

INTRODUCTORY.

THE BACKGROUND OF MYSTERY.

“Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: that in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him.”—Eph. i, 9, 10.

ONE great difficulty in understanding Paul's impassioned writings lies in the fact that when his nature kindled it moved so high into the very precincts of the spiritual and the invisible that in his own mind figures were obscure, and could not but be. It was one of the evidences of elevation. It brought him nearer to the preaching of Christ than any other apostle except John. It is difficult to interpret, because there are so few of us who ever rise into that region so far as to be familiar with its phenomena.

In this passage Paul speaks of mystery; but what the mystery was to which he referred is only very dimly hinted at in the tenth verse—namely, the purpose of God, in the future, “To gather in one all things in Christ.” You will observe how extremely vague the statement is. There are no limitations, no definitions, no specializations, no ideals, except a faint flash of foreseeing that the time was coming in which this distracted and dislocated world was to come into a perfect harmony in Jesus Christ. How that time should come, or what it should mean, he does not undertake to say. This mystery he speaks of not only here, but in many other places.

Now, *mystery* means hidden things; and it therefore

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means unknown things. Technically, as interpreted, for instance, by the primitive Greeks, it signifies a certain form of association with things purposely hidden from the great crowd outside, though the initiated were permitted to know them; but to us generally, in our usage, *mystery* means things unknown.

Not that we are necessarily incapable of comprehending elements that belong to the great unknown; but we have not yet traveled far enough to comprehend them. Whether we fail to comprehend them because we are not sufficiently advanced, or because they are beyond the reach of finite intelligence, makes no difference. The background of all theology, as treating of the nature of God and of the divine moral government, is mystery. The abyss that lies back of human knowledge is simply infinite—an abyss of mystery.

And yet, this is the region where not only men's fancy has been the most discursive, but where men have been the most despotic. About things in regard to which we have definite knowledge men are careless; but when they have gone into a realm that is infinitely remote from their positive knowledge, and where the rarest intellects are mere explorers in the night, as it were, there they have made faith in abstract doctrines to be the most cogent and determinative of moral character, and the condition of religious organization. On the nature of God, the methods of divine moral government, the great destinies of the future—subjects about which men know the least, the slightest aberration is counted damnatory. In one period of the world it was punished with physical pains and penalties; in our time it is punished only with moral pains and penalties—the transgressors being marked in order that they may be disesteemed by the faithful.

Men learn, and *must* learn, of God, of the divine government, and of the future, through their own experience. There is a species of anthropomorphism which is the indispensable door or avenue to knowledge on these subjects. It implies that men's essential faculties are, not in scope or perfectness but in quality, the same as the divine attributes. If you deny this you deny all possible knowledge of the

invisible realm. They who embrace materialism in its various forms do deny it. They say that God is unknowable. But if God is unknowable, then to all practical intents he does not exist. That view is practical Atheism. Not to poetic natures; but we are not all poetic natures. A poetic nature, though he may not know about God, may have a consciousness of the great "over-soul;" but most folks are not poets.

And as to loving a God that is inconceivable, unthinkable, unknowable—it is preposterous. A morning-glory wants something that is solid to run up on. It wants to twine; but it will not twine on a shadow. It must have something that is substantial to twine on. Human nature, too, must have something substantial to twine on. And if you proclaim an immanent divinity, a kind of Soul-of-the-World, that has reason, though not anything that we understand by reason, that has justice, though not anything that we understand by justice, and that has goodness, though not anything that we understand by goodness, you will surely throw men into hopeless confusion! If when I say, "I love the truth," there is no correspondence between my sense of truth and truth as it exists in God, then the term "truth" is perpetually binding and enslaving me.

What if men should employ terms of description in this way? Suppose we should say to a child, "I am going to take you to your grandfather's, and you are going to see a most magnificent horse, only that it is not like any horse that you ever saw. It has no eyes, no ears, no mouth, no legs, no mane, no tail, and no skin and bones; yet it is a horse. And a saddle will be put on him; but it is not a leather saddle, and it has no stirrups, and its framework is not like that of any saddle that you ever saw; yet it is a saddle!" What sort of a horse would that be that had neither legs, nor eyes, nor mouth, nor ears, nor mane, nor tail? and what sort of a saddle would that be that had no stirrups, that was not made of leather, and that differed in its framework from all other saddles? It would simply be cheating the child to tell him of such a horse and such a saddle.

And to say that justice in the divine nature does not answer to our conception of justice, and that truth in its quality and essential nature is one thing in God and another thing in men, is to falsify the whole sphere of human experience. It is true that the wisdom of God, in so far as purity and extent are concerned, is very different from our wisdom, just as the experience of a wise father is vastly greater than the intellectual operations of his little child: nevertheless, the little boy of four years old, on his father's knee, has the same quality of thinking that the father has, although in the father it has grown and ripened to a degree that the child cannot comprehend. Notwithstanding the difference which exists as to development, there is identity of substantial radical quality.

Therefore, in order that men may have a conception of a personal God it must be assumed that their essential moral faculties and intellectual structure constitute a just foundation for a comparison with the ideas which they form of God. Our conception of what is true may not be so large as the whole truth, and not so fine as the highest truth, but it differs from conception of truth in its fullest and most perfect form only as the taper differs from the sun. The difference is not in quality, but in degree or extent. No man would hold a candle out of the window and say that it was sunrise; nevertheless, the fire in the candle and the fire in the sun are the same in their essential nature, though they are not the same in magnitude, nor the same in power of heat or illumination.

The same is true in regard to the divine nature, the foundation, and the only foundation, for understanding which lies in a species of regulated anthropomorphism—the teaching of God in man, or human life, which is the signification of the term. But this, of course, is subject, as I have already intimated, to the perpetual correction which lies in the thought that while we have elementary faculties and feelings which define for us the divine nature, those same feelings and faculties exist in God in such variety, in such scope, in such combinations, and they act after methods that so transcend their action when limited to an

organization of the flesh, that there is always a vast background of mystery beyond them. We know, as it were, the alphabet of the divine nature: but the library, the learning, the literature of the divine nature we do not know. That lies back of all our possible thought when we are thinking toward God. We strike the elemental forms of the nature of God, and gain some definite conception of what is mercy, of what is gentleness, of what is love. When we have gained this conception we have only gained so large a conception as is possible to the limited operation of those elements in human conditions; but God is free from such conditions; he stands above them and beyond them; and in him those qualities take on forms so large and so intense that, after all, the background of every one of our thoughts in respect to the nature of God and the divine moral government is simply untraceable by human imagination or thought. The mystery of which the Bible so often speaks—the mystery of holiness; the mystery of the mercy of God, through which he is going to include all Gentiles as well as Jews in his Church; the mystery which is spoken of in our text, of “gathering together in one all things in Christ”—all things in the heaven above, on the earth beneath, under the earth, and throughout the universe—this mystery coheres with that philosophical principle which I have stated to you.

Consider, for a moment, what there is in the teachings of the Word of God which transcends human experience. Spirit-life must be incomprehensibly different from life in the body; and yet you will take notice that whenever spirit-life is interpreted to us by spiritual teachers it is done by bringing back to us human forms, human thought and human action. The whole literature and lore of what is called “Spiritualism,” in our day, is a confession that men cannot understand spirit. It frees man from bodily conditions, and throws him into a higher sphere by imagination; but then he is just the same that he was, only he seems to be made up of cloud instead of good honest flesh and bones; and he thinks, and hears, and feels, and talks, and walks, just as he did before.

Swedenborg has a whole world in which men are divided into classes, tribes, groups, in the other spheres, and all goes on there as it does here, except that they have a sort of effluent bodies—bodies that you can see through, as it were. Diaphanous, translucent creatures, they are, with material bodies of a little finer stuff than those which they inhabited on earth, though substantially the same. So nearly identical are they with their former selves that their very mistakes and errors have gone with them. Now and then Swedenborg hits the truth exactly. He relates that in one of his visions he saw, in heaven, or rather in the other life, a man who had been dead twenty years, and did not yet know it! I ought not to doubt that such a thing may be, since I see such men even among us in our day. They are dead, and have been for years, and do not know it; though everybody else knows it! According to Swedenborg, the other life is a reproduction of this life, with merely a poetic fringe about it.

Of everything that we can comprehend there is the germ, the possibility, the potential cause, in ourselves; and beyond that we cannot go in this state of being. You can think of a spirit as you can think of a dream, or as you think of a cloud which is rarefied and made so tenuous that it but just appears, melts to a transparent film and disappears. The moment that, in your conception of spirit-existence, you come to that which your senses cannot interpret by some earthly form, that moment it vanishes from your sight. The whole philosophy and art of spiritualizing consists in selecting such forms of matter as are the least opaque and cumbersome, and that have the most of levity, of lightness, and of transparency in them; but they are all radicated in matter; they all come from matter and go back to it; and to conceive of absolute, pure spiritual existence, even in saint or angel or divinity, transcends the power of any human intellect.

The conditions of spiritual life are relative to those of time by reason of the limitations of matter. Divisions of time were invented to express the succession of events. Abstractly, time has no existence. It exists only as we can

measure it, by seconds, and minutes, and hours, and days, and months, and years. Time is nothing but interspaces which separate events or phenomena. Men live under the operations of time because they live in the realm of matter, where things are measured by intervals between fact and fact. Time is calculated according to the motion of the earth upon its axis, and of the earth around the sun. To us time is real, because we are in the realm of matter; but if we were in the spirit-life it would not necessarily follow that we should be cognizant of time. The sublime angel of the Apocalypse cried "Time shall be no more," with something more, it may be, than poetic figure. To God a thousand years are as one day, and one day is as a thousand years.

According to the very terms by which spirit is defined, it is something antithetical to matter. Men that are in a state of limitation by reason of the flesh, and that are under the dominion of ideas caused by the mutations of matter, are limited by necessities that presumptively do not exist in the other life. So when we judge of things which belong to the upper realm by our lower and crude measures; when we bring to the infinite superiorities of the other life measures that belong only to the elements of time, to the transient and to the visible, we do that which is not warranted by the existing condition of things. The point of view on the part of men and the point of view on the part of God, as revealed in the truth of Scripture, are such that we are liable to fall into continual mistakes. If you suppose that when God, who knows all things in their infinite relations rather than in their limited time relations, who sees the end from the beginning, who lives in a largeness of which we have no conception, who is in a sphere removed infinitely further from us than we are from the beetle that burrows under the leaves, or that comes out at night from under the bark—if you suppose that when He attempts to teach men, who are shut up to matter, inclosed in the flesh, he will address them from his own standpoint, you have no true conception of the divine procedure. His standpoint of truth is one,

and ours is another ; and we must judge by that which is taught us in our circumscribed sphere, in the realm of our limited knowledge, while he judges by his boundless knowledge in a sphere which is no less in extent than the universe itself. Though it may be compatible for us to have the beginnings of an understanding of the divine nature, it is impossible for us to have such a conception of it as God himself has. The difference between a pure spirit in the spiritual realm and a soul in the body, surrounded by immutable physical laws, is one which leads to endless mistakes, unless we are willing to accept rudimentary, alphabetic ideas with humility. And yet, it is on these very points that men insist on the perfection of their knowledge with the most ferocious confidence.

If you undertake to deny the Trinity—in which I believe ; if you undertake to deny the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, three persons in one Godhead—what an uproar you make in the church ! Men say, “ If you do not believe in that fundamental doctrine, you must go out, and go out at once ! ” As if any human being, whether St. Augustine, Jonathan Edwards, or the farthest-reaching mind that ever lived, when he came to a measurement of the Divine Being, was competent to understand anything about it !

You may say, “ How do you believe it, then ? ” I believe it in this way : I find it easier to accept the intimations or words of the New Testament, that there is an invisible, a mysterious union of three persons in one Godhead, than to adopt any other view. But if you ask me a step beyond that I cannot answer you. When I strain my thought to look into this subject, I can see analogies which point toward trinity in unity. I see that organized life begins at absolute simplicity, develops new organs, increases in complexity. Thus a unity is reached, made up of many organs ; later a unity of groups of organs, and when you rise to human beings there is not simply one faculty, and there are not merely single faculties, but there are groups of faculties superinduced one over another ; there are animal passions, and social affections, and moral sen-

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timents, and over them all imagination and reason; and as the last of these stages is a vast reach from the beginning, so I can conceive that the same tendency may go on beyond this world, units and groups being combined to form personalities, and at last several personalities combined in One Being. I can understand that this mode of development has not exhausted itself in men, and that it may be found in the higher life, and that there may be not only groups of faculties, but groups of personalities. The thing is distinctly "thinkable," according to the German phrase. Therefore I am not turned back from believing in the Trinity because I cannot comprehend it. When you ask me as to the *quo modo*, the method, of the Trinity, I am obliged to confess that I do not understand it. But should this be a bar to my going into the church? A certain phase of orthodoxy says, "You must subscribe to the Trinity, or not come into the church." What is the law on which it proceeds, and by which it judges a man? Is it simplicity? Is it transparency? Is it loveliness? Is it that on which the fifth chapter of Matthew is founded? No. Men go into the most unfathomable realms of human thought, take the most difficult of all conceivable speculations, and make them the condition of church-membership; and if a man believes in them he may be in the church, but if he does not believe in them he shall not be in the church.

Take, again, the element of Time. When God speaks of the duration of his own nature, are we to suppose that our limited notions of time are fit instruments for the interpretation of it? Is it to be presumed that a man understands exactly what time means in heaven because he understands what time means on earth? Is it to be taken for granted that he knows what the measurements are in the spiritual realm because he knows what they are in this material world? And yet how positively men claim to understand the facts of the Eternal and the Infinite!

But there is no accounting for the folly of men when they have undertaken to regulate other men's consciences and belief. When a man thinks that he is a celestial hound set on the track of heresy, with his nose for a conscience, and

scents his prey afar off, and starts off with tail up and ears set, farewell sense, farewell honor, farewell humanity, farewell everything!

This exceeding difference which exists between the truth as it is seen from the spirit side, or the side of perfection, and as it is seen from the human side, that is relative and imperfect, throws light on many dark problems of life and thought.

First. One of the corroborative testimonies of the divinity of Christ is afforded by a consideration of this difference. The teaching of Christ, especially as it is represented in John (not exclusively, for there are traces of the same thing in all the Evangelists, but in John it is more marked than anywhere else), is mystical. It is mystical, at any rate, in the sense that it is a teaching which brings into view both the elements that belong to the upper sphere and those that belong to the lower sphere. It is the teaching of one who has the knowledge that is of the heavenly sphere, but who is surrounded by the conditions of men on earth. He finds difficulty in expressing his thoughts in human language, and still more difficulty in making it palpable to those to whom he speaks.

Therefore, you find in the teaching of Christ paradoxes and forms of statement that, so far as exact truth is concerned, are extravagances going beyond the point of our thought and experience. Especially you will find in his teaching fictions; for it is a truth that, in the lower sphere of human life, not unfrequently falsity addressed to the imagination is more true than truth itself. The evolution of truth in the human family on earth has been through fictions. Frequently, to state the truth exactly is to lie, and to state it without a particle of coherence to real facts is to tell the truth.

For instance, you wish to produce in your child's mind a conception of justice, and you make animals talk. You say, "There was a lion—one of those *good* lions, my dear—and he was walking one day in the woods; and what did he see? He saw a poor little innocent lamb by a stream; and there was a wolf—a bad wolf—and the wolf was saying