

Correspondence.

For the Christian Messenger.

UNIVERSAL LAW--SPECIAL PROVIDENCE--PRAYER.

If there is one principle running through all the Works and Word of God, more prominently marked than any other, it is the operation of Law and Order. God governs the world not capriciously, not at random, but according to fixed and unalterable principles. There is no proof that he ever violates or even suspends the action of a Law, either physical or moral. Perhaps he has done so, but we cannot know except by direct revelation. Should he tell us so, we could know that it was the case. But by unaided reason we can never learn the fact. What we call a miracle does not at all imply that a law has been reversed or even suspended; it simply implies that an event is brought about contrary to the usual course as observed by us—that we cannot describe the process of operation; that we know nothing of the means by which it is effected—that we cannot trace the effect to any secondary or intervening causes in the case, but must trace it directly to the great First Cause. God has done it. We have proof of this fact. But we don't know how he did it. To presume that we know all the powers of Nature, and all their possible operations and results, is to pretend to an extent of knowledge which can only be characterized as the extravagance of folly; for we are of yesterday, and know nothing.

The Creator, Jehovah, God, governs his creatures by methods,—by law,—adapted to their natures, and to their conditions. There are diversities of operations, but it is the same spirit; diversities of laws, but no clashing. All is harmony and order.

There are laws adapted to the control of inert matter—laws of gravitation, and cohesion, and attraction, laws of vegetation, and of animal life, laws of crystallization, of chemical affinities, and laws controlling mental operations, &c. &c.; and each of these laws governs in its own department. They are often quite independent of each other. Water for instance would congeal at the freezing point, and minerals would crystallize, whether plants and animals grew or not. And plants would grow and fruit trees yield their fruit altogether independent of the existence of men or animals in that region or age.

By the action of law water runs down hill, and smoke ascends, and it is the action of the same law that produces these two apparently opposite results. Man can so control this law, the law of gravitation,—that it forces the water up into the air above, and drives the smoke down into the depths below. To do this he simply controls a power; he neither destroys nor suspends it. What man can do on a small scale God can do on any scale, great or small, for His power is infinite.

But there is another Law, and wholly of a different species, by which God governs. There are intellectual and moral beings under his control, as well as suns and planets, vegetables and minerals, and mere animals. He has ordained a law wisely adapted to their natures and capacities and circumstances. Man is not independent of those laws that govern inferior creatures. He too is controlled by gravitation, vegetation, animation, crystallization, chemistry, and, for ought we know, by every other law in the universe. But over and above all these physical laws, and independent of them all, but still in harmony with them all, he is the subject of God's Moral Law.—I use the term law in its largest sense—in the sense of a controlling power—in which sense all the means and influences by which moral beings are controlled, come legitimately under the designation of Law. In this sense the Decalogue is a Law, and the Gospel is a Law—"the perfect law of liberty," (James i. 25., and divine influences controlling the heart and life of the child of God are a Law—"the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus," (Romans viii. 2.) and the whole of Word of God is a Law: "Oh how love I thy law. It is my meditation all the day," (Psalm cxix. 97.) and, finally, in this sense conscience is a Law: "These having not the [written] law, are a law unto themselves, their consciences ex using or else accusing" &c., (Rom. ii. 14, 15.)

Now in respect to all those other Laws it is useless to attempt to free ourselves from their control. Fire burns, and water drowns, and 'choke damp' suffocates, and the neglect of food and exercise and sleep, destroys health, and reason, and life, whether man will it or not. He must just regulate all his plans and opera-

tions in strict harmony with God's laws in all these things; since to contend with them is to contend with the Almighty, and "woe be to him that striveth with his Maker." The law will just take its course. The man who throws himself into the boiling surges of the Niagara, will be drowned. If he fall over a precipice, his bones will be crushed. If he swallow poison, he will be sick or die. If he cannot or will not eat, he will starve. And so of a thousand other things. Law rules.

With reference to all these natural laws and their uniform operations, how perfectly useless it is to complain or cavil. And how foolish and idle it would be also to undertake to disprove the possibility of the existence of certain effects in one department of nature, by opposing to them the laws and operations of another department? For instance, suppose a young man, somewhat skilled in arithmetic, and delighting in the combinations of numbers and their marvellous results, were to oppose the multiplication table as an objection to the facts and discoveries of geology? or of chemistry? or of astronomy? or of theology? The child that would do this would make himself supremely ridiculous of course. Nor would he be less unwise who should pretend to pronounce a priori from the most extensive knowledge he might possess, or imagine he possessed, of all the physical laws of the Universe, and their diversified operations and results, as to what might be the character of God's dealings with moral beings; and especially how He might deal with man. This much he might safely conclude, that God would deal with them by a Rule, a Law, that was just adapted to their natures and necessities, and that having established the Rule, it would be wise and just and good; and that man would be wise to regulate his conduct by it, and that if he failed to do so, on himself would fall the consequences.

One thing more, a thoughtful man might learn from Nature. As the laws that govern animal and vegetable life, cannot be urged to disprove the result of a chemical combination, and just as no knowledge of algebra or music will decide the question at what point water will boil or freeze, or in what countries and localities, gold, or coal, or ivory, may be found; that as each and all these other matters must be enquired into and learned according to the laws and principles that regulate each separate department; that even so it would be in theology. That Moral Law, that Divine Revelation,—in a word,—that the "Glorious Gospel of the Blessed God," would too have a department peculiarly its own, and that it also must be examined on its own grounds, independently of all reasonings objections or cavils draw, from any other department of knowledge.

Will the reader please ponder these things, and pray over them. They concern him deeply. Looking up to the Lord for aid I shall endeavor to pursue this train of thought in another paper.

S. T. RAND.

For the Christian Messenger.

A FEW THOUGHTS ON THE SPECIAL PROVIDENCE DISCUSSION.

There is no more remarkable fact learned from the study of nature than the wonderful uniformity of its operations. So far as we are able to show from our own observation, all results are brought about by secondary causes, and the natural chain of cause and effect has never been broken. Man is not left to stumble blindly amid disconnected facts and phenomena, but finds in their unchanging order of coexistence and succession a firm basis for that knowledge without which the continuation of human life would not only be precarious but absolutely impossible.

This is, in itself, a prime evidence of the existence of a benevolent Deity, and the belief in it seems as superior to ancient superstitions that attributed all success or failure to the favor or anger of the gods, as Christianity is to heathenism.

It is difficult to estimate the strength of our confidence in this uniformity, yet it mingles with every act of our lives. A remedy which has aided us once in case of sickness is unhesitatingly resorted to, in preference to all others, under like circumstances, and no sane man, no matter how strong his trust in the benevolence and power of God, would believe that if the proper medicine could not be procured, a deadly poison administered in faith would be instrumental in the cure of disease. I use this illustration at the risk of its being pronounced a man of straw because I think that our ordinary actions best enable us to understand our own belief—the shrewd sense of man often out-runs

his carefully formed creed. We have but to consider the confidence in the undeviating uniformity in which events take place presupposed by every act we perform, and we shall find little difficulty in understanding why this belief holds the minds of so many thinking men with a master grasp, and why some cling so tenaciously to a faith in its universality.

When we turn to the study of Revelation we find a marked difference. God is frequently represented as doing things without the intervention of secondary causes, and in a manner quite distinct from that in which he may be truly said to be the Author of all the operations of nature. He divided seas, gave water from a rock, and caused that the fire should not consume. The same is true of the miracles of our Lord, and the Apostles.

We see, then, that there was a time when the uniformity of which we have been speaking was interrupted. One showed himself superior to the forces of the physical world, and the powers of evil. He read the thoughts of men as from an open scroll, and the stern grasp of Death relaxed at his command. But for some reason this power has not been perpetuated. We meet with none now who can work miracles, and though some excellent christians believe that the cause rests with ourselves, yet the general impression seems to be that miraculous gifts ceased with the apostles, and that such was the divine will. A reason for this at once suggests itself, though it may not satisfy all. Man will not be condemned for not believing what comes to him with insufficient proof. Reason is the gift of God, and is to be used, not sinned against. It was necessary in order to convey an understanding of the truth to a half civilized tribe, to impress it upon their minds by awe-inspiring wonders. One who came as the very God required, in order that his claims might be intelligently received, the credentials of Deity—authority over what he had created. Miraculous power was therefore used at a time when it was needed to render faith possible; its use was laid aside when it would be hostile to the very nature and existence of faith. With this explanation the general character of the miracles of the Old and New Testament agrees.

While it is generally admitted that miracles—as we commonly understand that term, have ceased, and that the universe is governed according to uniform laws established by an all-wise Creator, the belief is very general amongst men that there are things equally miraculous in God's present dealings with the righteous and the wicked—Special Providences in fact, by which he rewards the former, and punishes the latter. The connection between prayer and its answer is usually explained in the same way. This opinion is very common among christians, though by no means universal. There are many objections to it—objections which may be avoided, it is true, but only by extraordinary intellectual dodging, or the more safe mode of taking refuge under a cloud. We can discover no connected proof of it. The good and the bad suffer together. The wicked man has his miraculous escapes, and is hardened thereby; while the man of pre-eminent piety is often the one on whom the greatest afflictions come, till his faith is well nigh overthrown. A godly parent is taken away when his labors and teachings are most needed by his family, and his sons left to grow up to evil. A great portion of the punishment of the guilty falls upon the innocent. These are things with which we are all familiar, and will to many minds seem to suggest grave questions respecting the commonly received doctrine of special providence. We cannot wonder then if reverent minds confident of the unmingled benevolence, spotless justice, and unlimited power of Jehovah look upon these as but apparent evils, the result of the workings of a divine order established by Him who sees the end from the beginning, or, as it is expressed by our great Christian poet,—'All's love, yet all's law.'

This belief—that God's dealings with man are all in accordance with uniform and established laws—the laws of his spiritual kingdom—is as compatible with vital godliness as the opposite.

This I supposed was the meaning of Thinker in his article on the Storm &c. He would find plenty to pronounce it a judgement of God for the wickedness of man, and his remarks on the subject showed ability and commendable sincerity. It has been objected to however on theological grounds. And on those grounds I refer to it.

It is as reasonable to refer a given result to the action of a law beyond our ken, as to suppose it brought about by miraculous means, and the former view has in its favor all the analogies of God's mode of working in nature, wherein is

afforded us our best opportunity of studying his government in detail. Not only is this the case, but whoever sets himself carefully to observe the growth of churches, especially their inner life, the spread of the gospel in heathen countries, and the growth of religious life in the heart of the believer, will find many things to favor a belief that God has established, even in spiritual things, a uniform action of secondary causes.

I by no means undertake to shew that this view is the only and correct one, but merely that it is compatible with christian faith, and reasonably deduced from premises afforded by this God-governed world of men and matter.

I was at a loss to understand the reason for the strong epithets applied to it by a writer in the C. M., especially as the number in which Thinker's article was published contained a statement that this same belief had been held by an eminent christian philosopher.

The question at issue is not whether the Bible teaches miracles and special providences—all this is admitted. If the fact that the Bible teaches special providences is to be accepted as proof positive there are such things now, why may not the same reasoning be applied to miracles, and our sick treated by the Clergyman instead of the Physician? If miracles have ceased why not special providences also? There is no doubt but that He who made can change, but does He? We are not striving to find out whether God rules over all, and works in all, but we do consider it a worthy thing to investigate his modes of working, for if it is the glory of God to conceal a thing it is the honor of man to find it out.

It is no question that endangers Christian faith. The presence of God in and among his people, the communion of the believer with his great Head, by which he receives strength to combat his spiritual foes, and grows more and more to that mind that was in Christ, are rendered the more certain and precious, as he knows that all things are divine agents, and the means appointed are the certain means of success.

Humanity has received an immense impulse from Christianity. The questions which the believer in Christ is called upon to answer, are not merely those of the infidel and scoffer. The thinker and honest inquirer for truth find difficulties in their way.

There are many who will subscribe to a declaration of faith drawn up by a leader of their sect and really believe it to be the independent expression of their own opinions. There are many more who are compelled to think and examine for themselves. The attitude which the church will assume towards independent thought, the manner in which the honest questioner is to be met by us, are considerations of the utmost moment. There is room and work for such men in the world, and they are doing noble work there; we believe that there is room and work for them in the church, and in an age of much tiresome form and insincerity, we can ill afford to lose them. I do not know what precept of Christ will authorize us to tell them that they are infidels, and turn them away.

The manner in which our understanding of the true meaning of the gospel has grown, should teach us to be careful in pronouncing our own views final. Although we are not yet sufficiently christian to lay aside the old weapons of abuse and invective in discussing the great questions which shake the human mind, yet we can look back to many opinions once defended from the Bible which are now acknowledged to be contrary to its spirit. More than one of the leaders we venerate as masters in Israel have left upon their names the stain of blood. Science has again and again remodelled our views of certain parts of Scripture, and taught us their true meaning. Perhaps before long we may find that our received views of Bible Chronology—so-called—are entirely incorrect. The foundation on which our forefathers rested their opinions, are many of them considered insufficient by us who hold like views. During all this Christianity has remained the same, we have but grown to a clearer understanding of it. The error and evil amongst us are proof that we have not yet reached the fulness of light. There are evidences of progress still. Everywhere we hear the question repeated—"What is truth?" and creeds of every description are being put forward as answers. Never was there a greater responsibility resting upon the followers of Christ to deliver his message of good will, freed from the trammels of individual prejudice, the mistakes of Fathers and Reformers as well as from the decrees of Popes and Councils. Around the churches there are numbers of young men who honor Christ and admire christianity, but who are repelled by the narrow egotism with which the statement of its truths is so often accompanied. I by no means wish to give the impression that this is the universal or even general character of the doctrinal teachings of christians, but that it is often the case, I hear lamented by the most excellent among us, and it is I believe one of the most fruitful causes of skepticism.

It is not a fair way of meeting objectors to deliver our own opinions *ex cathedra*, and then spread clouds and darkness around the subject, and warn the enquirer not to pry into the secrets of the Most High. If God's providence cannot be explained, as I presume we all admit, why do we put forward our explanation warning men to differ from us at their peril. This reference to the mysterious is so convenient that there is danger of using it too freely, making it an excuse for laziness or unwillingness to examine the grounds of our belief, a thing which the christian should be ever ready to do. To one who is looking for a consistent faith these replies look very much like the *credo quia impossibile* we are accustomed to ridicule.

A wonderful thing which man cannot under-