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THE
DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY.

A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED IN

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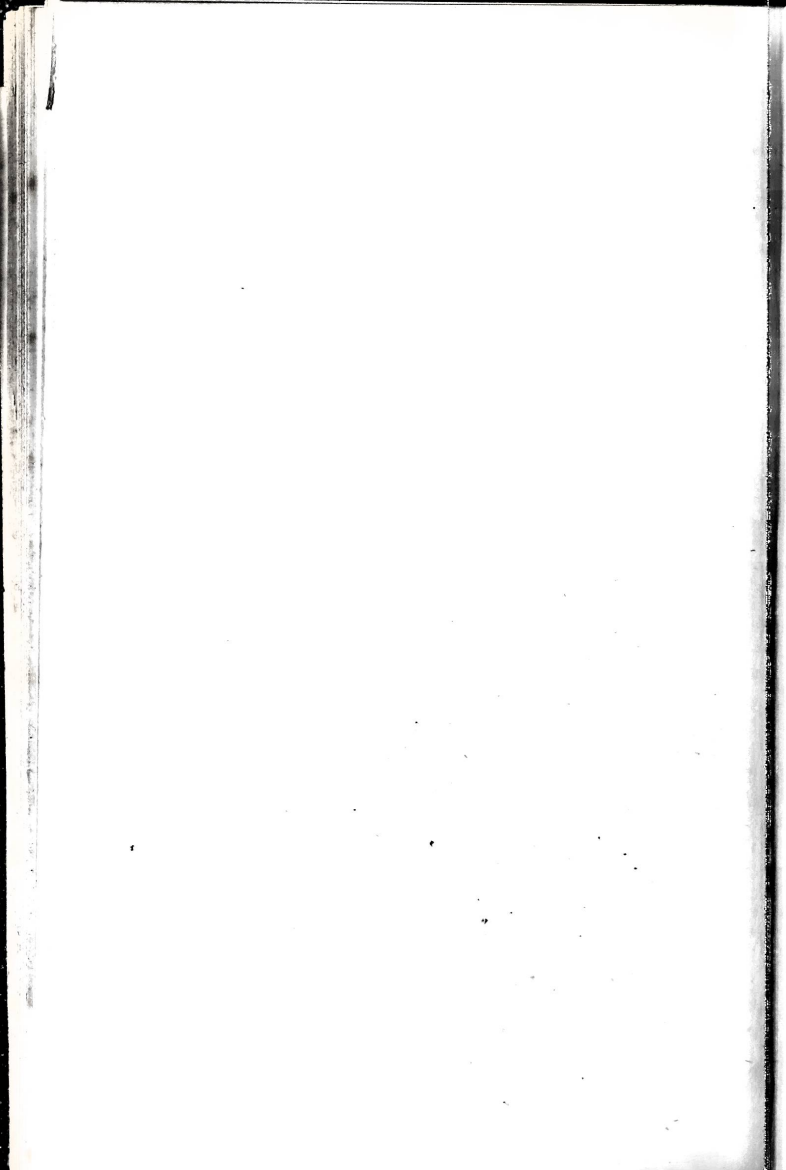
ON

TRINITY SUNDAY, JUNE 11TH, 1876,

BY

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PRICE TWOPENCE.



THE HISTORY OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY.

“In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.”—Matt. 15 chap. 9th verse.

THE purpose of this discourse, which was originally delivered upon what, in the ecclesiastical calendar is called Trinity Sunday, is to give a brief and simple digest of the history of the doctrine of the Trinity; not so much for directly controversial ends, as to put before younger persons, and those who may not have hitherto given any close attention to the subject, such material as will be useful in the foundation of an opinion upon one of the questions which divide us from the large majority of the religious people in Christian churches.

If the dogma of the Trinity were merely one amongst the many other ideas different men have of

God,—a mode of thought by which some minds sought to shape to their reason and understanding the Great Mystery which surrounds us all, and, as a product of the human intelligence feeling after God, consented to stand or fall according to its consonance with right reason and the order of nature,—it need not especially concern us, and certainly ought not to divide religious men from fellowship with each other. But they who believe it rest it upon other claims, and press it to other issues. They affirm it to be the foundation fact of a compact and co-ordinated scheme of supernatural revelation, which is of divine origin, and has an absoluteness of truth supported by miraculous attestation, illustration, and preservation in history. They declare, also, that, as a doctrine to be believed, it is the keystone of the one only system of human salvation, and is to be accepted upon supernatural authority, even against reason; as the imperative condition of the grace of God, the forgiveness of sins, and the inheritance of eternal life. It is these pretentious and high-sounding claims for the dogma which arouse, and we think justify, our opposition to it. If it can be clearly shown that this doctrine in all its forms has had not a history only, but a development in time, and especially that it did not originate with the Jewish, nor even the Christian religion, but was born and reached a certain culmination in purely heathen philosophy, then it will be evident that it cannot, as we know it to-day, have

been given by supernatural revelation ; that it was no distinctive and original part of Christianity ; and that it must take its chance in the intellectual conflicts of the time, and stand or fall with all the other elaborations of the restless, speculative ingenuity of mankind, according as it may be justified or condemned by the matured reason, and harmonised with the practical experience of the world.

They who differ from us, very sincerely suppose that a strong point exists in their favour, in the fact that the great mass of Christians believe this doctrine of the Trinity to be distinctly taught in many passages of Scripture, especially in the New Testament ; and to be plainly involved and inwrought into the whole tissue of the Bible and of Christianity. We are not unwilling to bring the question to this test, if the object be to discover what the Scriptures really do teach ; but as to the truth of the doctrine itself, such a course could never be final, for it rests upon the assumption that whatever the Scriptures teach must be true, and is to be accepted as religious truth without further inquiry ; —a prepossession of such a tremendous nature, and drawing after it such startling consequences, as must give us pause. It is a very interesting question to settle, as far as is now possible, what the various writers in the Scriptures intended to teach ; but that done, there yet remains the far more interesting, and indeed the only practical question, whether the things

so taught are true and fitted to help us in the attainment of righteousness. We think that it is fairly questionable whether the Scriptures do teach the doctrine of the Trinity. That point in it around which, in our day, controversy and dogmatic assertion tend to intensify themselves, is the idea of the Deity of Jesus Christ; that is, that in some quite real sense he is God. There surely must be serious difficulties in the way of justifying this doctrine from a book in which occur such passages as these;—"The Lord our God is one Lord." "There is no God else beside me; a just God and a Saviour: there is none beside me." "Before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be any after me. I, even I, am the Lord; and beside me there is no Saviour." "I, even I, am he, and there is no God with me." "I am the first, and I am the last, and beside me there is no God." "I am God and there is none else."—These are from the Old Testament. In the New Testament the same doctrine is constantly affirmed; Jesus himself is represented as saying, "This is Life Eternal, that they may know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." "Of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven; neither the Son, but the Father." "I came not to do mine own will." "I can of myself do nothing." "If I honour myself my honour is nothing; it is the Father that honoureth

me." "For as the Father hath life in himself, so hath he given it to the Son to have life in himself." "As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father." "I have not spoken of myself, but the Father who sent me, he gave me a commandment what I should say, and what I should speak." "The word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's who sent me." "I ascend to my Father and your Father, and to my God and your God." "I do nothing of myself, but as my Father hath taught me I speak these things." These are but very few of a large class of such passages. The words of Paul are often quoted in defence of the idea of the Deity of Jesus, and some of them, especially when viewed apart from their context, seem to bear in that direction; but it must not be forgotten that in the Epistles attributed to Paul we find such passages as these: "But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him." "There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." "Jesus Christ, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh." This is, however, quite enough quotation to show that the Scripture proof is not so simple and unanimous as is often assumed. Many passages can be cited on both sides, but if the simpler and plainer ones are taken to explain those that are figurative and mystical, the Scriptural basis for the Trinity disappears

altogether. We do not, however, seek to disguise the fact that such a question can never be settled by book authority at all. Mere quotation will not settle anything. The last appeal is to the highest critical judgment and reverent conscience of men.

It may be said that, even though the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be found, as we know it now, in the Scriptures, it is nevertheless true, and its formulation has been the result of the Holy Spirit enlightening and guiding the Church, in the persons of its Councils, Popes, Bishops, and the successors of the Apostles generally. This is but shifting the ground of an authority which is still external, and simply incapable of proof. There are those of the less rigidly orthodox school who think that the dogma of the Trinity is fairly deducible from natural facts and the order of things ; being indicated by many relations, prefigured by many analogies, and therefore a highly probable and reasonable doctrine. Upon this ground we are perfectly willing to join issue on fit occasions, and to abide by the result ; but now it is sufficient to show, by mentioning it, that we do not ignore this view of the case ; but, except as it may receive illustration from the history of the doctrine itself, it does not enter into our present purpose, which is to show that the conception is of heathen origin, and that it has a history, which is also a development, in the continuity of which there is no break.

It is unfortunate that Ecclesiastical history has had to indicate the march of its progress much more by the angry controversies which have agitated the Church, than by the development and deepening of its spiritual life, and the enlargement of its cleansing and healing power upon the souls of men and the life of the world. What is best in the Church has been least obtrusive, and has been lost sight of in the noise and heat of perpetual and manifold controversy. The great Councils of the Church have not once been convened to devise methods for saving men, purifying society, or resisting tyranny, oppression, or ignorance; but, without exception, to attempt to settle vexed questions of controverted dogmatic theology, or of Church discipline in relation to heretics. Hence, while the river of the Church's spiritual life, and the currents of purer, freer thought, seem often to flow underground, and altogether out of sight and following, the developmental history of some hard, unspiritual, and outward dogma, like this of the Trinity, is clearly traceable.

He has read the New Testament to little purpose, who so misunderstands Christianity as to imagine that what is now called by that name was given to the world by Jesus, formulated into a creed, and systematised into a set of dogmas from which there is no appeal. It is freely admitted by the most orthodox, that, in some sense and degree, Christianity was

developed out of Judaism, and owed to it some of its most marked ideas ; but it is not always seen, and seldomer admitted, that the Christianity of to-day owes quite as much, probably more, to the heathen authors of pre-Christian times. We must go much further back than the times of the Apostles and Jesus himself, if we would see the birth of the doctrine of the Trinity, that is, if we could see it at all for the dim haze of antiquity in which it is lost ; but from very early times indeed, we are able to trace its course and growth in the history of religious thought.

It was known, long since, to the fathers of our modern school of free faith,—Priestley, Belsham, and the rest,—that in the far time before Plato (B. C. 429-347) there was a kind of conception of the Trinity in Greek philosophy ; but we know what they did not know, that it is traceable backward for many ages beyond that time, to the very roots of the Aryan stock from which the Greeks had descended, on the one hand ; and, on the other, it can be traced to the remotest times, as a part of the Egyptian theosophy, long before the Greeks came into contact with Egypt. Indeed, there is now more than a suspicion that its origin is to be sought in those Sun-myths, and myths of a kindred character, which seem to have been the very earliest forms taken by the religious sentiment of mankind. It was, doubtless, from these ancient sources that Plato derived it, modifying it into harmony with his general system of thought, in which it sustained

clear and logical relations to all the rest. In his philosophy the idea of God did not at all take the form of a Trinity of persons, but simply a triad of qualities, or manifestations, like the later Christian Sabellianism of which it was the parent and type. He was well informed concerning the religions of India, of Egypt, and of his own country Greece; and, in an eclectic spirit, borrowed from them all in the construction of his own philosophy. He affirmed the existence of One Supreme God; eternal, immaterial, immutable, omnipotent, omniscient, the first and the last, the beginning, middle, and end of all things; as absolute essential Being, unknown,—perhaps unknowable,—but unfolded in the universe as the supreme mind, the active thought, the quickening spirit of all things,—a distinction which may have certain conveniences in a philosophic terminology, but which becomes absurd and mischievous when hardened into the dogmatism of a creed. After the time of Plato his philosophy became the favourite form of religious thought in Greece, and followed everywhere the lines of Greek conquest and influence; modifying, and itself being modified by, the various theosophies with which it came into contact. It thus came to be prevalent in Egypt; and when, shortly after the death of Plato, Alexander the Great founded the city of Alexandria there (B. C. 332), Platonism took vigorous root in the new city, and flourished greatly.

Of the condition of the Jews before the captivity in

Babylon we do not know much that is certain. The so-called history up to that time, is too legendary and traditional to be trusted implicitly ; but this much may be safely said, that they were very rude and lawless ; and mingled with the worship of Jehovah, who was to the mass of them but a local god, many gross idolatries, such as those of Baal and Astarte. They were carried to Babylon in two instalments divided by a period of ten years (B. C. 598 and 588) ; and remained there until the reign of Cyrus the Persian, who, after the fall of Babylon, granted them a decree by virtue of which a large portion of them returned to their own land (B. C. 536), purposing to set up the altar of Jehovah, and to erect a new temple. This was for the time frustrated by their own exclusiveness ; it was, however, accomplished some twenty years after. Later still (B.C. 458) there was a second return, in the reign of Artaxerxes ; and under the auspices of the same King a third (B.C. 445). The Jews, as they returned from Babylon, were considerably changed both in character and religion. They were less agricultural and more mercantile ; less secluded and more enterprising ; and, under the fervent prophets of the exile, they had lost their proclivities to idolatry, and returned to their land not only confirmed monotheists, but purists, with no small degree of narrowness and religious exclusiveness. They had, however, absorbed into their religion many ideas and legends from the Chaldees ; and later, while they remained under Persian, and afterwards

Macedonian or Greek protection, they imbibed much of the more intense and ethical spirit of the Zoroastrian faith. These, engrafted upon the Mosaic stock, produced the school of Talmudist or Jerusalem Jewish thought; which, having Jerusalem, the Temple, the Priesthood, and the resuscitated ritual as a centre, did not prove itself to be a growing philosophy.

It must be remembered that all this applies almost exclusively to the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin. When Cyrus granted them permission to return, the ten tribes, who originally revolted under Jeroboam to form the Kingdom of Israel, had been in exile for two centuries. They must have become naturalized in their eastern settlement; perhaps very much absorbed by intermarriage. In any case, Jerusalem had never been the centre of proud aspirations to them, and probably very few, if any, of them would return. Nor is it likely that all even of the two tribes would return; there was no compulsion to do so.

As far back as the time of the exile a number of Jews had formed a settlement in Egypt (Jeremiah, xliii. 7). When Alexandria was built, there is reason to suppose that many trading Jews settled there; and shortly after the erection of that city, Ptolemy, son of Lagus, when he captured Jerusalem (B. C. 320). carried to Alexandria a large number of Jewish and Samaritan captives, where he gave them all the privileges of citizenship. There was thus, away from Palestine, a large number of Jews, a great pro-

portion of whom would be the most active minded, and the most free thoughted. This was especially the case with those of Alexandria. That city was a great trading mart, and a still greater centre of intellectual and literary activity. Creeds from the East and West, commingled there. The philosophy of Plato was fashionable. The Jews became eclectic, and wedded Platonism to the religion of their fathers. So many of them had forgotten their own tongue that, in the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus (B. C. 260), and some say by his direction, the Hebrew scriptures were translated into the Greek language, and subsequently used by the Jews in their synagogues. This fact serves well to mark the great divergence of thought which had already taken place between the Hellenist or Alexandrine School of Jews and that of Jerusalem; for while the former accepted, indeed, in fact, actually made this translation, the latter exclaimed in hysterical agony, "The law in Greek! Darkness! Three days' fast!"

This then was the situation during the two centuries before the Christian era. Plato had gathered into his philosophy the trias of the old Aryan Sun-myths and faiths, and that of the, perhaps, equally old Egyptian theosophy. Platonism had migrated from Athens to Alexandria; and, there, Judaism coming into contact with it, had evolved a school of thinkers who spiritualised and rationalised the Scriptures, and sought thus to show that the ideas of

Plato were involved and prefigured in the Jewish faith. They were eclectic, and sought religion in universal principles ; and, hence, were ready to admit new light upon it from any direction. With these Jews of Alexandria, other colonies of Jews scattered about Greece were in sympathy, and there was, therefore, a large section of the Jewish people who held the Law very loosely, and who more than coquetted with the Greek philosophy. How thoroughly Platonic they were is evident from their literature, which remains to us in some of the books of the apocryphal Old Testament and the writings of Philo, which emanated from this Alexandrine School, and in which the various divine manifestations, as the Word of God, and the Wisdom of God, are personified ; and it is worthy of note that the personification is harder and more defined than in the Platonic trias. On the other hand, there was what we may call the more orthodox Jerusalem School of Jews, who held by the old interpretations of the law of Moses ; held heathenism in contempt and abomination ; and were especially rigid in their ideas of the unity of God. It is true they were not without tincture of Chaldean, and especially Persian thought ; but they held all in an exclusive, unfruitful kind of way which forbade progress. The Hellenised Jews were generally well content with their political situation, and had no very strong enthusiasm for the Holy Land or the Holy City ; but these of Jerusalem were restless, and did

but wait in a smothered impatience until Messiah should come to crush their heathen enemies under his feet, and more than restore the ancient glories of their city and nation.

After the time of Jesus, his doctrine first took root in Jerusalem and its neighbourhood ; and was little more than a sect composed of such Jews as actually believed Jesus to be the Messiah, and who expected his speedy return to establish his kingdom ; but by the agency of Paul, chiefly, it was extended to the Gentiles. In due course it came to Alexandria, most probably about the time of the destruction of Jerusalem. Many of the Platonising Jews there and elsewhere at once accepted it,—not absolutely, but in a purely eclectic spirit, after their manner ; adding it, as it were, to their Judaic-Platonism, making each interpret and dovetail into the other. In this way the new faith first came into contact with worldly philosophy, and a strong and vigorous church arose, in the speech and terminology of which Christian and Platonic words and phrases were about equally mixed. There was also a church in existence which had arisen amongst the Jerusalem school of Jews, and had been largely extended by the dispersion consequent upon the destruction of Jerusalem, and the deportation of the population out of Palestine. This church was not at all philosophic, but continued very Jewish in thought and practice, and still clung to Jewish rites and ceremonies ; and so long as it existed it never accepted

any form of the Platonic trias as a part of Christianity ; or, in any way, the doctrine of the Deity of Jesus, or its logical corollary of the Incarnation.

We see then that, before the end of the Apostolic age, there were the elements of two opposing tendencies in the Church, and each charged with a fundamental antagonism far older than Christianity itself, which began to manifest itself very early indeed, as we find from the 'Acts of the Apostles' ; and especially from the Epistles of Paul, which are decidedly Hellenic in their spirit. As the second century opened and advanced this antagonism did but deepen. The synoptic Gospels arose out of the Jewish-Christian Church, and were unfavourable to the high-wrought mysticism of the Alexandrine and Hellenist school ; out of which came,—probably late in the second century,—the fourth gospel. The date cannot be considered as certainly settled, but its character and origin are unmistakable. It has all the Platonic mysticism, with all the Greek ethnic breadth, and profound spiritual insight characteristic of the Christian Platonist of Alexandria. It uses the word "Logos" as applied to Jesus, and thus identifies him with the second principle of manifestation of the Platonic trias ; and the phrases "Son of God," "First begotten Son," and others, appear in it, which at this time were commonly used by the Hellenist Christians of Alexandria and all the cities of Asia Minor, to describe the relation of Jesus to God his Father ; but, as yet, there was no

thought of a second person of the Trinity, or of any theory of the proper Deity of Jesus. It was in the cities just referred to that Christianity grew the fastest. and, almost everywhere, the two opposing tendencies we are considering took strong controversial aspects. At length the dispute became serious, assuming this particular form, "Was Jesus a man simply—a prophet and sent of God—or was he a Being, uncreated, and of the same class as God?" in fact the "Logos;" the former being maintained by the Ebionites, as the lineal descendants of the Jerusalem School of Jews were now called; the latter, by the Gnostics, who were the representatives of the Alexandrine school.

This brings us to the beginning of the fourth century when Constantine called a Council at Nice, (A. D. 325) which, after much unseemly display, and, as it appears, almost by accident, decided in favour of the Gnostic doctrine; and Christ was declared to be of the same essence as God, but as yet there was no third person of the Trinity. Up to this point, what we now call the Apostles' creed had been for some time the recognised symbol of the church. It is practically a Unitarian Creed. Now a new creed was imposed, which we call the Nicene Creed, but it was not at first in the form we know it now. The remainder of the fourth century was taken up in the persecution of the Ebionites, or Arians, as they were now called; but the forces were not as yet very unequal. There were, during the century, thirty minor councils held,

at which the decisions were thirteen times against Arius, and seventeen times for him ; and, yet, ultimately, the Nicene doctrine was declared orthodox.

During these controversies there arose into prominence the question of what the Holy Ghost is ; and the dispute grew as hot and rancorous as before ; but at the General Council of Constantinople (A. D. 381.) the Holy Ghost was also declared to be of the same essence with God, and an addition accordingly was made to the Nicene Creed. It was not, however, fixed as we now have it until the ninth century. A controversy next arose concerning what was the relation in Jesus Christ, of his deity to his humanity. One party, of which Appolinarius was the leader, completely submerged the humanity in the deity : the other, under Nestorius, brought the humanity into greater prominence. Nestorius was the Bishop of Constantinople. Cyril, the Bishop of Alexandria, his rival for supremacy in the Church, was the alarmist, not to say the persecutor, on this occasion. The precise form the question took was, whether Mary was the mother, only of the Son of Man, or whether she was the Mother of God. Theodosius the younger convoked a Council (A. D. 431) which Cyril manœuvred to get fixed at Ephesus, a city which prided itself upon being the burial place of Mary, who had superseded the goddess Diana as the tutelary divinity of the place. Cyril was also president, and forced on the debate to a decision.

against Nestorius, before many of the friends of the latter had arrived ; one of whom, and probably the most powerful, was Paul, Bishop of Antioch. Cyril had with him almost an army of half-wild Nitrian and Thebaid monks who were devoted to him, and had done him many a piece of rough, shameful service. These overawed the Council, and the decision was against Nestorius ; it was, "that the union in Jesus of the divine and human was so intimate, that Mary might justly be called the Mother of God." Many of the Bishops present were so illiterate that they could not write their names, or even read ; and they acted simply at the direction, and under the intimidation of Cyril. He bribed the royal household. He cursed Nestorius ; and every way behaved himself so badly, that the Emperor, when he dismissed the Council, said, "God is my witness that I am not the author of this confusion. His providence will discern and punish the guilty. Return to your provinces, and may your virtues repair the mischief and scandal of your meeting." This was the third General Council. The orthodox were emboldened by success, and rushing off to the logical result of their dogma, taught that there was but one nature in Christ,—that he was all divine,—that there was no God but the incarnate word. Again the Church was aroused ; and the Emperor called another Council (A. D. 449.) which reversed the former decision. This Council, however, is not generally reckoned, owing to the fact

that it was opposed by the Bishop of Rome. Two years later the Church was again so unsettled that another Council was called at Chalcedon ; when it was decided, that Jesus, as to his divine nature, was of the same essence as God, in the same way in which, as to his human nature, he was of the same essence as other men ;—that is, that he was one person in two distinct natures,—very much the same doctrine that is considered orthodox now.

Even yet, the conception of the Trinity was not complete ; for during the dark ages, at a time subsequent to the fifth century, and before the ninth, what we now know as the Athanasian Creed came into existence. There is no reason but long usage for connecting it with Athanasius, who certainly did not write it. It came into gradual use in the Church, and was formerly endorsed by the fourth general Lateran Council (A.D. 1215.) And it is probably to the entering of this creed, with its contradictory statements, and its damnatory clauses amongst the authoritative symbols of the church, that we are to trace the persecutions of the succeeding five hundred years, and all the horrors of the inquisition. The doctrine of the Trinity has been by no means an unfruitful doctrine ; but its fruits have been faggots and martyrs' fires ; scaffolds, tortures, and death ; "red ruin and the breaking up of laws ;" and an inheritance, not yet expended, of weakness, bigotry, and uncharity. The last martyr who was

burned in Smithfield was one who suffered for denying it. (Bartholomew Legate, A.D. 1612).

Such is a brief resumé of the history of this doctrine ; much of it has not been a pleasant story to tell. It has been necessarily very imperfectly, but not unfaithfully, told. It is one of which we should remind ourselves sometimes, and which young people ought to know and thoughtfully ponder. But there is enough of it now ;—enough surely “ of crucifying the Lord afresh, and putting him to open shame.” As we gather in our church, built upon one of the open thoroughfares of this great city,—and so built as to challenge every passer-by,—here, with loud organ music and song, and with the summer sun mellowed into “ dim religious light,” streaming upon us “ through storied windows richly dight,” worshipping our God according to our own consciences, not only no man making us afraid, but under the protection of our country’s laws, it seems hard to realise how in by-gone times, even in this very London, our forefathers, of but a few generations ago, were fain to worship God in obscurity,—to hide their unobtrusive meeting-houses up narrow courts and in unfrequented places ; and to come sometimes to worship, and find them only a heap of ruins ;—nay, even how, few and scattered, they were hunted from place to place, in poverty, and fear, and outlawry, and not seldom the end of it all was the scaffold, or the pile, from whence they went out to God—“ pale martyrs, ascending in

robes of fire" to tell Jesus in heaven how men travelled on earth his doctrine of peace and good-will. Yet so indeed it was. This was our heroic time; our age of saints and confessors. Many of our churches have their very foundations laid in the ashes of these heroes; because, when dead, there was no place to find them a grave except where they had worshipped their God. It is well!

"The feet of those they wrought for,
And the noise of those they fought for,
Echo round their bones for evermore."

How little we think of all this now! And how loosely, and at how little cost, we hold the principles which they passed down to us,—nay, secured for us with such a glorious abandonment of self-sacrifice. Surely, we should not forget this! or that men and women far down the future, will be the better or the worse for the way we use these privileges of to-day. Let us hold the truth firmly; exercise it in charity; follow it faithfully; and, most of all, illustrate by our daily lives the doctrines we hold, that we also are the sons of God; that He is our Father whom all holy souls can see face to face; that religion is not the reception of abstruse mysteries or logical contradictions, but the cherishing of a reverent spirit and the living of a righteous life.

Our young people who are born and trained amongst us, are apt sometimes to be a little ashamed of belonging to an unpopular faith; would fain not

have it known ; and shrink away, attracted by the more fashionable churches. This is wrong, no less than undignified and cowardly. Who should be ashamed of such a grand heroic parentage and history?—of such a splendid wealth of truth handed down for an inheritance, and to which we are free-born?—and of such a promise as we have that the world will one day be at our feet? Of what is there to be ashamed? We have amongst us men and women, the children of other faiths, who were taught from their cradles almost, to curse our heroes, and to count our freest and highest thought, but as poison for men's souls,—who, when they came to mature estate, and saw the grandeur of our history, and felt the compelling power of our free faith, were content to purchase the privilege of citizenship with us at a great price. They are alien in our ranks, but are proud to be with us ; and ask of God no higher thing than to be worthy of such a company. Let us learn on our knees to be ashamed of our shame, and rise from kneeling to gather our heresy about our brows like a crown of glory, as it is ; and learn to use it, as it is, a wealth of power for what is noblest in ourselves, and most fruitful for the service of mankind.