INAUGURAL DISCOURSE

AT

ST. GEORGE'S HALL,

ON SUNDAY, 1ST OCTOBER, 1871.

BY

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LONDON:

To be obtained of the Author at

ST. GEORGE'S HALL.

1871.

Price Fourpence.

SERMON.

"Let us not be weary in well-doing; for in due season we shall reap if we faint not."

GALATIANS vi. 9.

I HAVE chosen this text as a motto on this very interesting occasion of our assembling here to-day, rather than as a special subject of our meditation.

It would be unnecessary, and even unprofitable, to occupy our thoughts with an essay on the duty of perseverance, or with a string of common-places about success being the reward of patient and well-sustained exertion. We are too much men of the world not to know by experience that if we wish to succeed in our present undertaking, we must bring to bear upon it our best and wisest thought—our undaunted courage under apparent failure—and our most patient and self-denying exertions.

It seems more fitting to the circumstances of the hour that we should begin our work with a brief and comprehensive review of what we have undertaken

to do, so as to get, if possible, in plain words, a definite statement of the objects which have drawn, and are still drawing, together from all parts of the world so important an organization as that which we profess to represent.

Our first work—that indeed which has been the key note of this organization — is to undermine, assail, and, if possible, to destroy that part of the prevailing religious belief which we deem to be false.

We make no secret of our antagonism. We frankly state our denials, and are ready to give our reasons for the denial of any doctrine which we denounce. We are in open warfare against much of what goes by the name of Christianity. We repudiate at the outset the tacit or avowed assumptions which are almost universally accepted as the basis of religious belief.

To be more explicit, we deny the doctrines of the fall of man from original righteousness; of the curse of God against our race, and of his supposed sentence of any of his creatures to everlasting woe; therefore we deny not merely the doctrine of the atonement, but the necessity for any method whatever of appeasing the imaginary wrath of God. For every one of these doctrines involves a flaw in the moral perfection of God, and violates our instinctive perception of His goodness. The fall of man, *e.g.*, involves an admission that God was either unable or unwilling to keep His creature as good as He had at first made him; and that, contrary to the conclusions of science, God's work is not progressive, that the

first man was a paragon of perfection, instead of being in the lowest rank of savages. The doctrine of God's curse against our race in consequence of the first man's sin involves a still greater blemish on the moral perfection of God; it is contrary to all sense of justice that one man should be an object of wrath in consequence of another man's sin, much more that a whole world of countless millions should be deemed accursed and sentenced to everlasting perdition through the sole faults of their first parents. This doctrine we discard, because it is morally degrading to God. For the same reason, only with immeasurably greater indignation, we reject the doctrine that God withdrew the curse and sentence from the heads of a few of our race in consequence of the death of Jesus, by which, orthodoxy tells us, the Father was reconciled to men. The remedy was worse than the disease. The compromise more dishonourable than the injustice which it was intended to amend. These are only a few, but they are the most prominent of the doctrines which nearly all so-called Christians deem to be essential; and our first work, I say, is to hasten their coming downfall—to rid the world of ideas which, though once were good and useful in comparison with the ideas which they supplanted, have now become both poisonous and loathsome—full of injury to the human heart and mind, and blasphemous in the ears of the most High.

Gathering round these abjured doctrines are others of only less noxious character, such as the belief in

a Devil, the doctrine of the Trinity, the Godhead, and even the superhuman Divinity of Jesus Christ—the expectation of His return to earth as the Judge and King of men—the doctrine of the Church as a spiritual and authoritative power—the doctrines of sacraments, of holy orders, of priestly interference and control in every shape, and of the necessity for priestly intervention at the burial of the dead. All these topics are suggestive of many protests, which it will be our duty to make.

There is one, however, which I have not yet mentioned, reserving it for a paragraph by itself. We shall be met at the onset of our attack by the warning, that we have no right to form about any of God's dealings an opinion which may be contrary to the revealed religion contained in the Bible, or in the Church, or in both. This is where the conflict will be hottest. We must bring all our forces to bear against this insidious and plausible plea. We shall have not merely to defend our own right to use the Light of Nature within us, but to show up the weak points in our enemies' armour—to challenge them to a defence of those glaring immoralities and absurdities in the Bible, or in the "revealed" religion, which none of them as yet have had the courage to defend—to exhibit also unsparingly the numberless fallacies which abound in their theories of a Church, and to make them show cause why any claimant for our obedience should be accepted more than his rivals. We must repeat and repeat the fact, that so-called revelations abound in

all the earth, each one being believed by its adherents to be the only true one; and that Christendom itself is divided piecemeal into separate and antagonistic Churches, each of which in turn is, of course, the only true Church.

To the world outside, who may watch the struggle, we may appeal with confidence, knowing that all the Churches, all the priests, all the Bibles, and all the catechisms, have never yet been able to quench the spark of Divine justice, and love of truth, which the Almighty God has kindled in the human breast. The time will come when, if our orthodox opponents shall have succeeded in proving that the Bible or the Church teach authoritatively doctrines against which the mind and heart and conscience of men rebel, men will make answer—"So much the worse for the Church—so much the worse for the Bible;" and what is bad in both will be cast away to the moles and to the bats—to the dust and darkness appointed for all falsehood.

To pave the way for even this preliminary work of necessary destruction, we must first of all persuade the timorous to enter upon the work of religious enquiry without any dread of being punished for honest conviction. The Churches hold all their power at this moment through the superstitious fears of men and women. From first to last the cry is, "Flee from the wrath to come," "Believe this, and thou shalt be saved;" and as nothing is so catching as fear, the multitude run hither and thither, to seek shelter from impending doom.

A great part of our work, then, must be to proclaim the perfect safety of the path of enquiry. To tell men and women that even if they go wrong in opinion, even if they miss much precious truth and embrace much mischievous error, the Lord of all will not damn them for it for ever. The Father's love will not shrivel up or grow cold because, in our blindness or twilight, we have missed the path of truth, or made but slow progress therein. We must teach them that, wrong or right, they are equally safe from the absurd horrors which have hitherto scared them; and that all the ill-consequences of error which Divine goodness has ordained, are only ordained to teach us to correct our mistakes, and to improve our method of search after His truth. I sometimes fear that—as regards this country at all events—most of us will not live to see the false doctrines of Christianity utterly rooted out, but we may well hope to have set free our countrymen in a few short years from this insane and ridiculous fear of damnation as the penalty for error in opinion. We can do nothing with the religious masses till we have set them free to think without trembling at every step. Let us do this with all our might, and let us not be weary in this piece of well-doing, for in due season we shall reap if we faint not.

But our work does not rest here. I believe I am only echoing the thoughts of every heart which has sympathised with us, when I say we should be both distressed and ashamed if all our work were only destructive, if all our energies were to be exhausted

in pulling down even false belief and only in undermining erroneous doctrine. So far from that, we only pull down that we may build up, we only desire to eradicate false beliefs that we may be able to plant true beliefs in their place. Though I am only an insignificant unit in the great brotherhood of freethinkers and enemies of orthodoxy, I may point with an honest pride to those published works for which I have been expelled from my benefice, and ask, Are not those writings full of positive beliefs? Can you find a sermon amongst them all which does not proclaim as much my anxiety that we should believe and teach what is true, as that we should give up and denounce what is false? Had this not been so, I should certainly not deserve to stand here to-day as the mouthpiece of so many earnest and devout men. But we must be prepared for every form of reproach and every degree of misrepresentation. When people can deliberately say of a man, "He is only a Theist," assuming that, in their own minds, and in that of their hearers, contempt need go no further, it proves that they know nothing whatever of Theism and that they have never taken the pains even to ascertain what we really believe, or why we believe it; still less why we should have willingly suffered for it.

It will be our chief duty and our highest delight to proclaim our real convictions — to contrast our own faith with the faith we have so gladly abandoned, and to try to teach those who may be halting between two opinions, and others who may have

no faith at all, to embrace the views which our own hearts, as God made them, have taught us to approve.

It will delight us to tell how we have learnt to call God our Father—to trust Him unseen—to look to Him for guidance in difficulty, and for strength in duty—to feel that He is about our path and about our bed, near to us at every moment of our lives, ready to give all the light and knowledge which our narrow souls can receive—to console us under every disappointment and sorrow—and to give us hope when everything else is gone. It will be our joy to show that this faith in our Father is the natural outcome of the possession and exercise of loving virtues; that—if there be a God at all—He must for ever be above, and never below, the moral beauty of the best of His creatures; that as we grow in friendliness, and brotherliness, and fatherliness to our fellow-men, we learn more and more of the exceeding and unspeakable love of God; that we give to Him the best name we know to-day, ready to exchange it for a better and truer one on the morrow, if human life and its relations rise higher still.

Contrasting this with the miserable narrow estimate of God's love as given us in Christianity, we gladly proclaim that *all that God is to ourselves, He is also that to every one of our fellow-men.* He has no favourites, and the best and happiest one amongst us all, in this world or in the world to come, is only the type of what every other soul shall be when his turn come. Meeting with the objection against His love,

drawn from the sufferings and moral degradation of many of our race, we can either explain it by thoughtful reference to pains and sins we have ourselves once experienced, and found them to be pregnant with eternal blessing, or we take refuge in the thought that our goodness—small as it is—would not allow us to inflict one grain of pain or shame without a purpose of lasting good, nor to withhold any amount of painful discipline that was necessary to secure the ultimate happiness and virtue of the individual exposed to it; and then we ask ourselves, "Shall mortal man be more just than God? Shall the creature be more loving than the Creator?"

We shall have to confront those who believe too little as well as those who believe too much. We know that if an unspoken Atheism be rife in this land, it must be laid at the door of those who painted man worse than a worm, and God blacker than a fiend.

The creed of Christendom is the cradle—nay, the mother of Atheism; and the Churches may thank themselves for degrading not only the name and work of Jesus—one of the world's best men—but also the principles of mankind and the honour of God. If we would do any successful work amongst those who are exiles from the regions of faith, we must come to them to learn, not to teach—to learn every bit of truth and duty which they have valued, while, perhaps, we have under-valued it. We must come to them, honouring them for their protest against a foul caricature of the Most High and His dealings, and

only desiring to impart to them what is so precious to ourselves by the legitimate process of argument, and the still more efficient agency of a well-ordered example. If they make their just boast that they are all for mankind—to raise their kindred and their race, to un-loose the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke—let us meet them, at all events, on their own ground as brothers of humanity, and as setting the highest possible value on services rendered to man as the only true service acceptable to God.

Amongst the beliefs which it will be our duty to proclaim, stands next in order our hope for the life to come. We do not dogmatise on this or on any other point, but it will devolve upon us to multiply and strengthen all the evidences on which our hopes are based. We all feel that our future life is bound up in the very existence of God; the two must stand or fall together; and while we are careful never to allow our hopes and longings for immortal bliss to clog our footsteps in the path of duty upon earth; while we are most scrupulous to avoid turning it into a bribe for the performance of duties which are their own reward, we should do all in our power to deepen the roots of our belief in the world to come, as the only solace under the bitter pangs of bereavement, and as a wholesome stimulus to our efforts after holiness, which can never be adequately satisfied in the world below.

To all this, which we may call our public work, we must add the far more important business of

cultivating in our lives the spirit of truth, integrity, purity, and brotherly love. In our own homes, and in the pursuit of our daily toil, we must find the great field of self-culture and discipline, without which all our public exertions in the service of truth and liberty will be thrown away. If we find our honour growing more sensitive, our thoughts more elevated, our speech more refined and exact, our tempers more placid and enduring, our consciences more tender, and our affections more wide and deep, we shall find, also, that our public and social influence for good will grow at the same time, and men will learn to love us in spite of our creed, and will pardon us for spurning their own. And above all, if, in our desire to know more of God, and to be convinced of His goodness, where we only doubted before, we seem only to become more confused, more bewildered by the strife of tongues, our only chance of rest, and peace, and joy in believing, will be found in our own efforts to be good and to do good. There is no other avenue to the Throne of God's majesty on high; no other means of rending the veil which hides the glory of His love, but what is to be found in the goodness of each man's own heart. "Blessed are the pure in heart for they only shall see God."

Time would fail me were I to attempt to enumerate the many collateral duties which will belong to us as an association. We must only resolve to meet them as they arise, in the same sincerity, and with the same activity, as that in which we desire to regulate our lives.

Of the service in which we have all united to-day, it becomes me not to speak but in terms of humility and hope. It has been prepared in distressing haste. At best it is only an experiment, and time alone will enable us to test its value and to correct its faults. I only ask you—and that with perfect confidence—for your patient trial of it.

One word more upon my text and I have done. "Let us not be weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap if we faint not."

For my own part, I have taken up my share in this great work without any sanguine expectation of my own success. But I mean to work at it body and soul, day and night, if need be, in spite of any amount of opposition and discouragement. I do not mean to let it go till I am beaten off it, as it were, lifeless. As long as I have a voice left me, it shall be raised to magnify the loving kindness of the Lord, and to speak good of His name. No terror shall shut my lips—no bribes shall tamper with the utterance of my heart's thoughts. So help me God! But in saying this for myself, I know I am speaking for the thousands who have hitherto supported me, and for those who are gathered here to-day. If we fight shoulder to shoulder, turning neither to the right hand nor to the left, we shall in time disarm all opposition, win over to our ranks the wavering and fashion-fearing multitude, and plant our banner of truth, and liberty, and love, where no foe can reach it. Thank God, the cause to which we have pledged ourselves is not our cause only but His—does not

depend on my life or fidelity, or feeble powers—no, nor on all of us put together—it must prevail in the end, conquering every obstacle, and rising over every wave of seeming failure, because it is devoted, first to God's truth, then to God's honour, and last, but not least, to the true welfare of man. "Our help standeth in the name of the Lord who hath made heaven and earth!"
