

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 Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

spirit, was formed, 'Der Allgemein Evangelisch-Protestantische Missionsverein,' which since then has been carrying on work in China and Japan, and in the latter country, especially, professes to have met with much success. It aims less at the

gathering of single converts than at the general leavening of Japanese society with the Christian spirit. By the orthodox party at home, and other German missionaries abroad, it is regarded with little favour.

Professor Gwatkin on Revelation.

BY PROFESSOR THE REV. ROBERT MACKINTOSH, D.D., MANCHESTER.

IN studying Professor Gwatkin's remarkably interesting Gifford Lectures,¹ one may be in danger of losing the general point of view in the mass of details. Does not his inquiry into the 'knowledge of God' really amount to a survey of *Revelation*? Mainly or professedly, the less central portion of revelation is under discussion—natural theology or natural religion; what older divines called 'general revelation.' Still the book investigates all human thought of God, upon the assumption that what man discovers, God reveals, and that what God reveals, man must discover and appropriate. It is only fair, when Gifford lecturers who deny supernatural revelation are allowed to discuss Christianity as one great phase of natural religion, that a Gifford lecturer who accepts the faith of Christendom should also have liberty to glance from lower forms of Divine knowledge to the highest. This liberty is tellingly maintained and suggestively employed by Professor Gwatkin.

The conception of *Christian* revelation with which Professor Gwatkin works seems to be essentially this: It is the best and most conclusive proof of the goodness of God. What we divine elsewhere, with lesser strength of assurance, comes to us through Christ with the fullest, clearest proof, the fact of God's goodness, in which men may trust. Still—if we rightly understand the significance of the grouping of parties given under 'Modern Thought'—Christian revelation is an appeal to reason, and is subject to reason, and gives the same sort of knowledge and certainty regarding God as other forms of that two-sided process which some chiefly contemplate as God's revelation, but others chiefly as man's discovery.

¹ *The Knowledge of God and its Historical Development.* By H. M. Gwatkin, D.D. (T. & T. Clark. 2 vols. 12s. net.)

Better in degree—enormously better—Christian revelation, on this view, does not seem to differ in kind from inferior revelation.

This is, indeed, to do Butler's work over again! And it suggests the same hesitations which one feels in presence of Butler's devotion to natural religion. When he calls it, as he repeatedly does, 'essential religion,' the Christian reader finds something ominous or menacing in the phrase. Butler, strong in his sense of justice, rebukes the shallow Deistic creed, with Hedonism for its rule of life and an abstractly benevolent God for its highest figure. But let him pass on to Christianity, and Butler is at a loss. Neither before the event, nor after the event, does he see anything in Christ's atonement fitted to make it of 'that efficacy' which we know by authoritative revelation that it actually possesses. It is a sure fact, but impervious and opaque to our minds. Better abstain from all theories, while firmly and reverently urging this fact! What does this mean? Except that Butler, doggedly loyal to the Christian facts and forces, fails utterly to find himself at home in them, *as he is at home* in the solemn thought of God's justice. Justice? yes; redeeming love? no! So, while Butler—with what we need not hesitate to call a fragment of Christianity—rebukes the Deistic reading of Natural Religion, he can do nothing, he can urge nothing regarding Christianity in its fullness, beyond silent acceptance of an unknown and unknowable redemption. Natural religion is regnant with Butler, 'revealed religion' is a stranger and a pilgrim in his world of thought.

Professor Gwatkin, of course, is in a much more favourable position as an interpreter of the intellectual contents of Christianity. One may recognize this in his central point of view, as already formulated. It is surely a *Christian* truth that our

chief concern with God is with His *goodness*. And one notes further how Professor Gwatkin's theory of revelation opens up in two directions. On one side, Christ must be truly Divine, and therefore we must accept the doctrine of the Trinity, or of a 'social constitution in the Godhead,' an idea so superior to all rival conceptions in attractiveness for an age which swings resolutely away from individualism. On the other side, Christ's Atonement is not a mere sacred *x* of mystery. Remedy or recovery from sin explains itself as the working of a personal influence, which incurs suffering and sacrifice, but which perfects its power and finishes its victory by these very things.

This is a view of the Christian revelation which appeals to the mind, and certainly, too, it impresses the heart. Still, one has to cross-question it. First of all: Do the various elements noted in Professor Gwatkin's book, and summarized (perhaps imperfectly) in the above paragraph, really cohere together in unity? Does the central thought of God's goodness open out into Trinity and Atonement, and then show itself enriched but preserved through the fuller exposition? The Trinity ('or social constitution of the Godhead') especially demands examination. It may be an interesting speculation. It may be, in the opinion of most minds, a logical presupposition of what Christianity reveals. But is it part of the message? It is one thing to hold the doctrine as a possible reading and vindication of philosophical implications in our faith; it is another thing to hold the doctrine as part of the gospel—bone of its bone, flesh of its flesh.

And, further, one has to ask: Supposing this first criticism met, does the view of Christian revelation that results go well with Professor Gwatkin's plea for (a modernized) 'natural religion'? If the Trinity, if the Atonement, comes into our reading of what Christ reveals, does it remain true that the central question is God's goodness, *as nature, philosophy, history may declare it*, only more clearly seen or more emphatically spoken? This is the centre of Professor Gwatkin's thesis. We are to keep in the daylight of science. We are to be loyal to reason. Therein lies (if we rightly understand) our first, highest, ruling loyalty—banishing priestcraft and superstition. And it is not incompatible with loyalty to Christ as—(1) the supreme proof of God's goodness; (2) the vehicle of revelation for the social constitution of the Deity; (3) the Redeemer.

At this point, then, one is forced to ask, whether the conception of revelation with which Professor Gwatkin works—interesting, suggestive, helpful as it is—really gets home? Or does it leave something out? One is the more impelled to press this doubt, because he meets us with a dilemma, in language borrowed from Dr. Bigg. Either be a 'disciplinarian' or be a 'mystic.' Either cleave to Christ's teaching, or to His person. Let Christianity be to us either a new legalism—as to Cyprian and the whole erring Western world,—or else let it be what it was to the great Alexandrian fathers; might we say, a new gnosis? It is a very difficult thing to make any disjunction perfectly watertight, and one is not satisfied as to the disjunction in question. Not only one's poor ideas, but, so far as one can judge, the strength and glory of Christ's gospel lie somewhere in a middle region—which this adroit dilemma is to ignore and sweep out of existence!

The business of revelation, in the more special and intense signification in which one connects the word with Christ and His forerunners the prophets, is not chiefly, one has supposed, to add to our speculative and scientific knowledge. It does not primarily offer to us materials for theory, asserting that God in His own nature is a good or even a loving Being. It authorizes, beseeches, constrains *us* to cast ourselves upon redeeming love. Revelation is, in a word, *God seeking or God gaining man's friendship*—man, the sinner! Reliable information that a great personage is kind or is hospitable is one thing—that is the analogue to Professor Gwatkin's view of revelation. An invitation from the great man when I am in deep distress, to visit him and get his help—that is the analogue to the view for which we are pleading here. It is possible endlessly to debate doubtful questions as to *how* Christ does this. But surely we Christians do not dispute or doubt that *this is what He does*—that He is the Word in whom God's love seeks, and finds, and calls to Himself, and draws home the whole lost family of man.

But, if so, then we have to distinguish where Professor Gwatkin unites. This is what natural religion does *not* do. This is what a scientific and rational account of facts cannot perform; it is not its *métier*. 'God is a kindly Being'—science, in some happy hour, may reach that assurance. 'God, in His love, calls you, the sinner, to His

heart'—what science dares to say that? But with that a gospel begins; if it should end too with that, small loss perhaps! That is at any rate the gospel's heart of heart—the grace and truth that came by Jesus Christ; the authoritative declaration of God's mind and purpose towards us. Do not let the word 'authoritative' be misconstrued! It is not the authority of a Church, or a Bible, or even of an official mediator, that is spoken of; but the personal authority with which a personality, in heaven or on earth, interprets himself. If there are scraps of this in the lower religions, we praise God for these scraps too, but they are chiefly His affairs, or theirs—the souls who had only lower religions to live by. None the less, upon a general view, 'natural theology' is the laborious spelling out of God's impersonal word. It is worth spelling over: all that comes from God is sacred. But we have a personal word from God. For us *the word became flesh, and tabernacled among us, and we beheld his glory*. Discovery is revelation? Why, yes; but this central revelation

is the nail which drives all home and from which all others hang.

One does not wish to quote the old grudging disparagement of Revelation in contrast to redemption. A spiritual religion must be capable of being read off in terms of mind. We only stupefy ourselves if we insist upon a single monotonous set of phrases or ideas. 'He hath declared Him' is Scripture, no less than 'peace by the blood of His cross.' Yet the thought of God's (one) personal word has to lead us on to the thought of God's (one) personal deed. Can it be pretended, in any Christian camp, that the Redemption, too, is only the best phase of the perpetual redemptive function of the God of nature? It is through the name of Christ that the universal purpose of love works its achievement—in any race, or in any world.

Does this seem to mean less of science, or of reason? Let us look twice! Let us make sure! Yet (if we must) we shall do with less of science, with less of reason. For our first loyalty is to Christ, and our one supreme need is God.

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF ST. LUKE.

LUKE VII. 47.

'Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.' (R.V.).

EXPOSITION.

'Wherefore I say unto thee.'—Our Lord gives the reason for His *saying* that she is forgiven, not for the forgiveness itself. The latter sense is ungrammatical, as well as out of keeping with the parable.—SCHAFF.

'Her sins, which are many, are forgiven.'—Jesus did not ignore or make light of sin in forgiving it. This woman had lived in a state of depravity, accumulating guilt and shame.—ADENEY.

'For she loved much.'—We have to choose between two possible interpretations. 1. 'For which reason, I say to thee, her many sins have been forgiven, because she loved much.' . . . Her sins have been forgiven for the reason that her love was great; or her love won forgiveness. This is the interpretation of Roman Catholic commentators, and the doctrine of *contritio caritate formata* is built upon it. But it is quite at variance (a) with the parable which precedes; (b) with the second half of the verse, which ought in that case to run, 'but he who loveth little, wins little forgiveness'; (c) with v.⁵⁰, which states that it was *faith*, not love,

which had been the means of salvation; a doctrine which runs through the whole of the N.T. This cannot be correct. 2. 'For which reason I say to thee, her many sins have been forgiven (and I say this to thee), because she loved much'; i.e. *λέγω σου* is not parenthetical, but is the main sentence. This statement, that her many sins have been forgiven, is rightly made to Simon, because he knew of her great sinfulness, he had witnessed her loving reverence, and he had admitted the principle that the forgiveness of much produces much love. This interpretation is quite in harmony with the parable, with the second half of the verse, and with v.⁵⁰.—PLUMMER.

'But to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.'—This is the other side of the truth, as it applied to Simon: little (conscious) sin, little love. The doctrine here enunciated is another very original element in this story. It and the words in Lk 5³¹ and 15⁷ form together a complete apology for Christ's relation with the sinful.—BRUCE.

THE SERMON.

Little Forgiveness, Little Love.

By the Rev. Alexander Maclaren, D.D.

They were a strange trio, our Lord, Simon, and the woman—Simon barely courteous, scandalized at her intrusion, and her vehement tokens of love,