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GOD'S METHOD OF GOVERNMENT.

A DIALOGUE.

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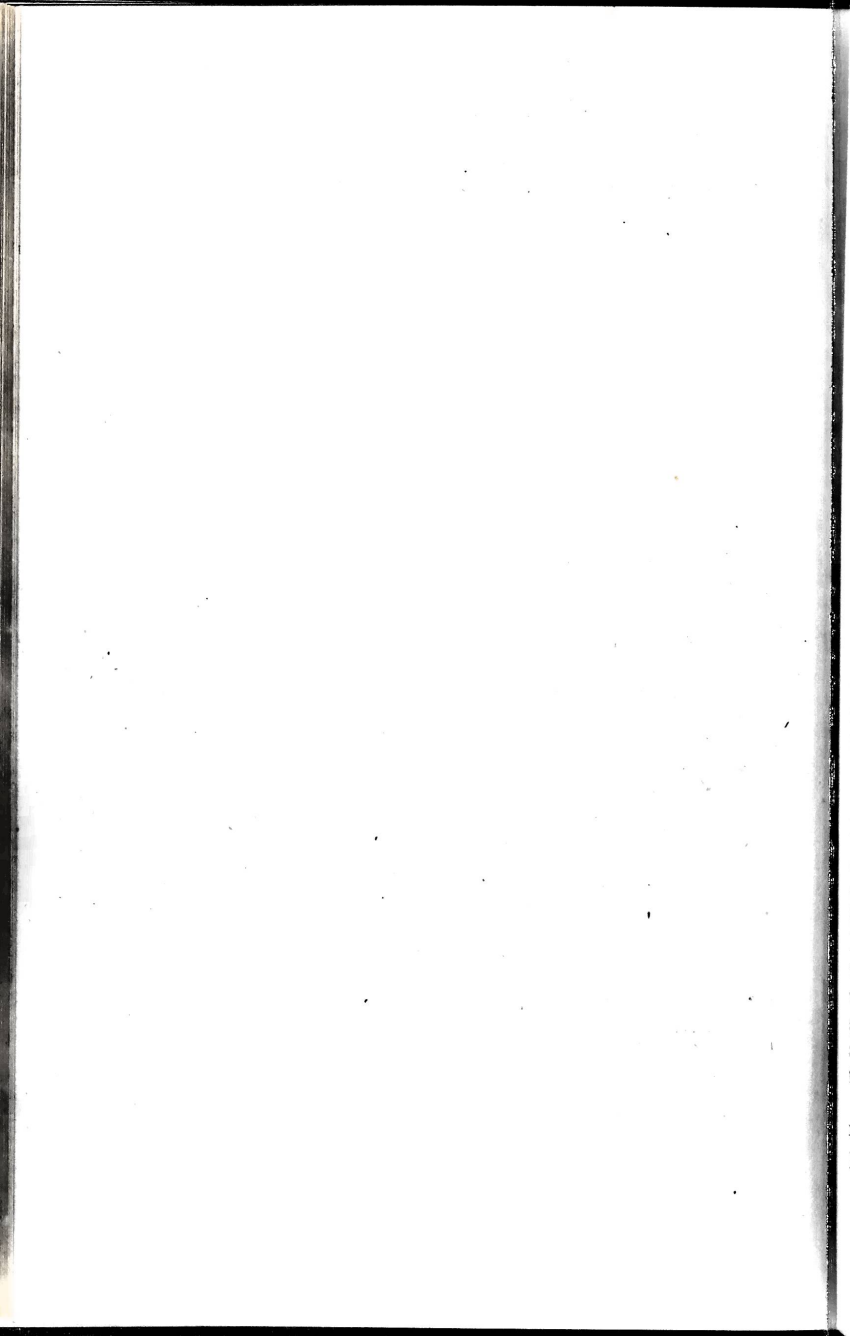
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GOD'S METHOD OF GOVERNMENT.

I PROPOSE discoursing this evening upon certain evangelical or Calvinistical views of God's method of government. And I think I shall be able to treat the subject more fairly if I throw it into the form of a supposed dialogue, held between three gentlemen in one of the private rooms of an Edinburgh hotel. The gentlemen were comparatively strangers to each other, and knew nothing of each other's religious creed. But they had met in a tour through the Highlands, and being pleased with each other's company, they had kept together, and on their way homewards had stopped in Edinburgh, to see what sights therein may be seen. Amongst other places, they had been to John Knox's house, and had looked out of the window whence he had frequently addressed the people. In the course of some remarks upon the house, the conversation which I am now to relate to you arose. The three gentlemen will be distinguished by the names, *Orthodoxus*, *Mysticus*, and *Dubitans*, each expressive of their respective stand-points. *Orthodoxus*, a Calvinist of the old orthodox school; *Mysticus*, one of those semi-mystical theologians of the present day, who attempt by metaphysics to explain away or make appear rational and consistent with modern thought, the essential principles of the old system; and *Dubitans*, who has discarded all belief in a supernatural revelation, and finds his God revealed in the whole course of nature.

Orthodoxus had just said he thought something more ought to be done by the civil authorities for the preservation of the house, and laying open to the public

so precious a memorial of the Reformation, when Dubitans rejoined that as a relic of the Reformation it had some interest; but, for his part, that interest became wholly lost when it became associated with the name of Knox, the least learned, the least gifted, and therefore the most narrow and bigotted of all the reformers.

Orthodoxus. I am surprised to hear you say so. To me it seems all that is free and religious in this land must be ascribed to Knox and those who were associated with him.

Dubitans. With regard to the freedom, I think that a great mistake. The leaders of the movement did nothing but give to it the definite form which it assumed. The people were the real source of the living, free spirit which established the Reformation and the political revolution which followed it; and had Knox and the other leaders never existed, the freedom would have been created in other, and possibly better, forms. And then, with regard to the religion, what Knox really did was to narrow the views of Calvin, and rivet his system upon the nation in harsher and more repulsive forms.

O. I fear by what you say you do not accept the doctrines of Calvinism, and have slipped away from that sure ground of anchorage for some one of the new-fangled systems which have sprung up in the present day. If such be the case, I trust you are looking well to the ground on which you stand, and are not trusting your precious, immortal soul to the uncertain results of mere idle speculation.

D. It is because I have renounced idle speculation, and am resting all my beliefs upon pure and simple facts, that I have rejected Calvinism and all other forms of supernaturalism.

O. My dear sir, you surely mistake. Calvinism rests upon the most indubitable facts in existence. It appeals to the experience of all mankind in confirmation of its truths, and is derived from a revelation established by

the most certain evidence. If you rested your beliefs upon facts, you would most assuredly accept the Calvinistical system.

D. Will you kindly mention to me one or two of those facts which lie at the foundation of the system?

O. Readily. And first, and most important of all, is the doctrine, or fact rather, of human depravity. No one can doubt that human nature is depraved. The evidence of it appears wherever we turn. The policeman in the streets is a walking testimony to the sad truth. Our gaols, our gallows, our laws, our judges, all proclaim it aloud. The little infant just born, by its cries of angry passion, bears witness. And we all go astray from our birth, speaking lies. What sadder proof could we have of the all-important scriptural doctrine of human depravity?

D. In conversations upon such subjects it is absolutely necessary to have clear definitions of the terms we employ. Will you therefore be kind enough to explain to me what you mean by human depravity?

O. By human depravity I mean that state of sin and wickedness into which we have come by Adam's transgression, in virtue of which all men at all times commit sin or tend to the commission of sin.

D. And do you mean to say then that our gaols, policemen, and laws, and the passions of infants, prove that our nature became corrupted through Adam's transgression?

O. No. They do not exactly prove that; but they prove that our nature is corrupt.

D. Then you have given me in your definition two factors, an alleged fact and an opinion. The alleged fact is that all men universally sin. The opinion is that this fact of sin arises out of the corruption of men's original nature through the sin of Adam. Experience establishes the fact, you say. The opinion is not derived from experience, but from the Bible.

O. You hardly state the fact of experience strong

enough. Facts show not only that men universally sin, but also that their nature itself is sinful and corrupt.

D. How so ?

O. Why, you must suppose that the nature which always produces sin is in itself sinful and corrupt.

D. You must suppose—*i.e.*, you must infer, conclude by reason. So that again I remind you of my former statement, experience merely gives the fact of universal sin. The rest is inference, supposition, reasoning, opinion, grafted upon the fact. Now, to a certain extent I admit the fact that men universally sin ; but I altogether contest the opinion that the sin proves a sinful and corrupt nature.

O. Not prove a sinful and corrupt nature ! Then, in the name of common sense, what does it prove ? Does the vine produce thistles ? or the olive, brambles ?

D. The sins which men commit are transgressions of some one or the other of the laws of their nature, and they commit them through the want of knowledge or sufficient self-discipline and control to act according to the knowledge. They prove, therefore, not depravity, but imperfection.

M. I do not accept our friend's full system of Calvinism, with its doctrine of universal depravity, but there is the fact of sin existing in the world, the darkest and most terrible evil, cursing man's whole existence.

D. I must confess I do not feel sin to be this dark and terrible thing you represent it. You orthodox people always seem to me to speak of it as though it were a something of a distinct existence poured into man's heart and overwhelming his whole being in ceaseless and unmitigated misery and wretchedness. It is nothing of the kind. Sin is *doing* something which does not lead to happiness upon the whole and in the long run. It is neither more nor less than that. Now the great amount of happiness men enjoy shews

me pretty conclusively that after all is said and done, their wickedness is anything but of the character you orthodox people make out. Upon the whole, the sum of their happiness is much greater than the sum of their miseries.

O. You have very greatly underrated the true character of sin. Sin is the transgression of, or want of conformity with, God's holy and righteous law, and the soul which sinneth shall die. It involves, therefore, the eternal death of the soul, whatever amount of happiness the sinner in his ignorance may enjoy.

D. Observe, you are now again bringing in speculative opinions, and I thought we had agreed to rest our beliefs upon facts. I have said that sin is transgression of law, and by that I mean physical and intellectual, as well as moral laws. As to the effects of sin, we know them by experience. Whenever we violate a law, it leads to suffering of some kind. But still, experience proves that the suffering is much less than the happiness in the world, and therefore, I say the sin cannot exist to anything like the extent, or be anything like so great an evil as you make out.

M. My conviction is, the real character and evil of sin can only be seen in the incarnation and sacrifice of the Son of God. When we see God giving up unto the accursed death of the cross his only begotten Son, and the Son voluntarily surrendering himself to death that he may redeem men from sin, it is then that sin comes out in its true character. And I do not mean by this merely that it cost the Son of God so much suffering to redeem men from it, but that its evil character is seen in its contrast and antagonism to the pure and holy love of God manifested in the sacrifice of his Son.

O. I must just put in one word. I think our friend Mysticus does not sufficiently bring out the infinite sufferings the Son of God endured on the Cross to

atone for the transgressions of his elect. Those infinite sufferings show above all things the exceedingly dreadful and evil character of sin.

D. Of course, gentlemen so thoroughly versed in the theology of your Church as you appear to be, will be able to explain a point or two I never could understand even when I myself was orthodox, but which are essential to the whole system. Will you tell me in what sense God made a sacrifice when he gave up his Son? and in what sense the Son of God made a sacrifice when he gave himself up, as you call it?

O. In what sense God made a sacrifice? Why, he sent forth his co-equal and co-eternal son as the infant of the Virgin Mary, in the humiliating form of sinful flesh, to live a life of ignominy and reproach, to endure persecution and suffering, and at last to die the shameful death of the Cross, laden with the sins and guilt of his elect. Surely that was a sacrifice, if ever there was one!

D. You spoke of the Son as co-equal and co-eternal with the Father? You give him all the infinite perfections of God?

O. Most certainly.

D. And these infinite perfections belong to him by reason and necessity of his own proper nature, and are not conferred or bestowed upon him?

O. Certainly.

D. Then, of course, these perfections are unchangeable and indestructible.

O. Of course.

D. It is also the property of God not to suffer; he is impassible, as the theologians call it?

O. It is the essential glory of God to live in the enjoyment of his own absolutely perfect being, independently of all things without himself. Were the whole universe to perish, he would still be as glorious and as blessed—rejoicing in his own absolute perfection.

D. Precisely, and the Son being God, possesses the same self-sufficiency, independence, and unchangeable glory and blessedness?

O. Most assuredly.

D. Then when he became incarnate through the Virgin Mary, his real and true glory and blessedness remained unchanged; he continued as perfect and as happy as he had been through all the past eternity?

O. That is the doctrine of the church.

D. Then I return my former question, Wherein was the sacrifice made by the incarnation? Sacrifice is the giving up of something; what did the Son of God give up? Not his own true and proper glory and blessedness, you say; that he could not do as God.

O. He did not give them up, but he veiled them in the garment of flesh—the infinite condescended and humiliated himself to appear as the finite.

D. To whom were his perfections veiled? To the Father and himself?

O. Of course not.

D. To angels?

O. No; for even the devils saw his glory and discerned him to be the Son of God.

D. How then was his glory veiled?

O. Men did not see it. There was no form or comeliness that they should desire him.

D. Had they seen it before his incarnation?

O. That depends upon whether we are to consider the manifestations of God under the Old Testament as made by the Son.

D. However, that is a critical point you cannot solve. And at all events, they did not know it was the Son as distinct from the Father. So that it is perfectly correct to say the glory or perfections of the Son as the Son were not discerned before his incarnation.

O. It seems so.

D. Then how can you call the incarnation a veiling

of his perfections—a hiding of them? These were discerned by God the Father, by himself, by angels, by devils, by all who had ever discerned them before; they only continued to be undiscerned by those who had never discerned them. I cannot see what humiliation or lowering himself there is in that. Nay, I must go further; according to your theory, the incarnation became a means through which the perfections of the Son of God were manifested to men—not at the time being, but afterwards, when the Spirit enabled the disciples to discern the meaning of all that he did and suffered. So that upon your own showing the incarnation, instead of humiliating, glorified him. And therefore, I ask again, where was the sacrifice?

O. You are forgetting all that he suffered on the Cross.

D. All that who suffered?

O. The Son of God.

D. The Son of God suffer! Dreadful! I thought you told me a little time ago that he possessed the infinite perfections of God, inalienable and unchangeable. How then could he suffer?

O. Well, it was not exactly the Son of God who suffered, but the man Christ Jesus; but in virtue of the mystical union of the divine and human in his person, it is counted and is as though the divine suffered.

D. It is counted and is as though the divine suffered! But did the divine nature suffer or not?

O. The divine nature cannot suffer.

D. Then the Son of God did not suffer, and the sufferings of the Cross were only the finite sufferings of the man Christ Jesus. Again, I ask, where is the sacrifice?

M. I think our friend Orthodoxus has given you an undue advantage by adhering to the old Calvinistical system too closely. I regard the incarnation and death of Christ as a pure and simple manifestation of God's

love. You will surely admit that it was an act of infinite condescension upon the part of God when he took upon himself our nature, and in the person of the son lived amongst us, teaching, healing all manner of disease and sickness, enduring the opposition of man, and at last laying down his life upon the Cross. All this was done to shew men the evil of sin, and to win them back into the paths of holiness. It was the outcoming of God's infinite pity and grace to us; and therefore, I say, "Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God."

D. You have spoken of all this as being done and endured by the Son of God. Of course you mean it was done by Christ Jesus. The Son of God, as has been admitted, could not in himself suffer, &c. Taking that for granted, the Son of God merely inspires, animates, or moves the man Jesus to do these things. They are still finite actions, although done by a divine impulse.

M. I admit that; but it was infinite love and condescension of God to so enter into union with the human nature as to become its impulse and animating principle.

D. But you must now admit that it does not differ from other manifestations of God's love and condescension, except in degree. All excellent men, all the saints, are manifestations of God's love in that way. He animates their good actions and is the impulse of them. And they are precisely of the same outward form and character. It is human goodness, kindness, truthfulness, love, and endurance which we see, although of a divine impulse.

M. Yes; but they possess divine dignity and glory because of the union of the divine and human in his person.

D. You give me an opinion superinduced upon the fact. You do not see the divine dignity and glory in

the acts ; you merely see what is human. Afterwards, the theological dogma about the union of the natures leads you to infer the dignity and glory. But that can have no practical influence whatsoever. The influence is derived directly from the facts. So that it seems to me this modern theory which you seem to have embraced is the weakest of all the theories. You admittedly have none but human love, goodness, purity, and truthfulness manifested in Christ. You then add on, to give effect to these things, the doctrine of the incarnation, by which you suppose the human actions obtain a divine glory. You call the Son of God's being thus connected with and animating the man Christ Jesus an act of infinite love and self-sacrifice, and yet you have to admit the Son of God gives up no single item of his perfections, glory, and blessedness in the act. You give up the old doctrine of the atonement.

M. I beg pardon, I do not. I hold it in a modified form.

D. What form ?

M. Why, I think that Christ, by offering himself a victim in obedience to the Father's will, performed the highest act of sacrifice, and all those who believe in him have such fellowship with him in the sacrifice, that it becomes their own, whereby they are delivered from sin and made to partake of the blessedness of eternal life.

D. Your terms are very vague. But at all events, the sacrifice is not the endurance of suffering in lieu of suffering ; it is simply the exertion of a moral influence which saves from suffering merely by purifying and bringing the mind of the saved into sympathy with the mind of the Saviour. Now this is an abandonment of the old ideas of atonement and sacrifice, and, disguise it as you will, the substituting for them of merely the influence of a holy example. I admit that is more rational, but it is less scriptural ; and the rationality is all merged by the introduction of the

incarnation, in order to enforce the example which is just as efficacious without it.

O. I perfectly agree with you. If I gave up my Calvinism, I would give up the whole system of revelation which falls to pieces without it. But let me remind you that, notwithstanding all you have said, there remains the grand doctrine of the atonement wherein Christ endured for his elect the infinite sufferings due to their sins.

D. You mean the man Christ Jesus endured them. How could a being who is necessarily finite endure what is infinite?

O. By reason of his connection with Deity.

D. But you cannot infuse infinite properties into a finite nature, else that would be making a man into a God. Whatever that mysterious union you talk of in the person of Jesus Christ of the divine and human, the divine nature could not suffer at all; and the human nature could not suffer what is infinite. So that, after all, your infinite sacrifice for the elect becomes a mere finite sacrifice offered by a man.

Orthodoxus—who had lately shown considerable signs of uneasiness, here gathered himself up in his chair with great dignity, and looking upon his companion very gravely, begged, in the most pompous manner, to say—My dear sir, you and I have enjoyed many pleasant days together in our recent tour, and to-morrow we separate, perhaps never to meet again in this lower world; but we shall meet hereafter at the judgment-bar of God. At the risk of even offending you, which I should be unwilling to do, I must deliver myself from the blood of your soul. You seem to me to be entirely lost in a maze of carnal reasonings, which the Evil One is always ready to lead self-sufficient intellects into. As a friend, I therefore warn you of the danger in which you stand. My brother, your precious soul is in jeopardy! Yes! your precious, never-dying, immortal soul. There is only one name given under heaven

whereby men can be saved, and you are rejecting that name. In your pride of intellect, you say, I will not have this man to reign over me. What must be your doom? Ah! already I seem to see the events of the last great day. There sits the Judge, no longer the meek and lowly Saviour you despise, but the righteous and holy One, with eyes like a flame of fire, piercing through and through you. Around him stand ten thousand times ten thousand angels, ready to conduct his elect to the joys of Paradise, and thrust down the unbelievers to Hell. There, my friend, must you stand and pass your last solemn trial. You reject Christ, you put from you his precious sacrifice. Nothing, therefore, can save you from the sentence, which already methinks I hear pronounced—"Depart from me, ye cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the Devil and his angels." Then will you realize the woes in the hymn of that devout servant of God, Dr Bonar:—

"Descend, O sinner, to the woe!
Thy day of hope is done;
Light shall revisit thee no more,
Life, with its sanguine dream, is o'er,
Love reaches not yon awful shore;
For ever sets thy sun.

"Call upon God, he hears no more;
Call upon death, 'tis dead;
Ask the live lightnings in their flight,
Seek for some sword of hell and night,
The worm that never dies, to smite,
No weapon strikes its head.

"Descend, O sinner, to the gloom!
Hear the deep judgment knell
Send forth its terror-shrieking sound
These walls of adamant around,
And filling to its utmost bound
The woful, woful hell!

"Depart, O sinner, to the chain!
Enter the eternal cell;
To all that's good, and true, and right,
To all that's fond, and fair, and bright,
To all of holiness and light,
Bid thou thy last farewell!"

Alas! my friend, there shall be weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth. Already I seem to hear the despairing cry of your soul—I am lost, I am lost for ever.

Orthodoxus had delivered his speech with great excitement, rising out of his chair in the midst of it, waving his hand about in the air, and using most vehement gesture. He sat down bathed in perspiration. When a minute's silence had followed, Mysticus turned towards Dubitans, and said: I cannot concur with those denunciatory terms our friend has used, and I think they misrepresent the character of God's government. I have hope that at last the worst will be rescued and saved. But, my dear sir, I am not less concerned about your soul than is he. I would rather, however, draw you by the tender love and grace of our God. I can hardly believe that you have ever fairly looked at that grace as manifested in his beloved Son, or surely your heart would have long ago been melted and won. Think, my dear sir, of all he has done for you. See him born in poverty, a tiny infant in the manger of Bethlehem. See him toiling along the lanes of Palestine, and through the hot sun-scorched streets of its cities, during the whole of a weary life, to do good to men. Oh, precious Jesus! how he endures so meekly the stupidity of his disciples, the treachery of false friends, the sneers of the self-righteous Pharisees, the contempt of infidel Sadducees, the brutality of the mob! How he hungers and thirsts, and has not where to lay his head! How ready he is to forget himself in the service of others! Then, come to the last sad scenes. Ah! see through shadows of the trees of Olives that prostrate form in prayer. Hear what in his agony he cries: "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt." Ah! what is that which bedews his forehead, his cheeks, and falls upon the ground? It is the sweat of agony in great drops of blood! Follow him to Pilate's

judgment-hall. See him there spit upon, and crowned with thorns. Stand now on Calvary: behold the victim of man's sin and the gift of God's love. Oh, dark hour of sorrow! What agonies the sinless One endures, and how lovingly he bears it all! Not the nails, not the laceration of the flesh, produce that doleful agony, but a deeper sorrow, poured forth in those memorable words, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani," &c. And now, let earth be clothed in darkness, for the Son of God bows his head, and gives up the ghost! And why? Why all this sorrow? Ah! my friend, for you, for you, for you he dies, that you may be won to God, and be blessed for ever. Oh! turn, turn unto him, and yield your heart in recompence for such love.

"Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my heart, my life, my all."

During both these addresses Dubitans had sat very quietly, resting his head upon his hand, and listening with great, though apparently amused, attention. When Mysticus had done, he quietly moved round his chair, facing them more directly, and said: I suppose I ought to be grateful to you both for the deep anxiety you have shown for the salvation of my soul. I am afraid my gratitude is not so deep as it ought to be, but I will prove it to the full extent in my power, by making a speech to you in return for your own. Bear with me, then, while I say I think, Orthodoxus, the whole system of Calvinism, with its doctrines of human depravity, predestination, atonement, and punishment, one of the most grossly immoral and degrading systems that ever was propounded by man. It represents God as an omnipotent fiend, without the sense of common justice, and much less of goodness and love. Here he creates and sends into this world millions upon millions of wretched beings, with natures

so depraved that they cannot but sin. Amongst them he has a select few, for whom he made his Son endure the sufferings due to the sins they could not help; these he changes into saints by a supernatural power called grace, and at last brings to blessedness. The rest—the millions upon millions, being denied the grace, without which they could not be changed into saints—perish, and perish everlastingly. Hopelessly they are thrust into eternal torments, and that for crimes they could not possibly avoid, since Adam fell. Such a system is perfectly fiendish; and a god who could so govern the world would be a monster of iniquity, deserving to be scouted out of the universe by all the creatures he has made. For my part, if I were the creature of such a god, all the torments he could inflict upon me by his omnipotence should not make me cease to look upon him with loathing and disgust. And as for your system, Mysticus, it has but few more charms in my eyes than that of Orthodoxus. You deny, indeed, the iniquitous doctrine of eternal punishment, but you have no right to do so. It is the doctrine of the New Testament. To deny that seems to me a disgraceful tampering with words to suit a necessity created by your false position. You endeavour, by the help of your moral and spiritual instincts, to get a system of religion out of the Bible consistent with the thought and spirit of the present day. Your attempt is in vain. The system of the New Testament is an embodiment of thought and spirit of the second century, not of the nineteenth. I have read all that your leaders, Maurice, Robertson, and the rest, have to say. It is vague, illogical, and will not bear the test of analysis for one moment. Your words are full of mysticism, which, as soon as explained, throws you back on the old Calvinism, or reduces your system to merely human elements. The truth of it is, my friends, you are both of you leaning on a broken reed. You are resting upon the infallible inspiration of the Bible, the one of you

endeavouring to sustain by it the theology of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the other a mongrel system you have devised in the nineteenth, out of a patchwork of modern metaphysics and old theologies. But for that infallibility you have not the shadow of a proof. The evidence altogether breaks down when it is thoroughly examined. The books you rest upon mostly belong to the second century. Their statement of facts is mingled with myths; and most certainly they are directly opposed to all the conceptions of modern science and the whole spirit and thinking of this age. I exhort you, therefore, in return for the exhortations you have addressed to me, to throw off these terrible superstitions by which your reason is enthralled. Look the facts fairly and fully in the face, and then you will learn that these notions of yours are only the conceptions of ignorant and barbarous times, and *that by far higher and better laws than you have dreamed of God governs the world.*

Here the waiter brought in their supper, soon after which they retired to bed. Next morning they breakfasted separately, in order to suit the time of their respective trains, and went their way each one to his own home. Which of them upheld the truth in their discussion, I shall leave you all to judge.