

# The Substance of a Letter on Some Present Difficulties

J. A. Trench.

*Not Published.*

*The fact that a letter to me, from a brother abroad, is being extensively circulated, leads me to present in this way the substance of my reply to him; and I take the opportunity of adding what may seem needed in this use of it, and of noticing some points not raised by his letter, but much dwelt upon by others.*

Beloved Brother, — Your letter is of deep concern to me as fresh proof of how much misapprehension, as to the meaning of the few sentences of Mr. R.'s which have been published, has to do with the trouble we are in. For I dismiss for the moment what sisters were reported to you to have said, and what E.C. has written;\* to notice the first point in Mr. R.'s own letters (printed by P.A.H.) that you refer to. Of these, you say — "They show a dangerous, radical departure from the truth," quoting Mons. L. — that it is "worse than that of F.W.G." I have looked at the passages objected to, and see nothing, however obscurely expressed, that is not cardinal truth as to the christian position. Nothing, I may say, has astonished me more, in all this sorrowful contention, than that you should call in question that "there is no such thing as responsibility in Christ" (when the context shows what Mr. R. means); and that "the true calling, relationship, and blessings of the Christian belong to the scene and sphere where Christ is" — that is, of course, to heaven — "wholly disconnected from human life down here." I feel I cannot do better than put these distinctions of truth in the words of another to whom we all owe so much: the italics are mine.

Which, I am thankful to say, he has condemned and withdrawn, as far as one who had nothing to do with the circulating of it could be said to withdraw it, having put in print the expression of his sorrow for having written it.

"Jordan represents death, but death looked at rather as the *end of human life*. . . . The passage of the Red Sea was also death. . . . It was complete redemption, the death and resurrection of Christ in its proper and intrinsic value. But in this aspect it is a complete and finished work, and brings us *to God*. Not a history of what one may go through in actually arriving at the result. See Ex. 15: 13 & 17; Ex. 19: 4, etc. It was then that the people entered upon their pilgrimage in the wilderness. The wilderness journey after Sinai supposes this christian position taken, but individual reality tested: to this all the 'ifs' of the New Testament apply; that is, to the Christian on the road to the promised land, but with a certain promise of being kept to the end if faith is there. . . . There is no 'if' as to redemption, nor as to our present place in Christ when once we are sealed. Redemption, complete salvation, . . . introduces the Christian into this pilgrimage. With God he only passes through the world as a dry and thirsty land where no water is; still this pilgrimage is but the life down here, although it is the life of the redeemed. But as we have seen there is the heavenly life which goes on at the same time with the wilderness journey. I do not mean at the same instant, but during the same period of our natural life on the earth. It is one thing to pass through this world faithfully or unfaithfully in our daily circumstances under the influence of a better hope; it is another thing to be waging a spiritual warfare as men already dead and risen, as being absolutely not of the world. Both these things are true of the Christian life." (Synopsis on Joshua 3.)

Here then we have the main elements of what has been objected to as Mr. R. expresses it:

namely, first our present place in Christ, fruit of God's counsels and work, what is true of us in Christ looked at in its own proper character as a new creation, all things of God, where there is no "if," no question of testing, "no such thing as responsibility;" and this distinguished from our path down here in the circumstances of human life, where, to our deep profit and blessing, the exercises, siftings, and humbling in God's government have fully their place. Then we have what is really involved in this, "the mystic Cluffite division of the life of the Christian," as you call it, but which I believe to be the clear and indisputable division of the Scriptures, of the deepest moment for our souls; namely, that of the heavenly life, and the life of pilgrimage down here. There is no part of Mr. D.'s teaching that he seemed to take more delight in developing, in every possible form, in the later years of his ministry.

In the Synopsis, in the same connexion from which I have been quoting, he goes on to say, "In both Phil. and Col. the heavenly life is spoken of as a present thing; but there is *entire separation, even down here*, between the pilgrimage and the heavenly life itself, though the latter has a powerful influence on the character of our pilgrim life." And this distinction led him on, not to divide the person of Christ, as you say others have been led on by it, but to do that which seems to be the only foundation of the charge — namely, to distinguish in the same way between these two parts of His life. Thus he says, "*His life in connection with men*, although the ever perfect expression of the *effect of His life of heavenly communion and of the divine nature was evidently distinct from it.*" He states that the influence of the heavenly and divine life "was perfect and entire in His case. . . . The joy of the *heavenly life* entirely set aside all the *motives of the lower life*, and leading to the sufferings of His earthly life, produced a life of perfect patience before God. . . . The fact that He was this life, and that for His living it, He had not to die in His death, as we have, to an evil nature, makes it more difficult to realize in His case; but obedience, and He learned what it was, suffering, patience, all referred to His place here; compassion, grace as to His disciples, and all the traits of His life, though divine, and such that He could say, 'The Son of Man who is in heaven' — all were the development of the heavenly and divine life here."

I do not quote more of the passage because it is in the Synopsis, and may be had of Broom & Rouse, in a separate form, entitled: "The sphere of heavenly life," consisting largely of new matter, inserted by Mr. D. in his latest revision of it. But the connexion between the life, as manifested here, and the objects it pursues, is deeply affecting when illustrated, as he opens it out, in the blessed Lord "Himself that life and its manifestation down here in pilgrimage" — referring to Heb. 12: 2.

The conviction is more and more forced upon me, that some of our brethren, through not seeing this distinction between the heavenly life, and the life of pilgrimage in connexion with men, in which it is developed, and this in Christ, as well as in the Christian, have totally misapprehended what has been said, and have gone so far as to charge brethren with heterodoxy and blasphemy, who are as far from it as themselves.\*

\*As for instance, in a letter of W. J. L., which I have seen since writing the above, abounding with denunciation of this type, he says, "The life of the blessed Lord is divided into two parts . . . . then the Christian's is treated in a similiar way; the upper part being heavenly and eternal in Christ, to which Mr. R. says no responsibility attaches, the lower his pilgrim life, in which he is responsible. This was openly taught last month in Bristol." We have only to refer to the passage from which I have quoted (and to more that will follow), to see that Mr. D. regards the life of the blessed Lord, as so divided, and that of the Christian too.

For myself, beloved brother, you must bear with me, if I say, that I think to bring forward such a charge without substantiation, is a very great wrong, not only to the brother accused, but to the saints in

general, because of the subtle character of the questions raised among them in the attempt to prove the charges (of which the pamphlets that have been issued are the witness), and because of the nature of the truths themselves concerned. With foot unshod one could only safely tread such ground, feeling at every step no one knows the Son, but the Father. Here the rash irreverent mind will be betrayed at once. The attempt to trace out the line, in Christ, between the heavenly life, and the lower in connexion with men in which it ever found its perfect expression when He was here, was ground upon which any of us were bound to err. But it has nothing to do with speculations on the union of the Deity and humanity; it need not involve dividing His Person, nor any heresy at root. On the other hand, to deny that there are these two distinct parts of the life of Christ and of the Christian, only betrays the way our superficial minds can slur over the most blessed things presented in the Word. The painful comments, in the pamphlet you referred me to, upon the letter, now condemned by its writer, show how easy it is on such a subject for one who undertakes to correct another, to fall into error himself, even more deeply affecting the inscrutable glory of His Person. But I dare not discuss the point lest I should do the same myself, and have no thought of characterizing its author as he does his brother.

But to return to the main question raised by your letter because of its importance. "Thus also," says Mr. D. as with Christ, so "with the Christian; there is nothing in common between these two spheres of life; and besides *nature has no part whatever in that above*: in that below there are things which belong to nature and to the world (not in the bad sense of the word "world," but considered as creation); nothing of this enters into the life of Canaan." Later he says — "This way (Jordan) was alike unknown to both [*i.e.*, man, whether innocent or sinful], as was also the heavenly life that follows. This life, in its own effects and the exercises here spoken of, is altogether beyond Jordan. The scenes of spiritual conflict do not belong to man in his life below; though, as we have seen, the realisation of the heavenly things we are brought into acts on the character of our faith down here. . . . No wilderness experience, be it ever so faithful, has anything directly to do with it." Again, I read (for everything we have most certainly learned seems now to be called in question to prove R. wrong, at any rate) — "The wilderness is the character the world takes when we have been redeemed, and where the flesh in us is actually sifted. But death and our entrance into heavenly places, judge the whole nature in which we live in this world;" and "the life of a risen man is not of this world — it has *no connection with it*. He who possesses this life may pass through the world, and do many things that others do — he eats, works, suffers; but as to his life, and his objects, he is not of the world, even as Christ was not of the world."

So much for the division of the life of the Christian and of Christ, as Mr. D. brings it out in the Synopsis on Joshua; the last edition giving far greater development on this very point than the former ones. But I turn elsewhere. In different papers in "Notes and Comments," he enters specifically into the whole question of our place in Christ, with all that is inseparably connected with it of calling, relationship, and blessing, into which no question of responsibility ever did or could enter, distinguishing this position in every point of view from the tested and responsible path of the Christian here. I open vol. 2, p. 200, and there read

"I am started in *my responsible course in this world on the blessed ground of redemption*, to reckon myself dead to sin, alive to God, and to yield myself to God as alive from the dead; and a blessed privilege it is to pass through this world, free by redemption, to live to God, and to serve in such a world as this. In the Red Sea we have deliverance, the salvation of God connected with the judgment of evil, dealing with men in either case as *belonging to this world*; but Jordan is a *passing out of the whole condition of responsible man in the world, godly or ungodly*. . . . In a word, Jordan is death as *ceasing to belong to this world at all*, and entering into heavenly places, as belonging to them, with

an ascended Christ. The Red Sea is death as redemption and deliverance, leading us to live to God in this world, and 'if' remains. The Red Sea is *deliverance into a responsible life in this world*, though if life be there we shall reach the goal; Jordan is dying to it and entering into Canaan as united to Christ". P. 209, "Romans says, those who are in Christ (Rom. 8: 1), but it puts us experimentally in the wilderness." At p. 210 "The gift of *eternal life* and the sealing of the Spirit, lead me into the consciousness of being in Christ, united to Himself now as sitting in heavenly places, and soon to be with Him bearing His image: here there is full present assurance of faith, and assurance of *being in Christ — an eternal thing in which we are, and have eternal life*, eternal redemption, heirs of God, joint heirs with Christ. *De facto* we are down here, with a given faith and hope, to pursue our journey towards the thing hoped for — in the wilderness on the footing of redemption, in the wilderness on the footing of responsibility to 'by any means attain,' but having to persevere with promises that faith confides in, power that keeps through faith for the inheritance kept for us, but having to get across," etc.

I call special attention to this last passage, because of W. J. L's. account of what was taught at Bristol. (See the preceding footnote). No fair mind but will admit, that it is precisely what Mr. D. teaches here. For he (as in all this line of truth) divides the Christian's life, and connects eternal life with the position in Christ, a heavenly and eternal thing in which we are; and distinguishes this from our *de facto* position, down here in pilgrimage, to which responsibility attaches. This passage may also help to the understanding of the expression which has been so much misunderstood, but which Mr. D. also uses in exactly the same connexion, I refer to "mixed condition."

There is in the same volume, "The Red Sea and Jordan," and in Vol. 1, "The Wilderness," all to the same purpose, and which are most helpful on the difference between the heavenly life, and our life of pilgrimage in which it is developed here, by the comparison instituted in great development between the aspects of the christian position as presented in the Epistles. There are interesting letters too, of those published, where the same ground of the truth is taken. He speaks there of "confounding the responsible man with the redeemed man," and lest we should after all suppose with P. A. H's. extraordinary reasoning,\* that there can be no responsibility save of the first man carrying with it condemnation, or as in Christ — Mr. D. adds, "Redemption is always absolute and perfect; the responsible man, *whether past Jordan or not*, tested . . . The wilderness is an usual but not necessary part of God's ways — what the world becomes to those who are redeemed, or stand on that ground, and individually tested if they get to the end, viewed not as in heavenly places, but through redemption on a journey there; *for Scripture does so consider us*."

\*"The responsibility of the first man is set aside wholly at the Cross, gone in Christ's grave. Mr. R. would resuscitate this, and put the believer back again under it, and thus again under wrath and condemnation. According to him, the believer is abstractedly in Christ; really under condemnation and wrath, in sin, and responsible as there," (p. 22). This might pass for complete misapprehension of the character of responsibility Mr. R is looking at, but for where he quotes (page 13) Mr. R. "It (i.e. Romans) is the life of responsibility here, though carried out in divine power," adding, "The statement one would not object to." Is this resuscitating the first man? Or could a life carried out in divine power be under condemnation and wrath?

P.A.H.'s comments on this point are only another sample of the misapprehension, and I fear I must add misrepresentation, that have done so much to disturb the minds of the saints. Putting the Christian by redemption into his responsible, tested path of the wilderness, to be dependent on infallible faithfulness, and power to carry him to the end, is only (for him) to put him back under wrath and condemnation. Not that I doubt for a moment that he or any other Christian, instructed in the Word,

would own that there is such responsibility into which redemption introduces us, totally distinct from our place in Christ; and that to connect the latter with the former would be fatal error. But, what then must be felt of the spirit that condemns, as not only destructive of the christian position, but a denial of the finished work of Christ, etc., etc. - that which, however imperfectly expressed, must, when understood, be admitted to be the truth, and of the last possible importance to the soul as alone giving it stability before God.

It is no part of my object to defend Mr. R., or the almost total absence, in the letters made public, of guarding statements of truth by other parts of the truth equally important; but when called upon to judge what he says, in the letters you quote, as a "dangerous and radical departure from the truth," I must confess I see nothing but the truth, though put out in such a way as to be liable to the grave misconception of his meaning, that such a comment implies.

Thus far the substance of my letter. I may here add that, since writing it, I opened casually the "Christian Friend," (vol. 7, p. 228,) and in notes of an address by Mr. D., I find the main distinction brought out very simply: — "If I am sitting in heavenly places in Christ, there is no one there to pluck me out of His hand; but if I am walking down here, it all depends on my dependence on the faithfulness of God . . . All the 'ifs' in the New Testament come in for the journey; it would be blasphemous to use an 'if' as to salvation" — or, in other words, to connect responsibility with in Christ. "It would be calling in question Christ's work. For the journey, it is a different kind of assurance; it is just as sure, for God has spoken — shall He not do it? But it is not yet accomplished. Hebrews is full of 'ifs;' for we are looked at there, *not as in Christ, but as poor feeble things, walking on the earth*, and Christ a Priest on high; therefore, all conditions were looked at as finally fatal, if not kept. There are no 'ifs' in Ephesians, because we are looked at there as sitting in heavenly places in Christ. In Colossians it is a hope laid up in heaven. Phil. always takes up salvation as something to come; it looks at justification as a future thing."

There is another point of which much has been made, W. J. L. going so far as to say, in a letter sent me, that it is the root of all that he calls the heresy. I refer to the manifestation of eternal life in Christ to the world. Now, it is no question with any one of a manifestation in the world, putting all under responsibility to receive Him. — John 1: 1-11, 3: 19, 5: 31-40, 15: 22-25. But to press that He was manifested *to* it is just to overstep the mark of Scripture. Here, again those who have harassed the saints for months by their charges of false doctrine are found to be opposing themselves to precious distinctions of the Word, long since brought out to us. As to this question of manifestation to the world, it would seem impossible for Mr. D. to speak more strongly than he has done, affirming that the glory of the Son has never "been assumed in manifestation at all," and that in this very fact lies the distinctive contrast between His second coming and the first. I quote from Vol. 2 of "Notes and Comments," "For though He came truly in the flesh, He was — not so known save spiritually — none could come to Him, as so come in the flesh, save the Father which had sent Him drew them. John 6: 63. Accordingly He spake and was known in testimony — He was known as the Word by His words; they had the power in which He appeared, to draw to Himself then; "he that heareth my words," etc. It was only spiritually He was known, though He was manifested in the flesh, it was only in the word that He spake that He was received. . . . In a word, as it was hearing the word, and keeping the word which was the sowing of the Son of Man, so it was *not manifestation to men*, but veiled, and manifested to be the Person (though men ought to have known Him), only to those whose eyes were opened by His word to see Him through the Father's grace. This is argued in John 6, and its principles opened out in John 8 . . . So those, amongst whom Jesus was in the flesh, did in moral fact only see the Son as we see Him now, *i.e.*, the moral character of the perception was the same. . . . His first coming was in witness, though it

was indeed the Son; His second coming is in Person, when every eye shall see Him, and the glory of Him who was hidden be known."

On the whole question, as all that has come out and been controverted passes before me, I see nothing beyond what might have been profitably discussed in brotherly confidence among those who study the Word. In this way, when in teaching, the balance of the truth — ever so important but difficult to maintain, for our minds are generally one-sided — seemed to be endangered, it might have been adjusted. What was actually accomplished thus gave hope as to what was yet wanting. "Pretending to accuracy," as Mr. D. has said, "destroys reverence and leads to infidelity;" but, referring to one whom he feared through confidence in his studies, had run into this, he adds significantly, "the worst of consequences would be brethren following him into it even to oppose . . . what I dread is any number of brethren *committing all to what many may be incapable of entering into.*" Apart from all question of Mr. R. and his views, we are face to face with the effect of what was thus deprecated; and it seems to me to be largely due to the deplorable character the controversy has assumed. It is deeply humbling to us that the occasion was found in the defective way things were presented. But, however this may be, the most serious feature of the present movement (next to the scattering of the handful of saints that had been cleaving to the Lord in the unity of His body) is the spirit of opposition that has been excited against a part of the truth that has ever been the most difficult to maintain — because of the demand it makes upon the believer as to man, and the world he once belonged to, and the unceasing hostility of the enemy — even that which gives Christianity its distinctively heavenly character. Only in the growth of the soul spiritually does this side of God's blessed revelation of Himself to us come to be appreciated, as it ministers to and forms this growth. What full development then it needs, in caring for the Lord's beloved people; what careful maintenance of the foundations of the truth of the Christian position, the common platform of the faith of God's elect, when we would bring out, not our entering in, but the deepest and most blessed character of what we enter into. This was lacking, and gave the opportunity, that the enemy only too well knows how to seize against the truth.

The Lord, in His mercy, look upon the many now stumbled, and in danger of being ranged in opposition to truth that otherwise might have become theirs, in the normal growth of the soul under God's gracious culture. He alone is our refuge and resource in humbling ourselves under His mighty hand. The charges that the Person of Christ has been assailed, if true, would rightly stir the truest and deepest sensibilities of the saints. Many, incapable of entering for themselves into what is in question, will believe that being so freely made they must be true. If true, absolute separation from any who would defend them, was the only course to be pursued, in faithfulness to Him. Nothing could be worse than that jealousy for the glory of His Person should be weakened. That rash expressions have been used is admitted in the withdrawal of them, but these, though deeply to be deplored, are not attributable to Mr. R. But when satisfied that there has been no false system, no false doctrine at root, and the conviction is forced upon one that those who have made the charges, have put themselves into the solemn position of false accusers of their brethren, what a state is disclosed; how humbling to us all. The Lord give us, in His great mercy, to take it truly to heart, bowed low in sorrow and shame before Him; while we rest, as in His grace we can, upon the sure accomplishment of His purposes through it all, for His own glory, and the blessing of His people. J. A. T

*Copies of this Paper may be obtained from W. K., 17 Arthur Square, Belfast.*