

INAUGURAL ADDRESSES

AT THE OPENING

OF THE

PRESBYTERIAN

THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

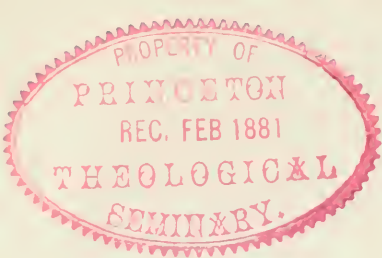
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INTRODUCTION.

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(23)

INAUGURAL ADDRESS OF N. L. RICE.

NATURE and Revelation alike proclaim the value of truth. The discovery of it is the object in every department of investigation; and in every department the interests of mankind are promoted in the proportion that truth is known and regarded.

This principle, so universally true of God's natural kingdom, is preëminently true of his spiritual kingdom. The religious beliefs of men necessarily mould their moral characters, and direct their energies. Holiness is nothing more or less than obedience to the truth. The only religious zeal acceptable to God, is "according to knowledge." The highest liberty man can enjoy, is that which the truth gives him. "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed." God's revealed truth is the proper nutriment of the spiritual life of the soul—the milk for the young disciple; the meat for the more mature; and that truth only is the means of sanctification. "Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth." To assist candidates for the Christian ministry in obtaining a thorough acquaintance with God's system of revealed truth, and the best method of teaching it to men of all classes, is the appropriate work of Professors of Theology.

The department of instruction assigned to me by the General Assembly, in this Institution, embraces the entire system of doctrines and morals contained in the sacred Scriptures. My duty is to teach candidates for the sacred office, first, how to state, illustrate, and prove each of the doctrines contained in the Divine system, and, secondly, how to defend them against the multiplied forms of error, by which they are constantly assailed. The mere statement of what is embraced in Didactic and Polemic Theology, reveals the extent of the field over which, in this department of instruction, it is necessary to travel; and even a superficial glance at the past history of the Church and the world, is sufficient to discover to us the difficulty and the responsibility of the work. If in the ordinary work of the ministry, we constantly feel the absolute necessity of Divine illumination; how much more is this inestimable blessing needed in the work of teaching them how to discharge the duties of the sacred office!

FAITH is the leading condition of salvation. It is that exercise of the mind, or that grace, from which all the other graces may be said to flow. The disbelief of the Scriptures as completely shuts out from the view of the mind the glorious objects they reveal, as if they had no existence. Consequently it renders love, repentance, and every other grace impossible. The most important question ever asked, is, "What must I do to be saved?" and the most important answer ever given to any question, is the answer to this. Didactic Theology shows the necessity and the unspeakable importance of the question, and gives the true answer. Polemic Theology defends both the question and the answer against all the assaults of error.

It will not be inappropriate to the present occasion, to consider the source from which sound Theology, the object of saving faith, is to be derived, and the best method of teaching Theology, Didactic and Polemic.

In considering the source from whence Theology is to be

derived, several important questions might be discussed: as how far the human mind can discover the being, the perfections, and the will of God, without a revelation; whether unwritten tradition forms any part of that revelation which is to guide us in faith and morals; whether the Apocryphal books, as they are called, are entitled to a place in the sacred Canon; whether there is on earth any infallible interpreter of God's revelation. I prefer, however, to pass by all these questions, important though they are, to consider others, which, in our day, are assuming great prominence, and which demand the attention of every theologian. In the discussion, I assume that the Scriptures are a revelation from God; and that the Old and New Testaments contain the entire revelation which God designed to guide mankind in faith and morals. These positions will be denied by none but infidels and papists; and I do not now propose to controvert the errors of either of these. Assuming these truths, I remark :

1. The fact that God has given to mankind a revelation, is evidence conclusive, were there no other, of their incompetency to discover, by any other means, those truths which he has thus taught. If the Word of God is "a lamp to the feet and a light to the path," it is so, because without it we must walk in darkness. "The world by wisdom knew not God;" and, therefore, could not know his will, their duty, or their destiny.

2. The fact, that God has given his revelation in human language, is evidence conclusive, that the true office of a teacher of Theology, whether in the Seminary or in the pulpit, is that of *an interpreter of language*. In what other way can we become acquainted with the ideas God designed to communicate, than by a correct understanding of the words which are the medium of communication between God and man? "To the word and to the testimony," saith Isaiah. "Search the Scriptures," said our Lord. Luke highly commended the Bereans, because they heard the Apostles attentively, "and

searched the Scriptures daily, whether these things were so." Apollos was "an eloquent man, and mighty in the Scriptures." At Thessalonica Paul reasoned with the Jews "out of the Scriptures." Christ crucified was the theme of the Apostles, whether they preached to Jews or Greeks, to the learned or the unlearned. The clamours of the Jews for a *sign*, and of the Greeks for *wisdom*, did not divert them from the inspired word. The example of Paul is surely worthy of the imitation of uninspired men. "And I, brethren," said he to the Corinthian Christians, "when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ and him crucified. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the spirit and of power." It is a remarkable fact, that in the preaching of Christ and his Apostles we discover not a trace of any existing system of philosophy.

The Scriptures claim not only to be a revelation from God, but to teach completely all that is necessary to make us "wise unto salvation." No doctrine, therefore, is worthy of our confidence, or can be safely received into our creed, unless it is sustained by the language of the Scriptures, fairly interpreted; and no minister of the Gospel has the right to ask his hearers to receive the doctrines he preaches, till he has sustained them by a direct appeal to the language of the Holy Spirit. The Apostles themselves gladly submitted to this test.

Nor is the principle for which we are contending, limited to what are technically called *the doctrines* of Christianity. It applies with equal force to the *duties* arising from the doctrines. The world has as signally failed in discovering the true code of morals, apart from the Scriptures, as in reasoning out a creed. The conscience is not a light in the mind, as it has been so often represented, but a faculty to be enlightened. Like the judge on the bench, it decides each particular case according to its view of the law. One of the arguments most

constantly urged by Christian ministers to prove the necessity of a Divine revelation, is the entire failure of the wise men of the world to discover the true code of morals. In ascertaining the duty of men, therefore, the appeal must be, in all cases, to the language of inspiration, interpreted in accordance with the known principles of language.

3. The fact that God gave a revelation, not for the learned, but for all classes of men ; not for any one age or nation, but for all ages and all nations ; proves, that that revelation may be understood, at least as to its direct teaching, without the aid of human science. It is an instructive fact, that the Gospel was understood, and did achieve its most signal triumphs, at periods when every existing system of philosophy was fundamentally erroneous. The entire history of the Church in all ages, and in the present, sustains me in the assertion—that the Gospel has lost its power over the human conscience and heart, precisely in the degree in which there has been departure from the obvious meaning of the language of the Bible, to accommodate its teaching to any science or system of philosophy. The history of the Church furnishes not a solitary exception to this general statement ; indeed, one of the most convincing proofs of the inspiration of the Scriptures is the fact, that every attempt to improve upon their obvious meaning, (and there have been many such,) has been attended with loss of power, or has exhibited a perverted and pernicious power.

True, there have been instances, not a few, in which a mixture of philosophy, materially modifying the interpretation of the language of the Scriptures, has produced a temporary effervescence, which has been mistaken for an increase of sanctifying power ; but in every instance the results have reprovèd the presumption of self-conceited men. When in the third century, the New Platonism, so much admired by the learned Origen, was introduced into the Theology of the Church, the multitude of ascetics who hastened to the wilderness to live in

seclusion, in devout meditation and bodily mortifications, awakened the admiration of many sincere Christians, and even of eminent ministers of Christ; and in our own day, the Church of Rome still applauds and worships those devout dwellers in dreary solitudes, as "lights of the desert." Yet this admixture of human philosophy with Divine truth substituted a spurious piety for vital godliness, and rendered the most religious persons the most worthless.

And within the last thirty years, the introduction of a new metaphysics into the Theology of our own Church, in connection with revivals of religion, seemed to add great power to these works of grace, and gave great prominence and almost unbounded influence to a class of fiery evangelists, whose labors filled the churches with unconverted and self-righteous members. Men were assured that they could and must regenerate themselves; and it is not surprising, that multitudes persuaded themselves that they had performed the difficult work. Crowds attended upon their preaching with intensest interest: and the news of multiplied converts was published throughout the land. Soon a terrible reaction occurred, and the withering effects of those spurious revivals have long since been seen and deplored. So it has been, and so it will be.

Let me not be misunderstood. I would not array Christianity and Science against each other. God cannot contradict himself. He has revealed himself partly in his works; he has revealed himself more fully in his word. Beyond a doubt, these two revelations are perfectly harmonious. If they ever seem in conflict, it is because one or the other has been misinterpreted. Because we know the teachings of Nature and Revelation to be perfectly harmonious, we cannot but desire the knowledge of the former to be, as nearly as possible, perfected. Christianity has much to hope for, and nothing to fear, from the progress of true philosophy. It dreads only that which is false.

We do not contend, therefore, that the theologian can de-

rive no advantage from science. In several ways it may be greatly subservient to the interests of Christianity.

In the first place, it may aid in the defence of Christianity against infidelity and other forms of error. It is a significant fact, that very generally infidelity has been the product of false philosophy ; and in its defence it has relied mainly upon the systems from which it sprang. When, for example, infidels advocate the *development hypothesis* against the Bible, and appeal for support to the sciences of Astronomy and Geology, the telescope does good service by demolishing the nebular theory ; and Geology renders service no less important by demonstrating *creation*, instead of *development*. When the German metaphysics proclaims pantheism as the grand result of all its inquiries, and when the French philosophy pronounces materialism and atheism the highest reason, true mental science may greatly aid in the defence of the doctrines of revelation against these false systems. It is, indeed, very remarkable that of all the sciences, that of the human mind is the most unsettled ; and that the study of this science has so commonly resulted in very grave theological errors, and even in the boldest infidelity. Dr. Chalmers was not far from the truth, when he said, the main advantage of a true metaphysical formula is “to restore our confidence in the old lessons of common sense ; old as human nature itself, and which we never had deserted, or in which we should never have lost our confidence, had not a perverse metaphysics arisen to disturb and darken it.” A child, says he, “sees an apple on the table, and affirms an apple to be there. A Berkleian philosopher labours to disprove the assertion. A second metaphysician arises and repels the sophistry of the first.”

Again—when men object to the *mysteries* of revelation, and contend that the Scriptures unduly restrain reason in its inquiries after truth, true science may expose the weakness of these objections, by showing that the mysteries of nature are precisely of the same character as those of the Scriptures ;

and that in the study of the latter, human reason is no more restrained, than in the study of the former; nay—that both are to be studied on the same principles. This is a subject of great interest, and a very powerful argument may be deduced from the mysteries of Nature, as compared with those of the Scriptures, in favor of the inspiration of the latter.

Science, in its different departments, may afford many illustrations and confirmations of the doctrines of the Bible. When the inspired writers would fill the minds of their readers with reverence for the infinite majesty of God, and inspire them with confidence in Him, they point then to the vastness and grandeur of his creation. Read, for example, the fortieth chapter of Isaiah. Every improvement which increases the power of the telescope, adds beauty and force to the eloquent language of the Prophet, and constrains us to feel that his pen was guided by that Spirit who garnished the heavens, and who perfectly knew the boundless extent of the creation of God.

Again. To a very great extent, the principles of God's natural kingdom are identical with those of his spiritual kingdom; and the former both illustrate and confirm the latter. "Ye shall know the truth," said our Lord, "and the truth shall make you free." Throughout the kingdom of nature, it is truth, known and obeyed, that delivers men from the evils and dangers to which they are exposed. Why should not the same principle hold good in the kingdom of grace? "Whatsoever a man soweth," says Paul, "that shall he also reap." The principle, that the harvest is of the same nature as the seed sown, runs through the entire government of God. In every department men receive the legitimate fruits of their works. When our Lord says, "Strait is the gate and narrow the way that leads to life," he states a principle that finds ten thousand confirmations in the history of the world. One who has never investigated the subject, would be astonished at

the extent to which the laws of these two kingdoms are identical.

We are far from undervaluing science in any of its departments ; but, like every other good thing, it is injurious when misplaced ; and the injury is in proportion to its value when rightly used. We cannot breathe water, nor drink air. Food, water, and air are equally necessary to animal life ; but neither of these can be substituted for the other. So science and revelation are both necessary to the well-being of mankind ; but neither of these can take the place of the other. Science reveals the objects and laws of the kingdom of nature directly and clearly ; the objects and laws of the kingdom of grace, if it reveals them at all, it reveals indirectly and very imperfectly. The Scriptures reveal the latter directly and fully ; the former indirectly and imperfectly. To a certain extent, the two volumes of Nature and Revelation overlap. That is to say—the inferential teachings of science extend into the kingdom of morals and religion ; and the indirect teachings of the Scriptures extend into the kingdom of nature. Now it is just as absurd to allow the inferential teachings of science, which may be, and often are erroneous, to control the direct teachings of the Scriptures, as it is to insist that the inferences of theologians from the direct or indirect teachings of the Scriptures, shall control the direct teachings of science. For example, science teaches directly, that the sun is stationary, and that the earth revolves around it. Would it be wise in Christians to deny this, because the Scriptures tell us, that Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, and it obeyed him ? Very properly the inspired historian, in narrating the facts, used popular language ; and there is no real discrepancy between astronomy and the Bible. On the other hand, the Scriptures teach us directly, that all the human race sprang from one pair. Shall we allow the devotees of science to shake our faith in this truth by mere *inferences* from the facts of physiology ?

Again. The Scriptures directly and clearly teach the doctrine of *original sin*. Shall we allow metaphysicians, by their speculations, to shake our faith in this doctrine, and to give us in its stead an *innocent proclivity* to sin? The Scriptures teach us directly that God can control the minds of his rational creatures, the good and the evil, without interfering with their moral agency. Shall we permit our faith in this doctrine to be overthrown by modern metaphysicians, like Dr. Bushnell, who assert that God could not create a race of accountable beings who would not certainly sin?

Why should we bow so submissively to the inferential reasonings of men claiming to be philosophers? Have they been so generally in the right, and have the literal interpretations of the Bible been so generally untrue? How old is science? Which of all the sciences has yet reached the maturity of manhood? How often have its advocates reviewed their premises, and changed their conclusions? And how often may they yet be obliged to repeat this operation? What power was it that overthrew the erroneous philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, and prepared the way for a new era in the progress of human knowledge? Was it not the Bible, in the hands of the Reformers of the 16th century? And what power is it that has conducted the sciences to their present degree of maturity? What has science achieved, where it has not enjoyed the light of Christianity? What is it doing now? Which of the four or five systems of metaphysics, now claiming our homage, shall we receive as true? The well ascertained *facts* in all the sciences we gladly receive; the *inferences* from those facts, when they contradict the plain teachings of God's word, we cannot admit.

This subject is one of growing interest. We are entering upon an age of subtle theorizing and bold speculation. Too self-conceited to sit humbly by the volumes of Nature and Revelation, in the character of *disciples*, learning their facts and their laws, men are beginning to repeat the folly of past ages,

by substituting theories for facts. The man floating in his balloon, two miles above the earth, may look down contemptuously upon the vulgar crowd, who are content to walk or ride on *terra firma*; but wise men pity his folly. Our theorizers are thus floating aloft. The realities of things do not compare with their day dreams. As in ages past, so it will be again. True science, as well as true religion, will lose ground, just as far as this theorizing spirit shall prevail. But as Chalmers said, we are chiefly concerned to see, that in the midst of all that is unsettled, our Theology is safe.

We take fair ground. Let science be supreme in its own domain; but let it not attempt more than it can perform. Its ascertained *facts*, and the *laws* those facts reveal, we admit and appreciate. But in the higher department of religion and morals, "let God be true, and every man a liar." His plain declarations infinitely outweigh the doubtful inferences of fallible philosophy.

These views will indicate the method of instruction I propose to adopt in the responsible position assigned me in this School of the Prophets.

1. I shall endeavour to demonstrate, against all infidels and semi-infidels, the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures.

2. We shall try to sit at the feet of the great Teacher, listen to his words, and interpret them according to the established laws of language, praying for that Divine illumination without which none can rightly understand the truths of the inspired Volume, see their beauty, and feel their power. We shall test every doctrine by this perfect rule; and every moral principle and every proposed reform, we shall try in the same way. It shall be my constant aim to impress upon the minds of candidates for the ministry, that they must go to the Word of God, not as philosophers, but as disciples; not to show to how great extent human reason is independent of Divine teaching, but to submit the understanding implicitly to "the wisdom that cometh from above." As in the teaching of the inspired Paul,

so in ours, the cross of Christ shall ever stand in the centre of our system of faith, pouring its light and heat upon all the doctrines and truths of the Scriptures, as the sun illumines and warms the planets that revolve around it.

3. I shall ever seek to impress upon their minds the great importance of confirming all their instructions, when they enter upon their official work, by abundant quotations of the language of the Scriptures; that their discourses thus enriched, may come home to the consciences and hearts of men, backed by the authority of God, whose ministers they are.

4. It shall be my aim to make them acquainted with the different forms of error, especially with those prevalent in the fields in which they may be called to labour, and with the best methods of stating and defending the doctrines of the Gospel. Then, if called to an open issue with any of these forms of error, they may wield "the Sword of the Spirit" skilfully and effectively; if not, they may know how so to direct their ordinary preaching, as to render controversy unnecessary.

5. I shall teach them, as far as possible, to use every department of human knowledge in illustrating and defending the truths of the Gospel.

But "who is sufficient for these things?" In the most favourable circumstances, the work of the Christian ministry is one environed with difficulties and discouragements, and involving fearful responsibilities. In every department of it the interests of both time and eternity are involved. But in such a day as this, and in view of the vast changes that must soon occur in the world, attended with unparalleled excitements and agitations, how much are both the difficulties and the responsibilities of the work increased! And how much greater the difficulty and the responsibility attending the training of those called of God to take part in this conflict! The standard of ministerial qualification needs to be greatly elevated. The Church and the world now especially need ministers who know

how to “preach the word” in its purity, and who are not afraid to do it—men who know how to address the masses of the people, so as both to instruct and interest them. Were I not convinced, that in entering upon this work, I but obey the call of God through his Church, I would not dare to touch it. But I would fain adopt the language of the Apostle of the Gentiles, and say, “I can do all things through Christ, which strengtheneth me.” I thank God that in laying the foundations of this important Institution, I have associates, whose eminent qualifications will, in some measure, compensate for my deficiencies. To Him whose servants we are, and at whose call we are entering upon these labours, we humbly and prayerfully commit the destinies of this School of the Prophets.