

One-sided Theology

[Calvinism and Arminianism]

C. H. Mackintosh.

We have lately received a long letter, furnishing a very striking proof of the bewildering effect of one-sided theology. Our correspondent is evidently under the influence of what is styled the high school of doctrine. Hence, he cannot see the rightness of calling upon the unconverted to "come," to "hear," to "repent," or to "believe." It seems to him like telling a crab-tree to bear some apples in order that it may become an apple-tree.

Now, we thoroughly believe that faith is the gift of God, and that it is not according to man's will or by human power. And further, we believe that not a single soul would ever come to Christ if not drawn, yea, compelled by divine grace so to do; and therefore all who are saved have to thank the free and sovereign grace of God for it; their song is, and ever shall be, "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy name give glory, for Thy mercy, and for Thy truth's sake."

And this we believe not as part of a certain system of doctrine, but as the revealed truth of God. But, on the other hand, we believe, just as fully, in the solemn truth of man's moral responsibility, inasmuch as it is plainly taught in Scripture, though we do not find it amongst what are called "the five points of the faith of God's elect." We believe these five points, so far as they go; but they are very far indeed from containing the faith of God's elect. There are wide fields of divine revelation which this stunted and one-sided system does not touch upon, or even hint at, in the most remote manner. Where do we find the heavenly calling? Where, the glorious truth of the Church as the body and bride of Christ? Where, the precious sanctifying hope of the coming of Christ to receive His people to Himself? Where have we the grand scope of prophecy opened to the vision of our souls, in that which is so pompously styled "the faith of God's elect"? We look in vain for a single trace of them in the entire system to which our friend is attached.

Now, can we suppose for a moment that the blessed apostle Paul would accept as "the faith of God's elect" a system which leaves out that glorious mystery of the Church of which he was specially made the minister? Suppose any one had shown Paul "the five points" of Calvinism, as a statement of the truth of God, what would he have said? What! "The whole truth of God;" "the faith of God's elect;" "all that is essential to be believed;" and yet not a syllable about the real position of the Church — its calling, its standing, its hopes, its privileges! And not a word about Israel's future! A complete ignoring, or at best a thorough alienation, of the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David! The whole body of prophetic teaching subjected to a system of spiritualizing, falsely so called, whereby Israel is robbed of its proper portion, and Christians dragged down to an earthly level — and this presented to us with the lofty pretension of "The faith of God's elect!"

Thank God it is not so. He, blessed be His name, has not confined Himself within the narrow limits of any school of doctrine, high, low, or moderate. He has revealed Himself. He has told out the deep and precious secrets of His heart. He has unfolded His eternal counsels, as to the Church, as to Israel, the Gentiles, and the wide creation. Men might as well attempt to confine the ocean in buckets of their own formation as to confine the vast range of divine revelation within the feeble enclosures of human systems of doctrine. It cannot be done, and it ought not to be attempted. Better far to set aside the systems of theology and schools of divinity, and come like a little child to the eternal fountain of Holy Scripture, and there drink in the living teachings of God's Spirit.

Nothing is more damaging to the truth of God, more withering to the soul, or more subversive of all spiritual growth and progress than mere theology, high or low — Calvinistic or Arminian. It is impossible for the soul to make progress beyond the boundaries of the system to which it is attached. If I am taught to regard "the five points" as "the faith of God's elect," I shall not think of looking beyond them; and then a most glorious field of heavenly truth is shut out from the vision of my soul. I am stunted, narrowed, one-sided; and I am in danger of getting into that hard, dry state of soul which results from being occupied with mere points of doctrine instead of with Christ. A disciple of the high school of doctrine will not hear of a world-wide gospel — of God's love to the world — of glad tidings to every creature under Heaven. He has only gotten a gospel for the elect. On the other hand, a disciple of the low or Arminian school will not hear of the eternal security of God's people. Their salvation depends partly upon Christ, and partly upon themselves. According to this system, the song of the redeemed should be changed. Instead of "Worthy is the Lamb," we should have to add, "and worthy are we." We may be saved today, and lost tomorrow. All this dishonours God, and robs the Christian of all true peace.

We do not write to offend the reader. Nothing is further from our thoughts. We are dealing not with persons, but with schools of doctrine and systems of divinity which we would, most earnestly, entreat our beloved readers to abandon, at once, and for ever. Not one of them contains the full, entire truth of God. There are certain elements of truth in all of them; but the truth is often neutralized by the error; and even if we could find a system which contains, so far as it goes, nothing but the truth, yet if it does not contain the whole truth, its effect upon the soul is most pernicious, because it leads a person to plume himself on having the truth of God when, in reality, he has only laid hold of a one-sided system of man.

Then again we rarely find a mere disciple of any school of doctrine who can face scripture as a whole. Favourite texts will be quoted, and continually reiterated; but a large body of scripture is left almost wholly unappropriated. For example; take such passages as the following, "But now God commandeth *all men* everywhere to repent." (Acts 17: 30.) And again, "Who will have *all men* to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Tim. 2.) So also, in 2 Peter, "The Lord is long-suffering to usward, not willing that *any* should perish, but that *all* should come to repentance." (2 Peter 3: 9.) And, in the very closing section of the volume, we read, "Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely."

Are these passages to be taken as they stand? or are we to introduce qualifying or modifying words to make them fit in with our system? The fact is, they set forth the largeness of the heart of God, the gracious activities of His nature, the wide aspect of His love, It is not according to the loving heart of God that any of His creatures should perish. There is no such thing set forth in scripture as any decree of God consigning a certain number of the human race to eternal damnation. Some may be judicially given over to blindness because of deliberate rejection of the light. (See Rom. 9: 17; Heb. 6: 4-6; 10: 26, 27; 2 Thess. 2: 11, 12; 1 Peter 2: 8.) All who perish will have only themselves to blame. All who reach heaven will have to thank God.

If we are to be taught by scripture we must believe that every man is responsible according to his light. The Gentile is responsible to listen to the voice of creation. The Jew is responsible on the ground of the law. Christendom is responsible on the ground of the full-orbed revelation contained in the whole word of God. If God commands all men, everywhere to repent, does He mean what He says, or merely all the elect? What right have we to add to, or alter, to pare down, or to accommodate the word of God? None whatever. Let us face scripture as it stands, and reject everything which will not stand the test. We may well call in question the soundness of a system which cannot meet the full force of the word of

God as a whole. If passages of scripture seem to clash, it is only because of our ignorance. Let us humbly own this, and wait on God for further light. This, we may depend upon it, is safe moral ground to occupy. Instead of endeavouring to reconcile apparent discrepancies, let us bow at the Master's feet and justify Him in all His sayings. Thus shall we reap a harvest of blessing and grow in the knowledge of God and His word as a whole.

A few days since, a friend put into our hands a sermon recently preached by an eminent clergyman belonging to the high school of doctrine. We have found in this sermon, quite as much as in the letter of our American correspondent, the effects of one-sided theology. For instance, in referring to that magnificent statement of the Baptist in John 1: 29, the preacher quotes it thus, "The Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of *the whole World of God's chosen people.*"

Reader, think of this. "*The World of God's chosen people!*" There is not a word about people in the passage. It refers to the great propitiatory work of Christ, in virtue of which every trace of sin shall yet be obliterated from the wide creation of God. We shall only see the full application of that blessed scripture in the new heavens and the new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness. To confine it to the sin of God's elect can only be viewed as the fruit of theological bias. There is no such expression in scripture as "Taking away the *sin* of God's elect." Whenever God's people are referred to we have the bearing of *sins* — the propitiation for our *sins* — the forgiveness of *sins*. Scripture never confounds these things; and nothing can be more important for our souls than to be exclusively taught by scripture itself, and not by the warping, stunting, withering dogmas of one-sided theology.

We sometimes hear John 1: 29 quoted, or rather misquoted by disciples of the low school of doctrine in this way, "The Lamb of God which taketh away the *sins* of the world." If this were so, no one could ever be lost. Such a statement would furnish a basis for the terrible heresy of universal salvation. The same may be said of the rendering of 1 John 2: 2, "The *sins* of the whole world." This is not scripture but fatally false doctrine, which we doubt not our translators would have repudiated as strongly as any. Whenever the word "*sins*" occurs, it refers to persons. Christ is a *propitiation* for the whole world. He was the *substitute* for His people.

NOTE It is deeply interesting to mark the way in which scripture guards against the repulsive doctrine of reprobation. Look, for example, at Matthew 25: 34. Here, the King, in addressing those on His right hand, says, "Come, *ye blessed of my Father*, inherit *the kingdom prepared for you* from the foundation of the world." Contrast with this the address to those on his left hand: "Depart from me ye cursed [He does not say 'of my Father'] into everlasting fire, prepared [not for you, but] the devil and his angels." So also, in Romans 9. In speaking of the "vessels of wrath," He says "fitted to destruction" — fitted not by God surely, but by themselves. On the other hand, when He speaks of the "vessels of mercy," he says, "which *He had afore prepared* unto glory." The grand truth of *election* is fully established; the repulsive error of *reprobation*, sedulously avoided.