
CHARDON STREET AND BIBLE CONVENTIONS.

IN the month of November, 1840, a Convention of Friends of Universal Reform assembled in the Chardon Street Chapel, in Boston, in obedience to a call in the newspapers signed by a few individuals, inviting all persons to a public discussion of the institutions of the Sabbath, the Church and the Ministry. The Convention organized itself by the choice of Edmund Quincy, as Moderator, spent three days in the consideration of the Sabbath, and adjourned to a day in March, of the following year, for the discussion of the second topic. In March, accordingly, a three-days' session was holden, in the same place, on the subject of the Church, and a third meeting fixed for the following November, which was accordingly holden, and the Convention, debated, for three days again, the remaining subject of the Priesthood. This Convention never printed any report of its deliberations, nor pretended to arrive at any *Result*, by the expression of its sense in formal resolutions, — the professed object of those persons who felt the greatest interest in its meetings being simply the elucidation of truth through free discussion. The daily newspapers reported, at the time, brief sketches of the course of proceedings, and the remarks of the principal speakers. These meetings attracted a good deal of public attention, and were spoken of in different circles in every note of hope, of sympathy, of joy, of alarm, of abhorrence, and of merriment. The composition of the assem-

bly was rich and various. The singularity and latitude of the summons drew together, from all parts of New England, and also from the Middle States, men of every shade of opinion, from the straitest orthodoxy to the wildest heresy, and many persons whose church was a church of one member only. A great variety of dialect and of costume was noticed; a great deal of confusion, eccentricity, and freak appeared, as well as of zeal and enthusiasm. If the assembly was disorderly, it was picturesque. Madmen, madwomen, men with beards, Dunkers, Muggletonians, Come-outers, Groaners, Agrarians, Seventh-day-Baptists, Quakers, Abolitionists, Calvinists, Unitarians, and Philosophers, — all came successively to the top, and seized their moment, if not their *hour*, wherein to chide, or pray, or preach, or protest. The faces were a study. The most daring innovators, and the champions-until-death of the old cause, sat side by side. The still living merit of the oldest New England families, glowing yet, after several generations, encountered the founders of families, fresh merit, emerging, and expanding the brows to a new breadth, and lighting a clownish face with sacred fire. The assembly was characterized by the predominance of a certain plain, sylvan strength and earnestness, whilst many of the most intellectual and cultivated persons attended its councils. Dr. Channing, Edward Taylor, Bronson Alcott, Mr. Garrison, Mr. May, Theodore Parker, H. C. Wright, Dr. Osgood, William Adams, Edward Palmer, Jones Very, Maria W. Chapman, and many other persons of a mystical, or sectarian, or philanthropic renown, were present, and some of them participant. And there was no want of female speakers; Mrs. Little and Mrs. Lucy Sessions took a pleasing and memorable part in the debate, and that flea of Conventions, Mrs. Abigail Folsom, was but too ready with her interminable scroll. If there was not parliamentary order, there was life, and the assurance of that constitutional love for religion and religious liberty, which, in all periods, characterizes the inhabitants of this part of America.

There was a great deal of wearisome speaking in each of those three days' sessions, but relieved by signal passages of pure eloquence, by much vigor of thought, and especially by the exhibition of character, and by the victories

of character. These men and women were in search of something better and more satisfying than a vote or a definition, and they found what they sought, or the pledge of it, in the attitude taken by individuals of their number, of resistance to the insane routine of parliamentary usage, in the lofty reliance on principles, and the prophetic dignity and transfiguration which accompanies, even amidst opposition and ridicule, a man whose mind is made up to obey the great inward Commander, and who does not anticipate his own action, but awaits confidently the new emergency for the new counsel. By no means the least value of this Convention, in our eye, was the scope it gave to the genius of Mr. Alcott, and not its least instructive lesson was the gradual but sure ascendancy of his spirit, in spite of the incredulity and derision with which he is at first received, and in spite, we might add, of his own failures. Moreover, although no decision was had, and no action taken on all the great points mooted in the discussion, yet the Convention brought together many remarkable persons, face to face, and gave occasion to memorable interviews and conversations, in the hall, in the lobbies, or around the doors.

Before this body broke up in November last, a short adjournment was carried, for the purpose of appointing a Committee to summon a new Convention, to be styled 'the Bible Convention,' for the discussion of the credibility and authority of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. A Committee was agreed upon, and, by their invitation, the new Association met in the Masonic Temple, in Boston, on the 29th of March, of the present year. This meeting was less numerously attended, and did not exhibit at its birth the same vigor as its predecessors. Many persons who had been conspicuous in the former meetings were either out of the country, or hindered from early attendance. Several who wished to be present at its deliberations deferred their journey until the second day, believing that, like the former Convention, it would sit three days. Possibly from the greater unpopularity of its object, out of doors, some faintness or coldness surprised the members. At all events, it was hurried to a conclusion on the first day to the great disappointment of many. Mr. Brownson, Mr. Alcott, Mr. West, and among others a Mor-

mon preacher took part in the conversation. But according to the general testimony of those present, as far as we can collect it, the best speech made on that occasion was that of Nathaniel H. Whiting, of South Marshfield. Mr. Whiting had already distinguished himself in the Chardon Street meetings. Himself a plain unlettered man, leaving for the day a mechanical employment to address his fellows, he possesses eminent gifts for success in assemblies so constituted. He has fluency, self-command, an easy, natural method, and very considerable power of statement. No one had more entirely the ear of this audience, for it is not to be forgotten that, though, as we have said there were scholars and highly intellectual persons in this company, the bulk of the assemblage was made up of quite other materials, namely, of those whom religion and solitary thought have educated, and not books or society, — young farmers and mechanics from the country, whose best training has been in the Anti-slavery, and Temperance, and Non-resistance Clubs. Mr. Whiting has been at the pains to draw up, at our request, a report of his speech on that occasion, on the subject of miracles and the authority of the Bible, which we gladly present to our readers, as a fair specimen of the spirit of the debates which we have described, and the best record we can preserve of an assembly in all respects noteworthy.

SUBSTANCE OF MR. WHITING'S REMARKS.

The advocates for what may be called *technical* Christianity rest their claim for the special and plenary inspiration of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, mainly upon certain *external* circumstances attending their promulgation among men; — the principal of which are the material miracles which are recorded in them, but which, however, have no necessary or legitimate connexion with the facts they accompany.

Now it seems to me there is a radical defect in this sort of evidence, inasmuch as truths which pertain to the soul cannot be proved by any external testimony whatever; and can only be wrought out and demonstrated by the experience of the soul itself. I might, perhaps, write my own faith; but that scripture could not be taken as conclusive evidence of the truth of that faith, even though it might be accompanied by all the "signs and wonders" of which history bears record. So that, even if these miracles could be proved beyond the possibility of

doubt, this could never settle the question of the divine nature and the absolute truth of the sentiments with which they are associated, as this can only be done by the nature of the doctrines taught, and not by any extraneous or adventitious circumstances attending their utterance. But the pertinacity with which the supporters of Christianity cling to these miracles, and the prominence given to them in nearly all arguments to establish its exclusive claim, as a religion of divine origin and authority, upon the confidence and belief of mankind, and its singular and sole power to elevate and redeem the race, would seem to indicate that they are regarded as an essential part of the system; the literal truth of which can never be questioned, without sapping the very foundation of the whole Sacred Canon. I do not think, however, that this is the case; on the contrary, I apprehend that these supposed miracles do little else than mystify and obscure the real beauty of the great truths which the Bible does actually contain; and thus neutralize in a great degree the healing and saving influences which they would otherwise exert upon the destinies of men. And this because they so bewilder the imagination, and bias the judgment, that they can never receive that full and free investigation into their nature and tendency, and that deep and searching analysis which their influence upon human welfare demands.

If miracles are indeed fundamental to, and a necessary part of Christianity, as is contended by its advocates, then it is essential that these should not only be wrought in one age, but in all ages; not only by one of its advocates, but by all of them. Absolute truth, as the axiom, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," is eternal,—needs no external support, and can receive none. It is intuitive to the soul and meets a cordial response in every human breast. But a miracle, being a supposed suspension of the laws of the universe, for a specific and individual purpose, rests entirely upon external evidence; and must, therefore, require to be renewed, from day to day, and in the presence of all who are to be converted to the creed it is intended to confirm and enforce. If it is necessary for one man to see miracles performed in order to believe *other* truth, it is so for all surely. Of what avail is it to me that miracles were wrought eighteen hundred years ago, before men who have been long since dead? Or of what avail is it that they should be performed before others even now? It is necessary that I should see them as well as others. I require the same evidence of truth that they do. But what have we now to prove the truth of Christianity, supposing it to rest upon the external basis claimed by its advocates, but a meagre and very questionable *record* of miracles, said to have been wrought hundreds and thousands of years ago! Surely our credulity is greater

than that of those who lived in those days. They required ocular demonstration; but we are to be satisfied with such evidence as we can pick up among the ruins of the ages, that such things *were*. I insist that it is as necessary for preachers of Christianity to work miracles now, as at any former period. The Catholic and the Mormon have seen the importance of this. Hence, I believe, they claim to be in possession of that power, and at times to perform miracles each in evidence of the divinity of his own faith.

If a miracle settles anything in regard to the truth of Christianity, how much and what does it prove? Does it prove that those who have wrought miracles could never err, because they were infallible? This will not be pretended in the face of the record itself. If they were mistaken in one thing, why might they not be in another? Even the immediate disciples of Jesus were notoriously ignorant in regard to the nature of the truths taught, and were for a time utterly at fault with reference to the mission he was sent to accomplish; while the very *arch traitor* of them all, Judas Iscariot, for aught that appears to the contrary, wrought miracles as well as the rest.

If the power to work miracles does not prove infallibility on the part of those who have it, it is certainly desirable to know precisely what it does prove, and what subjects are placed beyond the reach of question by its exhibition; so that on those subjects the understanding and the conscience may go to sleep, for to me there can be in so far no sort of use for their exercise. But the truth is, a miracle proves nothing whatever beyond itself. It testifies of itself, and the power requisite to its performance, and nothing else.

One argument, however, in favor of the miracles recorded in the Bible, and one which may be worthy of a passing notice, is, that the people were so ignorant and sensual when its writers lived, that they required some such supernatural exhibitions to induce them to *reflect* upon the truths which were uttered. If miracles were ever needed for this purpose, they are now. For men were never more confined to sense than at the present day. Universal skepticism prevails. It would seem, then, that we need as signal an exhibition of divine power to-day as ever. But what effect can such exhibitions as are recorded in the Scriptures have on men, but to foreclose the judgment, and shut out the reason? Truth cannot be viewed with that searching glance which is essential to its perfect understanding, when its enunciation is accompanied by "signs and wonders" which no one can comprehend. I love truth for itself, and not because he who utters it is able to perform acts which elude the grasp of reason, and therefore produce nothing in the witness but stupid wonder. Besides, all these things transpired so long

ago, and in such a dark age of the world, that there must ever hang a doubt upon them; and the proof of their reality can never be given to the satisfaction of unbiassed, reflecting minds. Thus the real value of the Gospel is in a great measure lost, by coupling it with acts and events to which the understanding can never give credence, and which, if true, could not add one particle of value to the great truths upon which it is based.

These old traditions, which have come down to us amid the ruins of the past, were probably founded on some fact; but it is difficult, if not impossible, at the present time, to ascertain what the primitive fact was. Neither is it of the slightest consequence to the progress of the race that we should ever know. The great conservative and renovating principle of the universe, *Love*, yet abides. This shall suffice for all the purposes of redemption and salvation.

It seems to be supposed by those who tax our credulity to the enormous extent, requisite for belief in the literal miracles of Hebrew and Christian Scripture, that there were as great facilities for the detection of error, and for the apprehension and preservation of truth, as at the present day; and that, all the evidence taken into the account, there is no hazard in giving implicit faith to these ancient records. But, in the first place, these things were performed in the darkest ages of the world, among a people addicted to the grossest superstition, and ignorant of the most common rules of science. In the second place, passing by this fact, we find it hard to get at the exact truth in relation to any important subject in our day, with all our multiplied means of detecting error; much more surely must this be the case in dealing with events which have been mingled with, and modified by, the changes and revolutions of whole thousands of years.

We should always receive with great allowance, if not with absolute unbelief, records which contradict the present experience of the entire race; and which therefore rest wholly upon external testimony for their support. It is doubted whether the miracles recorded in the Bible are any better authenticated than the Salem witchcraft; or, at least, than the miracles said to have been wrought by Ann Lee, the female Jesus of the Shakers. Few have now any sort of faith in the witchcraft in the one case, or in the miraculous power of the Shaker Jesus in the other.

If, therefore, Christianity does indeed rest on such a foundation as these historical miracles, if it have not absolute, living truth, which will commend itself to the understanding and conscience of every man, independent of, and totally aside from, the supposed miracles of its authors; then indeed it must pass away, and be superseded by clearer and brighter light, as it has supplanted the grosser and darker superstitions of the past.

Taking this view of the nature of miracles and their influence, the only valid and indestructible argument for Christianity must be some such one as that of Soame Jenyns, in his work, called, "A View of the Internal Evidence of the Christian Religion." He very wisely sets aside the whole question of miracles, including the miraculous birth of Jesus, and rests his cause upon the intrinsic nature of the doctrines which Christianity inculcates. This is right. Many of the sayings and acts of "Jesus of Nazareth" are all over radiant with the Divine Spirit from which they emanated and will continue to pour an ever-increasing flood of light upon the great problem of man's nature and destiny when the thousand dogmas, that have been professedly elaborated from them, shall have crumbled beneath the touch of "time's effacing fingers," and be remembered, if at all, but as way-marks to indicate the weary and painful steps of human progress. Well would it be, if they were suffered to complete their work of regeneration, unobstructed by the creeds, and forms, and claims to exclusive divinity, with which they have been environed and fettered, and which have been the parent of so much superstition, cruelty, and death.

The great error of such advocates of Christianity, as Jenyns, consists in the assumption that, "from the Bible may be abstracted a system of religion entirely new, both with regard to the object and doctrines, not only infinitely superior to, but unlike, everything which had ever before entered into the mind of man." The truths which Jesus shadowed forth have their foundation deep within the human soul. They have flashed across the world, more or less distinctly and emphatically, all down the history of the race. They have ever been mirrored, feebly and dimly perhaps, but yet surely and divinely, by all of human faith and human hope. All religions are, in some respects identical,—have a common foundation; to wit, the nature of man. The forms which they assume may vary,—the result of accidental circumstances as they are; but they all have some truth. They could not live without. No man can subsist on chaff alone. There must be some grain mixed with it. So of religion, of whatsoever name. It cannot be wholly false. If it were, it could not be. When, therefore, these men take the ground that the Christian religion is unlike everything which had previously entered into the mind of man, they occupy a false position, which would not only destroy their own religion, but also the religious nature of man.

It is admitted that the old philosophers had some idea of a future state, which was incorporated into their systems of government; but only, we are told, for the purpose of making men live better here, while the object of Christianity is said to be

to prepare men for the kingdom of heaven in another world. If there be, as is contended, a wide difference between these two systems, it is in favor of the ancient religion, so far as that is based upon the absolute good of virtue, in opposition to the doctrine, that its exercise gives rise to suffering in this world, which can only be compensated by a state of felicity in the next. There is in reality, however, little difference, except in the form of words, between the motives held out in the ancient religion, and those presented by the advocates of Christianity. They both stand upon the position, that virtue is a sacrifice, instead of a positive and permanent good; requiring the external motives of future rewards and punishments to balance the superior attractiveness of vice in this life. In this respect, they are alike false. Man should do right, because that alone is the appropriate food for his mind to feed upon—is alone adapted to the wants of his nature, and can alone produce health, and strength and happiness. For precisely the same reason that we should take good and wholesome food into the physical stomach, should we live in the exercise of virtue alone. No man can do wrong with impunity, any more than he can take poison into his physical system, without suffering the penalty which is attached to such a violation of the law of his being. He cannot escape. The penalty follows the violation as surely in the one case as the other. He may boast that he does not feel it, that he is conscious of no evil result to himself here from his vicious practice. But, as has been justly remarked, by one of the most beautiful of modern writers, "The brag is on his lips, the conditions are in his soul." It is written in the very constitution of his being, that Good alone is life, and that Evil is death. If it be otherwise—if it be true that vice gives life, that virtue produces death, then, indeed, is this world inevitably a "vale of tears." Then the woe of a blighted universe may well ascend to heaven in one loud wail of despair. The sun of hope must be blotted from the human soul, and set forever in the blackness of a starless and endless night.

It must be admitted that the great truth, upon which Christianity is professedly based, is more clearly developed by it than by any other system. But then the grand idea of Jesus, *Love*, was proclaimed, almost in his identical words, by Confucius, Terence, and others. Jesus, doubtless, more clearly apprehended its nature, and its far-reaching application, than they did; and perhaps this is more clearly seen at the present day than ever he or his disciples saw it. Jesus was unquestionably a great Soul,—probably the sublimest Incarnation of the Great Spirit, which has ever appeared in our world, to unlock the dark prison-house, and break the fetters in which humanity has so long been bound. But he was a *man*—subject to like passions

and infirmities with other men. He lived a glorious life, only for the same reason that other men should;—because the law of his being demanded it of him. He was not the Saviour of the world, any more than any one is who, like him, lives a true and genuine life. The truths which he inculcated are a part, perhaps the substance, of the universal law of man. As such, and alone as such, are they interesting and valuable to us, who live so many centuries after his advent.

The book from which Christians professedly "extract" their faith, may not inaptly be compared to the Common Law of England and America. This Law consists of precedents and decisions of courts, running through many centuries, and as various and diverse in character, as the individuals by whom, and the circumstances under which, they were given. When a question comes before the courts, it is settled not by justice alone, but by an appeal to the authority of precedent. So the Counsel on the different sides search the old records to find what the courts have done before, which may be made favorable to the cause they have in charge. Thus they respectively quote from my Lord Mansfield, or my Lord Coke, or Sir William Blackstone; and he who can produce the greatest number of these so called precedents, is considered entitled to judgment in his behalf. It is of very little consequence what the naked right of the matter is; what do the *books* say? how have questions of this character been decided heretofore?—these are the points of inquiry. Occasionally these tribunals are found giving righteous judgment; but they dare not do it on the simple equity of the case. They search the books and bring up the case of "*Hobson versus Snobson*," to show that their decision is in accordance with the law, as expounded before, in other courts.

I never knew but one question that was settled in our so called courts of justice, by an appeal solely to the law of God, as written upon the heart of man; and that was in the instance of the Vermont Judge, who refused to give up a fugitive slave, until the pretended owner could bring a bill of sale from the Almighty. He did not search the records to ascertain what my Lord Mansfield or Judge Story said on the subject. He went to the source of all law; and demanded of him who claimed to hold his brother as an article of merchandise, that he should present his title deed, signed and sealed by Him who alone has the right to dispose of the work of His own hands. I do not know, however, but that this is a solitary instance in the history of human jurisprudence. At all events they are not common occurrences.

The Bible, like the Common Law, is a collection of biographies and sayings, running through many ages, and of the most

opposite and irreconcilable nature. When an existing relation, or any practice, or craft, which affects society, is arraigned for judgment, the question by the people is not, what is its intrinsic nature, but what does the "Book" say about it? Then the opposite side commence piling up their texts of scripture; and he, who is most successful in the accumulation of this sort of authority, secures the victory,—in his own estimation at least.

Behold the various sects throughout Christendom, each of them vehemently quoting text after text to prove that it is right, that all others are wrong; and that one which can furnish the greatest array claims judgment in its favor, on just such principles as we have seen applied in the case of Common Law. Few there are who dare appeal to the God within their bosoms, and decide all questions according to their own understanding and conscience. Even in the case of Slavery, that most flagrant of all wrongs, seldom do we see one who ventures to rest the cause of human freedom on the axiom that "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" are the common birth-right of the human race; most men pore over the "Book," to see if that will not sustain a truth which is as self-evident as their own existence. Here the oppressor meets them on their own ground; and with no small degree of success, he, too, quotes from Moses, and Jesus, and Paul, to show that this most monstrous outrage upon God and man is in strict accordance with the precepts of this Common Law of morality.

Thus men involve themselves in inextricable mazes of confusion; and stumble even at noonday, over the sayings of dead men, and in questions which concern the welfare of the soul they bind themselves to the letter of books written by men, who, to say the least, were as fallible and as ignorant as themselves.

The Common Law contains much truth, and probably had its foundation in strict justice, viz. the unwritten law of human nature. But it has become so cumbrous and unwieldy, and withal so mystified and corrupted by the fraud or ignorance of its expounders that it is now little better than an engine of tyranny; and answers scarcely any other purpose than to aid in the support of a class of men, who live by means of the practical belief kept up in the minds of the people, that their services are absolutely necessary to save them from being defrauded of possessions and rights.

The above remarks will apply, in a greater or less degree, to the various parts of the Bible. The books, which have been written from age to age to explain and enforce its precepts, were they all piled up together, would not only "o'ertop old Pelion," but would almost literally verify the declaration of John, with reference to the unwritten words of Jesus, "that the world would

not be able to contain them." These all aid somewhat in the maintenance of the spiritual lawyer or doctor, who is retained to explain truths, which are said to be so plain that the way-faring man though a fool need not err in relation to them.

The Bible contains many great and sublime truths; perhaps more than any other book extant. These truths are valuable, not because they are there, but for their influence upon the welfare of man. Nevertheless, the idolatry which is inculcated and practised with reference to the letter of that book is highly mischievous, and of incalculable injury to the world. It degrades the present, denies the eternity of God, and the integrity of the soul. It makes men slaves to the past, and the walking shadows of buried ages. It impugns the judgment, throttles reason, and hoodwinks the mind. In fine, it denies the presence of God in the soul—the ability of man to know anything *now*. It declares that all the truth which he can have,—all he can know of God, or his own immortality, is to be found within the lids of this book, and was proclaimed by some Moses, or Isaiah, or Jesus, or Paul, centuries ago. Nothing can be more fatal to human advancement than this idea, which is the prevailing one of Christendom.

The Bible also contains much which in its letter is false,—evil and only evil. There are no crimes committed among men, that are not attempted to be, ay, and that may not be justified by an appeal to some parts of the Bible. Slavery, War, Intemperance, licentiousness, and fraud of all kinds are sustained by an appeal to its pages. Now, so long as men declare this book to be beyond the reach of criticism, not to be touched by the understanding, or the conscience, such things will be, and great evils must flow therefrom.

But, when we adopt the principle that the Bible, like every other book, is to be judged by the light of the present hour, and be received or rejected in accordance with the intuition and experience of the soul, there is hope of the final triumph of truth over all error. The Bible, then, is to be valued, like other books, for what it contains, to enlighten, quicken, and renovate the soul, and redeem the race. It is not to be received for what it has been, or what it has done, but for what it is *now*. What is it doing for man to-day? that is the question. Is it doing more good than evil? Its claims should be canvassed fearlessly and impartially. Whatever of good it does, or inculcates, embrace—of evil, cast away.

But above all things maintain the right of the living soul—of every individual man, to judge, unhesitatingly and unqualifiedly, everything in the past and all of the present; remembering always that the Soul is its own authority, is bound by its own laws, does not live in the past, but is now. It is greater

than all books—is antecedent to them all. It is the maker of them; and cannot be made subject to them, until the Creator can be placed in bondage to his own workmanship. When this great truth shall fill the human heart, and be shadowed forth in human life, then the morning of the Universal Resurrection will dawn, then man shall arise from his grovelling position, among the coffins, the bones, and ashes of a buried Past, and live, and grow, and expand, in the bright sunlight of that Eternity in which he dwells.
