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# THE BIBLIOTHECA SACRA

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## ARTICLE I.

### DIFFICULTIES IN FAITH.

BY EX-PRESIDENT JOHN BASCOM, D.D., WILLIAMSTOWN, MASS.

IN speaking of the difficulties of faith, we do not refer to those which pertain to any particular creed but to those encountered by earnest and intelligent minds striving to hold fast these fundamental convictions — the presence of a wise, loving, and supreme Ruler in the world; our lives as ripening into immortal life. Few achievements in physical power are as remarkable as the firm, pliant balance of a man on his feet. If we consider the height of man, his upright structure, the narrowness of his footing, and the slight hold of his feet upon the ground, the dexterity of wrestlers in attack, their resistance to overthrow, become a marvel of resources. A strong, rapidly changing balance is opposed to lift, push, and pull in a way that baffles all effort; when a statue of either combatant could not maintain its equilibrium without bolts. The poise of a sound mind within itself by which it holds in check the endless forms of doubt, stands firm against the innumerable convictions which attack it on every side, and maintains a secure movement forward amid all the fluctuations of belief, is not less a marvel of power, achieved only by athletic intelligence. We have as yet much to learn in the art of intellectual equilibrium, by which we move freely yet safely amid the veering

winds of belief, and pursue with alertness the shifting flight of truth. We wish to give a few of the conditions of thought which, in the matter of faith, favor a steadfast, coherent, rational movement.

We are, in the first place, to accept as equally worthy of credence all portions of the facts which come under discussion; the facts of the physical and of the spiritual world which, interlaced in a great variety of ways, constitute the data of knowledge. Much of the uncertainty which attaches to belief arises from an artificial weakening of familiar convictions, either physical or spiritual, and so destroying the balance of thought on which the stability of belief should rest. Spiritual and physical phenomena are alike valid and must be rendered together under their own primitive force. They unitedly constitute the universe we have to explain, to which we have to adjust our actions and notions. The universe has these two sides, and so we must apprehend it. If we dwell separately on either of the two we shall soon find ourselves as incapable of extended, satisfactory movement as the fish with one fin, the bird with one wing, the man with one leg. The progress of physical events is to be understood in connection with causes, the growth of intellectual conceptions in connection with spontaneity of thought. We cannot accept and sustain either movement except under the conceptions which belong to it. We deal with things by the impulses already imparted to them; we measure the thoughts of men by the coherent relations which arise between them. The lives of men, as a psycho-spiritual product, we expound by both dependencies. We accept them under their own terms, with no deeper, more ultimate measure than that given by these ideas. How thought begets and sustains itself is no more incomprehensible than how forces are lodged in separate things, and pass from one

thing to another in their interactions. We have no more justification in taking one of these notions and constructing the world by means of it, than we would have in doing the like labor with the other notion. Our passing tendency has been to construct the world under physical dependencies, in blind reaction against an equally excessive extension of spiritual connections. We thus lose much of the world as an intellectual product, and are greatly straitened, at times utterly confounded, when we attempt to measure up the universe as one whole. Faith stumbles grievously or utterly falls off when our estimates of the drift of events are made up simply of things and forces. This is not the problem propounded to us in a complex spiritual world, and we can make nothing of it. We first undertook to construct a world out of volitions, wayward, unguided, and were shortly immersed in superstition. We now strive to build it out of granite blocks taken from the nearest quarry in the physical world, and though our structure is far more firm, it is no longer vital, human, comforting; is no more spiritual than are the pyramids. We can paint a flower, but if we are to have a flower we must reach it by the inscrutable stages of growth. Life in its unfathomable processes becomes and remains the chief thing.

We are familiar with the spontaneity of thought; we have constructed our own lives and the lives of our fellow-men in connection with it; and to cast it aside in our last and highest effort of apprehension is to hopelessly confound the problem and cripple ourselves in its solution. Nor are the physical agencies which we retain any more transparent to the eye than are the spiritual ones we reject. Both are the blocks given us with which we rear the first and the latest structures of the mind. It matters not that neither of these two things, physical and spiritual dependencies, can be expressed in terms of the

other; it is this fact rather that gives them their reciprocal power. Neither has precedence over the other, and each yields to the uses of the other. When we deal with the world — its origin, progress, and destination — we must freely accept the facts which we find in it, and which we employ in expounding the ordinary processes of human life. These, our data, cannot be shortened in and we still reach the secret of the universe. The mind that starts with physical connections comes out with physical connections — nothing more. The universe gives back to him the voice with which he speaks to it. We must accept all forms of events before we can even measurably apprehend their combinations in the world.

The discussions which have been called out in connection with the supernatural have often owed their force to the assumption that we find nowhere in the world this element of the supernatural. It has been assumed as certain that the procedure of events is everywhere natural, and only natural. If this were true, and the supernatural constituted no part of human experience, we should not be able to, and find no occasion to, introduce it as a means of explaining the problem of life. Far from this being the case, a large share, and a most important share, of our experience contains a supernatural element. Man, as an intelligent, skilful, and virtuous agent in the world's affairs, is in the use of powers which rise above nature. Nature and man are of a different order. He is, and that increasingly, supernatural. Natural elements predominate in the barbarous, supernatural ones in the enlightened and spiritual, man. The natural and the supernatural are woven together in the web of human history; we may therefore believe them to be united in the structure of the world. The selection of things — natural selection — explains much; the selection of thoughts — intellectual activity — explains more.

We need to seek diligently into causes that we may follow the steps of God in creation; we need as carefully to entertain the thought of the world that our higher powers may receive and rejoice in the light that comes from the divine presence. The ease with which we accept natural selection as a sufficient explanation of the order of the natural world yields no honor to our sagacity. We might as well fancy that, time being given, such a structure as Cologne Cathedral might be understood as a slow accumulation of self-supporting parts as to suppose that the complicated order about us is simply the result of physical affiliations.

A second source of confusion in our thoughts about the world is a disposition to consider it and criticize it in its parts, and not as one whole. We overlook the fact that we are enveloped in a system, and that the fitness of that system must be judged by all the relations involved in it. We are not at liberty to say that this or that part is defective and might be improved, with no recognition of the effect of our improvements on the system in its interdependence as one whole. We have to choose between a systematic, self-consistent universe and one made up of sporadic adaptations to special exigencies. Since we are to be taught, trained, in intelligence, and to take part in the activity of the world, we must be treated coherently, steadily, systematically. A system is an essential condition of participation, and gives us at once conditions of knowledge and of use. But the need of a system being admitted, we must judge that system, when it comes, by its applicability to our wants and to the wants of all at any one time and at all times. We are not to accept it when it meets our wishes and reject it when it crosses them. The question we have to answer is whether another system would give us better conditions of activity and growth. To suggest such a sys-

tem is a very different task from a facile criticism of the parts of our present system. The parts of our system are in harmony with themselves, in harmony with our general wants, and are to be regarded as media of training. There is much miscarriage and suffering and many accidents in the world, but they all demand foresight and are capable of correction. Can this balance between liability and possibility, between difficulty and skill, failure and success, be disturbed and give no additional temptation to vice, indolence, ignorance, carelessness? Do the helplessness and waywardness of man constitute a claim for easier conditions? This question must be answered theoretically and practically. Avoidable accidents teach insight; unavoidable ones teach dependence, of much the same importance as self-reliance. Practically we are quite certain that the temperate zone, the midway region of exposure, the arable soil that demands yet requites labor, give us the best development in character. Under these conditions the thrift and energy of the world have sprung up. We are certainly not able to say, either in view of facts or of the force of motives, that a system less urgent and persistent in its demands would be more productive of growth. Fearful accidents and terrible suffering are incident to life. The imagination dwells on these and feels, as when a tempest sweeps over the sky, that our wants and wishes count for little. Yet when we consider the stupidity, improvidence, and presumption of man, we should be hasty in saying that these things are unbearable and weigh down the spirit of man.

The confusion of thought which accompanies this detached way of judging human affairs is seen in the curt argument frequently employed concerning the power of God. That power is infinite; therefore the evils of the world are needless and make against his goodness. Yet human action should

be self-supporting, systematic. It should show the control of reason. If we are to work with God and God with us, there must be the same law of action for both. Power cannot be allowed to do anything against reason or out from under it. This is the lesson which man finds constant occasion to learn and which God is always teaching. It is under the supreme principle of reason that God reveals himself. This is his integrity. The goodness of God is not exempt from wisdom either in its purpose or in its method of accomplishment. This supreme fact of the rationality of the world is the one fact that must not give way. Infinite power and infinite wisdom and infinite goodness blend in one system and cannot be altered in their relations. Our judgment must take on the scope and the grandeur and the perpetuity of the universe, before we can begin to say what is possible to power when it is found in fellowship with wisdom; both pointing toward righteousness. The idle or restless or fault-finding temper has no place in the apprehension of a world.

There has been an assertion floating about ascribed to Helmholtz, "If a mechanic should make an instrument as faulty as the human eye it would be returned to him as inadequate." If we reflect on the breadth of the field of vision, the ease with which it is perused in all its parts, the command of the eye both of outline and color, the care which it calls for with the degree of misuse which it can bear, the skill with which its shortcomings are overcome and its powers increased by human contrivance, this criticism will seem to us stupid and perverse, a false outlook on life. A system involves a ruling idea under which it is framed. A great difficulty in our tremulous faith is that we do not give sufficient prominence and importance to this primary disciplinary purpose. Is there such a purpose in the administration of the world, and can we arrive at

it and be profited by it? No thought has so occupied the minds of men in our generation as that of evolution. But the gist of evolution is progress, a movement toward higher attainment. In the physical world this evolution shows itself in the forms of life, culminating in man. But man, the paragon of physical perfection, can take on a spiritual development, which at once lifts him far above all other animals. He breaks into a higher world, resting indeed on the lower world and in a measure its counterpart, but as much more tenuous, subtile, and expansive than it as is the atmosphere a superior agent to the crass, material structure it incloses.

What a sudden liberty is there in man! What a multiplication of appetites and loosening of restraints! What a boundless field of desire, of passion, pleasurable and perverse, and what a realm of truth, of things beautiful and good, lie before him! In how many ways and with what enthusiasm these things may be pursued, be partially attained, be forced into conflict, reaching harmony only after much confusion and delay! This last term in evolution, intellectual and spiritual development, alone gives an adequate summation of the entire movement,— defines the system through which we are passing and presses it forward to fulfilment. But a system that is put together for such an end as this, that is ever pushing on openly and secretly toward conduct and character, single and collective excellence, must be exacting in its methods, protracted in its unfolding, and obscure in many of its processes. A thousand years may count for a single day. Its very purpose is to bring all things, little and large, near and remote, into the common consciousness; to unite them into that perfect life which we know as spiritual, and which, in all its members, sees, accepts, and rejoices in the right. We are pressing beyond instinct; we are gaining new mastery over the body. We

are finding ourselves in each other and in God. The delays, the sufferings, the corrections, the deepened insights which belong to the process of developing a man and forming a community, of shaping the Kingdom of Heaven, must be undergone as a small price for that which we obtain by means of them.

This process is slow because we are so slow, because we pass with so much hesitation and deficiency into every new attitude of concession, concurrence, sympathy with and toward our fellow-men. A kingdom that is to contain all must know the wants of all and provide for them all. We pursue a virtue till we turn it into a fault, and then displace it by another virtue to be treated in the same manner. Our faith passes into dogmas and sustains itself by bigotry. This bigotry we overcome by a softened form of bigotry, and then perhaps survive the struggle in a spirit of contempt, arrogance, indifference. To mold a man is to chisel a statue, and to mold a community is to set up a gallery of art. In this immense labor toward this immeasurable reward we make progress — by no means as much as we seem to ourselves capable of making, by no means as much as is present to our vision, yet all the progress that we ourselves, others, and the world will allow us to make. Does not this progress, such as it is, explain much, explain all things, if we give it that amplification which belongs to it? There is no prolonged retreat, there has been no rout, in this march of years toward the goal of life. Some type of good, like the Grecian, may have hardened, become fragile, and crumbled under its own restrictions, but the day returns in which we are ready to take it up again in higher uses and in more perfect fellowship with the wants of man and the welfare of the community. There are no lost arts, they all multiply, accept new service, assume new forms, and bring us

nearer the Divine Mind. All things work together for good to them who love God, to them who are called according to his purpose. In a narrow sense and for a short period this may not be true, but we have not to do with narrow things and short periods. The longer the time the more profoundly does the history of the world respond to this interpretation of it. We must always look for justification from within, but that justification is constantly coming to us.

Something of this deeper thought is seen in the history of demonology. The malign gods, the encroaching devils, the evil-minded ghosts, are all in full retreat. We see more and more that there is no place for them in human history, no case of their action, no proof of their presence. We have evoked them simply that we might lay upon them a part of our own evil-doing, ignorance, and neglect. Banish these personal failures, and there is no residuum of mischief in the world which we are compelled to refer to some malign spirit. First we make the world void of invincible centers of injury, then we take up its ministrations of kindness, and then we find it pervaded with divine love. The fact — and has it not in our own experience the constancy and pushing force of a fact — the fact of an obscure, difficult, but growing spiritual revelation should make us slow in fault-finding, patient in delay, and exultant in success. We ought not to expect to measure all things; but we can measure enough of them to keep the mind firm, the heart full, the purpose clear. We raise no vain cry for the end, we waste no pleasure discarded because it is not greater; we remember that happiness, sufficient and overflowing, is not our immediate but our ultimate attainment; lies in the lap of well-developed life and has no sympathy with that hasty indulgence which feeds on life, eating out the very heart of it. Who shall show us any good? is the cry of one who has lost

the way to welfare and knows not where to find it. We know perfectly well, like the mountaineer resting for a moment, that the summit lies before us. We can never say of any vision, This is all; we can say of many visions, This outstrips our thought.

Another difficulty arises in faith from the fact that we are not satisfied with general assurances, but are asking premature questions in search of some specific explanation. The world gives us points of the compass, and under these we are left to define our own particular path. Principles are the same for all, applications remain to be worked out by each man according to the circumstances which inclose him and the wisdom that is in him. If we insist on specific directions, we mar our own liberty and fall short of the understanding mind. "Be ye perfect, even as your Father who is in heaven is perfect," settles down on the trustful temper as a controlling injunction to be daily worked out,—with perplexity, it is true, but with a quiet, enduring sense of good. The world is like the words of Christ. There is little doubt as to the feeling which should go with them, much doubt as to the precise form of interpretation they should take on. That we should aim at perfection is perfectly intelligible; but that we should suppose ourselves or another to have reached perfection involves a stupid misapprehension of the command. Our action thus becomes in the last degree inadequate and superficial. M. D. Conway, in his autobiography, complains of the amount of dogma he found in his path waiting with much loss of time to be pushed out of the way. Farther on he mentions the fact that John Fiske, like himself, is struggling to find his way back to a controlling, central conception of God. It would seem that he and Fiske cleared away more dogma than the case called for, and at length found the need of restoring at least

a portion of it. He and Fiske, in trying hard to recover their earlier belief in a personal deity and personal immortality, again lost time in reaching belief. Should they not have remembered that they had left in the way of others a good deal of skeptical rubbish in removing which they might, in turn, meet with difficulty and danger? This raises the farther question how far time is really lost on rubbish, and whether its removal may not be an essential part of securing an open path. Men never build in a city without occasion to dig over and shovel away the refuse of previous toil. Is not this the very condition of their building, a condition to be accepted with patience? While it is true that current belief is often an obstacle to truth, it is much less obvious that it really stands in the way of those who are entertaining it, and still less obvious that overcoming this error is unprofitable to those who take the task in hand. What are we about in the world unless it be this very thing,— a constant reconstruction of the highways of thought? The best thing that any of us can do is to be patient, intelligent, and persevering in this process. The obstructions we offer to others and the obstructions they offer to us are part of the day's work.

The physical world gives many opportunities for path, trail, highway. Few of them are perfectly laid out or entirely well made. Still fewer are wholly misleading and of no avail. To rebuild roads, lay them out more skilfully, and improve their construction is the work of civilization. To correct the mistakes of those who have gone before us, to correct our own mistakes and the mistakes of those about us, is our ever-recurring discipline in knowledge. Our spiritual engineering is not of less moment than our physical engineering, nor does it proceed under different principles. We have still to lay out our courses, grade our ascents, bridge our chasms, and guard

our exposures. We are anxious in spiritual matters to have all this work done for us, and much of it is done for us, but we are still delivered over to the task of criticism, correction, improvement, and to that delay in the growth in wisdom which is incident to inquiry. Under these conditions it behooves us to impose on others as few delays and embarrassments as possible, and to conquer our own as quickly as possible. The first thing is to grade our own path, to avail ourselves in doing it of the work of others, and then to place our own work at their service. If we remember that the one thing relatively plain is the purpose of this toil, and the thing that remains obscure is the method of improvement, we shall escape many hasty judgments and come less frequently under the censure of others. It is a most fitting thing to pray, Thy Kingdom come, and a petition in which many can unite with us; but when we come to define that kingdom and still more when we come to lay down the lines of approach, we part company with those about us and may easily fall into strife. If we endeavor to restore the concord of purpose, and to work out empirically its manner of fulfilment, the things which perplex us will be slowly reduced in number and those which unite us steadily increased.

The empirical method may well stand for a general principle in dealing with the difficulties of faith. Much of our perplexity arises from a theoretical attitude. We are to handle things, understand things, and think of them as we find them, with no superinduced conceptions. Men have met with little success in striving to understand themselves, their own spirits, and the interaction of body and mind. It can hardly be said that they have gotten one particle of light out of intervening images, as the dove and the pineal gland, in uniting two sets of phenomena, physical and spiritual; two forms of

experience, conscious and subconscious. Their discomfort at times has been so obvious that they have been led, as a means of escape, to deny the existence of the spirit. Yet practically there is not the least difficulty in handling together material and intellectual events. Keep near the facts, and perplexity disappears. "Show us the Father," say the disciples, "and it sufficeth us." "Have I been so long time with you, and hast thou not known me," says Christ. "He that hath seen me has seen the Father." Much dogma is a needless mechanism thrust between Christ and God, between Christ and us, between God and the world, in hopeless confusion of the subject in hand. To hold back the imagination that derives its data from the senses often becomes our wisdom, our science, and our religion. The symbols of chemistry are useful as symbols, but we have no right to suppose that they cover any formal fact in the make-up of compounds. The atoms still remain obscure in their own nature and in the method of their interplay with each other.

The world constantly asserts itself as a third term between us and God. We frequently give it in reference to God much the same independent power which it possesses in reference to ourselves. We thereby make any adequate theism impossible. Either the action of God becomes a fitful intervention, or the action of the world becomes a stubborn, intractable fact. If God is to be to us a living presence, we must find him in the world and the very substance of the world which completely envelops us. Here are his support, protection, guidance, love. We are to encounter the world as the momentary expression of his will, the ever renewed word which he is now speaking to us.

The two elements in the world—a regular ongoing of events, and events constantly shaped to our wants—are

neither to be lost. Our own relations to physical events are as typical of God's relation to them as are our physical and spiritual experiences in connection with our bodies. In this experience we can overlook neither the physical nor the spiritual terms; nor regard either as a law unto the other. We daily manage to make the two a coherent experience, and we are thus prepared to believe that a like thing may be done in bringing together matter and mind, the mechanism of things and the mechanism of thoughts, in the construction of the world. We are to think neither of the one nor of the other of these two classes of phenomena as pursuing an independent path or as acting with violence on each other. The prosperity of the world is as restful and peaceful as is our own prosperity. This conception recognizes a constant presence of God in events, and makes these events the most direct expression of that presence. It compels us to accept this hourly action under its own forms according to its own tenor, and not to surround it with images foreign to it. We understand what is required of us, what is done for us, in what way and how far done, as we understand the history of our own lives. The study of our relation to God becomes like the study of our relation to our physical organism and our successful use of it in the world.

This perpetual putting of something between us and God is akin to the sin of idolatry. The moment the idol is shaped it begins to assume power and become a law of action. We find nothing on earth or under the earth to aid us in forming a conception of God, or to make him other than we find him in the events, the ever potent events, by which he surrounds us. Those most perfectly immersed in the world, who apprehend it most completely, touch it most closely on the physical and on the spiritual side, know God most perfectly and are known

of him. If we understand the facts with any measure of completeness which are pertinent to any question, we therein understand the solution of that question. The more comprehensively we find God everywhere, the more intelligible and serviceable will his presence become to us.

We are to remember that our solutions of the world, except in its most superficial bearings, are never absolute, never complete. Conduct is far too complicated, our point of view far too remote, for spiritual events to become transparent to us. Faith is a balance of certain convictions as the most probable and rational of the conclusions open to us. This is preëminently true of religious faith. Intelligence and love at the center of the world is an assertion ever more convincing, but never beyond difficulty. The things which make for it become more distinct, more numerous, more harmonious, as we look at them. While those things which lead us to think that the world is destitute of guidance, indifferent to human welfare, or is in pursuit of some obscure or less comprehensive object, or is thwarted in its aims, or is drifting without aims, these convictions are more and more dispersive of thought and are ever taking on fugitive and perplexing forms. Faith must necessarily shape itself by the balance of considerations, and wait on the growth of experience for firmer conclusions. The very fact that there is growth under the notion of theism, that the mind finds it a pivot and swings ever more freely thereon, is of itself a confirmation of faith.

Take the Twenty-third Psalm, "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want." How far back in the millenniums did this become the glad utterance of a human spirit? How many experiences akin to it have taken form under it, and found in it the harmony of life? Once written, this psalm has been buoyed up and floated on by the spiritual atmosphere of the world;

has shown itself the true formula of spiritual relations, the one conviction, the tranquil sentiment, that can never be lost to the sons of men. But that which brings order is itself order; the restfulness of truth is the proof of truth. The mind stays itself upon it as the well man stands on his own legs.

Whatever of conviction underlies pragmatism turns on this same point. What is sound in thought corresponds to what is real and coherent in things. The perception of this reality, and this correspondence of our mental products with it, give us at once a sound footing. The man who walks in close contact with both the physical and the intellectual world comes to be fully possessed by this sense of reality, and is bewildered neither by extravagant belief or unbelief. If the mind wanders away from this fullness and harmony of its life, it easily slides into extravagance and uncertainty.

Religious faith, united with a large percentage of errors, may yet give a wholesome discipline even by its partial interpretation of events. The training of the world does not turn on absolute truth, or complete righteousness, but on the manner in which we are weaving the truth and the good into the fabric of life, and are in the constant instruction and correction of the process. Correction does not give rise to a sense of uncertainty, but the reverse rather.

The reformatory temper is constantly confronted with failure, but failure is not to it a hopeless result. The feeling is rather that something has been accomplished, though much remains to be done, not at first caught sight of. We are prepared for the second and third stages of effort by undergoing the first stage. The spiritual landscape, like the physical landscape, must be walked over as a condition of becoming familiar with its parts. Knowledge grows up in the midst of things seen, half seen, unseen. The sense of actuality, of coherence.

increases at every step. When the rays of light come to the eye from all directions, we cease to be confused by them. There is and should be much skepticism in a world where a few things lie in strong light with deep shadows and unpenetrated spaces about them.

How strangely are the contradictory feelings of fate and of fortune united in the thoughts of men! Neither suffices to drive out the other. Men, devotees to fortune, are ready to incur great risks, and yet shortly are impressed by an irresistible fate, baffling human effort. They abide in neither conviction with any steadfastness. Standing between the two they bring together the events of the world with zest, becoming neither the bondsmen of fate nor the irresponsible favorites of fortune. The variety in life is inexhaustible, and through it all runs the sense of favor and disfavor, diligence and indolence, courage and despondency, according to the impulse and patience we bring to our work. Take the world for exactly what it is, and we are neither worn out by contradictions nor left to the barrenness of unchangeable events.

These two notions of fate and fortune, that hover about the mind, reappear in religious convictions as decrees and free will. Our thoughts fly off at the one point or at the other according to the swiftness of revolution, but if we keep our activities true to themselves, the elements of success thoroughly commingled, we meet with no difficulty with either idea. Effort is not smothered by its hard conditions, nor does it become volatile, extravagant, and meaningless by the ease with which it is expended. Accept facts in their integrity, with their own light upon them in their true unfolding, and clearness and certainty grow apace. Life explains itself and brings its own convictions with it. The conviction of the normal mind, like the health of the normal body, is native to it. Life is as much an

acting as it is a seeing, and we can never successfully separate them. Most of the extreme opinions of men arise from some eccentric notion. Restore the balance and they disappear. We know the doctrine by doing the will of God. The running of the machine both reveals and tests its capacity. We travel on till the revelation comes, and stands confirmed in its own light. The world is not understood in scraps and shreds, but as it comes forth in its fullness and completeness from the hand of God. If we plant ourselves exactly where his providence has placed us, and try assiduously to answer the practical questions put to us, we shall, slowly it may be, but surely, find our way into the path of truth.