Christianity in the Nineteenth Century.

A SERMON

IN THE UNIVERSALIST CHURCH,

CHARLESTOWN, MASS.

ON SUNDAY MORNING, SEPTEMBER 26, 1852.

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BOSTON:

RAIZIN & CHANDLER PRINTERS, 37 CORNHILL.

1852.
SERMON.

"IF ANY MAN SPEAK, LET HIM SPEAK AS THE ORACLES OF GOD."

1 Peter, iv. ii.

If this Apostle could have cast a glance forward, eighteen centuries from his own day — if he could have known that the world would have lasted so long, and had been asked what he should suppose would then be the power of the Gospel in the world, how do we think he might have answered? What, may we reasonably imagine, would have been his expectations? Would it not have been a thing incredible to him to have imagined the actual state of the world? Could he ever have supposed that at the end of so many centuries, the Jews, his brethren, according to the flesh, would be apparently as far off as ever from acknowledging the faith of Christ? Could he ever have believed that Christianity would have proved so powerless to lead the barbarian, and to throw light upon the dark places of the earth, full of the habitations of cruelty? And above all, could he ever have thought that among Christians themselves Christianity would still remain for the most part only an impracticable idea?

And yet it is very much so. The Jew everywhere refuses to acknowledge that Jesus is the Christ. The Pagan and the Mahometan are found to be altogether inaccessible to any amount of Christian evidences — the Missionary enterprise being only a cumbersome and expensive method of spreading the arts of civilization. And among Christians themselves, essential Christianity, what themselves confess sometimes to be pure and undefiled religion, is only an idea, a theory, a beautiful speculation, or a something desirable, that receives plenty of the cheap homage of
any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; but practically we, the preachers of liberal Christianity, have no such freedom. One thing has impressed me very unfavorably in this land of equal rights: I mean the tyrannous weight of public opinion, or what is assumed to be public opinion. I remark a want of individuality of character, and a slavish submission to custom and usage on the part of the American people, that beforehand I should never have expected. Politically, socially, religiously—whether it be a Fugitive Slave Law or a Maine Liquor Law, or a Church Creed—I see the same spirit everywhere. And I have often asked myself, remembering some things that I have preached, what would be the consequence if I preached all I believed to be true, or might one day come to believe so. Could I be certain that my own sect, for instance, would think as well of me as a man, and feel as kindly towards me, no matter what I might believe the truth to be, or whether they would receive or reject it? If I should wander into the wilderness of unbelief, (as they might call unbelief,) could I depend upon them that, like the Good Shepherd we read of, they would be ready to leave the ninety and nine righteous persons, and go and seek the lost sheep till they found it, and when they had found it, would they bring it home again on their shoulders rejoicing? If I should be obliged to doubt, or deny this, or the other article of the creed, would they speak na harsh word? would they do no unkind thing? would they be found walking in the footsteps of Him, the divine heretic of Nazareth, Galilee, of whom who upbraided never his unbelieving disciples, but rather gave him the desired proof, “Reach hither thy finger and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand and thrust it into my side, and be not faithless but believing?” I think these questions are their own sufficient answer. It has never been so hitherto. It is not so now. It has never been but that the Christian sects, like the Priest and Levite in the parable, have passed by the poor unbelieving Samaritan on the other side of the way, and have had no thought of going to him in what they consider his distress, and binding up his wounds, pouring in the oil and wine of Gospel peace and consolation. It has never been but that they have passed him by, merely observing, perhaps, in passing, that “it is very sad;” that it would only be a waste of time to attempt to convince such an one; or that “such doubts and unbelief are just what is to be expected from a weak intellect, and a vain, corrupt heart.”

So do the current Christianities treat with affected contempt, those who doubt or disbelieve their pretensions. Among the things dreamt of in their philosophy are these—that doubt and disbelief are an evidence of moral disease, and that a sceptic must necessarily be a mournful, melancholy being. That modest man and generous Christian, the author of the “Eclipse of Faith,” thinks that what may be “expected” of a genuine sceptic is a modest hope that he may be mistaken, a desire to be confuted, a retention of his convictions as if they were a guilty secret, or the promulgation of them as the utterance of an agonized heart unable to suppress the language of its misery.” So they all think—

they make the evil first
A base, then pile a heap of censures on it.
Tis their own sin supplies the scaffolding
And mason work: they skillful, rear the grim
Unightly fabric, and then point and say,
“How ugly is it.” They meanwhile forget
Tis their own handy-work.

This is the way of them, to judge every thing and everybody only from their own point of view, and yet this is “liberty of opinion”; this “liberal Christianity.” How, I ask, is it to be expected that with this vulgar prejudice, this most ignorant common-place, this injurious and irreligious cant, any man in the present pulpits can preach as the oracles of God?—unless it be assumed, and the assumption be allowed, that my sect, or your sect, or that other man’s sect has appropriated all the oracles of God to itself, which; to say true, is what they all claim, in effect, if not in words.

But suppose I try them on their own ground in this matter of liberty of opinion.

I am told, perhaps, that if any man speak as the oracles of God, he will teach what the Bible teaches. Well, then, I inquire upon this, how, he is to ascertain what is the teaching of the Bible; and I am further told, say, that he is to find what is the original sense of any Scripture—what was the thought which
the original writer had in his mind when he wrote it. This, as far as I am able to discover in a thing so dark with confusion, is the received principle of Scripture interpretation, at least among ourselves. But what if I object to it? what if I entirely dissent from it? what if I say this is to bind our judgment to the opinions and doctrines of men who have been dead these many centuries, and who were strangers to the thoughts of these latter days? What if I say this is to stereotype opinion? What if I affirm that this is in effect to deny the great law of human progress; nay more, to deny all that can constitute the Bible the Word of God, and to make the Bible any thing rather than the living oracles of God? What if I ask where is the freedom here—only to be the poor dependents upon what Prophets once believed, and Evangelists and Apostles once preached? The great God; you say, makes these earthen vessels called David and Isaiah, and Paul and Peter, the mediums of conveying his infinite love and wisdom to the souls of men; and you say that those earthen vessels were the exact measure of that love and wisdom, and knew all about it. What an idea of revela-
tion is this! What a speaking as the oracles of God is here!—to believe that a half dozen of men of the Hebrew race drained the last drop of the river of the water of life. No wonder that theology is complained of and despised as the only thing that is stationary in a world of continual change. A man must be content merely to copy the ancient oracles, and not be an oracle himself. It is credited that there was once, a long time ago, a holy Spirit of God in the world, and it taught men, and they needed not that any man should teach them but as the same anointing taught them of all things, and was truth and was no lie.” This was once a fact and worthy of all acceptation, but it now lies nearly two thousand years behind us, and if we would be right we must be careful to look back to it. No wonder that the Bible, thus interpreted, instead of being the lively oracles of God is become a millstone round the neck of religion. For surely we cannot call this spiritual freedom where the words of a book are made of higher authority than the soul of man, and the ever-dwelling Spirit of God within him. This is no spiritual religion where the plain teaching of Jesus Christ is altogether discarded.

“it is the spirit that quickeneth, the flesh profiteth nothing; the words that speak unto you they are spirit, and they are life.” The words thus read are dead words. The Bible thus approached, is a dead book. I appeal to your own knowledge of these things. I ask you how many are the preachers who in the least conform to this description by Christ himself, and whose words are spirit and life. How many are they who resemble the good man that is a householder, and that bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old? How many are they who can take up a text of Scripture, and show you a truth and a beauty, a divine spirit and life in it, which you had never seen before? Alas, I fear the reproach is too just; that the text is merely the motto of the sermon, and where it is not the motto, it is treated in a dry, mechanical manner, and worked up into a proof of things which have been proved a thousand times before, and ought long ago to have been taken for granted. What South said, two centuries ago, of certain preachers of his day is not without its application now: “First of all they seize upon some text from whence they draw something which they call a doctrine, and well may it be said to be drawn from the words, for as much as it seldom naturally flows or results from them. In the next place, being thus provided they branch it with several heads. Whereupon for the prosecution of these they repair to some trusty concordance which never fails them, and by the help of that they range six or seven Scriptures under each, head, which Scriptures they prosecute one by one; first amplifying and enlarging upon one, for some considerable time, till they have spoiled it, and then, that being done, they pass on to another, which in its turn suffers accordingly.” Of a certain sort of Universalist preaching this is a very life-like description, and it is a natural consequence of those blunders about inspiration which are insensible to the great truth, that the words of Scripture are spirit and life, and carry with them, in the thoughts which they embody, the properties of an infinite Word of God.

Now we have got somehow to alter all this. The times demand it; and it is perhaps the one demand which includes every other. They demand an altered treatment of that particular word of God which we call the Bible. I think it is exceedingly dangerous to
proceed any farther in the path in which we are now so blindly treading. Our ways are the ways of death. They lead straight on to that Infidelity we so much affect to dread, and we seem, (shall I say it?) to be conscious of this, by the limitations which we set up beyond which it shall not be lawful for a man to doubt. Sceptically two ministers hold the same theory of inspiration; and there was theory taught in the colleges, and in the schools of the doctors, which is not a heap of contradictions, or which has the slightest pretensions to scientific expression.

But let me particularise some things. Let me hold up the mirror to this kind of Christianity, that it may see itself. The Christian sects, however much they may differ in other matters, agree in the general assumption, that there is in the Bible no truth but the truth of the letter. They reject the idea of a spiritual sense or senses beneath the letter; that is, they believe the words of the Bible to be only like the words of any other book, and that when God speaks, he speaks only after the manner of men.

Now I take them on this ground. I try the Bible by this rule, and what do I find? I find that I get the following astonishing result as a correct statement or summary of the main doctrines of the Bible:

"God created the universe in six days, and rested on the seventh. He made the world as a man might make a world, as if he were only an infinite machine. He made man, as a potter might make man, out of the dust of the ground. He then, by an after-thought, made woman from one of the ribs of man. He placed the man and the woman, thus strangely fashioned, in a garden. He made them liable to err, and set before them a temptation to err in the shape of a tree, the fruit of which they were forbidden to eat, on pain of death. Being made liable to err, and tempted to err, this liability, of course, soon manifested itself in the Fall. A serpent beguiled the woman, and she did eat, and the man, as he was bound by his affection for her, became partner with her in the transgression. Upon this, God drove them out of the garden into the wide world, cursed by Him for their makers, and God placed at the east of the garden, cherubims and a flaming sword, that turned every way to keep the way of the tree of life. They did not surely die on the day they sinned, as might have been expected, but the death was a never-dying death, an endless perdition of body and soul in hell. Following further the history of this primitive pair, we find that they and their immediate descendants, live to the extreme age of nearly one thousand years. They become very wicked, so that God repents ever having undertaken the work of creating the race of man. He gets angry with them, cuts them off from the earth, with eight exceptions only, by a deluge of waters, which covered the face of the whole earth, and overflowed all the high hills under heaven. After seeing the work he had made, God repents again. He says he will no more bring a flood of waters to drown the earth. Then speedily he has another quarrel with this poor unfortunate race of men. He comes down among them as they are busy plotting against him on the plain of Shinar, and confounds their speech, so that they may be no longer able to understand each other. Having done this merciful thing, he leaves them all to themselves for a while; to follow their devices and desires of their own hearts, till at last he selects from them a single tribe or nation to be his favorites. For these he has an especial regard. He watches over them with a jealous care, and performs a long series of providences for their benefit and protection.

"A tale of bloodshed is their history,
And all human hearts a mystery."

But from among this people there arises the hope of redemption. A Saviour is born of them, who shall deliver man from that fall and its consequences, which he incurred by acting according to his natural propensities. God is pleased to give fallen man a chance of salvation. For this end he takes upon man our human nature. He comes into the world by the common ways of birth, and He dies on a cross in Palestine. This is the great central fact of Christianity, and belief in this is made the condition of salvation, "though the very fact to be believed must necessarily have remained unknown to millions, damned for their ignorance, and questionable to millions, damned for their unbelief?"

Such, I repeat, is a summary of Bible doctrines, according to the received theories of the Bible. In the main this is Orthodoxy; or to go further back, and speak still more correctly, it is Roman Catholicism. It is that form of Christianity which men have gleaned
from the Bible, by the perceptions of their natural mind, and as seeing no truth but the truth of the letter. It is that sensuous Christianity which men will always believe in, as they look no deeper than the outward show and sense of the Word of God; as indeed the entire history of Christianity proves. It is the Christianity which the Church has universally taught, and we who are liberal, and cast out of the pale of the Church, reject a good part of it. But see our inconsistency. See how we fail by our present methods, or rather no method of Biblical interpretation, to prove that this is not the Christianity of the Bible. The Infidel argues that it is. He says, that Roman Catholicism is the only consistent Christianity, and that the moment you relinquish Roman Catholic ground you come over so far to him. He gives you the alternative, Roman Catholicism or Infidelity. He says that orthodoxy and liberal Christianity, in all their forms, are only so many vain and futile attempts to bridge the impassable gulf between them. Can we, as we now are, disprove his positions? I think not. I am certain we cannot. Ask any of the leaders of our liberal Christianity, whether he believes some things in the foregoing statement, and he will take the question as next to an insult. Either he rejects them entirely, or he adopts them in some other sense. But many parts of the statement he unconsciously adopts, and that, too, in the most literal sense. For instance: He is Unitarian in his idea of Christ, (if there can be said to be any Unitarian idea of Christ,) and so he does not believe in any exclusive relation between Jesus and the Father; he does not believe in original sin; he does not believe that a serpent, or the devil, in the form of a serpent, tempted Eve; he does not believe there was a literal tree of life, or of the knowledge of good and evil, in the midst of the Garden of Eden, or a cherubim, or a flaming sword; but he believes in the literal Mosaic account of the creation of the world, of the creation of man, of the creation of woman, of the sudden fall of man, of the great ages of the antediluvian patriarchs, of the deluge, of the building of Babel, of the confusion of tongues, and other things equally incredible, and equally repugnant to the enlightened reason. He has believed all this from his youth upward, and it would sorely puzzle him to say why, after rejecting other parts of the story, or explaining them in another than a literal sense, he should refuse to give up these portions of it, or to treat them after the same fashion. Nay, if there be one thing plain on the face of the Scriptures, it is their emancipation, that Jesus Christ was God manifest in the flesh; it is that Jesus and the Father are one, in the most singular and exclusive sense; and liberal Christianity, whether Unitarian or Universalist, by explaining away this Scripture doctrine, sufficiently refutes itself. What a position! It rejects the plainest testimony of Jesus Christ, and yet accepts, without inquiry, such stories as that of the creation of woman, and of the tower of Babel. Do we need any clearer proof of the inefficacy of our present methods of interpreting the Bible, that is, of the inefficacy of our liberal Christianity? Do we need any more convincing demonstration that we, liberal Christians, as we love to call ourselves, are in an attitude of impotent antagonism towards the old theology, while we do not, and cannot provide a religion, which shall be credible to the cultivated intellect, and to the best mind of the age? This seems a harsh question; and a hard conclusion; but truth . . . well, truth is a hard master.

It is to me a most surprising fact, to see how liberal Christianity flatters itself that it is destroying or modifying orthodoxy, while it is seemingly in blissful ignorance that its very foundations, which are the same as the Orthodox, are being gradually undermined by the resistless and remorseless progress of the natural sciences. No man among us seems to be aware that there are now great questions, lying far back of those we dispute, and which must be settled before those we dispute can be worth a hearing. No man appears to recognize the immense discrepancies between the teachings of Scripture, in their literal sense, and the teachings of science. Now and then some learned professor from the orthodox ranks, such as Dr. Hitchcock, in his Religion of Geology, tasks his ingenuity to reconcile the contradictions between the express language of the Bible, and the conclusions of science, (and the very helpfulness of the attempt may ensure its toleration.) But as for us, we are "like unto them that dream." I can compare us to nothing but so many theological Rip Van Winkles. We are still contending about such queries, as whether the Universal Father can doom any of his children to the miseries of an endless hell; or whether the consequences of sin extend into the future state; or what is the difference between punishment and
discipline, and if future punishment should not rather be called future discipline. We are still laboriously striving about questions of words and names to no profit. We are like that foolish bird we read of, that runs from danger to hide its head in the nearest bush, and flatters itself that then it is hid every whit, and safe from harm. Astronomy, geology, physiology, ethnology, chemistry, comparative anatomy, all the natural sciences, have in their turn borne down with the certainty of fact upon this or the other text of the Bible, and demonstrated its literal absurdity, and yet, what have we done? What are we doing in this war of words and things—in this conflict of science with opinion, of demonstration with guess-work, of facts with fancies, of the Book of Nature, which none can doubt is God's book, with that other Book, which we say is his, but have never proved to be his? What are we doing? Why, if for a moment we venture to look round from our hiding-place—if we bestow a thought in that direction where the mind of this age is busy, we content ourselves with declaiming against "rain philosophies," and the oppositions of science, falsely so called! We hint our disparagement and dislike of human learning. We set up the foolishness of preaching, (foolish enough,) the simplicity of the Gospel. We virtuously build our divinity on the ruins of humanity, and hale the Bible to the worst of all drudgeries—to recommend natural weakness for supernatural grace. We join in the now unmeaning cry, the Bible, and the Bible alone, the religion of Protestants; and as for objections to the Bible, we say that there is nothing new in them; we say that they are substantially the same with those which have been refuted from the days of the Christian Fathers to our own day—from Origen down to Paley. Nay, we have even the affected ignorance to affirm, that there is no contradiction between the teachings of science, and the teachings of Scripture; that the Bible, though often attacked, still stands firm as ever on the old basis where it was originally placed, and that every new scientific discovery, so far from disproving it, only serves the more to confirm it. We are so very innocent, that we seem to have persuaded ourselves, that these grim and stubborn facts of the Word of Nature, are so many helps and incentives to make us cling the closer to the teachings of that other Word of Scripture, and to the "simple faith of the Gospel." Doubtless,
said, "The Son of Man shall come in the glory of his Father, with his angels, and then he shall reward every man according to his works. Verily I say unto you, there be some standing here, that shall not taste of death till they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." Whether the Apostles' conception of the meaning of these words was the exact thought of Christ himself, may be doubted, and perhaps reasonably denied by those who regard his word as the word of God; but what the apostolic conception was, is beyond all doubt. Paul himself expected to live to the second coming, and in fifteenth of first Corinthians, he places himself at the advent, not among the dead who should be raised incorruptible, but among the living who shall be changed. In another place he desires not to be unclothed of his mortal body, as a man that dies in due course of nature, but to be clothed upon, that mortality may be swallowed up of life. In another place still, we find him exhorting believers: "But this I say, brethren, the time is short; it remaineth, therefore, that both they that have wives, be as though they had none; and they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and they that buy, as though they possessed not; and they that use the world as not abusing it, for the fashion of this world passeth away." Equally clear is the testimony of the other Apostles. "The evidence on this point," says a well known writer in the Westminster Review, "is so positive and overwhelming, that writers, whose testimony is undoubtedly retract, no longer think of resisting it. Nothing, indeed, can be opposed to it, but a kind of interpretation, which is the ore of a people of English theology, and whose proposition is, not simply to gather the author's thought from his words, but from among all true thoughts, to find the one that will sit the least uneasily under his words. Thus, "the end of all things" is explained away into the founding of the Christian Church: "the coming of the Son of Man in the clouds of heaven," into the Jewish war under Titus; "the last judgment which rewards every man according to his works," into the escape of the Christians, and the slaughter of the Jewish zealots at the destruction of Jerusalem." This writer goes on to say, "No doubt many good and well instructed men have persuaded themselves, that by such exegetical sleight of hand, they could save apostolic and other infallibility." Yes, there is the trouble. This is our interpretation, and just the way in which we contrive to escape Orthodox dogmas, and at the same time, to save apostolic infallibility; for that must be saved by some means or other. Precisely by this "exegetical sleight of hand" have we managed to emasculate the apostolic Christianity. The magnificence of the wise and foolish virgins, and of the sheep and goats, are to us nothing more than a sort of dramatic representation of "the rejection of the Jews, and the calling of the Gentiles." Throughout our theology, there runs the cry of "Hebrew old-clothes," and to hear us in our interpretation of the New Testament, one might suppose that this "rejection of the Jews" was the whole of Christianity. Every text that has any the least touch or tint of orthodoxy about it, is referred to "the rejection of the Jews, and the calling of the Gentiles." Truly, it is a poor thing to be called, "the everlasting Gospel," that we make out of this class of Scriptures. It is a kind of inspiration, and a Word of God which will never make us spiritual Christians, or put life and devotion into our cold, heartless religion. And why cannot we give it up? Why cannot we abandon it as untenable? We are afraid. We dare not. We cannot receive the Orthodox doctrine, so we are obliged to take up with this, which again, we shudder to part with, because, to part with it, and to place the apostolic Christianity in its true light, involves, as some say, "the entire principle of German Rationalism." But I say, what of that? What if it does involve the principle of Rationalism, or any other tam, provided it be true? "What can it profit any mortal to adopt lections and imaginations which do not correspond to fact; which no sane mortal can deliberately adopt in his soul as true; which the most orthodox of mortals can only, (and this after infinite essentially impious effort to put out the eyes of his mind,) persuade himself to believe that he believes?"* I have often suspected the scepticism of our Christianity. I have sometimes thought that the opprobrium which we fasten upon the Orthodox, for saying, that if they did not believe as they do, they would live as they pleased, might be extended to ourselves. We think, that to believe the Apostles looked for the real personal return of Christ, is "to act aside their authority as teachers,"—that is, to question their infallibility; or.

*Carlyle's Life of Sterling.
to put it in plainer words still, we think that if the Apostles were mistaken in regard to the second coming of Christ, then their writings are invalidated, and there is no more any standing-room for faith. Now I can never consent to this. I care absolutely nothing for that word “authority,” when it is thus made to represent something that is external to myself. My religion is from within outwards, and not from without inwards. But this dictum concerning the authority of Paul, like almost every other dictum of the Christianity that now is, reverses this true method. I think it is entirely wrong. I think it is a pitiful tenuresy by which to hold fast the profession of our faith as Christians, and I think also, that of all the men that ever lived, none would have rejected it sooner than Paul. A slight acquaintance with Paul’s manner of expressing himself is enough to convince me that he had no thought of claiming any such authority, as that which has been conferred upon him since the authority of the Church; three hundred years after the death of Christ decided that his letters were a part of the Word of God. To me, I confess, it has long appeared that on the whole it is only Paul himself who is speaking in these letters. It is everywhere, “I Paul, say unto you;” and not unfrequently, he guards against mistake, by declaring that he has no teaching or revelation from the Lord, but speaks from his own mind. It is the man Paul, and his opinions and beliefs, which are mostly presented to us, a fact so evident in Paul’s Epistles, that it led Swedenborg to reject all the apostolic epistles, as being no part of the proper Word of God, but “merely dogmatic writings, whose meaning is conveyed on the surface, in the plain grammatical import of the language.” And what Swedenborg did a century ago, we have all got to do sooner or later; we liberal Christians especially, if we have any hope of really dispossessing orthodoxy, or of gaining the ear of a careless and unbelieving world. As we now are, our quarrel with the old theology is, to say the least, very inconsistent and unmeaning. We complain of the orthodox theory of life. We say that it is impracticable and unreal. We say that human nature cannot be made to accept it—that there is no such antagonism between heaven and earth, and temporal and eternal things, as forms the continual burden of the teachings of the Orthodox pulpit. But we forget. This Orthodox theory is borrowed mainly from Paul, and is the legitimate effect of Paul’s expectation of the second coming of Christ. Paul believed that he lived in the very days of which the Christ had said, “Can the children of the bride-chamber mourn while the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then they shall fast.” Paul believed that a new heaven and a new earth would shortly appear; it was therefore natural that he should not be concerned or careful for the perishing things around him. He had a desire to depart and to be with Christ. “Our conversation,” he writes, “is in heaven, from whence we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body.” And again, in another place, he exhorts believers as “knowing the time that now it is high time to awake out of sleep, for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed; the night is far spent, the day is at hand!” And again, in many places, he intimates that it is not worth while to be concerned in the things of this world, as where he says, “Judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come. Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? Know ye not that we shall judge angels, how much more the things pertaining to this life? If ye then have judgment of these things, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church.”

Orthodoxy in its estimate of life, copies Paul, and walks by his rule and example. How are we in a condition to meet it from the Scriptures? How can we justly charge it with holding a theory of life which is scorned through all the live-long hours of the working day world, and confined to the empty homage of a Sabbath recreation? Orthodoxy, by a sort of expansive process with which it is familiar, extends the time of the second coming indefinitely, and so contrives to keep hold of that view of life which was connected with it and grew out of it. We, on the contrary, fulfil every thing by that magic phrase, “the destruction of Jerusalem.” But can we really and seriously refer these passages which I have quoted from Paul, to the destruction of Jerusalem? Can we truly say that the rejection of the Jews and the calling of the Gentiles, let that mean what it may, exhausted all their meaning—the meaning which was the thought in Paul’s mind when he wrote them? I must confess I cannot, and I do not see what it is to set aside the authority of Paul as a teacher, if this be not
—to affirm that Paul had nothing more in his mind than what we call the second coming of Christ, when he wrote these solemn words, "for if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air; and so shall we be ever with the Lord: wherefore comfort one another with these words." Comfort one another! It were cold comfort methinks, to tell these Thessalonian believers, sorrowing for their dead, that all that Paul meant "was fulfilled a few years afterwards at the destruction of Jerusalem." I know it may be said that this passage refers to another coming, at "the time of the resurrection of all beings," but I never could understand or make out, that there were three comings of Christ spoken of in the New Testament. Paul's language cannot be thus evaded. It is plain enough, "we which are alive and remain." There can be no question but that Paul described one return of Christ, whatever were its nature, and that it included in his mind a resurrection of the dead, an end of the world, and a day of judgment as being within the limits of his own natural life, and of the lives of those to whom he was writing.

Time forbids, or I might extend this inquiry, and examine other particulars of our belief, to show that we are incompetent to 'handle the Word of God; and therefore, incompetent too, to present to the world a Christianity which shall be credible to it, and which shall have some prospect of getting itself universally discussed and accepted. Confessedly the Bible is too big for our handling. We make no progress in the understanding of it. Universalist theology is just where it was when "the Plain Guide to Universalism" was published. Our Scripture exegesis is, for the most part, a resurrection of Lightfoot, Whitby, and other Rabbin, whose opinion on any real vital doctrine of Christianity is as worthless as that of a Jew or a Mahometan would be. We have no science of Biblical interpretation, but we go on interpreting the Bible in the same way that men formerly interpreted Nature—according to merely sensuous appearances. How, then, can we reasonably expect that if any man speak he will speak as the oracles of God? To do this, he must come to the study of the Bible as he would to the study of any other work of God; with his eyes open and his reason free. For only thus can he discover if it be indeed a Word of God; but now, after eighteen centuries of controversy, we have not yet determined that one question. We are still debating it; and if no doctrine can be considered as established, till it has your universal assent in the arena of free and universal discussion, then is the doctrine of the Sacred Scriptures far enough from a goal like this. It cannot get itself accepted within the limits of Christendom. So far from having won universal assent, there are scarcely two who think alike about it. There is no king in Israel, but every man does that which is right in his own eyes. Every man has his own opinion, and I know not but the extremest opinion is as good as any, when all opinions are equally adrift. In the present state of things, given up as we are to endless guesses and conjectures, and running the round of universal hypothesis, we need not wonder if some of our preachers do fly off in chase of any exciting novelty that comes in their way. It is only the old story reversed.

"Rather than choose theills they have,
They fly to others that they know not of."

The Gospels of Messermeister and of the Spiritual Rappings are only the marks of an absent inspiration in the churches—an evidence of the poverty of the current religions—a sign how hard it is, after men and women have come to what are called years of discretion, to turn the current of their thoughts; for these Gospels, I take it, are but a kind of complement or supplement of the Gospels they have been brought up to believe. If they really believed that life and immortality had been brought to light by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, they would not want, neither would they seek, any additional evidence of the fact, in the spiritual gymnastics of our modern chairs and tables.

Ah! believe me, we need not go far to find that a profound scepticism lurks under all our religion, and is behind our loudest professions of faith. Like children in the dark, the more afraid we are, the louder we shout. I see it in these modern Gospels of immortality. I see it by the way in which we cling to these poor
empty relations of earth and time, and think that to be immortal is
to perpetuate them. We do but half believe. We are not able, as we say we are, to give a reason for the hope that is in us.
We do not, for one thing, heartily believe in the reality of the
religious sentiment, for we have never dared to repose in it an
unlimited trust. Our faith stands in the wisdom of men after all,
and not in the power of God—else why should we think
that such terrible consequences would follow from denying the
infallibility of the man Paul? It would seem, indeed, as if a
single move from our present theological position would plunge us
into eternal night—as if we were committed not simply to truth
but to a system. Instead of allowing one another the
largest liberty of thought, and of suffering one another to
think the best we are able concerning the great problems that we
have to encounter, we are doing all we can as a denomination to
stereotype one particular form and doctrine of Universalism.
So far are we from leaving the minds of our preachers free
to work out for themselves a Christianity which shall fulfil its own
function, and make this earth a heaven, and get the will of God
done on earth as it is done in heaven—as far are we from any
state and condition of Life like this, that there are those among us
who seem "to consider it their duty as a kind of ecclesiastical
Dogberries, to "comprehend all vagrom men" who are disposed to
break the peace of the Church." We see that something must be
done or we shall die, and so we are beginning to talk about eccle-
siastical disciplines, church systems, and other such "childish
things," as the best means we know of for getting that spiritua-
 kingdom established, of which the Christ declared that it cometh
not with observation, but is within. But the time is gone by
for these things. "Nothing dies," said a wise man, "but what
deserves to die;" and this Church idea, and the notion that
pervades it, of a man's responsibility to external authority, is
dying daily past all hope of resurrection. We must be blind
indeed if we do not see this—if we do not see that the entire
spirit of this age is a revolt against authority, and a struggle for
individual sovereignty—if we do not see the gradual and irre-
sistible tendency, no less in the religious than in the political
world, to replace external arbitrary coercion by internal voluntary
conviction; in a word, the tendency to spiritualize religion, "to
anoint the man, and to supersede the priest," with all the paraphernalia that makes him priestly.

If it would avail anything, or if I flattered myself that I had
any influence, I would speak "in season and out of season," against
the movement now going on in the Universalist denomination, and
against the priestly spirit of inquisition and terror out of which it
is born—the spirit, I mean, which appears week after week, com-
plaining of the lack of distinct scriptural preaching among us, and
especially among the younger preachers. I would, with all my
heart, that we could have distinct scriptural preaching. This is
just what we want, but it is just that which those who call the
loudest for in others are least able to furnish themselves. I
would we had preachers, many of them, who could give us dis-
"cinct scriptural preaching on these topics which I have dis-
cussed in this sermon. Distinct scriptural preaching! Seeing
what we are, and what we know of Scripture interpretation, let
us for shame be silent on any demand like this. Let us give up
this carping and quibbling about the merest trifles, and remember
rather the word of Jesus, "why beholdest thou the mote that is
in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is
in thine own eye?"

I fear that we are in a poor sickly way just now, by all I can
read and hear. I fear we shall remain a sect with no hope of
ever being anything better. It does not look likely that the
grub will ever come to be a butterfly. If the present spirit shall
bear rule—if our preachers are to be haled back to this old-
fashioned, dogmatic, chop-logic Universalism, miscalled distinct
scriptural preaching—we shall do our best to make the doctrine of
Universalism contemptible. But thank God we can never do
that, for that doctrine has other evidence besides the Scrip-
tures—that doctrine is not the Universalism that some
among us so want to have preached in every pulpit; no, but
something I take it, infinitely grander if the tree is to be known
by its fruits—something that suggests no thought of divisions and
contentions, of hatred and envyings, of murmurs and complai-
nings, as our present Universalism does and always has done, and
always will do; for it is with us, practically, not a positive doctrine
at all, but merely the negation of something else that is false. No,
the true Universalism, believe me, is widely distinct from this.
It is really in word and also in deed, a doctrine of love and goodwill and mutual charities, for it is the doctrine which links all men together, not by any natural, but by a spiritual bond. It is the doctrine which teaches that the Good God cannot have any more respect or affection for one than for another of his children—that he loves an Ishmael or a Jem, just as much as he loves an Isaac or a Paul—and which, for an end of all controversy, affirms once for all and for despite all texts, and all presumed Scripture proof, and all scriptural preaching distinct or otherwise, that we cannot be accountable to Him from Whose hands the issues of our life proceed. It is the doctrine which teaches that there is no crime in the creed of the understanding—that the Atheist and the Christian must stand equally innocent in the eye of God, and that therefore, eternal punishment for belief, can have no truth in itself, no place in philosophy, nor admit of any defence in discussion. This is my doctrine of Universalism, and therefore in my preaching I have been in the habit of taking some things for granted. I have ventured largely to assume my position, and to work from it, not at it. This is my doctrine, and I do confess that it is something exceedingly distasteful to me to prove it by common Universalist methods, and to feel obliged to run the eternal mill-horse round of orthodox controversy and textual preaching to settle it. But yet I have so preached it, and from the Scriptures too, that by your own united confession you have seen a glory in it and in them which you had not seen before. This is my doctrine of Universalism, and I hope that he who shall follow me in this place where I stand to-day, will preach it from the Bible as I have preached it, and show it in Christ as I have showed it, for, believe me, there are some among you who will not hear him otherwise, and who could not hear him if you would.

For you are not what you were, and what would once content you, will content you now nevermore; you, I mean, who do not come to meeting merely because it is respectable, or as if there were some duty or virtue in hearing sermons, or as if the only road to heaven lay through the Church doors. We are both changed since first we assembled here. “We all with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image, from glory unto glory.” And one thing is certain now, that whoever henceforth preaches here, must be a Bible preacher, to meet your wants. He must bring out of this treasury things new, as well as old. He must still lead you on—ever on. As it has been hitherto, so it must continue to be. He must “speak unto this congregation that they go forward.” Above all things he must understand what that Scripture means, “the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath;” and must not venture to read it thus: “the Bible was made for man, and not man for the Bible.”

I know well that my late lectures on Science and Scripture have made it impossible for those of you who are capable of thinking, ever again to care about the present theologies, or to seek rest and shelter, food and raiment in them; just as impossible as they made it for me to continue over this society as Pastor. I knew perfectly well, the consequences that would attend upon them, before I preached the first lecture—one consequence in particular, that with them my ministry here would be ended. They were too real for the modern pulpit. They discovered too plainly the nakedness of the land. They showed that if I was right, our present methods of proving our doctrines from the Bible are wrong. They were such that “the publicans and sinners” began to draw near for to hear them, as they always do like to hear a man who can speak “with authority and not as the scribes.” So we part. The modern pulpit loves a respectable gospel and opinions which are at least in tolerable favor, and these I can no longer give, any more than could my master Christ before me. So we part, and with the consciousness on my side, that I have done what I promised to do when I accepted the call—which you were pleased to extend to me. As is known to many, I did not come to this country with any intention to preach again. I came determined, if possible, to relinquish preaching, and so this office was none of my seeking. I did not seek it. I was not eager to accept it when offered to me. I am not concerned to relinquish it. My determination is the same still, to retire from a profession which, in its present form, is become a burden of insincerities to every man of any intellectual mark, and who loves not a life of perpetual warfare, such as must be his lot if he do battle with those insincerities. If, indeed, I could find or gather around me, a people who would welcome me in my true character, grant me a manly independence and hear me for what I had to say, then it would be something
desirous to be a preacher; but there is little hope of this. So we part: and I am careful for nothing at this hour, except it be that I have kept my word. I have kept it, in the letter and in the spirit—kept it as knowing well, what is the position of the minister in these days, that he can be no more than a Religious Lecturer; a man hired by sundry associated individuals to give them on the Sunday: the best thought that is in him, on things as seen from the religious point of view. Societies, indeed, profess that it is otherwise, but I know better. They profess to seek for a minister who shall be a good pastor as well as a good preacher, but then they only see in this way, out of an uneasy recollection of what has been in the time of their forefathers, but can now be no more. For if a man were to come among them really in earnest to be a Pastor in the Scripture sense of the word—if he were to attempt to go "from house to house, teaching and exhorting the things concerning the kingdom of God," the days of his pastorate, methinks, would soon be numbered.

Let us clear our minds of cant—above all things let us clear them of cant. Let us try to be sincere. What people really mean by a pastor, is one who will talk with them on this or the other trivality from Monday morning to Saturday night, and then on the Sunday be expected to come into what they are pleased to call the sacred desk, and in all reverence and solemnity of spirit, take upon his lips those awful names, God, Heaven, Immortality, Eternal Life.

The age of worship is past—at least with us. It is the age of criticism now. It is the spirit of criticism, not of devotion, which is visible here. We do not, as we know well, come to worship. It is, as I have said, the preacher has ceased to be the minister of Christ. He is a Religious Lecturer, and the Church is a kind of Sunday Lyceum. And yet he is obliged to go through the form of confessing himself a minister of Christ in the house of God. He must continue to speak of himself as one "appointed to feed the flock of God, over which the Holy Ghost hath made him overseer."

Let there be no regrets, therefore, at this parting hour. For myself when I think on these things, I can feel none. I go to breathe the airs of a larger freedom. I give you farewell.