

C
D25 K
1876

SOURCES OF INFIDELITY.

A

BACCALAUREATE DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED AT

DARTMOUTH COLLEGE,

JUNE 25, 1876.

BY ASA D. SMITH,

PRESIDENT.

CONCORD, N. H.:

PRINTED BY THE REPUBLICAN PRESS ASSOCIATION.

1876.

DISCOURSE.

ISAIAH 44:20.

“HE FEEDETH ON ASHES: A DECEIVED HEART HATH TURNED HIM ASIDE, THAT HE CANNOT DELIVER HIS SOUL, NOR SAY, IS THERE NOT A LIE IN MY RIGHT HAND?”

When the wise man says, “Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof,” he by no means intends to speak lightly of the latter. There is evermore a special interest in beginnings. They awaken curiosity; as when some broad river, like the Nile, is traced with weariness and painfulness, and great expense of treasure and peril of life, to its far-off source in the centre of a vast continent. Beginnings are intrinsically important. They are causal and prophetic. They are seed-like. There is a type and a law in them—a law of descent and of propagation. Beginnings, as types, shed light on the antitypes. We learn, as we study them, whence came the Pactolian sands, or the death-bearing malaria. Ascertained, besides, they may often be controlled and

modified. "I have read," says one, "of a hill in Europe, where a little spring bursts forth; and if its waters run down the slope on one side, they mingle with the Rhine, and find their way to the German Ocean. If they leap from the cliff on the other side, they wander till they blend with the mighty Danube, and, after passing through many nations, kindreds, and tongues, are lost in the Black Sea, a thousand leagues from the other. The removal of a single spadeful of earth determines the question, to which of these distant embouchures the waters of that little spring are destined." Especially important are beginnings in the moral and spiritual sphere. They give us the protoplasm, so to speak, which forms the basis of the whole subsequent life. It is not strange that one of the most popular volumes in the published works of one of the most eminent divines of the last half century, was his series of discourses on "First Things."

The view thus suggested is to nothing more applicable than to that Protean infidelity, so rife in these latter days, and which, in some of its more specious forms, is one of the chief perils of the youthful student. To understand it thoroughly, and so to be fully armed against it, you must know its sources. And these are often not in the recent, but far back in the past history. They are to be sought for not mainly in the open plain, but in the thick

jungles of the soul, in its shrouded morasses, or on rugged and cloudy heights hard to be reached. Yet the search for them is, for reasons already hinted, of vast moment. Latent as they often are, and unsuspected—doing their deadly work subtly and in the dark, and doing it the more effectively because so stealthily—it is half the battle to eclaircize them. The diagnosis here is not less important than in the case of physical disease. Of the poor soul “feeding on ashes,” as our text has it, it is just as true as of the idolater originally referred to, “a deceived heart hath turned him aside, that he cannot deliver his soul, nor say, Is there not a lie in my right hand?” In the hope of exposing some of these self-deceptions, and so of helping to break the cords, delicate, it may be, as gossamer threads, yet strong as bands of iron, wherewith many are held in unconscious bondage, I propose to speak to-day of some of the chief SOURCES OF INFIDELITY.

I name first, *early associations*. Though we hold not with Mill and Mackintosh, that conscience in its fulness, and all the moral intuitions and sentiments, are the mere creatures of association, yet it is doubtless one of the most far-reaching and potent of all the laws both of our intellectual and moral being. It has much to do in fashioning and coloring the whole web of life. Especially is this true of the associations of early years. The mind and the heart

send forth then their clinging tendrils in every direction; and the fibres, at first of downy softness, at the touch of the passing years harden into steel. We speak but truisms, you may say; but they are truisms of such amazing moment that we can hardly be too often or too earnestly reminded of them; and they have a special relevancy to our present theme. Who has not felt in later life the power of early impressions, albeit reason and conscience have disowned them, and he has known surely that they were but as the phantoms of a troublous dream? I would be glad to find the New Englander so entirely disenthralled from the spells of his boyhood as to feel not the slightest uneasiness at the sight of the new moon over his left shoulder—knowing though he does that the whole legend pertaining thereunto is as truly a myth as “the man in the moon.” Preëminently enduring and potent are the associations of home. They were meant to be so. God intended that there the heart should have its first unfolding and the mind its first direction; that there should be the primal fountain of sweet waters or bitter—and that as they are the one or the other, so should the stream of life flow on. Happy is he in all moral relations, and especially in relation to the subject in hand, the abode of whose childhood has been irradiated by the light of faith.

What moulding power has a father's known accept-

ance of divine truth, and his daily illustration of it. What a greater power in the same direction is a mother's devotion and a mother's saintly life. We all remember the saying of John Randolph: "I should have been a French atheist if it had not been for one recollection, and that was the memory of the time when my departed mother used to take my little hands in hers, and cause me, on my knees, to say, Our Father, who art in Heaven." There has been a strenuous effort, as you know, to secure the opening of the Centennial Exhibition on the Sabbath. At a meeting of gentlemen, I have been told, who had much to do with the matter, there was one present who came with the determination to favor the movement. But as he sat awaiting the discussion, some little filament of association drew his thoughts back to his boyhood. A thousand Sabbath memories thronged about him—of the mother who arrayed him for the house of God, of the walk thither, of the Sabbath hymn and prayer in church and at home, of forms that had passed from the old paternal dwelling to the better land—and his heart melted within him. When called on to speak, he frankly said: "I came intending to vote for the proposed measure, but a change has passed over me, and I shall take my stand with those who oppose it." I have seen a student, born and bred in a place where rationalistic influences prevailed, preserved from the contagion, and

held fast to the truth, almost solely by a pious mother's influence. Ah! these Christian mothers—what a ministry of blessing is theirs! As I have sat in our College Chapel, and looked on the great body of young men that gather there—ardent, impressible, inexperienced, comparatively—and have recalled the temptations that beset them; for the surest and dearest safeguard, next to the arm divine, I have turned to the spells and the memories of home. And I have said in my heart, thankfully and hopefully, as I have thought of the mothers who were praying for them, “Their angels—those guardian angels of the fire-side—do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven.”

But what now if all this power for good,—of multifarious associations and precious memories,—become a power for evil? What if there be no family altar—no voice of prayer from him who should be the priest of his household—no lessons of God and his word from the mother's lips? What if the Bible be not merely neglected, but spoken of slightly and doubtfully—as if it were of questionable authority, or but partially inspired? What if flings and sneers at the leading truths of Christianity, or at the church of God, or at the members thereof, are heard at the family board? The faintest whisper of this sort shall be echoed, with ever increasing volume, all along life's pathway. It may prove the soul's death-knell. “It

is hard, indeed," wrote one of our alumni to me lately, of his missionary labors among the natives of Asia, "to free them entirely from the old superstitions, to quite uproot the faith planted and nourished by the mother's hand, who, morning and evening, led the child to bow before the idol and offer a prayer." And the law of association works in America just as it works in India. Nay, the influence of young companions may be hardly less potent. A beardless infidel, self-confident, loquacious, magnetic, has been known to poison the minds of half his juvenile companions. And what if the associations of the school or the college are in the same direction? What if in the circle of learned and revered teachers scepticism is known to exist, even if it be not taught—much more, if it be stealthily though only occasionally insinuated? From influences like these, received unconsciously—denied it may be, and the purest autonomy vainly asserted—how often have we occasion to say, "He feedeth on ashes: a deceived heart hath turned him aside, that he cannot deliver his soul, nor say, Is there not a lie in my right hand?"

As the second source of infidelity, I mention, *a needless stumbling at mystery*. There is in fallen man everywhere, the old Edenic desire to "be as gods, knowing good and evil." In every age, "vain man would be wise, though man be born like a wild ass's colt." In respect to divine things especially, many

are impatient of inevitable limitations. They are unwilling to receive what they cannot understand. They are "slow of heart to believe;" they call for explanation, for demonstration, for the last conceivable analysis. Instead of the great intuitions, primal, ineradicable, more real than gold or granite, they would have the forms of technical logic, or the revelations of the crucible and the microscope. They call, indeed, in theology for what they find nowhere else. Mystery, it should be remembered, is involved in the very idea of the finite. The very term suggests a limit, as well of knowledge as of being, and points to something above us. There is mystery everywhere, even in the lowest range of existence. We find it in the earth we tread upon, in the heaving sea, in the air we breathe. There is mystery as well in the grain of sand that lies on our palm, as in the shining orb that wheels through space. It sits with us at our tables; it lies down with us at night; it travels with us through our dreams; we meet it in the minutest insect that basks in the summer sunlight. Each one of us is a breathing, walking, thinking, working mystery. So far as the circle of mystery is concerned, the proudest achievements both of science and philosophy have only served to broaden it. If it be so with the finite, how can it be otherwise with the infinite? If it be so with the human, how much more may we look for it in the divine! A book that should profess to be a

divine revelation, and yet to embrace no mystery, would bear upon its brazen brow the stamp of falsehood. When our common sense accepts the unexplainable, the unfathomable, in a thousand other directions, why should we so "feed on ashes" as proudly to reject it in the domain of theology?

There are two errors into which even men of philosophic thought have fallen, as they have grappled with this subject. They have failed, in the first place, *to discriminate duly between facts and modes*. This distinction pertains everywhere to nature, and it is readily acknowledged there. What takes place may be patent; as that matter attracts matter, that the electric current flows along the wires, that combustion occurs—but how we know not. When Mr. Tyndal convinces us that heat is but a mode of motion, the modal problem, after all, has only receded. That a volition moves a congeries of bone and muscle and flesh and nerve we doubt not, but the intimate nature of the process no philosophy can show us. Sir William Hamilton gives us the four ingenious theories of it, only to conclude that we know nothing about it. What we admit so promptly in the lower sphere, why should we reject or ignore in the higher? Why should we hesitate, as many do—deceived by a perverse intellectual habitude—to receive the great facts of Revelation, because the modes are hidden from us? What profitless feeding on ashes is it!

The second error, akin to this,—little more than this, indeed, in another form,—is a failure to *distinguish*, as we may express it, *between apprehending and comprehending*. A grand distinction is this, one that disposes effectually of that doctrine of nescience, under the baleful shadow of which some have come to affirm that all knowledge of God is impossible to us. We cannot indeed *comprehend* him—so the Scriptures affirm: “Who by searching can find out God?” But we can *apprehend* him. We can know the fact of his existence, though we cannot understand it. We can believe in his attributes—his omnipresence, for example, and stand in awe before it—while we say with the Psalmist, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, I cannot attain unto it.” Nay, we discriminate thus in all the finite. Strictly speaking, we comprehend nothing. A blade of grass is as really an insoluble mystery to us as aught that pertains to the divine infinitude. Why then should a confusion of thought which we tolerate nowhere else, deceive and mislead us in relation to the Bible and Christianity? Yet simple as the matter seems, when fairly stated—level to the plainest understanding—it has become “a lie in the right hand” of some of the keenest thinkers of our age.

I pass to name, as a third source of infidelity, a *false independence*. There is, indeed, a true independence—not absolute, for of that the finite universe

knows nothing—but qualified and limited. It is the opposite of a blind credulity and a cringing subserviency; especially, of a servile regard, as of the weathercock, for the fickle breath of popular applause. It pertains to all proper individuality. But it is of a counterfeit I speak, manifesting itself in various ways, and particularly, as I am now concerned to say, in relation to Christianity.

It takes the form, in the first place, of an undue independence of *others*. It is the order of Providence—to be everywhere regarded, however liable to misuse—that we build, to some extent, “on other men’s foundations.” Human nature exists successionally; and each generation, while it learns from the preceding, has, or should have, a lesson for the following. For the communication of that lesson, even in dogmatic forms, the Creator has made, in the family economy, specific provision. Human nature exists, there and elsewhere, socially and communally. We are not all, as an old writer phrases it, “empty pitchers attempting to fill each other.” We have all something for each other, and something which we are bound to impart. The accumulated treasures of knowledge and virtue in the world are the aggregate of multitudinous contributions. For one to take the position that he will accept nothing on trust; that in every matter, theoretic or practical, he will begin at the beginning, and master everything for himself,

would be obviously the height of absurdity. While it would sadly limit and cramp some of the most blessed of the social forces, it would as clearly belittle all good knowledge itself. And what is the height of folly in earthly relations, is no nearer to wisdom in the heavenly. As well cast away what linguists, and geographers, and painstaking historians, and indefatigable scientists have done for us, as count worthless the researches and conclusions of saintly and laborious expositors and theologians. True, we are exhorted "to prove all things." We are, indeed, in a sense, to think for ourselves. We are to hold fast, as worthy descendants of the pilgrims, the right of private judgment; and as ability and opportunity serve, we are to scrutinize the grounds of the faith which has been handed down to us. There may be, and there doubtless are, unworthy failures in this regard. But as human nature is, and as the times are, our danger lies in quite a different direction. There are displays of a proud and arrogant self-sufficiency, a lofty scorn of all human wisdom, present or past, which, if it were not so ridiculous, might make "e'en angels weep."

Exhibitions of this sort are sometimes made even by the undergraduate. You recall one perhaps, brought up on the "sincere milk" of Puritan teaching, furnished and fortified in his earlier years with creeds and catechisms, and duly reverent then toward all home inculcations and sanctuary teachings. But the mar-

vellous intellectual expansion of college life has proved too mighty even for those potent home associations of which we have spoken. It has burst the bands of tradition, and he stands erect in the consciousness of a disenthralled self-hood. He is an independent thinker now. He has come to doubt the truth of the old Bible, and to question, if not to scout, the claims of Christianity. What matters it to him that parents and friends not merely, but a line of intellectual worthies—such as Newton, and Bacon, and Milton, and Davy, and Edwards, and Chalmers—a line running through the ages as a trail of glory—have received with unfaltering faith the Gospel of Christ? He has a keener analysis, a more compact logic, an ampler induction, a broader sweep of thought. You saw him, perhaps, as, wrapping the mantle of his new-born scepticism about him, he made his appearance at the old homestead. What a sensation was there, as he flourished before the astonished household the lore he had gathered—independent thinker though he claimed to be—from the shallow pages of men whose rhetorical brilliancy had passed with him for profoundness. He had learned from Renan with what myths the Gospels were laden. He had been taught by Colenso the falsity of the Bible chronology. He had accepted, as a finality, Tyndal's prayer-gauge. He had been shown by Darwin the initial honors of his genealogical record. He

had found the secret of all life in Huxley's protoplasm, and had learned to bow in rapt devotion before Arnold's drift-idol. As he propounded his "views" to venerable aunts and more venerable grandmothers—with gratified self-consciousness, evidently—they were in the plight of the listeners to Goldsmith's school-master :

“ And still they gazed, and still the wonder grew
That one small head could carry all he knew.”

But in their admiration of his precocious parts, what a tinge of sadness was there! How much rather would those godly—aye, and those right judging souls—have seen him hearkening with meek docility to all good human teaching—not despising even the hallowed traditions—and receiving, at the foot of the cross, the kingdom of God “as a little child.”

There is a second form of false independence, more subtle and harmful, perhaps, than the first. It is an independence, as I may term it, *of our own moral nature*. It has been stoutly advocated, within a few years past, by some from whom better things might have been expected. They have insisted on a sort of theological indifferentism. In order to estimate aright moral and religious truth, we must approach it, they say, in a state of perfect neutrality. To be competent and safe judges of Christianity, in particular, we must have, at the outset, no leaning either against it or for it. Our preference must be, not for

the truth, but for truth abstractly considered. Christian ministers, therefore, and professors of theology—nay, by consequence, all church members—are in the nature of things unfitted to weigh the Christian evidences. They must be ruled out of the jury-box, and are to be little heeded as advocates of the Gospel.

There is in all this, a little reflection will show us, a strange confusion of thought—a mistaking, as the metaphysicians would say, of the subjective for the objective. As to subjective truth, or “truth in the inward parts,” there should be but one mood. Truth in feeling, in purpose, in speech, in the whole life, should be steadfastly maintained by us, and every tendency to the contrary should be unsparingly condemned. In respect to the indispensableness and importance of *personal* truthfulness, as we may term it, both in ourselves and others, there can be no exaggeration. Of the simple love of truth in this view—of truth for its own sake—we admit, without hesitation, all that has been affirmed. But as to truth objectively considered, or as offered to us for acceptance or rejection, the case is essentially different. There are, indeed, spheres and ranges of thought in which a pure indifferentism is quite allowable. As it regards the question, for example, whether the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, or whether the emission theory or the wave theory of light is the true one, we may have

no prepossession. So in regard to purely scientific questions generally. But there are different relations in which we may have—nay, we ought to have—a bias for certain objective realities or truths, and a bias against others. God has incorporated with our very being certain prepossessions: we must be more or less than human—nay, we must be fiend-like—utterly to disregard them.

Let some one affirm, for instance, that a man we have known and esteemed for long years is a thorough-paced scoundrel. Is there any law, either of science or of ethics, that requires us to regard the assertion with perfect nonchalance? Must we be just as well pleased with such an objective reality as with the opposite? Must I be just as willing to have George Washington proved a knave as a patriot—John Howard a selfish trickster as a philanthropist? What becomes of the charity that “thinketh no evil,” that “hopeth all things,” and “believeth all things”? Why, even cold, passionless law rejects a perfect and universal indifferentism. It has a prepossession for our common humanity. It leans toward objective innocence. The man with a hundred counts against him it presumes to be blameless, until he is proved beyond a reasonable doubt to be guilty. All this because the Creator has put within us, as constitutional endowments, kindness and sympathy, and a sense of justice; and because his word has sanctioned

and enforced them. What we affirm now on a lower plane is still more evident on a higher; and the higher we go the more absurd seems the opposite view. Are we bound to approach objective righteousness, whatever glorious form it may take, with no bias in its favor—no leaning of heart or conscience toward it? Must we, so far as feeling is concerned, be just as ready to accept unrighteousness? Must we look with equal eye, so far as all affectional or moral prepossession is concerned, on a demon and an angel? That were to eliminate from our souls their most god-like qualities. That were to deny the grandest part of our being—that which allies us to the Infinite, and makes us capable of spiritual and immortal blessedness. That were like requiring the man, who with undimmed optics walks abroad at noonday, to hold himself perfectly undecided on the question whether the sun, just then, has a place in the heavens—to have no leaning, one way or another, till a demonstration has been wrought out by the Professor of Astronomy. Not less absurd is that dogma of moral indifferentism so stoutly contended for in certain quarters. It is an attempt to quench the light which God has kindled within us, to close that eye of the soul formed by the Creator for the direct beholding of moral and spiritual truth. There are, indeed, minor questions of ethics, and even of theology, in respect to which there may properly be little, if any, pre-inclination.

They may be referred mainly to the sphere of dry, unimpassioned logic. But not so with higher questions, especially with the great question of theism, and the equally important question of Christianity. On these our better nature has a voice. Reason, in its diviner sense, bears testimony, and conscience is to be heeded. The great moral intuitions are to be regarded—as valid and imperative as those of the purely intellectual sphere. Neutrality here, especially in relation to that ultimate and supreme embodiment of moral and spiritual truth, the Gospel of Christ, is utterly impossible. “He that is not for me,” says our Lord, “is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad.”

I pass to mention, as another source of infidelity, the influence of *much of our periodical and popular literature*. I say much—not all; and, I am happy to believe, not of the greater part. For the comparative purity of the American press, whether in its fugitive or permanent issues, we may well be thankful. It seldom shocks us with the grosser forms of scepticism—with the utter rejection of the Bible, or with bold atheism. And it gives us not a little pure gold. There are men in editorial chairs—chairs of secular journalism even—never oblivious of the moral and spiritual interests of their readers, careful to allow in their columns

“Not one immoral, one corrupted thought,
One line which, dying, they would wish to blot.”

But all, alas, are not such ; and where there is nothing of the more revolting sort, there is often a subtle tincture of scepticism,—or, at least, a gracious treatment of it,—well suited to mislead unwary and ill-fortified minds. This is of the greater moment, from the fact that our periodical literature has come to be so largely the intellectual nutriment of our people—the daily, weekly, monthly, semi-monthly, and quarterly issues falling upon the whole land “like leaves in Vallambrosa,” and doing more than almost any other instrumentality to mould the character of the nation. Not to speak of periodicals like the Westminster Review, and its few imitators on this side of the Atlantic, surpassing it in malignity, but with a smaller stock of brains,—publications the less to be dreaded for the clear manifestation of their all-controlling animus,—there are other magazines, not professedly in the interest of infidelity, which pain you, now and then, with articles of most injurious influence. They may go forth under the name of “Popular Science ;” but they tend, so far as faith in the Bible is concerned, to popular demoralization ; and how often, in the daily and weekly papers, in sly and specious editorials, or in bolder communications, do you meet with statements, or inferences, or vague hints, or positive affirmations, adverse, if not to theism, at least to Christianity. Revelation is really but covertly ignored, and reason is exalted as the sole arbiter. An excel-

lent book is the old Bible, but there are errors in it ; the idea of its plenary inspiration is held, at the present day, only by the narrowest minds. You have a caricature, it may be, of some old Puritan—an extract, perhaps, fraught with mediæval terrors, from Jonathan Edwards. The thunder-peal and the lightning-flash of his pages are reproduced ; but not the day-star or the day-dawn, the fragrance of the “ rose of Sharon ” or the beauty of the “ rainbow round about the throne.” There is a sneer here and there at the old theology, and an intimation that, in the light of this nineteenth century, many of the stern old faiths, sour and crabbed to the modern taste, are fast becoming obsolete. What hits at bigotry have we ; what praise of liberalism ; what a magnifying of the life, as all in all ; and what disparagement of all doctrine, as rubbish, fit only for the “ Paradise of fools.” As books are reviewed, what faint and qualified praise, at the best, is accorded to those of an orthodox stamp, and in what terms of unbounded admiration are the men of lax faith, of bold speculation,—the “ advanced thinkers,” so called,—commended to the unwary. He has read with little discrimination who has not met with numerous illustrations of these remarks ; and when, to all this, we add the adroit infusions of sceptical thought into novels, and romances, and essays, and volumes of poetry—often into such as have a special fascination for the young—it is no marvel that we have occa-

sion to say of many an unsuspecting reader, feeding upon such ashes, "a deceived heart hath turned him aside, that he cannot deliver his soul, nor say, Is there not a lie in my right hand?"

As another and a prolific source of infidelity, I name *ignorance of the Bible*. No other book of importance suffers, in this respect, like the word of God. Among the various evidences of this, are the inaccurate quotations so often made. It is not strange, perhaps, looking at the whole history concerned, that a man like Gladstone should refer to the prophet Daniel as in "the burning fiery furnace." But when writers or speakers of credit give us such sayings as "God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb," or "To err is human, to forgive divine," as veritable quotations from the Scriptures, we cannot help thinking that while a greater familiarity both with the ancient and modern classics would be desirable, still more desirable would be a better knowledge of the Bible. An eminent American scientist, not over favorable, it is understood, to the evangelical faith, speaks, in a volume recently published, of the "outpouring of the Spirit of God" as "an expression which would be blasphemous if it were not the result of ignorance." He seems not to be aware that this figurative form of speech is one of the most common in the Scriptures. Yet these minor mistakes are but straws, indicative of greater deficiencies. There are not a few of those

who berate and reject the Bible, who know little more of its contents—nay, in some cases less—than of the Koran or the Shasters.

The advocates of Christianity are often charged with ignorance of the various fields of scientific research. And the charge, it must be admitted, is, in many cases, well founded. An acquaintance with that

“Elder scripture, writ by God’s own hand,”

is every way profitable. It would in no wise hinder, but greatly help the wise and effective defence of the sacred volume. For there is no antagonism between nature and the Bible. They have one author, one great end; and, to the reverent ear, there is a glorious harmony between them. The more nature is studied, if it be with a true docility, the more clearly will this appear. But to that end the Bible should be studied also, and that not in the manner of a mere sciolist. It is true here, in a sense, that

“A little learning is a dangerous thing.”

It may, to a perverse mind, be a fruitful source of infidelity. The Bible, no less than nature, requires profound study. It has its chemistry, its geology, its strata, its demiurgic periods. It is a connected whole. As a tree of life, it has a divine botany, giving us its root in the garden of Eden; its trunk expanding and rising heavenward through the ages; its branches outspreading at the touch of the Son of God; its

leaves for the healing of the nations ; and its "twelve manner of fruits" for the dwellers in the New Jerusalem. As it is faithfully studied, what seem at first defects, will be found to be excellences. Even the silences of the Scripture are among its greatest felicities. And as in mineralogical and geological investigations, what appeared to the tyro like disorder and confusion, a mere chaotic jumble, shall pass, to the eye of the honest and diligent student, into perfect order and exquisite beauty. Not only is the Bible its own best interpreter, it is its own best defence. As ignorance of it leads naturally to infidelity, an intimate acquaintance with it is the most potent means of evoking at once the assent of the intellect and the faith of the heart. So our missionaries among heathen nations have told us, and such is the testimony of pastors and Bible-readers, as they have labored in our own land. Interesting and impressive things the learned astronomer may tell us of the orb of day ; but it is only as you gaze directly upon it, as it lifts its disc above the eastern hills, as it passes to its meridian elevation, as it moves adown the western sky, sending its rays aslant over hill and valley and plain and garden and grove, that you say with the deepest emotion, "Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun." So of that sun of the moral world which the purblind infidel madly discards. If we could only insure the

daily reading of the Bible in all the families of our land, I should little deplore the absence of all ponderous apologies. I should be sure that scepticism would go to its own place, and the nation be saved. With this conviction, I take my stand, on this centennial year, at the threshold of the Common School, and, remembering all that the Bible has done for us since our fathers sought here "a faith's pure shrine," I say to those who with whatever vain quibbles would banish it from the place of teaching,—

"Procul, O procul este, profani!"

I pass to speak of another source of scepticism, *a misapprehension of the evangelical faith*. A point this naturally and closely connected with that last made. Men of straw are never particularly seemly; and this is especially true in the sphere of religion. I do not marvel that one becomes an infidel when the fair form of Christianity is transmuted,—whether by his own fault or that of others,—into a scarecrow or a hobgoblin. I have always been a little less severe in my judgment of the French infidels—Voltaire and the rest—for the sort of Christianity against which they revolted. Such transformations as I refer to have the leading doctrines of our faith often undergone; and the result has been a sad one. The genuine coin has been rejected because of the counterfeit. The inspiration of the Scriptures, to begin at the beginning, has been apprehended as a purely

mechanical affair, the sacred writers being the mere amanuenses of the Holy Spirit—the almost unconscious conduits through which the mind and will of the Most High were uttered. As the human element has been thus discarded or ignored—man putting asunder what God has wisely joined together—the issue has often been an unhappy confusion of thought and faltering of faith. The doctrine of the Trinity has been understood to mean not only that there is a mysterious threefoldness in the Godhead, but that God is three in the same sense in which He is one. Miracles are represented as annulling the laws of nature, instead of merely using them; or of simply interposing a superior force, and being thus, on a higher plane, the proper analogues of the commonest human acts. Our doctrine of total depravity is understood by many to mean that every man is by nature as bad as he can be—that there can be nothing in any sense approvable or lovable about him; when it simply imports that he is totally destitute of loyalty to God; that he is a rebel against his Maker, though, like other rebels against rightful authority, he may have many a pleasant and praiseworthy quality. Regeneration is apprehended often as a physical or constitutional change—not a mere change of heart or of the affections; and so, the balance of truth being disturbed, doubts and cavils are begotten. The great doctrine of the atonement is misunderstood,—

as if it taught that God gave his Son that he might love the world, and not as we have it in the Gospel, that he so loved the world that he gave his Son. The death of Christ is conceived of as a literal punishment—not, as in the most orthodox view, a penalty only in a secondary, vicarious sense, and that voluntarily endured by one who had a right to lay down his life. Predestination is often caricatured, as not including the merely permissive sense, and so as not leaving the human will, according to Edwards' resistless demonstration, as free as it possibly can be. Justification by faith is regarded as superseding or disparaging a holy life—not as being at once its indispensable basis and its most potent motive. Time would fail us to note all the distortions of Christian doctrine whereby the Gospel is discredited, or to follow out all the lines of sceptical reasoning which they originate. They are due sometimes to the incompetency or wrongheadedness of the advocates of Christianity. They fail to present it in its own fair, symmetrical, glorious proportions. But they come, in part, of other causes; of that ignorance of the Bible which has been already dwelt on, of a lack of faithful investigation, and of a fair and candid consideration of what the defenders of the truth have had to offer. How many revilers of Calvin are there, who have never read a page either of his Institutes or his Commentaries. How many a determined op-

ponent of "orthodoxy," so called, do you meet, who could scarce give you its true outline, who has not indeed honestly sought for it, but, putting a miserable changeling in its place, and identifying that with Christianity, has made utter shipwreck of the faith. The pertinacity with which men often cling to their misapprehensions is a sad indication that a deceived heart has turned them aside, and that they delight in the ashes on which they feed.

I pass naturally here to the last source of infidelity on which I propose to dwell, *a lack of sympathy with the Gospel*. This is not only the complement of the series, but is intimately connected with the whole. Other springs of error lie far back in the years, and deep down in the heart; this has not only the precedence chronologically, but is profounder than all the rest. Nay, the others have largely, as we have intimated, their root and nutriment in it. They work subtly, indeed; but this more subtly, because more quietly, constantly, pervasively. It is as a still but chilly night-air, covering with a hoar-frost whatever abides in it. This lack of sympathy, moreover, is not a purely negative affair. It has its positive side; it implies a real and deep-seated dislike, and that of a most indomitable and persistent character. You may seem to overcome it; but, divine grace apart, like nature in the Horatian saying, Though thrust out with a fork, it will come back again.

And like the Circean spell, it is

“Of power to cheat the eye with blear illusion,
And give it false presentments.”

The point we now make has, I know—as an open utterance, at least—been strongly objected to. In a public discussion on the best means of arresting infidel tendencies, I have heard from the lips of an able and excellent divine a protest against any resort, as he expressed himself, to the *odium theologicum*. In a certain relation of that term, I should heartily coincide with him; but, as to the grosser forms of infidelity, there is a divine method, which, it is believed, we may safely follow. It is “the fool,” God affirms—the fool in a moral sense—who “hath said in his heart there is no God.” And shall we hesitate to make a similar affirmation? It was because men “liked not to retain God in their knowledge,” the Scripture declares, that he “gave them over to a reprobate mind,” even to all vile idolatries. And as to the Bible, we have ample warrant for saying, that if men like not it, it is because the Bible likes not them. “He that is of God,” said our Lord, “heareth God’s words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God.” To the same effect writes the apostle Paul: “The God of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not;” and “God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts”—in our *hearts*,

observe—"to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." When Christianity was rejected in that age,—and the fact is just the same at the present day,—it was the heart, primarily and mainly, that needed to be rectified.

Let us not be misunderstood here. Far be it from us to affirm that the men of sceptical leanings are all of immoral character, or destitute of amiable susceptibilities and sympathies. The fact is the very reverse of this—albeit the tendency of infidelity, in itself considered, is to all manner of deterioration. But, immorality apart, there is a natural contrariety between the unsanctified heart and the Gospel of Christ. The Gospel strikes a death-blow at human selfishness in all its manifold forms—at self-seeking, self-exaltation, self-dependence, self-will, self-righteousness, self-salvation. It touches, with its Ithuriel spear, the thin disguises of the soul, and a thousand unsuspected evils are straightway revealed. When self-complacency cries, "All these have I kept from my youth up," the response is, "Sell all that thou hast;" and the man of great possessions departs in sorrowful mood. It makes no compromises; it allows no reserves; it abases all human pride. To the monarch on his throne, as well as the serf in his hut; to the sultan, amid all the splendor of his intellectual triumphs, as well as the illiterate peasant; to

all alike, it cries ever, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." And it is, in many a case, because the old perverse heart—the same through all the ages—reluctates at such self-renunciation and self-humiliation, that it seeks, at length, to fortify itself by some specious form of infidelity.

"But is there no such thing," you may say, "as honest doubt? We have heard its praises spoken; and do you repudiate it utterly?" There are, without question, doubters with a measure of honesty. And so far as that element really prevails, it is a token of good. It is like the spring bud, making its way through snow and frost, with unmistakable vitality and promise of fruitage. It is the leaning of the plant in the dark cellar toward the faintest ray of light. And it may be recognized by the fact that such is ever its leaning. It holds not fast its cavils and difficulties, of whatever sort, but rejoices to have them removed. In an inquiry meeting which I held one Sabbath evening, when a pastor, I observed a gentleman and lady, of intelligent aspect, whom I found to be husband and wife, waiting apparently to be conversed with. As I approached them, the gentleman rose to give me passage to his wife, for whose sake alone he had tarried, on an invitation given after the discourse of the evening. I gave him to understand, however, that I had a word for him also, and, in the kindest manner

possible, I sought to ascertain the state of his mind. "They call me," he said, in answer to my inquiries, "an infidel." "Ah," I replied, "some persons are so called who have not much of the infidel about them, after all." A brief conversation followed, in which I said to him, "Do you think you really desire to know the truth?" I shall never forget the apparent sincerity with which—impressed, probably, more than he was aware, by the services of the evening and by his wife's solicitude—he answered, "*I do.*" Encouraged by this assurance, I took a long walk the next day to his dwelling, to leave there for him Nelson's "Cause and Cure of Infidelity." On the following Sabbath evening he was at the inquiry meeting again; and he gladdened my heart by telling me that the book I loaned him had scattered his infidelity to the winds. I had the joy of receiving both him and his wife to the church of Christ. He uttered no falsehood when he said he desired to know the truth; and this was the outcome of it. Honest doubt—if it be really such—is the break of day to the benighted soul. It is the mingled solicitude and hope of the captive, as some kind hand is breaking link after link of the chain that has bound him. Let me see that doubt is really honest—that the old repugnancies of the heart are passing away—and I can as little question the issue as that the vernal sunshine will be followed by the luxuriance of summer. For

“if any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine.”

YOUNG GENTLEMEN OF THE GRADUATING CLASS :

You will bear us witness that, in all our past relations to you, our utterances on the subject of religion have been in no sectarian vein. It has been to us a matter of little consequence, comparatively, with which of the various divisions of the sacramental host your lot might be cast. But while minor things have been held thus in abeyance, we have magnified to the utmost the Word of God. Among all our textbooks, so far as moral and spiritual subjects are concerned—subjects of chief moment, it should be ever remembered, in the training of a rational and immortal being—the Bible has been foremost. We have insisted ever on its supremacy in matters both of faith and practice. And our chief desire has been that you might yield your hearts and minds fully to its control; that each one of you might be a true Christian—which is, indeed, “the highest style of man.” We rejoice, with joy unspeakable, that our hopes and efforts in this regard have not been utterly in vain. While some of you have found here, as we trust, “the pearl of great price,” it has become more and more precious to others, we doubt not, under the quickening influence of the Spirit of God. By the great majority of you, so far as I

know, Christianity is accepted as the only hope either of the individual soul or of a lost world.

It was from no special fear in regard to you that the theme of the present occasion was selected. It was well, we thought—in this age of doubt rather than of faith, or of faith, in some of its sternest conflicts with doubt—to stir up your minds, at least, by way of remembrance. We recall the admonition of Scripture, “let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall.” While we are thankful, as you may well be, for whatever escapes have been vouchsafed you from whatever latent springs of error have lain about your earlier years, we bear in mind that there are snares and pitfalls still in your pathway; and that, for the sake both of yourselves and of others, you cannot be too effectually guarded against them. We have thought it well, therefore, to call your attention to the perilous “seeds of things;” to the little germs which require an almost microscopic scrutiny, but out of which may grow the deadly nightshade.

Let us counsel you, then,—gathered as you are for your last Sabbath service here,—not only to beware, in all your future, of those evil associations by which your own faith may be imperilled, but to be sure that you harm not thus the souls of others. Along those delicate cords of sympathy which bind your hearts still to your fellow-youth,

and through those other channels of influence which will open before you, as the years steal on, have a care that no perilous current of scepticism flows. Dim not even by a word the brightness of that hope which alone can purify and save the rising generation. As touching the claims of Christianity, let not mystery disturb you. Bow down with reverence, rather, before the inscrutable things of God, rejoicing that as you gaze with awe into the unfathomable depths of the firmament of his truth, so many blessed lights shine clearly and brightly upon you. Nor let the spirit of a false independence possess you—an independence that scorns not only all the wisdom both of the past and the present, but rejects even those primal intuitions and instincts,—the indispensable conditions of all good knowledge,—which God himself has wrought into the very texture of the human soul. Be on your guard against that taint of error which lurks in many a brilliant page of our various literature, especially in its lighter and more transient forms. And should the press become your chosen instrument of influence, see to it that through this channel no utterance go forth suited to weaken the hold of men upon the truth of God. Be not corruptors of your fellow-men, even editorially. That you be under no injurious misapprehension, and that you may be helpful to others, study carefully and candidly the evangelical faith. Above all, be con-

stant and diligent students of the Bible. Study it with all docility,—not putting finite wisdom above the infinite, but seeking meekly to be taught of God. Study it in its relations and correlations—in the whole, as well as the parts. Study it in no cavilling spirit. Watch not for apparent roughnesses of the bark upon this tree of life, but pass to its heart, and satisfy the soul's hunger, and stay the maladies thereof, with its refreshing and healing leaves. To this end, invoke that divine influence which shall take from the soul all its secret aversions to the humbling doctrines of the Gospel, and beget in it a profound sympathy with the Word of Life. So shall all mists of doubt and unbelief pass away. So shall your lives be peaceful and beneficent. And when you are summoned at last to follow that one of your number, the earnest, trustful, and faithful PUFFER, who was early and suddenly called to the rest above, but who left in your hearts a memory of him that will never die, you shall lay your trembling hands upon the dear old Bible, and, as earth's flickering stars fade away, the Star of Bethlehem, yea, the very Sun of Righteousness, shall irradiate the valley of the shadow of death.



3 0112 098552554