

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



**PATREON**

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

*THE RELIGION OF OUR CLASSICS AND THE  
CLASSICS OF OUR RELIGION.*

NOT long ago, in a well-known German popular series on theological subjects, a scholar published a book with the title *The Religion of our Classics*; whereupon it was remarked, by some bitter tongue, that he might have been better employed in writing on *The Classics of our Religion*. A controversy ensued, in which these rival phrases were bandied about by the combatants. But the public, looking on, soon discerned that both phrases were good—both referring to things which are treasured possessions of all cultivated Christians—and the upshot has been the happy one, that a publicist has advertised a new series of books, entitled *The Religion of the Classics and the Classics of Religion*. More than a hundred separate volumes are promised, for the production of which many of the most eminent pens have engaged themselves; and some dozen or score of the books have already issued from the press.

The Religion of our Classics—the Classics of our Religion—these are alluring phrases for us also; and it may be worth our while to linger a little over the ideas suggested by them.

THE RELIGION OF OUR CLASSICS.

The German classics selected by Professor Sell, the author of the work mentioned at the commencement of this article, are Lessing and Herder, Goethe and Schiller; and it would be interesting to consider which would be the four corresponding names in our literature, if the choice were

limited to four. Would they be Shakspeare and Milton, Burns and Scott? At all events, to set forth the religious opinions of these four would be no less interesting or instructive than the study of the four selected from the literature of Germany by Professor Sell. But this quartette could not be chosen without the claim of others to be included being clamoured for by their admirers—names such as Wordsworth and Browning, Thackeray and Carlyle.

It is astonishing how many of the greater figures in our English Parnassus may be cited as express teachers of religion—Spenser and Milton, Cowper and Wordsworth, Ruskin, Carlyle and Emerson, Tennyson and Browning—and it is worthy of note that the proportion of such writers increases, instead of diminishing, as we come near to our own time. Tennyson belonged to the same section of society as the leaders of the Broad Church party; and their thoughts, to a large extent, recur in his poems. Browning, on account of his Nonconformist connexions, was the denizen of an ampler world, and his religious ideas have a depth and penetration more akin to the atmosphere of a Congregationalist meeting-house. It is indubitable that not a few of the trains of thought in the religious poems of both these writers were started by sermons they had heard in church; although they have amply repaid the debt by the multitudes of sermons for which they have supplied suggestions: So frequently is the poetry of Cowper an impassioned reproduction of preaching that he almost separates himself from the poets and has to be reckoned among the pulpiteers. It was by Evangelical doctrine that Cowper was inspired; but, when we turn to High Church doctrine, we recognise Keble and Newman rather as preachers who sometimes versify than poets who sometimes preach. There can be no doubt that a poet can give to a thought a distinction by

which it shines, besides, by the help of rhyme or rhythm, making it easily remembered. It is a deeper question whether the ability of a religious idea to lay hold of a poet's mind is a test of its truth and of its value. Would preachers be justified in putting in the forefront of their message those elements which have proved attractive to poets? Philosophy and poetry have been characterised by a famous thinker as a mirror with two names, differing only in cut and frame; and some would say the same of poetry and theology.

On the whole, however, the impression made by the utterance of religious truth in literature is partly due to its rarity. A theologian or preacher is continually uttering himself on such subjects as a matter of course; and, it is to be feared, a large discount is taken off his words because of their professional character—"He says what he ought to say," remarks the hearer, in company with the Northern Farmer—but the fact that the poet's ordinary subjects are secular gives piquancy to the rare occasions when he touches on religion. Hence, too, the question of religion in any of our poets is most interesting when there is room for debate as to whether the author in question is entitled to be heard on the subject at all. The poet Burns is a case in point. On the one hand, he may be said to have had a heritage in religion; for his father was a religious character; and perhaps it is his father's religion more than his own that is depicted in his greatest religious piece, *The Cotter's Saturday Night*. Then, there is a natural religiousness, of which Burns had a good share. There is, also, an influence of Christianity reaching beyond those who are savingly interested in it; and he was well qualified to give expression to the sentiments arising from this source. But, on the other hand, he gave way to two vices, and ultimately became the victim of them, which are so contrary to the

Christian character that those who succumb to them are generally regarded as being outside the pale ; and the question is, whether one who has thus offended is entitled to be called as a witness for Christian truth.

I for one should be loth to give up the testimony of Burns ; for, in the sphere of ethics at any rate, he has expressed many a truth in terms which touch life to the quick, and sometimes the wisdom which he utters derives weight from his very errors. But it may be that teachers of religion are too eager to commandeer into the service of their subject the testimony of the unwilling or the unfit. Christianity is not so desparately in need of being acknowledged or praised as to accept testimonials without asking questions about the competency of those who grant them. I should question the propriety of citing George Meredith, for example, as a teacher of religion ; and, when, in a book just published in an English edition, entitled *Jesus in the Nineteenth Century and After*, I find pages devoted to the opinions of H. G. Wells, the novelist, on a theme so sacred, I feel inclined to say that I know well enough beforehand not only what Mr. Wells' opinions on Jesus will be, but also what they are worth. The same book descends to testimony still more questionable ; but I disdain to go lower than Mr. Wells. The Scripture says : " The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God ; for they are foolishness to him ; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." Religion is a subject about which all think they know ; and all are, at any rate, for putting their word into the discussion. But the truth is, comparatively few have a right to be exponents of religion ; the privilege has to be purchased at a high price. Mr. W. E. Henley made a ferocious attack on Robert Louis Stevenson, because he had dared to lift up his voice among the saints. Stevenson and he had sinned together ; there had been a

time when they had together frequented Bohemia ; and the less fortunate man could not bear to think of his old comrade in the opposite camp ; but the reason why, in his later life, Stevenson was hailed by the religious world was because it was believed that he had come to know what penitence and humility are ; and these form the password into the ranks of the confessors. To have doubted, to have despaired, to have prayed, to have confessed—without more or less of such experiences the witness of anyone to religion is of no value ; and it is better to go against the enemy with Gideon's three hundred than to sweep up cheap suffrages from every street-corner.

In one of his best-known essays Lord Macaulay raised the question whether poetry would survive the spread of science. The human mind, it was thought, might become so habituated to the contemplation of facts that it would lose all taste for poetry. Of this, however, we have no fear now ; for, by deeper study, it has been ascertained that the objects the factual side of which constitutes science have, at the same time, another side, appealing to the æsthetic sensibilities, the interpretation of which is poetry. And we are now proceeding further in the same direction ; for the conviction is spreading that the same things which present one side to science and another to art have still a third side, which they present to the religious instinct ; and this is the highest side of all. Literature has principally to do with the æsthetic side of things ; but it always dignifies itself when it reaches over to the religious side, and that in so doing it does not cease to be treading on solid ground is proved by the fact that it improves when it touches religion. In all Shakspeare's works there is no character which so completely draws forth the wealth of the author's mind as *Henry the Fifth* ; but the career of Prince Hal is Shakspeare's version of the Prodigal Son. By Wordsworth the highwatermark

is generally recognised to have been reached in the *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality*, a thoroughly religious piece. Among all Scott's work no single novel surpasses *The Heart of Midlothian*, and in *The Heart of Midlothian* no scene equals that in which Jeanie Deans, in spite of her overwhelming love for her frail sister, refuses to save the criminal's life by telling a lie. Hawthorne's masterpiece is *The Scarlet Letter*. Thus is the religion in our classics the most real and lofty element they contain ; and this may be cited as a contribution to the argument that religion is the flower and blossom of human life, and that Christianity is the absolute and the final religion.

#### THE CLASSICS OF OUR RELIGION

The mention of the other half of our subject reminds me of a work bearing almost the identical title, which has long been one of the favourites in my library—*Our Christian Classics*, in four volumes, by the late Dr. James Hamilton, minister of Regent Square Church, London. This is a survey of all the religious writers of the English race, from Cædmon and the Venerable Bede down to Cowper and Wesley, with specimens of their productions. Far too many are enumerated ; for, when classics are spoken of, not common stones of the brook should be intended but gems from the mine. Yet Dr. Hamilton was singularly qualified for the task he had undertaken ; and he gives a quaint account of his unconscious preparation for it. Speaking of the compiler—that is, of himself—he says : “ It was his lot to be born in the midst of old books. Before he could read them, they had become a kind of companions, and, in their coats of brown calf and white vellum, great was his admiration for tomes as tall as himself. By and by, when he was allowed to open the leather portals, and look in on the solemn authors in peaked beards and wooden ruffs, his reverence

deepened for the mighty days of the great departed ; and with some vague prepossessions, his first use of the art of reading was to mimic an older example, and sit poring for hours over Manton and Hopkins, Reynolds and Horton. Indeed, so intense did this old-fashioned affection grow, that he can very well remember, being compelled to shut the volume and retire to rest, how night after night he carried to his cot some bulky folio, and only fell asleep to dream of a paradise where there was no end of books, and nothing to interrupt the reader." As this quotation proves, Dr. Hamilton could wield himself a graceful pen. Indeed, though, I fancy, his name will be sought in vain in any literary history of his generation, I venture to esteem him a more accomplished and gifted writer than many whose names do figure there ; and, although, as has been hinted, his classics are too numerous, his disposition being to make his geese into swans, yet I do not know where to look for writing more charming than the essays, scattered through these volumes, on his major heroes, such as Richard Hooker, Bishop Hall, Richard Baxter, John Owen, John Milton, John Bunyan, John Howe, Jeremy Taylor, Isaac Barrow, Dr. South, Archbishop Tillotson, Matthew Henry, Isaac Watts, Philip Doddridge, George Whitefield, and Sir Isaac Newton.

These names will suffice to indicate what is meant by the Classics of Religion. There are classical religious writers, and there are classical religious books. A classical religious writer is one who not only may have produced one or two masterpieces, but whose general output has been on so high a level that his works are collected and reprinted after his death, so that those so disposed may have the opportunity of studying his views as a whole or ascertaining his opinions on any particular point ; and such a minute and exhaustive acquaintance with a notable and congenial



spirit is certainly a great gain to the disciple. He who never quotes, it has been said, will never be quoted ; and it may be safely affirmed that he who has it in him to become a thinker or author himself will usually be found to be an enthusiastic admirer of some great writers who have gone before. There are authors whose volumes are so numerous as almost to supply reading for a lifetime. Thus, in my library the works of Luther number a hundred-and-one volumes ; and, near by, the works of Schleiermacher comprise thirty-one, thick and closely printed. There are other authors who are more merciful ; and, as was said above, we have to speak of classical books as well as classical authors. A single book may make its author immortal. Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* and Pascal's *Thoughts* are cases in point ; and a recent remarkable instance is the *Journal* of the Swiss Amiel. Or some single work of an author may so out-distance the rest that the mention of his name suggests this and this alone. Thus, though at the present time the works of Thomas à Kempis are being published abroad in many volumes, it is questionable whether the world will care to hear of any of them except *The Imitation of Christ*. Bunyan has the unusual number of three masterpieces to his credit—*The Pilgrim's Progress*, *The Holy War* and *Grace Abounding*—and the general reader is unaware that he penned anything besides ; nor is this ignorance a great loss ; for the level of the rest is by no means equal to that of these classics. On the other hand, in my opinion, *The Life of Christ*, by Jeremy Taylor, is far superior to the *Holy Living and Dying*, by which he is best known, and I question very much whether *The Saint's Rest*, by which Richard Baxter is remembered, be the best work of that exceedingly voluminous divine.

This may raise the question, how the books recognised as classics have reached this station and degree, or how it

is determined who are the classical authors. Is it not possible that there have been better books written than those which reappear in every collection, or that there may even have been authors more worthy of immortality than those who have actually attained it? There were brave men before Agamemnon ;

Sed omnes inlacrimabiles  
Urgentur ignotique longa  
Nocte, carent quia vate sacro.

Books have their fates ; and even the best of books depend, in some degree, for their influence on other circumstances than merit. Some readers have a generous and enthusiastic way of praising the books they read. Of this there has been in our day no such example as Principal Whyte, of the New College, Edinburgh, and no man alive has done more either to determine who are to be reckoned religious classics or to secure that these shall be read. Not only did he, early in his career, cause to be preached in St. George's, and published under the title of *The Evangelical Succession*, lectures on a score of leaders of the Church Universal, most of whom were also religious classics, but he has gone on, to the present day, issuing from the press, as the result of his enormous but discriminating reading, appreciations of his own favourite authors, with choice extracts from their works, till the volumes now amount to a considerable library ; and there can be no question that these have done much to both stimulate and guide reading. So wide are the sympathies of the venerable and beloved Principal that writers of all schools, if only they reveal excellence, obtain admission to his gallery. On the other hand, the intensity and the narrowness of particular views may secure to writers the chance of republication. Thus, the Evangelical Revival gave resurrection to the authors of the Puritan Period ; and the leaders of the Oxford Movement translated and circu-

lated the works of the Fathers. In the Roman Catholic communion the greatest effort of the kind—the publication of a series of the Latin Fathers, extending to over two hundred volumes, and a collection of the Greek Fathers, of even vaster extent—was the work not of official zeal, but of a priest cast out by his superiors, who turned in his extremity to bookselling. The bookselling tribe have displayed remarkable enterprise in devising series of the kind, and critics in the press have helped them. But, whatever virtue may lie in the arts of advertising—this term being used in the widest sense—the ultimate decision rests with the public; for what the public will not buy publishers cannot continue to print; and, where the public persist in buying in quantity sufficient to justify publication from generation to generation, it may be assumed that there exists genuine merit. Of what nature this is, we proceed to inquire.

First, I should say, there is required in a religious book which is to be a classic a certain amount of literary quality. The prime quality of a religious book is religion, just as the prime distinction of a literary classic is style; but we have seen that a literary classic may do well sometimes to go over into the sphere of religion, and now I add that a religious classic may be helped on its way to diffusion and success by the possession of literary distinction. Of this the most striking examples are the Cavalier theologians of the seventeenth century. Richard Hooker, Jeremy Taylor, Bishop Hall, Thomas Fuller all breathed the air of England at the same time as Shakspeare, and the atmosphere of the Elizabethan Age fills the sails of their eloquence. They would be mentioned in the histories of literature even if they were omitted from the ecclesiastical histories. The contrast between them and the Puritan authors living at the same time is extraordinary; for the latter were singularly destitute of the literary faculty: substance they had in abun-

dance, but very little form ; and it will be interesting for later generations to watch how far this will handicap them in the race for longevity. The only one of the Puritan writers who greatly excelled in style was Bunyan ; and he is the one whose works find a place even in collections of literature which have no bias towards theology.

A second mark which may give to a book a position among the classics is a providential origin. There are books which may be called inevitable. They are products of history, and they are themselves a portion of the history they recall. Those who pen them are not so much their authors as the mouthpieces of the opinions they embody. I have spoken of the Evangelical Revival and the Oxford Movement as having both caused the republication of series of books congenial to their spirit ; but each of these also produced a book in which its own genius was concentrated and prolonged. Wilberforce's *Practical View* might, at the time of its publication, have been called an Evangelical pamphlet, though it has become a religious classic ; and in Newman's *Apologia pro Vita sua*, not only did the author himself rise to life again out of the tomb of obscurity to which he had been consigned by his perversion, but the passion for antiquity and ritual which has meant so much to the Church of England for half-a-century received a living embodiment. The Broad Church Movement, in the same communion, achieved a literary monument no less likely to endure in Seeley's *Ecce Homo*. When thus the pith of a great movement finds its way into a book, the hold of the latter on the interest of the world is strengthened. Milton's *Paradise Lost* might be called Puritanism set to music, and Dante's *Vision* contains within itself all the penitence and the aspiration of the Middle Ages.

A third quality essential to a classic is a certain antiquity. We do not style the works of living authors classics, although

of course they may deserve the honour more than some of the authors or books that receive it. It is not at all unusual, indeed, for critics to predict that their own favourites will be classics ; but so frequently have such predictions been falsified that the public is sceptical, and prefers to wait and see. The very power of a book or writer to make a great impression at the moment may be prejudicial to lasting success ; because it is due to adaptability to a situation which is transient and not important enough to make a permanent impression on the memory of the world. For a similar reason books of learning are seldom likely to be included among the classics of religion. Learning grows from generation to generation ; and, the faster its growth, the more certain are its products, however priceless they may seem at the time of their appearance, to become antiquated and be laid upon the shelf.

A fourth element entering into the composition of a Christian classic is experience ; and this is probably the most vital element of all. Experience does not, like learning, grow old, but unites to one another Christian minds in all the centuries, just as it converts the contemporary members of all the denominations into brothers who understand and appreciate one another. “ It is a communion, mediated through Christ, of the soul with the living God, wherein is included all that belongs to the peculiar life of Christianity—revelation and faith, repentance and the comfort of forgiveness, the joy of believing and the service of love, aloneness with God and fellowship with the Christian community.” This definition of what experience is, taken from one of the best productions of the Ritschlian School, Herrmann’s *Communion of the Christian with God*, is excellent ; but that school has gravely erred through thrusting in the Church too far between God and the soul ; for the essence of experience consists in the immediate contact between the divine

and the human, the direct intercourse of Person with person. In the awakening of the aspirations of the spiritual nature, the quest of God through regions of doubt and systems which do not satisfy, the finding of the Saviour at last, the ecstasy of His love and the never-ending pursuit of His image, lies the very romance of religion; and, in maintaining this, we dread no reproaches of Pietism or Mysticism, from whatever quarter these may come. If the indubitable classics of religion be reckoned up, it will be found that a remarkable proportion of them, such as Augustine's *Confessions*, Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*, Scott's *Force of Truth*, are records of the initial stages of Christian experience, while the very titles of others, such as *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living and Holy Dying*, Scougal's *Life of God in the Soul of Man*, Doddridge's *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*, indicate that they deal with the later stages of the same process. The earliest record of religious experience, after the Fall of man, is that Enoch "walked with God." There could be no better definition of what experience is; and in the efforts of the children of men to imitate this primitive example there has been so much of pathos and tragedy, of both littleness and grandeur, that the wonder is, not that there are so many classics of religion, but that there are so few.

This may introduce the mention of the last element I shall touch on at the present time—namely, scripturalness. If the classics of religion are rare, it is not only because so many religious books fall beneath this standard, but because the best of all rise above it. In Carlyle's *Lectures on Heroes* there is no place given to Christ; and that is in harmony with the feeling of the author's native land, though a different sentiment rules elsewhere; for example, the first volume published in the series of German books I commenced by referring to has *Jesus* for its title. The same feeling prevents

us from reckoning Isaiah and Paul among our religious classics, though we lose as well as gain perhaps by setting them aside as not classical, but canonical. So full are the sacred Scriptures of the elements with which religious classics require to be impregnated that they are able to impart to other books the germs of immortality. Not a few of our religious classics—like Bengel's *Gnomon* and Leighton's *First Peter*—are actual interpretations of Holy Scripture ; but many more of them have borrowed from the same source that which has made them what they are. In fact, this may be said of them all ; and the best training for anyone aspiring to write a religious classic is to be imbibing the letter and the spirit of the Scriptures all the time.

Enough has been said to prove that both the topics touched upon belong to the sphere of a preacher of the Gospel; while the union of the two suggests how wide his range must be. It will be from the young that the demand will come that he should display sympathy and comprehension for their secular reading ; and it will be in persons at the opposite end of life that the expectation will arise, that he should manifest acquaintance with the choicest products of Christian thought, so as to be able to feed them with the finest of the wheat. It may seem most natural for a young minister to be absorbed in the literary classics and for an aged one to be familiar with the religious classics. Yet the development is sometimes the other way : a minister's reading is sometimes in youth limited to theology, but, as he advances in life, he becomes more alive to the connection of his message with all human interests, not the least important among which is literature. When we say with Paul, " I am debtor both to the Greeks and to the Barbarians, both to the wise and to the unwise," we ought not always to lay the emphasis on the second noun in each pair : we ought not always to be thinking of what we owe to the Barbarians, but seriously some-

times to be considering the Greeks ; and, instead of always thinking of the many unwise, we should occasionally give attention to the few wise. We must seek the lost not only in the purlieus of vice and crime, but on the slopes of Parnassus and among the thyme of Hymettus ; for there human beings may be sinning and suffering quite as much ; and, while we do not withhold from the multitude the rousing message of the evangelist, we must seek, with the Ecclesiast, to find out " acceptable words " for the select few who aspire not only to live but to grasp the philosophy of life. The Apostle who wrote, " My speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom," went on to say in the very next breath, " Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect."

JAMES STALKER.

### *THE CHRIST-PARTY IN CORINTH.*

DISPUTE about the divisions at Corinth, reported to Paul in Ephesus by members of the household of Chloe, refuses to be silenced. It is with good reason. The matter is too vital to our understanding of conflicting tendencies in the primitive Church, too indispensable to our appreciation of Paul himself in relation to the older apostles, and withal too inherently obscure and disputable, to permit its quiescence. We urgently need to understand ; yet the varying interpreters refuse to be reconciled. Under these circumstances the needful thing is not the restatement of old arguments, but the contribution of new data. The latter is our aim.

Lietzmann in his recent Commentary on First Corinthians<sup>1</sup> very justly remarks on the passage (i. 12) : " Each one of you saith, I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas,

<sup>1</sup> *Handbuch z. N. T.* iii. 1, 1910, p. 85.