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ARTICLE VIII.

THE HISTORICAL STUDY OF CHRISTIANITY.[1]

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CONVENIENTLY, though somewhat broadly and ambiguously, my subject may be styled: "The Historical Method applied to the Study of Christianity," or more briefly, "The Historical Study of Christianity." The wide use of the historic method is one of the marked features of the intellectual life of the present age. In all branches of knowledge its influence has been felt, and a revolution, second only to that which connects itself with the name of Francis Bacon, has been accomplished by it in our scientific thinking. The historic method, in fact, controls all lines of study and investigation. Whether applied to the works of nature or to the works of man, it is the same: in the one case, it gives us the theory of evolution; in the other, human history, which in the modern view is simply the account of an evolution in the sphere of the humanities. Christian thinking, as is always the case, has felt the influence of the spirit of the age, and has become historical. Not that the study of Christian history is a new thing, but that the historical study of Christianity is; for the conception of history and the historic method have undergone a great change since Eusebius wrote his ἱστορία ἐκκλησιαστική in ten books. To him the history of the church was a drama in which two great opposing forces—God and Satan—were struggling for the mastery. All heresies, schisms, and persecutions were the work of Satan, who by means of them attempted to corrupt and rend

[1] Opening address delivered at Lane Theological Seminary, Sept. 15, 1892.

and destroy the church of God. With such a transcendental notion of history, no true understanding of the growth and development of Christianity was possible. Indeed, the idea of a development was far from Eusebius' thought. The Christian church was complete and perfect in the beginning, and such it would always be. An evolution or a change of any sort in doctrine or in polity was inconceivable. Heresies and schisms were simply attacks upon Christianity from without, and, having overcome them, the church went on just as before, with perhaps a clearer consciousness of her own position, but otherwise unchanged. This transcendental and dualistic view of Christian history, Eusebius shared with the entire church of the ancient and middle ages. It is the view of the Roman Catholic Church to-day. That the whole Christian system was complete in the beginning, and has undergone no change, is one of its dicta. John Henry Newman smoothed his own path into the Catholic Church by the elaboration of a quasi theory of development to account for the mediæval accretions of the Roman creed. The church, that she might not drive away her new disciple and others like him, preserved a discreet silence in the matter, but she has since given expression to her opinion of the doctrine in terms of unmistakable dissent. To do otherwise were self-stultification. But the Catholic Church has not had a monopoly of the Eusebian conception of Christian history. According to the "Magdeburg Centuriæ," the first historical production of the new Protestant spirit of the sixteenth century, the church, perfect and complete in its inception and during the early centuries of its career, had been later corrupted by Satan through the agency of the papacy—the antichrist. No growth or development in Christianity was desirable or even possible. All that was needed, was that the papacy should be destroyed and its corruptions effaced, and Christianity would once more stand forth in its pristine splendor, its form and features unchanged. The conception

of the nature of Christian history, it will be seen, is still the Eusebian. The terms are changed, but the essence is the same. To Eusebius, church history is all apologetics; to the Magdeburg writers, all polemics; and the new view is no truer than the old. But during the present century the modern historical spirit has made itself felt, and the modern historical method has been employed in the study of Christianity. The standard works which are now in our hands are all written with the idea, more or less clearly and consistently held, that Christianity has undergone a real development during the eighteen centuries that are past, and that church history is the record of that development.

To study an organism in its antecedents and in its genesis, to trace the course of its growth, to examine it in the varied relations which it has sustained to its environment at successive stages of its career, to search for the forces within and without which have served to make it what it is; to do it all, not with the desire of supporting one's own theory or of undermining the theory of another, but in order to understand the organism more thoroughly, in order to enter more fully into its spirit, in order to gather from its past new light to shed upon its present and its future; to do it all with the humble, docile spirit, and with the eager, inquiring mind of the true student,—this is the historic method, and this is the way we study the church to-day. This is the way the modern scholar studies all the factors of Christianity in all their varied phases.

It is my purpose this evening to discuss some of the results which follow such historical study. These results are manifold and various; for no intelligent student and no department of theological study has failed to feel the influence of the modern spirit and method. But, if I would not unduly transgress the limits of an address, I must be content to confine myself to a narrow section of the subject. Compelled thus to make a selection from the wide range of ma-

terial, I propose, with your indulgence, to discuss, first, the historic spirit which historical study fosters in the student; and secondly, the influence which the prevalence of the historic spirit and the use of the historic method have exerted in the sphere of Christian doctrine.

I. The effects of intelligent and judicious historical study upon those who engage in it are of the most beneficent character. That culture of the intellect which opens a man's mind to all that is noblest and highest and best in his own and other ages; that absorption in large interests and lasting forces which liberates him from the bondage of the material and temporal, and raises him above transient trials and discouragements; that chastening of the temper which makes him superior to petty jealousies and quarrels and intrigues; that training, by large and constant exercise, of the critical and judicial faculty which guards him against the allurements of vicious but inviting novelties; that enlargement of the human sympathies which brings him into touch with all humanity, and makes him part and parcel of the human race—one with it in its experiences—his heart beating with the heart-throbs of universal man—till he can exclaim in truth, "Humanus sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto;" that cultivation of the spiritual sense which enables a man to discover and to appreciate the spiritual and ideal wherever it exists; that widening of the horizon which engenders true liberality, manly tolerance of others' views and sentiments, and genuine sympathy with the good in every creed and institution; that clarifying of the vision which lets a man through the encircling frame of visible and transient event into communion with invisible and eternal powers and purposes, and gives him a sublime faith in the ultimate victory of the highest and the holiest,—all this, and more than this, it *ought* to mean, to study history aright. Alas, that with so many of us in our blindness and our weakness it should mean less than this!

Upon these and other natural and legitimate results of faithful and devoted historical study, I should like to dwell at length, but I must confine myself to one, and as it seems to me the most important, of its effects: the *generation and development of the historic spirit.*

History as we now understand it is the record of a development. To use the historic method is to study a process of development, and a direct fruit of such study is the *historic spirit.* The true historic spirit, as I understand it, is that spirit which makes for *progress*, not by the *destruction* but by the *fulfilment* of the past, by the conservation of the best that is in it. It is often said that the study of history tends to make a man conservative; and in a sense this is true—in another sense, false. If to be a conservative is to stand still and to repudiate all progress, then the tendency of intelligent historical study is not to make a man conservative. For, coming into touch with the development of Christianity in the past, the student feels the glow of progress and finds himself instinctively moving forward, eager to carry on the grand historic march in his own day and generation. And yet, if he have the genuine historic spirit, he will not be a radical—destroying and overturning the old and rejoicing in its ruin. He will be a true conservative, in that he will realize that genuine progress can come only by the conservation of the past, only by rising upon it to higher heights. The historic spirit gives the student a sense of the continuity of Christian history. Each step he sees to have its place in the development of the whole, and to each he endeavors to do full justice. He stands always upon the confines of two ages, the past and the future, and he faces both ways. He finds the promise of the future in the performance of the past. He finds past growth inseparably linked to future progress. He sees past begetting future day by day, and he knows that they are but undivided portions of one indivisible whole. His life draws nourishment alike from past, from

present, and from future. He is the child not of one age only, but of all the ages, and he is loyal to them all. Such is the true historian, but historians have not been always such. In the olden days, when history was only archæology or annals, to study history meant often to bury one's self in the past—to become so engrossed in it as to grow oblivious to the present and the future—to think of it as complete in itself, as needing and admitting of no larger growth, and as severed by an impassable gulf from the present, with its bustle and movement and change. To such a man progress was hateful. The new must of necessity be false and vicious. Only what had always been, could find acceptance, and that only in its ancient form. The tendency of such a man was reactionary. His great desire was to preserve, or to restore, the old in form as well as in substance. His gaze was ever backward, and he sighed for the return of the golden age. Wherever the study of history has resulted, or still results, in such a spurious and deadening conservatism, it fails of its highest mission. Rightly understood and rightly studied, history has a higher and nobler lesson to teach than this.

Another, perhaps less common, but no less vicious, effect of a misconception of the true nature of history is to induce in the mind of the student an indifference to the eternal distinction between the true and the false. Looking upon the past, as some do, as a meaningless succession of events, as mere restless change and motion without progress or purpose, one might easily become a latitudinarian—equally friendly to all beliefs and movements, equally faithless to them all. To such a man, the past contains no good worth conserving, the future contains no promise of better things. All is, and always has been, and always will be in flux; and one is as good and as true and as worthy of respect, and one is as bad and as false and as worthy of contempt, as another; and as it always has been, it always shall be,—mere fortuitous change, without reason and without result. Such

thinking is as alien to the true historic spirit as is the deadest conservatism. In so far as the study of history makes either latitudinarians or reactionaries, it is a curse, and not a blessing. But in so far as history is rightly understood and rightly studied, it bears fruit neither in reaction nor in latitudinarianism; for it reveals to the student a vital and permanent force—a spirit—which in all the changing scenes of the past has been present and active, moulding all the elements into the one organic and consistent whole, even as the life principle builds out of air and earth and water a growing plant, unlike them, and yet always like itself, unerring in its conformity to the original type. Tracing the action of this spirit in the past, and the development of the church, ever advancing, under its organizing power, in spite of all irregularities and inconsistencies and aberrations and failures, the true historian throws himself into line with that spirit, and looks with a sublime faith, and works with a consecrated energy, for a still larger and richer growth, and for a final consummation infinitely more glorious than aught the past has seen. To him the golden age lies in the future; but it is to be reached, not by denying and destroying the past, not by stultifying history, but by advancing further still along the path already trod. Such a man is the heir of all the ages; he rejoices in the past, and glories in the length of his spiritual lineage. Not that he would go backward,—for he is prophet of the future, as well as disciple of the past,—but that he sees in the past the roots of the present, that he knows that the present is what it is because the past was what it was, that out of the past and present shall grow a yet more splendid future. Getting into the swing of historic progress, such a man is all alive with energy, and all aglow with eagerness to push forward,—careless of form, careful of spirit,—remembering that the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life; that, outgrowing the bondage of the letter, the spirit may create new forms through which its vitality can

express itself in larger, freer measure. He sees that Christianity has suffered most, on the one hand, from those who, in their ill-regulated eagerness to advance, have trampled the past under foot, have destroyed both spirit and letter; on the other hand, from those who have clung too long to the letter; who have failed to distinguish the form from the substance, and have preserved the body long after the spirit has left it, losing the true reality in their concern for its mere shadow. He sees that a false conservatism and a false progressiveness have been alike the bane of the church, and he studies the past freely, yet reverently, that he may, if he can, pass beneath the letter, and come into communion with the informing spirit; that he may learn, if it may be, what is permanent and what is only transitory,—what bears upon it the stamp of infinity and eternity, and what is marked merely with the symbol of the finite and the temporal. Men like this are needed in these times and in all times; and if any training can make such men, it is a training in the use of the true historical method of study. It is instructive to notice in this connection the different tendencies of the early church in relation to Judaism—that historic system which Jesus Christ came, not to destroy, but to fulfil. After his death, there were those among his disciples who would have preserved the entire Jewish system, and would have made circumcision and the observance of the Jewish ritual a condition of Christian discipleship—those who would have made of Christianity a mere Jewish sect. There were others who looked upon the Jewish system as the handiwork of Satan and they would have thrown the whole thing over,—Bible, law, and ritual—and would have severed Christianity completely from its parent stock, heaping hatred and obloquy upon all that had to do with the earlier economy. Equally unhistoric were these positions: the one rejecting the whole past—spirit as well as form,—the other retaining it all—form as well as spirit. The great historic genius of the apostolic

age was Paul; and, taught by the Spirit that Christ had come neither to preserve Judaism nor to destroy it, but to fulfil it, he tore off the shell and revealed the vital kernel, and taught that the Jewish system was a divine system ordained of God as a schoolmaster to train his people, and thus prepare the way for the larger, freer dispensation of the gospel, which should conserve the vital spirit of the old while rejecting its lifeless form. The sympathetic student of Paul who studies him historically, not alone dogmatically, learns from him a lesson of inestimable value. He is inducted by him into the true historic spirit,—the spirit of progress by conservation,—and he ought to be henceforth an intelligent student of the past and a wise counsellor in the present.

In times of theological unsettlement and controversy, the historic spirit is peculiarly needed. A destructive radicalism cannot be successfully met with a stationary or reactionary conservatism. The spirit of progress which underlies radicalism is born of God, and *will not* be smothered; but it may, and it should be, guided into safer channels. Life is better than death, and he who feels in his heart the pulse-throbs of an active, vigorous vitality will not submit, and should not submit, to the stagnation and death of a non-progressive conservatism. But meet him with a life as vigorous as his own, with a progress no less real than his; and show him that you rise upon the achievements, not the ruins, of the past,—that you in your advance are fulfilling, not destroying, that past,—that you are the heir of all its richest fruitage,—and you will find a ready sympathy and a quick allegiance. It is not that the old is hateful in itself to the lively and vigorous yet genial mind of this closing nineteenth century; but that it has too often hung as a weight about the neck of the present, impeding and even preventing progress,—this is why so many are cutting loose from the old in dislike and distrust. A sense of the true

historic relation of the past to the present and to the future; a realization of the truth that the past used rightly does not hinder, but assists, our progress; that we can rise to higher heights with it than without it,—this will make the young and restless energy of our day a conserving instead of a destroying force; this will chain to the onward moving chariot of the church a power which is now too widely used to block its wheels; and this will hasten the consummation toward which the history of Christianity is surely and grandly advancing; though so many, absorbed in the contemplation and love, for its own sake, of that which is old, will not see it, and still try to hinder and impede. I am as deeply concerned as any one can be to meet and check destructive radicalism; but I find the hope of Christianity, not in stagnation, but in vigorous, aggressive life,—not in reaction, but in steady *advance* along the whole line—an advance not *across*, but *in* the path of history.

Much is said in these days, and has been said ever since the Reformation, about the desirableness of returning to the simplicity of the apostolic church, of reproducing to-day the apostolic age. But the very thought of such a thing is absurd. We can no more go back to the apostolic age, and the church can no more become what the apostolic church was, than can a man become a child again. Christ set a child in the midst of his disciples, and said, "Except ye become as one of these little ones, ye cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven." But what he meant, we all know, and we know that Peter and James and John, if they but had the humble, teachable spirit of childhood, were of far more worth to the kingdom of God on earth at forty than they could have been at four. To unlive a life once lived, and become a child again in thought, in interest, in intelligence, is to pass into second childhood—into the inanity of a decrepit old age. To go back to the apostolic age again, even if it could be done, were a sorry ending of a long and vigorous

life. No! the apostolic church had the fire and zeal of youth —it had perhaps to some extent its purity and innocence; but it was an infant church,—without maturity, without the experience and strength gained by long and bitter conflict. It was a glorious church, because of its promise, because of the health and robustness of its youth; but the consummated church will be to it what the tempted and fallen and triumphant saint is to the untempted and untried Adam. There is glory in manhood, and only weak or thoughtless men would be children again. There is glory in the present and prospective maturity of the church, and only the unhistoric mind or the mind of little faith can advise it to renounce that manhood, and to assume again the limitations of infancy. If we study the apostolic age in the true historic spirit, we do it, not that we may reproduce it to-day in its entirety, but that we may learn from the inspired founders of the church, that we may learn in its genesis, Christianity's true nature, the eternal principles, which are of its essence, and which must always, through all external changes and vicissitudes, be preserved pure and unrestrained. Learning these, we find, as we trace their influence in the history of the past, that they can, and that they must, incarnate themselves in various forms at various times; that the course of history in so far as it is in the true line will see them incarnating themselves ever more clearly, in ever better forms. It were no recommendation to say of our forms of worship, of our polity, and of our statements of doctrine, that they are identical with the forms and statements of the apostolic church. If they are to be commended, it is because they give adequate and accurate expression to the apostolic spirit of worship, to the great and permanent principles of association and of government, and to the eternal truth which the apostles preached, and to which they gave expression in forms suited to the age and to the conditions in which *they* lived.

Much is said in these days about church unity, and I

yield to no one in my deprecation of the evils of division and in my desire for a true and vital union among Christians. And yet, if I understand the teaching of history, unity can never come by going backward. Unity for us lies not in the past, but in the future. The unity of the apostolic church may appear ideal to all; the unity of the patristic church, to our Episcopalian brethren, and perhaps to some of us; the unity of the mediæval church, if not to them or us, at least to our Roman Catholic brethren; but the unity neither of the apostolic church nor of the patristic or mediæval church, is to be our unity. We cannot unlive our life. We cannot unmake our history. We cannot go back five or fifteen or eighteen centuries, and live as if those centuries had not been. Whatever unity the church of the present or of the future may attain, it must be a unity which shall take account of all these centuries of disunion and of discord, of individual and separate development and growth. It must be a unity above, not below, them,—a unity not unconscious, but vividly conscious, of past divisions and developments,—a unity gained not by destroying the past but by conserving it. If there is to be church union on the basis of a uniform polity, we must seek a polity adapted not to the life of a past age, but to the stirring, independent, democratic life of the coming age. If there is to be a creed basis, it must be not a fifth or a sixteenth, but a twentieth, century creed. Calixtus and Leibnitz tried to unite the church of the seventeenth century on the basis of the œcumenical creeds of the first four or five centuries; our Episcopalian friends would see the church of the twentieth century united on the basis of the Nicene Creed; but such syncretistic attempts have always failed, and always will. If we are to unite at all on a credal basis, we must have a creed that we have grown up to through all these centuries of thought and of experience, not one that we have grown beyond.

Not by cutting away our beliefs, not by making our platform smaller that it may contain nothing offensive to men of other schools, shall we find a platform upon which we all can stand; but by making it larger; by building into it plenty of the solid timber of sturdy and positive faiths and affirmations; not by *ex*cluding, but by *in*cluding, what the church has learned during the past; not by unsaying what the church has said, but by repeating it in ringing tones,—thus, and thus alone, can a platform be built upon which Christians of all shades of opinion can stand together, and for which they can do enthusiastic battle. May it not be that, when the church shall attempt to formulate such a universal creed, it will find the Word of God—ready made to its hand—a fitter symbol than it can itself produce? and may it not be that, instead of confining itself to a partial and incomplete statement of its truths, it will adopt as its all-sufficient, because all-inclusive, standard, that word of God contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, which already is accepted by all Christians? The development of the church has been a development not beyond or away from the Word of God, but toward that Word. Beginning with a very incomplete apprehension of it, Christians have grown up more and more into the fulness of its meaning, and the day of perfect Christian union *may* be the day when all sects shall have embraced its truth in its entirety, and when the light, breaking forth from the Word of God, shall have made for all of us its darkest places clear as noonday, and shall have removed all our misapprehensions and corrected all our misunderstandings, so that we shall see, all of us, with a single eye the whole truth as it is in Christ Jesus.

Meanwhile, till that millennial consummation is attained, who shall say indeed that a unity of form, whether in ritual or in polity or in credal statement, is to be desired, simply because our fathers had it? Will not the student of history say rather, that the separate lines of development which the

past has witnessed are not without their meaning, and that no unity is to be coveted which shall not conserve *all* the good that has been gained in *every* line? Will he not demand of every scheme proposed for our acceptance, that in it shall be incarnated the unity of the spirit in such form as to preserve the historic heritage of *all* our churches? It may be that we are learning, and shall in days to come, under the divine blessing, learn yet more clearly, that a richer, fuller, grander unity than the apostles or the Fathers ever knew, may be realized in and through a large diversity of form. In the natural world the higher the organism the more complex its structure. Variety in form and feature within the church of Christ—such variety as these stirring latter days are witnessing—*may* indicate a higher rather than a lower plane of spiritual development.

II. The historic spirit, born of the historical study of Christianity—the nature of that spirit, and some of its consequences I have endeavored to make clear. I must now turn to the other branch of my subject: the *influence which the prevalence of the historic spirit and the use of the historic method have exerted in the sphere of Christian doctrine.* As the effects of historical study upon those who engage in it are many and momentous, so are its effects upon the Christian system. Our conception of the Bible, for instance, and our knowledge of its teachings, have been modified and greatly enlarged by the use of the historic method in the study of it. Exhibiting the growth and progress in divine revelation of which the Bible is the record; tracing the development of theology in successive ages and in the minds of successive writers; bringing out the organic connection of the various books as marking different stages in the evolution of a common race and faith, and thus emphasizing its unity in and through wide variety and diversity; discovering the historic conditions under which those books were written, and revolutionizing our methods of interpretation; showing

the Bible in fact all instinct with vitality as the living record of an ever-growing revelation, instead of treating it, as it was far too long treated, as a lifeless code, as a mere *thing* to be twisted and distorted at will,—doing all this, the historical study of the Bible which has been pursued for many decades with such unflagging zeal and with an ever larger measure of success has won the lasting gratitude of all Christian students. So our polity, and our ritual, and our general conception of the nature of Christianity and of the Christian life, have felt the beneficent influence of historical study. Upon all of these I should like to dwell, but I must be content again to confine myself to a single line, which I have selected from the many because it seems of peculiar significance, and because in it are exhibited with especial clearness the results of the study which we are discussing. Let us consider, then, the influence which the prevalence of the historic spirit and the use of the historic method have exerted in the sphere of doctrine.

It was only toward the close of the eighteenth century that the history of doctrine came to be regarded as a special discipline. Up to that time it had been treated, when treated at all, as a branch of systematic theology, and as such it consisted in massing patristic and scholastic authorities for or against a particular doctrine, thus being entirely polemic in its aim and method. Even when a more objective treatment began to prevail, the time-honored custom of handling the science theologically, continued, and until quite recent years most works upon the subject did little more than give under each period a catalogue of the beliefs of the leading men of the age upon the various heads of theology in the order in which they occur in the creeds. Though this has been dignified with the name of the "history of doctrine," it cannot be regarded as an historical treatment of doctrine, for it leaves no room for the conception of a growth and development. First, within a few decades has the true

historical method been applied to the study of Christian doctrine as it has long been applied to other branches of knowledge, and the results are momentous and far-reaching in their consequences.

In the first place, the historical study of doctrine is clarifying our conception of the nature of doctrine; is emphasizing what has long been known, but too often and too widely forgotten, that our doctrines are not themselves divine truth, but human conceptions and statements of that truth, and that as such they may and have had not an apparent merely but a real growth and development. The Roman Catholic denies such a growth in his own system, and maintains that the creed enlargements which have taken place century by century, mean simply a fuller statement of doctrines held in their entirety from the beginning; and though this view is not ostensibly shared by Protestants, yet the constant tendency even of Protestant theologians has been to look upon the development as a development rather in form than in substance. The application of the true historical method has shown the falseness of this notion. It has shown us that a sharp distinction must be drawn between divine truth and our conceptions of that truth; that, though the former is always and eternally the same, unchanged and unchangeable, in our conceptions of it,—in other words in our *doctrines*,—there has been as real a development as in our institutions; that out of truths lived and taught by Christ, that out of truths revealed to the apostles and preached by them, we have by the use of our human powers, under divine guidance as we trust, evolved an elaborate system which has been the slow growth of centuries. To deny a real growth in the system were as absurd as to deny a real growth in a plant simply because the germ existed from the beginning. The germ did exist from the beginning in Christ himself and in the truths divinely revealed through him. Out of that germ have come, by a genuine process of devel-

opment, not our statements merely, but our beliefs as well, —not the form only, but the substance, of our theology. We have been too apt, studying theology as a systematic whole, to imagine that all our doctrines were revealed directly by God, and have been too apt to forget that many of them were worked out by the church itself within human limitations and under the play of human forces. Studying them historically, we can trace their origin and growth, and can discover, and to some extent measure, the influences which more or less powerfully affected their rise and their development. We can see more clearly, we believe, than before the hand of God in the process, and can appreciate the power of the divine germ,—the revealed truth which lies back of it all and which is working through it all,—but we can also estimate more justly the play of other forces, and can analyze more accurately the various factors which have helped to make the product what it is. Such estimate and analysis enable us to appraise existing doctrines more nearly at their true value. The common tendency of the study of theology merely as a system is to lead us to emphasize most those doctrines which are logically essential to the integrity of our system. The best corrective of such a tendency is the study of biblical theology,—the study of the Bible, that is,—not for the purpose of confirming or defending this or that doctrine, but with the aim of learning not alone the views of Scripture writers, but the true perspective and proportion of their views. But after such a study of the Bible, nothing is so helpful as a thorough investigation of the history of doctrine in the church. If there has been any change or enlargement since the days of the apostles, we shall be able better to understand it and more justly to estimate its worth, when we have learned whence and how the change came, to what extent human agencies had a hand in bringing it about, of what sort those agencies were, and in how far, if at all, the change was the fruit of condi-

tions merely temporary. To be able, with a thorough knowledge of the Bible, studied scientifically and in the light of history, to test existing systems and to form, if need be, our theology for ourselves,—this, and only this, is to be a theologian in the true sense, and such theologians the church of God needs in all ages.

Again, the historical study of doctrine guides us in our search for what may be termed the essential truths,—those truths, in other words, a knowledge of which is absolutely necessary to the existence of Christianity in the world and to the growth among men of the kingdom of God. These are the truths which it is of the utmost importance for the church to keep constantly in the forefront of her teaching and her preaching. No other truths, however true, should be allowed to obscure them or to crowd them out. Truth out of its true proportion is as false as falsehood. If in the largeness and richness of our revelation the radiance of the great essentials and fundamentals is dimmed by the multicolored glow of lesser truths; if they shine less clearly because of the light that comes from a thousand minor stars, then our spiritual wealth becomes a curse. There is no more fruitful source of discord and of unbelief than the confusion of essential and non-essential truth. So often have the fundamental verities been forgotten or neglected, and the church plunged into the darkness of formalism or of corruption, and its power to electrify and vivify the world been lost!—and that not always through the insidious influence of error, but through the over emphasis of one truth at the expense of another truth more vital, through the failure to preserve truth's due proportion. So often has a distorted picture of Christianity thus been published to the world, and so often have men and nations embraced the caricature only to find it a delusion and a snare, or rejected it in scorn and with it the true original which it belies and hides.

And this failure to distinguish between essential and

non-essential truth has led the church into many a needless controversy and bootless war, has begotten most of the quarrels and conflicts which have marred its history, and most of the heresy trials which have disturbed its peace and impeded the onward march of the kingdom of the Christ.

A careful and candid study of history will show us that the real emphasis does not always fall where we might think it would, does not always fall where the logical emphasis does; that many doctrines which stand in the forefront of our systems, and for which we have been all too ready to do battle, have been of very minor significance and influence in times when the church has most fully realized and best fulfilled its mission; that the ignorance or neglect of them has not resulted as disastrously as the ignorance or neglect of other truths of which our systems and our preaching make far less account. Not that history thus proves their falsity, —far from it; not that history thus absolves us from the duty of accepting and preaching them—(we would not abuse history as is sometimes done)—but that it advises us which truths and which errors have been proved in practice most pregnant with lasting consequences for good or for evil, and thus confirms and enlarges the knowledge gained by us in our careful and candid study of the Word of God.

Still farther, the historical study of Christian doctrine reminds us that human notions and conceptions change from age to age, that even the categories of thought undergo more or less of a revision, and it thus teaches us, that, if we will be true to the truth as it has been revealed unto us, we must from time to time adjust our statements to the new conditions. The great need of every age is a sound and vital theology adapted to the peculiar wants of the age, and fitted best to mirror to the age the eternal truth of God. To translate divine revelation into the language of to-day—that is the paramount duty of every theologian, whether in pulpit or in teacher's chair. Not that we would truckle to the

wishes of this or of any other generation; not that we would soften the truth that it may not hurt or offend; not that we would prevaricate or palliate our message; not that we would utter fair words to our brethren's undoing; but that we would so speak as most clearly and adequately to present to the minds of our own day and generation the truth which they most need, whether we do it in the speech our fathers used or no. Often indeed our fathers' speech is unintelligible or even misleading if repeated at the present day. A simple illustration of this which will occur at once to you all is found in the doctrine of divine sovereignty. Calvinists of to-day believe just as sincerely as they ever did in divine sovereignty, but sovereignty does not mean now exactly what it did three hundred years ago. If we shall introduce into the Westminster Confession a statement of the love of God, does it mean that God is less a sovereign to us than he was to our fathers? or does it mean that we are less consistent than they? No! it simply means that in the thinking of the world to-day there is wrapped up in the idea of sovereignty the responsibility of the sovereign to rule his subjects, in so far as may be, for their good. The idea of arbitrary sovereignty has become obsolete, and if we to-day define our supreme sovereign, God, in sixteenth or seventeenth century terms, we define to many minds a God other than the God and Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To make God mean to us what he meant to our fathers, we must use terms that our fathers did not use. The language of the nineteenth century is not the language of earlier centuries. We must translate divine revelation into the new tongue, or we shall be teaching the people lies, and not the truth.

A similar change has taken place in the world's conception of the responsibilities and rights of fatherhood, and the alternative faces us—if we will not perpetuate a most vicious misconception and confusion—either to give up the term en-

tirely in speaking of God, or to adjust our other speech about him to the changed conceptions which the term involves. And if history teaches us anything, is it not that these and other changes in our conceptions are the fruit of the Christian spirit working in the souls of men and nations, and that our theology should take account of them just as truly as of any of God's revelations to his people?

To translate divine truth into the language of to-day: that means creed revision, and to the true historian creed revision, and frequent creed revision,—in thought, if not in fact,—is a necessity. To accept always and absolutely unchanged, either in form or substance, and in its original sense, the creed of a past age, is to lose touch with the historic progress of the church and fall behind fossilized and forgotten. Even though we were to maintain that the doctrines of our creeds remain ever the same, we should need at times to revise their statements, that the substance might really be preserved intact. Revisionists *may* be more conservative than the adherents of the old creed in its old form. But the historian is not content with such revision. He knows that every age which is not dead or stagnant has had, and that every age must have, its own theology, and that the theology of no other age can fully meet its needs. He knows that an age rich in spiritual life gets new and larger glimpses of divine truth,—glimpses which the old words are too feeble to report. He knows that God has been leading his people into ever larger knowledge of himself and of his will, and that in these glorious days of the oncoming twentieth century,—when man's earthly vision has been so enlarged and clarified, when revelations of nature are vouchsafed him such as our fathers never dreamed of even in their wildest fancy,—there awaits the pure eye of true faith a larger, richer vision of spiritual truth than man has ever known. For "new light shall break forth from the Word of God," and in the pages of history shall be read new lessons, and out of the heavens shall come winged

messengers bearing new treasures of wisdom and of knowledge. For to every age is granted light according to the measure of its need and of its worthiness, and this thoughtful, inquiring age needs more light than other ages, and true as it is trying to be, with an earnestness seldom matched, to all the light of the past and present, God grant that it may be found worthy of the larger light it needs.

The historical study of Christianity. All, and more than all, that I have said, it is accomplishing and will yet increasingly accomplish. But, brethren, we have not studied Christianity aright if our study has not taught us that there is more of Christianity than history records—more than history ever can record. For what is Christianity but the perpetual incarnation of God in humanity—the perpetual union of God and man? And if it be this, we have not understood it, and we cannot in any measure interpret it to others, unless we have been led beyond the visible and temporal, which we call historic Christianity, and which is ever changing, into the presence of the invisible and eternal, which we call essential Christianity, and which changes not. However variously, in different places and at different times, it may incarnate itself in objective form, God cometh to the soul of man—whether here or elsewhere, whether now or long ago —in form always and everywhere the same. A history of the visible kingdom of Christ men may write and we may study, but the kingdom which cometh in the hearts of men —that kingdom without which the other were a meaningless and empty show—no man can describe, and only he can know in whose heart it is already come.