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A table of contents for *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* can be found here:

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1918.

THE 597TH ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING.

HELD IN COMMITTEE ROOM B, THE CENTRAL HALL
WESTMINSTER, ON MONDAY, MARCH 4TH, 1918, AT 4.30 P.M.

A. W. OKE, ESQ., B.A., LL.M., TOOK THE CHAIR.

The Minutes of the last Meeting were read and confirmed.

The HON. SECRETARY announced the election of Dr. A. H. Burton, Miss C. Pearce, and the re-election of the Rev. W. D. Sykes as Members; and of Theodore Roberts, Esq., W. Hoste, Esq., M.A., W. Dale, Esq., F.S.A., F. S. Forbes, Esq., J. T. Galathan, Esq., R.E., J. R. Christie, Esq., M.A., and R. Lindley, Esq., as Associates.

The death was reported of Brigadier-General the Hon. F. C. Bridgeman, an Associate.

The CHAIRMAN then called on the Rev. H. J. R. Marston to read his paper on "The Reserved Rights of God."

THE RESERVED RIGHTS OF GOD. By the REV. H. J. R. MARSTON, M.A.

I HAVE no intention of delivering a Theodice. The task attracted both Milton and Leibnitz. We may agree that neither of these great men was very successful in the attempt to "justify the ways of God to men." We may make that concession without for a moment admitting that Voltaire, in his profane and licentious ridicule of the "best possible world," was any more successful than was the philosopher whom he lampooned.

The truth seems to be that Theodice, on formal and set lines, is a task beyond our powers; and may even degenerate into a sort of spiritual impertinence, born of zeal not according to knowledge. The Bible is certainly not friendly to the attempt. The *Book of Job*, though it allows the utmost freedom of speculation and of speech about the ways of God among men, ends in the confession of the Patriarch: "I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes"; as if he should say: I abandon my attempt

to justify God, since I have come to learn how deeply I need to be justified myself."

St. Paul, in the *Epistle to the Romans*, having surveyed the course of history and the order of Creation, instead of attempting to justify the enigmas of the world, leads us to contemplate the wonders of Redemption, and to hope for the manifestation of the sons of God, when the Creation shall be liberated from the bondage of corruption, and brought into the liberty of the glory of the redeemed.

It appears from these two samples of Biblical thought that the purpose of the Holy Spirit, alike in the Old and the New Testaments, is rather to point out the way in which God justifies man than to show how man may justify the ways of God.

I aim in this lecture to demonstrate that there are certain rights in God, in virtue of which He withholds from the ken of His intelligent creatures some things which we have a desire to know; that it is possible that those things may never be wholly known to us; and that, in thus withholding this knowledge, He acts conformably to His character. Hence we may rest in that character without feeling any sense of injury, and in a certain measure of what may be called ignorance.

It is quite compatible with Christian confidence in the faithfulness of God to assert that there may be matters which do not come under the consoling assurance, "What I do, thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter." While the Christian clings, with a tenacity which nothing can move, to St. Paul's declaration, "Now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known"; yet even that future, and that purer knowledge, may be a growing knowledge and may never exhaust all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge that are hidden in Christ.

I shall endeavour, then, to show that there are two rights reserved to Himself by God. The first of these is the right vested in His Omniscience, of limiting the powers, opportunities, and attainments of His creatures in regard to many portions of His dealings with them. The second is the right vested in His Creatorship, of disposing of His creation at will—that is, of course, according to His will, conditioned by His perfections, and not arbitrarily.

This double right in God flows from His Sovereignty. When the New Testament speaks of God as "the blessed (blissful) and only Potentate," as "the King of kings and Lord of lords,"

it does but express a feeling which is indelible in the human breast. Sovereignty is felt to be a constituent in the very idea of God. A God who is dependent, limited, confined within even His own laws, is no God at all. How deeply this thought is ingrained in men's minds may be seen by the testimony of the Attic Drama. Nowhere is it expressed more unmistakably. *Æschylus* and *Sophocles* do, indeed, use the jargon of polytheism, but they are penetrated by a profound conviction that there is somewhere a sovereign something, if not a sovereign someone.

In a noble passage in the *Prometheus* *Æschylus* beautifully expresses this conviction. He says: "Never shall the wills of mortals pass beyond control of Zeus." The same sentiment pervades the spirit of *Virgil*. Even a whimsical and one-sided thinker like *Mr. Wells* attests how deeply men feel the truth of God as sovereign, for he entitles his recent book, "God the Invisible King."

Now, the shrine and oracle of this idea is the Old Testament. The thought of Divine Sovereignty was nursed and developed by the institutions and vocation of the chosen people. The great truth is no soft and sickly exotic transplanted into the soil of Israel from *Babylon* or *Nineveh*; it was deposited in the mind of the people by the hand of God himself, and was unfolded with sacred and salutary richness in the course of their history, and by the very genius of that wonderful race.

The political spirit of the Old Testament is democratic and progressive. Israel's eye of hope looked stedfastly to a golden future, and not wistfully to a golden past. When Israel came out of *Egypt*, and the house of *Judah* from among a strange people, *Moses* became the leader of a rudimentary democracy. *Samuel*, the last of the popular saviours of the tribes, and the founder of the prophetic order, resisted and deplored the coming of a king. *David*, the man after God's own heart, who remains to this day the ideal monarch of Israel, and who is the type of a future Royalty, was anointed and acclaimed by the two sections of his nation "as bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh"; and is described in a glowing passage in the *Psalter* as one "chosen out of the people."

The record of the monarchy in Israel is disappointing. Most of the kings, whether in Israel or in *Judah*, were either weak or bad, or both. *Hezekiah*, the most earnest and dignified of the successors of *Solomon*, deserves his eminence, because he

diligently followed the instructions of Isaiah, not because he pursued a policy recommended by his royal predecessors. The greatness of the soul of Israel was cherished, not by kings, but by prophets, who leaned on the suffrage of the hearts of the believing portion of the community. Isaiah and his beautiful pupil Hosea, Jeremiah and Zechariah did far more to mould the theology and the faith of the nation than did any of the occupants of the throne.

In such conditions did the idea of the Sovereignty of God reach its fruition. In the fulness of time it passed into the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ, and became a solid part of Christianity itself.

The Sovereignty of God, as delineated in the Bible, contains four constituent elements. The first is *Originality*, or the element of origination. This is the teaching of the first chapter of Genesis. The second is that of *Judiciality*, the element of rectitude, that cannot be corrupted, diverted, intimidated, baffled. This is the teaching involved under the grand dictum of Abraham: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" The third is *Affinity with the Meek*. This is taught by our Lord when he thanked the Lord of heaven and earth that He had revealed the truths of the Gospel to babes. The fourth is the element of *Fatherhood*, for the same passage reminds us how that the Lord of heaven and earth is also the FATHER.

According, therefore, to Scripture the ideal sovereign may be defined as transcendent personality, possessing to infinite degrees originality, justice, humility and love. To a self-complacent sceptic like Goethe, this idea of God as a sovereign was only one way of conceiving of the Divine being, a way suited to servile natures, seeking for a sort of prop for their own felt weakness. He would have pointed to it as a thought eminently agreeable to the court chaplains of Louis XIV, prone to ascribe to the Almighty the qualities which they lauded in their master, who hired their eloquence to flatter and conceal his crimes. Such a view of sovereignty has in our unhappy day been used to support the wickedness of the supreme war-lord of Prussia, and to excuse his own infamous doctrines of war in spite of every moral law.

These, however, are only travesties of the Biblical truth. They are not Biblical in origin or scope. They are condemned by the very history of that doctrine as I have just traced it in the Old and New Testaments. They excite nowhere so strong

an antipathy as in hearts animated by the spirit and doctrines of the Gospel.

But it is not only the origin and history of this idea in the evolution of Israel which liberated it from defiling admixtures. The idea itself has proved its own purity and force by two notable effects which it has produced in the Christian consciousness. It was on this idea that St. Augustine, amid the world-débâcle that followed the fall of Rome, erected the system of the City of God. For many generations Christian thinkers nursed the hope of the Church on that model. The mediæval system had, indeed, many grievous faults, and inflicted on mankind many grievous evils. Yet it sustained, through ages of barbarism and ignorance, a scheme of things which in due time gave birth to a better state. This mediæval system rested on the doctrine of God as sovereign in grace and government, and from that fountain flowed all that was true and clean in the life of the Church for centuries.

The Reformed Church, when she was menaced by the reactionary sophistries and immoral casuistries of the Jesuits, was saved from dissolution by the genius of Calvin, who gave to it a cohesion and a logical compactness that proved irresistible. The teaching of Calvin, as all men know, was based on the Sovereignty of God. There must be inestimable preciousness in a doctrine which enabled St. Augustine to save Christian society from the deluge, and which enabled Calvin to save for modern democracy the principles of personal liberty. This great doctrine created the nobler parts of the world-embracing Church of the Middle Ages; and from the same doctrine was derived the spirit and the character which produced the United States of America.

It is reasonable, then, to expect from a truth that has been so immensely beneficent, in politics and society, consolation and refreshment in the philosophy of the human heart and mind. In the midst of vast disorders to-day the world is in quest of comfort and interior repose. People ask two questions—What does this all mean? What is this vast upheaval and dislocation for? To what is all this vast cost, endurance, self-sacrifice, energy, invention, directed? Now, it is probable that no one can answer this question so clearly or so completely as to satisfy all minds. Yet to all minds there may come, I think, a certain measure of real repose from the reflection that God knows all. It may or may not be true that some day He

will clear it all up. But He knows the meaning of it all now.

This is not blind-man's buff in the universe. The all-knowing God sees far; all forces are within His ken and His control. The total effect is beyond my arithmetic, but it is not beyond the calculus of Omniscience. The reflection is to some degree an intellectual anchorage amid the depths of the world-flood that threatens to engulf all security of thinking or of trust.

The second question that is in many hearts is this, How can we believe in a Divine Fatherhood at all that can complacently endure the mass of misery—mental, moral, physical, social, national—that now exists in the world. No face, no form of ill, is wanting to the picture. Death, mutilation, outrage, destitution, flight, famine, fire, and wounds, are all horribly familiar. To these are added desolation of heart, irreparable hopelessness, long-drawn suspense, hourly shock and stress of nerves, scarcity of food, and innumerable minor discomforts. Waste in substance, loss in art, diminution of energy, lowering of health, decline of faculty, chaotic change of plan—these are present on top of all the rest.

Again, it must be said that the solution is not with us. Yet, again, it must be said that the truth of the Divine Sovereignty does help us. It appertains to the sovereign God to dispose of the creatures of His hand absolutely at will. That will is a will of sovereign love, but it is the Sovereign Will of one who made all things for itself and for themselves.

Nothing is further from my intention than to offer this answer in the spirit of old-fashioned Calvinism. I believe to the full in the rights of the human heart to question, to mourn, to complain, in the tenor of the psalm. To soothe and mollify hearts tortured by doubt and lacerated by bereavement, one must begin by the sympathy that understands, and the reverence that acknowledges. Yet in administering the consolation which they need, one finds some strength in the doctrine that the God of all is a sovereign and faithful Creator; and that nothing can alter the elemental truth, "It is lawful for Him to do what He wills with His own."

The tempered and balanced view of sovereignty just expressed, will not please some. It involves consequences that do not belong to the present lecture. It is prior to, and independent of, any dealing of God with sin as such. It necessitates a happy issue to all out of their afflictions unless they will not have it so.

It is remote from all stoic indifference to human nature's rights, and to all the brutal socialism of the Prussian war-school. It is sovereign might arrayed on the side of the meek and the kind. But it is sovereignty.

Two ultimate rights then disclose themselves to the reverent student of the Divine Sovereignty, as portrayed in the Bible and imaged in the human heart. The first is *the right of mystery*; the second is *the right of disposal*. Under the former right we see how God withholds from us certain elements in His acting and governing. This does not mean that we are to distrust the findings of reason or of conscience where we are able to exercise these faculties. It does mean that there are situations in which these faculties are not able to pronounce a final verdict. This appears to be the meaning of the noble saying of the Apostle: "Making his home in the light that no man can have access to." The right of mystery is, so to speak, natural to God's Omniscience, and is not a decree morally imposed.

The effect of recognising this right of mystery should be to stimulate inquiry, not to check it, and at the same time to save us from disappointment when we reach the end of our mental tether. He whom we know truly, and who knows all things perfectly, though He has not made us consorts of his omniscience, yet approves all true science, and does not disdain our inevitable nescience.

I close this section with the words of Vinet:—

"If there were no obscurities, the heart would leave all to be done by the mind. To know that we cannot know, is already knowledge."

The saying of our Lord, near the close of the beautiful parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard, most perfectly expresses the right of the Divine disposal. The disposing power, which I have outlined and vindicated, is not an arbitrary decree irrespective of human considerations. It is an absolute prerogative, indeed; but a prerogative always exercised with the fulness of the Divine Philanthropy. "Is it not lawful for Me to do what I will with Mine own?" is an expression of Christ's will to deal largely and sweetly with the least meritorious or fortunate of His labourers. It furnishes the key to the dark saying that there are "first that shall be last, and last that shall be first."

Nothing can divest the Sovereign Will of its proprietary rights. The lowest and meanest of its possessions is under the keeping care of the Supreme Disposer; it remains His own for ever.

That this must throw some blessed and solemn illumination on the problems of ultimate destiny, is certain; even though it remain uncertain what those ultimate things shall be. The preciousness of this right of disposal consists just in this, that **WILL**, not *chance* or *fate*, has the last word in things. That Will, moreover, is the Will of Eternal Love and Divine Proprietorship.

There is a sentiment proper in us toward each of these rights of God. The proper sentiment toward the right of mystery is that of relief. The sentiment proper to the right of disposal is reliance composed of resignation and of hope. The faithful Creator cannot go back on Himself. He is steadfast to His nature, and to His purposes. As He is greater than man, so has He ordained that man shall be the greatest of His creatures, the master, priest and spokesman of them all.

In what has been now advanced, I have made no attempt to offer a complete solution of present difficulties. I have faced them all and fully. Yet I submit that, by frankly acknowledging the sovereignty of God, as it is set out to us in Christ's revelation, we gain a certain vantage ground for the soul, amid the tragical perplexities of the time. We become aware of the greatness of Him with whom we have to do. We come to rest in His character and not in His light alone. We find that He is greater than His ways, and worthy of confidence, even where He cannot be explained. Even if He should never vouchsafe a complete elucidation of Himself at all points, we yet have hope that since He knows all we can afford to remain partly ignorant; and since He owns all He will not let one thing fall to the ground that claims of Him its rights.

A Vote of Thanks to the Lecturer was moved by the CHAIRMAN, and seconded by Dr. SCHOFIELD; and after brief remarks by Professor LANGHORNE ORCHARD, the Revs. JOHN TUCKWELL, G. B. BERRY and J. J. B. COLES, followed by Messrs. M. L. ROUSE and SIDNEY COLLETT, the Resolution was adopted with cordiality.

The Lecturer having briefly acknowledged the vote, the meeting adjourned at 6.10.