas of his own in regard

to God; and however restricted and sectional the present controversy may appear to be, it is after all his own controversy, and his own doctrinal views that are being advocated or impugned. This is what dignifies the occasion. All of Christendom is somehow involved in it.

At the first look of it, it seems exceedingly unfortunate that so many precious weeks of a year, that is only too short, should be devoted to a discussion which apparently connects so indirectly with the essential interests of Christ's cause and the extension of His kingdom. No doubt the net results in the Presbyterian Church wrought by the preaching of the Gospel will be less this winter than last, so far as results are to be calculated by the number of men and women that are converted to Christ. Neither pulpit nor pew can convey or receive so much in the way of Gospel effect when interest is divided between Christianity considered as a mode of divine life and Christianity considered as a form of human opinion. It is on this account that with a considerable show of reason this expenditure of time and monopolizing of interest has been numerously deplored.

At the same time, as soon as we begin to discover the long ranges of effect and to remember that the largest efforts have always to be arranged for, and that the finest flowers blossom only in prepared ground, there is started the surmise that getting the soil in order may have as direct a bearing upon the matter of a harvest as does dropping the corn in the furrows. Gathering out the stones, plucking up the hard-hack and clearing out the sluiceways are as much a part of husbandry as sowing wheat in May or threshing wheat in October. And while we may be disposed to consider that human opinion does not come very close to the core of the Christian matter, still whatever growths we may hope to promote in the way

of holiness of heart and beauty of demeanor must have their roots in the soil of a true conception of God and of His character. What we think about God will largely decide what God can do for us and make of us; and the character under which God is presented by a church or communion through its accepted creed or through its clergy, recognized as the mouthpiece of the church, will determine for the most part how much divine effect will admit of being wrought even by God's own spirit. To grow in the knowledge of God is to grow in likeness to Him. Christ converted the Samaritan woman not by enlarging upon her sin, but by making to her a new revelation of God. St. John looks forward to the time when we shall be like Him because we shall see Him as He is. So far then as the great debate shall issue in a more defined and juster conception of God, so that His ministers shall preach Him with more of completeness and truthfulness, the expenditure of time will show itself amply warranted, and present loss will be a good deal more than compensated by future and permanent gain.

It might also seem at first that such issues could be secured by methods of a more pacific type. While the language used on either side has been almost without exception of a courteous and even kindly character, yet there is no disguising the fact that the average blood-temperature of those standing in the ranks has been considerably above the normal. In other words, it has been a square theological fight. And such is the method by which generally in the history of human opinion truth has come to its development and manifestation. The growth of idea is regularly along frictional lines. Nothing good or true is gained but that has in some way to be fought for. The wheels of progress, whether in matters of science, politics, ethics, or religion, do not roll over a macada-

mized highway. Truth is set free under strokes of contradiction as sparks issue from clashing flint, and as the precious metal is released under the blows of the quartz-crusher. Our minds are not keen and quick enough to feel profoundly a truth except as it is set over against its correlative. The powder that has been burned the last few months has made clearer and more distinguishable the very battle-ground on which the cartridges have been discharged. Contrasting ideas have been put with a definiteness that has been a novelty and a surprise. Something has been done that is going to stay done. There has been a good deal of fog scattered both out of the air and out of our own minds. We have had shown on the one hand a God whose love is so great a part of His infinitude that there is enough of it for every creature made in the image of God to have a share; and over against that have had portrayed to us a God in whom love is so an accident and afterthought of His being, that it ill suffices to enfold all His children, compelling Him to an arbitrary selection of the particular few to whom His mercy shall be allowed to extend and to whose salvation and eternal weal it shall be permitted to redound. Now that, stripped of all evasive periphrasis and rhetorical attenuation, is the just statement of the two positions. The putting of these two antitheses over against each other is wondrously educating; and the very sharpness of the contest has only resulted in evincing more and more fully their glaring incompatibility. Matters have in this way gotten out very fully into the light. The bird had been living very comfortably in its shell, but having once pecked through into the air, the shell will never again be large enough to hold it. God does His utmost to save everybody; that is our position. God does His utmost to save a part and passes by the rest; that is the other position. That last, according to what seems to us the

only fair mode of interpretation, is the doctrine of our Confession of Faith. And it amounts to nothing for the advocates of the latter to say that we mistake their views so long as they refuse to alter by so much as a syllable those expressions in the Confession that make it necessary for us to suppose that such are their views. We have no disposition to say that they are obstinate. We have no disposition to say that they hold opinions that are more brutal than they have the courage possibly to confess. We only say that the revisionists represent the doctrine of an unlimited atonement, and that the anti-revisionists represent the doctrine of a limited atonement, and claim to believe in a God who ordains some men to perdition before they are born, and consistently therewith withholds from them the influences of regenerating power ; and that just this sharp enunciation of sharply contrasted opinions has brought about, in a way that nothing else could, the clearing of men's minds, and has so exhibited the two conceptions of God, each in its own individuality, that the one of the two that is truest will henceforth have a better opportunity than ever to win its way in the regards of God's people.

As already said, there is nothing in the range of religious knowledge that we need so much to know as the divine character. To show us this is the object of revelation. The verse quoted at the beginning of this article is of value because it gives us an insight into God's character. God is the world's proper study. If we knew Him as He is, we should be like Him. Clearly there is no end to the study. The finite mind would have to contemplate God till eternity's sundown before the ground would all be traversed. A creed is a statement first of all of what its authors have learned to know about God. It is a report of progress. It is valid for the date that it is written. It is

not valid for the day after unless the students of God have in the mean time been taking a recess. A creed is bound to be a theological terminus *a quo*, not a terminus *ad quem*. The Holy Spirit, too, is in the world not to review us in old truth, but to guide us into new truth. A live Christian swayed by the illuminating influence of the Holy Spirit is appointed to be a sort of Columbus continually on the edge of a new continent. In matters of secular enterprise we widen our outlook by standing on the shoulders of our fathers. In matters of religious enterprise we are bidden to behave ourselves and stand in the old shoes of our fathers. Two hundred and fifty years ago a company of Englishmen of varying ability and piety gathered together and wrote down what they knew or thought they knew of God, and therein produced what we call the Westminster Confession of Faith. Anti-revisionists have been telling us these months past that that statement to the dotting of an "i" and the crossing of a "t" is a just statement of what *we* know about God. Now, if that is true, it is true for one of three reasons: either that the Westminster divines had gotten clear out to the end of the knowledge of God; or the Holy Spirit had gotten tired of leading men into new and wider apprehensions; or the students of God throughout Christendom have been on a two hundred and fifty years' vacation. The first two would be to blaspheme God, and the third would be to insult the church.

But the reply comes back, "We have had no new Bible the mean time; how, then, can we make fresh acquisition of religious knowledge?" The farmer has no new land from year to year, but because the soil has not been exhausted, and the sun has not got tired of shining or the clouds of raining, he has no trouble in raising a new crop of fruit and grain every year. Physical science has no new universe to work on; but the geological creed of fifty years

ago, or the chemical, or the astronomical, will not stand as a symbol of to-day's knowledge in these ranges of discovery. Only a dead science never outgrows its creed; only a dead man is fitted with garments that need never to be replaced by a fresh suit; and a creed as detailed as ours, that will for two hundred and fifty years suffice in its every expression to utter the religious knowledge of a great communion of believers, is far less to be considered the habiliments of a living church than it is the cerements of an ecclesiastical mummy; and for such a waxed and sheeted body to fidget in its coffin, strain at its grave-clothes, and open its eyes and ask to have a little modification made in its apparel is not a symptom of dissolution; it is not a signal to the mourners to beat their breasts and tear their hair, but a token of life, a summons to laughter rather than wailing, meet occasion for prophecy more than for obituary.

We have put the quotation from John's epistle at the beginning of our discussion for the reason that there are passages in our Confession, as there have been repeated statements in the course of the Revision controversy, that appear to indicate not only that men have been ordained of God to eternal perdition, but that they have been ordained for the simple reason that He chose to ordain them. "Extendeth or withholdeth mercy as He pleaseth" is the phrase in the Confession; admitting some to the benefits of Christ's atonement because He chose to admit them; rejecting others from the benefits of the same atonement because He chose to reject them, in the same manner as the potter has power over the clay to make an honorable utensil out of one portion of the clay and a base utensil out of another portion, not because there is any difference in the clay, but because he *happens* to do so.

We use this illustration because it is the portion of

Scripture used as proof-text for the doctrine under consideration. It is another way of asserting the pure arbitrariness of the principle or unprinciple upon which He proceeds. Now if a man acted on that principle, there is not one among us but would pronounce it intolerable and vicious. For a despot to say to each of two criminals, independently of their respective characters, to one, "I relieve you," and to the other, "I am going to hang you," would be tyranny at its worst; and no man educated under civilized government would be able to conceive of it otherwise. The tyrant's power to do as he pleases has nothing to do with his right to do as he pleases. Power does not begin to be righteousness even though expanded to the limits of infinitude. There is an ineradicable something in each man's own bosom that insists upon this. There are within us certain moral instincts that are as valuable as anything that the Bible can teach us; in fact, instincts of such a character that without them no teachings of the Bible would be of any value. The Bible was made for man, not man for the Bible. These instincts are older than the Bible. These instincts are as divine as the Bible; as much God's own workmanship as the Bible, and the meaning of the Bible, when there is any possible question of interpretation, is to be tested by them. If the general consciousness of men with a conscience says that it is tyranny for people in power to treat their subjects just as they please, then they have got to feel that it would be tyranny for God to treat His subjects just as He pleases. If you try to make the same conscience talk two ways and glorify God for the same quality of act that you would reprobate if done humanly, is to outrage conscience and make it eventually incapable either of religion or of ethics. As is well and frankly stated by Dr. Hamilton, any doctrine that shocks the religious consciousness is

doomed.* It does not touch nor even approach to the point to say that we ought to believe what God tells us. If it is a thing that lacerates our moral sense, we are not going to believe that it was God that *told* us. We believe that God does right, and no proofs will be equal to the task of convincing us that that is right for God to do which we would reprobate as criminal if seen in each other. To persuade a man that his conscience is no criterion of what is right for God to do, is a long step towards convincing him that it is of no great account as an index of what he ought to do himself. If divine righteousness and human propriety are circles described from distinct centres, so that there is no reading backward and forward from one to the other, there is an instant end of all revelation. If the mere fact that God is not accountable to any one makes it right for Him to do what it is wrong for us to do, then irreligion is the mode of religion most worthy of us, and blasphemy our most commendable cultus.

In view of what is implied in our Confession of Faith as to the arbitrary character of God's dealing, electing some simply because He chooses to elect them, rejecting others simply because He chooses to reject them — in view of all that, we appreciate easily the remarkable contribution of the truth of the matter made by our selection from John: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins," *just* to forgive us. Arbitrariness is ruled out. He is no more free to act independently of considerations than we are. He does not forgive because there are some that He takes a fancy to forgive; He forgives them not only because He loves to do so, but because there would be an injustice in His not doing so. God's justice seems in some quarters to be so thought of, as

* See p. 134.

though it were of that quality according to which God would be warranted in treating every man exactly as he deserves. It is not always *just* to treat a man as he deserves. Justice, in order to be just, has sometimes to be forgiving as well as to be retributive. Our text declares that. Error and misunderstanding have crept in by conceiving of justice and mercy, as set over against each other, and working at cross-purposes. It has not been conceived that both attributes can be present in congeniality and plenitude in the same person ; and that is one reason why the personalities of the first and second members of the Trinity have been forced sufficiently widely apart to allow separate *embodiment* to each of the two attributes. Instigated by the demon of analysis, we sacrifice God to the interests of our theological inquisition, like the botanist who ruins his flower by pulling it to pieces to see to what species it belongs. The charm of this verse is that it conceives and represents the justice and mercy of God as so inseparable and so contained in each other, that the only way in which God can be perfectly just, is *by* being merciful. He is not merciful on occasion, simply because he chooses to be so, but merciful because mercy alone can comport with the requirements of His own Holy Being. He is *just* to forgive. His compassion is holy, and His holiness is compassionate, being in this like the sun which shines with no capricious or one-sided refusal, but out of the abundance of its luminous life makes known everywhere the power of its splendid presence ; and wherever it puts its touch of brightness, also leaves enfolded within it a genial token of its own mellowness and warmth.