

JAMES FREEMAN CLARKE

JAMES FREEMAN CLARKE, an eminent American Unitarian clergyman and author, was born at Hanover, N. H., April 4, 1810, and died at Jamaica Plain, Mass., June 8, 1888. Educated at Harvard University and at Cambridge Divinity School, he became pastor of a Unitarian church at Louisville, Ky., from 1833 to 1840. In 1841, he established at Boston the Church of the Disciples, where he officiated until his death. A conservative Unitarian, he was, however, a man of broad sympathies, and although differing widely in doctrinal matters from Theodore Parker, he exchanged pulpits with him on one occasion, because, as he said, he "could not sit still and see an honest man tabooed for his opinions." He took interest in politics from a high ethical standpoint, and never hesitated to express his personal convictions, whether they were likely to be popular or not. He took an active interest in the philanthropic reforms of his time, both local and national, and as a writer exercised a wide and beneficent influence. His published works include "Christian Doctrine of Forgiveness" (1852); "Christian Doctrine of Prayer" (1854); "Orthodoxy, its Truths and Errors" (1866); "Ten Great Religions," his best-known work (1871-81); "Exotics," a collection of fine verse translations (1876); and "Essentials and Non-Essentials in Religion" (1878.)

WHY AM I A UNITARIAN?

"But this I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers."—Acts xxiv, 14.

WHY am I a Unitarian? Why are we Unitarians? Is it because we like to stand apart from the rest of the Christian Church? Is it because there is any special pleasure or satisfaction in being known as heretics? Is it because we would not enjoy as others enjoy being in the sympathy and in the brotherhood of the whole Christian Church? By no means. We should all like that. We are not Unitarians and do not call ourselves Unitarians, because there is any special pleasure in standing thus alone and apart from our brethren whom we respect and honor, though they differ from us.

(70)

Why then did the early Unitarians in this country; why did he who first professed himself avowedly a Unitarian in this city and in this country, Dr. Freeman; why did William Ellery Channing and Henry Ware; the late revered and beloved James Walker of Cambridge, and Francis William Pitt Greenwood, that pure apostolic soul,—why did these come out from the rest of the Christian Church and stand apart? It was because they thought that it was necessary to bear witness to some truths which they believed had been neglected or forgotten, and they were willing to encounter any possible obloquy or opposition in the defence of what seemed to them to be important truth. And now I propose to show you why some of us still believe the same, and think that the time for this protest against many of the popular doctrines of the Christian Church is not over.

Perhaps some present may say, "What do you mean when you speak of a Unitarian? Unitarians have no creed, and therefore they have no common belief at all. There is nothing which can be represented as Unitarian belief, since there is among them no fixed or avowed creed." It is very true that for reasons which I shall presently state we have not any formal creed or Confession of Faith; but it does not by any means follow from this that we have no common belief. There may be a common belief when there is no definite, precise, or formal statement of it. Take a great party for instance like the Democratic party or the Republican party; they have no Thirty-nine Articles, they have no Confession of Faith; nevertheless they have a belief. There are certain great ideas which unite them together and which make their faith.

Suppose that you should go into one of our universities and should find there certain professors calling themselves

geologists, teachers of geology; or of chemistry; or of astronomy; and you should say to them, "Where are your Thirty-nine Articles of astronomy? Where is your Confession of Faith of chemistry?" and they should reply, "We have nothing of the sort."

"Why then you cannot have any common belief; the astronomers in one university probably teach an entirely different doctrine from the astronomers in another; and so do the chemists and geologists."

"No," they would answer, "we have a common belief which is determined by certain convictions which we all share, certain knowledge which we all possess; and though we may differ in details from each other you will find that the professors of astronomy in Oxford in England and Cambridge in the United States and in the University of Paris, teach essentially the same thing, though they have not formulated their doctrines into any creed."

You can express the union of men in a common faith in two ways just as you can express the union of a flock of sheep in two ways. You can put a flock of sheep into a fold and build a fence around it, and that will distinguish it from any other flock. You will say, "The flock that I refer to is in that fold." Or else you may say, "The flock of sheep which I refer to is the flock which has such a man for its shepherd."

If you are travelling over the hills of Syria you may see two great flocks of sheep coming from different directions, and meeting each other and passing each other; each with its shepherd at the head, each following its common shepherd, and never confounding themselves together, although they have no fence around them to separate them.

And so parties in the Church and parties in the State can

have a fence put around them, and you call it a creed; or they can be inwardly animated by the same great ideas which lead them as the shepherd leads his flock; and because they love these ideas they are sufficiently identified in their faith.

We believe that there is a mischief in these fences which men set up and call creeds or articles, and therefore we refuse to submit to them or to accept them. The tendency of the creed we think is to prevent progress, because it defines beforehand the limits of opinion and tells men, before they begin to inquire, what results they are to arrive at, and so prevents progress; as Lord Bacon long ago said, that "system, because it has a show of completeness, doth arrest men as if they were already at the farthest."

And another difficulty about the creed is that it tends to hypocrisy. Far be it from me to say that those great denominations which have creeds are hypocrites. They are as honest no doubt as we are. Nevertheless the tendency of the creed is that way. It is a remark which I have found in one of those charming volumes of Mrs. Stowe, in which she put so many of the experiences of her early life, when she was in the habit of sitting a quiet little girl and noticing the conversation of the friends of her father, the Orthodox clergymen who came to see him,—it is one of her remarks that "it is a custom of theologians to assume that theology is a progressive science, and at the same time to maintain that we must hold exactly the same things which were held a hundred years ago."

Now it is very true that you will find creeds which do not represent the present opinions of those who profess to hold the creeds. It would be very hard I think to-day to find in the Presbyterian Church of the United States many clergymen who would teach the doctrine that infants dying in

infancy were lost; and yet what does the creed say in respect to that? It says, "Elect infants shall be saved;" and it does not give us the least hope or promise that all children dying in infancy are elect any more than they would all be elect were they to grow up and die then.

And yet though the creed certainly shows as far as it shows anything that the Presbyterian Church believes in the damnation of a large proportion of infants, its members would be shocked and horrified if we were to accuse them of that. And it was not a great while ago in a convocation of the Church of England,—which church ordains and commands that every one of its thirty thousand ministers shall four times a year read in the open church the creed of St. Athanasius, which ends by stating that all who do not believe its metaphysical distinctions shall without doubt perish everlastingly,—that in that convocation of the Church of England a bishop arose and declared without a single voice dissenting that there was not a man in the whole body who believed that affirmation in the creed.

Well the tendency of all this is certainly toward hypocrisy; toward professing to believe what we do not believe. And for these two reasons, because creeds tend to prevent progress of thought, and because they tend toward making men profess what they have ceased to believe and have passed by we reject them.

I am speaking to-night for myself; and yet I believe in speaking for myself I am speaking for many more. In saying why I am a Unitarian, I do not profess to say that others who are not Unitarians may not believe a great many things that I do, and believe them more fully than I do. But in giving my views to-night on this subject I give this as one reason for my belief: that

the views commonly held by Unitarians can all be stated in the simple, distinct language of the New Testament, while few of the opinions which we reject can be so stated.

That is a reason for being a Unitarian, that we are able to state what we believe in the simple language of the New Testament; while the doctrines which we reject cannot be so stated. If we are asked to give our views concerning God for instance we can say in the words of Scripture, "that though there be called gods many, yet to us there is but one God the Father from whom are all things and we in him," and that "in him we live and move and have our being;" that "he is light and in him is no darkness at all;" that "he is love, and whoso loveth dwelleth in God and God in him." And if we are asked to give our belief concerning Christ, we can also express that belief in the simple words of Scripture: "There is one Lord and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus;" "Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you, by miracles and wonders and signs which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know."

These are the expressions which define precisely our views concerning God and Christ; but while the New Testament teaches so plainly that the Father is the only true God it nowhere teaches that there are three subsistences or three persons in God. It nowhere uses the word Trinity at all or Triad or Triune in relation to God, these having all been subsequently invented for that purpose; but moreover it does not say anywhere that "the Father is God and the Son is God and the Holy Ghost is God; and yet there are not three Gods but one God."

It does not anywhere say that Christ is God the Son, the second person in the Trinity. It nowhere teaches that when

Christ prayed to God he was praying to himself; that when he was tempted he was the being whom the Scriptures say cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempts any man, that when he said, "I can do nothing of myself," what he meant was that he could do everything of himself; that when he said, "My Father is greater than I," he meant by that to state that he was equal with God; and that when he says, "No man hath seen God at any time," the meaning of that is that Christ whom so many had seen was the unseen God.

I am a Unitarian for this reason to begin with: that we can state every one of our opinions in the plain, simple language of Scripture, while it is impossible to state the old doctrines in such language. You cannot state the doctrine of the Trinity in the language of the New Testament. You cannot state the deity of Christ in relation to the Trinity in the language of the New Testament. You cannot state the Calvinistic doctrine concerning sin—namely, of inherited guilt, of total depravity, of the imputation of Adam's sin—in the language of the New Testament. Therefore it seems to me we have an advantage here as far as it goes. Moreover it is very certain—at least it is certain to us—that if all the creeds and all the teaching in accordance with the creeds should cease to exist, and that if men should study only the New Testament, it would be impossible for them by the simple reading of the New Testament to find the doctrine of the Trinity or the deity of Christ in that volume.

We have seen many instances of the truth of this. I have myself known many persons who, having been educated to believe the doctrine of the Trinity from childhood by the simple reading of the New Testament,—never having seen a Unitarian, never having read a Unitarian book, never having heard a Unitarian sermon, and some of them not knowing

that there was any such person in the world as a Unitarian Christian,—have nevertheless come by the simple reading of the New Testament to the Unitarian belief, and have been very much amazed when they found that there were others besides themselves in the world holding that doctrine.

Another reason for being a Unitarian is,—and this perhaps may surprise some who have been accustomed to think that Unitarians believe correctly as far as they go, but that they do not go far enough,—another reason is that our views enable us, as it seems to us, to believe more concerning God and Christ and the Bible and sin and salvation than we could if we accepted the usual creeds of the Church. We are not Unitarians in order to believe less, but we are Unitarians because Unitarianism opens wide the gate through which we can pass up and on into higher, larger, and nobler truths. We can believe more in the power of redeeming love and redeeming grace, more in the beauty and glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I do not say that we are more religious or that we have more faith than those who differ from us; but I do say that we have the power, if we use it aright, of going down into a deeper religion and going up into a higher faith than if we were bound by the creeds of the churches.

Take for example the Trinity. We are able, as it seems to me, to believe more about God by omitting that doctrine; to have more faith in God, not less. For what is the Trinity but essentially a system of negations? The substance of the Trinity is this: that you must not believe this on that side, and you must not believe this on the other side, but something indefinite and undefined between. The Trinity declares that in the nature of the Deity there are three persons, and that these three are one. But you must not sup-

pose the three persons to be three persons in the sense in which three men are persons,—in which Peter and James and John are three persons.

You must not go as far as that on that side, and on the other side you must not believe that three persons are only three manifestations, or three relations, or three modes of action of the Deity; you must believe more than that on the other side, and somewhere between you must stand; but exactly where, we are never told. Now I say that to believe that is not to have a positive conviction, but only a negative belief.

And if we demand the meaning of these terms,—subsistences if you please,—if we demand to have the definition in order to believe it, we are told that it is a mystery; it is a great mystery. And then if we say, "If it is a mystery then we cannot believe it," we are told, "Why not believe a mystery? You believe a great many things that are mysterious. You believe that the grass grows, and that is a mystery. You do not know how it grows." Then to that we always make the same reply, and that reply, to my mind, is perfectly satisfactory, and I have never heard any answer to it; and yet it is never accepted as an answer. If we are told that we believe that the grass grows, and it is a mystery because we do not know how it grows, we reply that the fact that the grass grows is not a mystery; it is a simple fact which we perfectly understand. How it grows is a mystery, and therefore we do not believe anything about the way in which the grass grows. We do not believe the how, because it is a mystery. We do believe that the grass grows; that is not a mystery.

It is perfectly true, and must always be true, according to the constitution of the human mind, that where mystery begins the belief ends, and it ends just at that point. Suppose

we set aside this whole doctrine as something which is the work of man,—a system of metaphysics grown up in the Church; suppose we set it all aside, and then, instead of looking for God in this system of dialectics, in this logical puzzle, we open our eyes, and minds, and hearts, and we find him everywhere in nature, in life, in all beauty, in all history.

We see him in the slow, majestic processes of creation; we see him in the reaches of terrible power in the universe; we see him in the immense revolutions of the stars, and in the wonderful structure of the little insect, just perceptible to the most powerful microscope, on the leaf of the little plant; we see him in the long years which, in the geological ages, preceded the formation of this earth.

Everywhere that divine power is working around us. We see it in all the beauty which is manifested in the mountains, clouds, and seas, and brooks, and sunrise; in all the history of the human race; in childhood, and youth, and society; in business, in pain, and in joy; in all the riches of the world; because in all of them there is some manifestation of the divine truth and love, and he has left no race and no family of mankind orphans without some knowledge of himself. And in the soul, in the distinction between right and wrong born in us all, in the vast idea of cause by which we go backward to the beginning of the universe, and in the great conception of the infinite by which we, little creatures of the dust and of the day, are able to reach out beyond all knowledge and all understanding and grasp the eternal,—in all these we find him. In this we have vastly more, not less, than in the belief that in the Godhead there are three persons and that yet those three persons are not three Gods but one God, and that a person is more than a mode, but less than a personal man. Now

we find God above, around, beneath, and within, and we gladly accept the great words of the poet, and say of him:

"All are but parts of one majestic whole,
Whose body nature is, and God the soul;
Who, changed in all, and yet in all the same,
Great is the earth as in the starry frame;
Warms in the sun, refreshes in the breeze,
Glow in the stars, and blossoms in the trees;
Lives through all life, extends through all extent,
Spreads undivided, operates unspent.
To him no high, no low, no great, no small,
He fills, he bounds, connects, and blesses all."

And thus, too, in rejecting the technical and theological doctrine of the deity of Christ we do not believe Christ less divine, but more. To say that Christ is God, unless we know what we mean by it when we say it, does not show us God in Christ; does not make him a revelation of God. It is to see something divine in Christ which brings us to God, and that is what he came for—to bring us to God. To say that he is perfect God and at the same time perfect man confuses the mind and leaves it in darkness and not in light. But we see something of God in Christ whenever we see that the goodness of this highest child of earth, of this greatest of all human souls which God ever sent into this world, that his goodness must be a revelation of the Maker, because he comes nearer to the Maker than any other; and therefore in his goodness, in his daily life, in the happiness of his soul, we study and find more and more of the Deity.

When we accept him as a pure man, as a simple man, made in all things like his brethren, and yet without sin, then we know that man was not meant to be a sinner, and that God did not make it necessary for man to sin, and that the time is surely to come in which men following Christ will rise above sin. When conscience of evil, conscious that we are ourselves sinners, doubting and distrusting the pardoning love of God,

we open the New Testament, and we find Christ saying to the sinful woman, "Neither do I condemn thee; go and sin no more;" when we find him saying, "Son, be of good cheer; thy sins are forgiven thee," making no condition, but teaching that the moment we come in simplicity of heart, seeking for pardon, he loves to bestow it, in that we see something of the divine fatherly affection which comes to us through the eyes of Jesus, and shows to us that God also, when we come to him with the same longing for pardon, will say, as Jesus said, "Son, be of good cheer; thy sins are forgiven thee."

And so we find more of God in Christ, not less, because we do not embarrass ourselves by these technical and theological distinctions, but accept him as he appears everywhere to be—a simple man—a man who, by the divine gift and help and inspiration, was able to rise till he came so near to God that when we see him we catch something of the reflected light of the Deity shining in his face. An old English religious poet has said:

"A man who looks on glass,
On it may stay his eye,
Or, if he pleases, through it pass,
And then the heavens espy."

Christ as a man is the glass. If we please we can look on the glass, stay our eyes on that. Then we see his human character. Or we can look through the glass and see that he is a mediator of God, who shines through his mind and heart, and so fills us with a sense of the great Deity. So we are able to see more and not less of God in Christ than if we held the common view.

And also by setting aside all technical and theological views concerning the Holy Spirit, we can believe more and not less in the Holy Ghost. To us God is so near to the human heart, he is so full of overflowing love for man, and he is so ready