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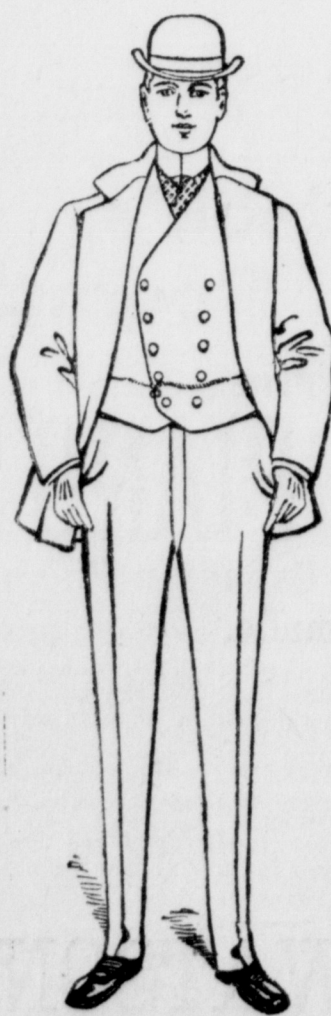
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THE BASIS OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF.

Below is given a sermon preached in Ottawa on June 16th by Rev. Dr. Fraser, of St. John, and published in the Ottawa Citizen of June the 17th. It is here prefaced with the introduction and comment of the Editor of the Citizen.

A significant incident of the pulpit supply provided by the general assembly of the Presbyterian church in Canada, now in session in this city, for various local pulpits, was the appointment by the committee having this matter in charge, of Rev. Daniel J. Fraser, LL.D., of St. Stephen's church, St. John, New Brunswick, to preach in the Church of Our Father, Unitarian, last evening. The liberality of the latter in inviting the assembly to provide a supply was rivaled by that of the former in sending one of its ablest preachers, and, as the sermon of last evening demonstrated, one of its most skillful dialecticians and Christian apologists to occupy that pulpit. The preacher was welcomed by a large audience and it is to his credit that he discharged his mission in such a manner as to excite the admiration of his hearers, and that without the sacrifice of an essential principle held by the best thinkers of the honored body of which he is a member. The preacher took for his text, Romans x. 8, "The word is nigh thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart, that is, the word of faith which we preach," and spoke as follows:

"The question is being earnestly asked today: What is the basis of religious belief? Or, to use the language of the late Dr. Martineau, what is the seat of authority in religion? Why do we believe in God, in Christ, in righteousness, in immortality, in the Bible? What final answer can we give to him that asketh of us a reason for the hope that is in us? Why do we believe in Christianity? Toss this question among a company of theologians, and you will likely stir up confusion. The church is the infallible source of religious belief, says the Roman and Anglo-Catholic. The Bible is the ultimate seat of authority in religion, says the evangelical Protestant. Reason is our final religious guide, says the Unitarian. And these will all have many and strong words to speak in behalf of their favorite claimants. My purpose now is to show that while there is truth in each of these contentions the deeper truth lies beneath them all.

"Reason as a candidate for the seat of authority the evangelical churches have been in the habit of dismissing in quite too summary a fashion. Many parts of our creed, they say, which we believe most firmly and from whose binding authority we cannot break away, are these before which reason is dumb. Many truths of our religion, while they do not oppose, yet transcend reason. Some of those religious facts which lie in the universal consciousness of the race are such as reason has not yielded us and reason can offer no ample apology for their persistence. But reason, as defined by many in the so-called liberal churches, can make no unworthy claim to a high place among religious guides. Dean Everett, of blessed memory, one of the greatest and best representatives of New England Unitarianism, shortly before his death began an article in the New World with these significant words:

REASON IS REASONING.

"Suppose a child to have this problem set before it: Given fifty dollars to be divided among five men, how many dollars will each man receive? This problem, however simple it may seem to us, we can imagine to be a little formidable to the child. It sets down its figures, adding ciphers to represent cents, and proceeds by long division. It reaches the result that each man will receive a hundred dollars. Now, whether it discovers the cause of its mistake or not, it might possibly be bright enough to see that the answer could not be right. This might be seen to be unreasonable. The child's reason might decide that the result of its reasoning was a mistake."

"Proceeding to apply this distinction between 'reason' and 'reasoning' to religion, he says: 'In the course of the history of Christianity, the Christian world in general has been made to believe many strange doctrines. One doctrine, for instance, that has been received by many with joy and has driven others insane, is that God elected from eternity some to everlasting joy, and some to everlasting and unmitigated torment. These doctrines have been reached by reasoning that seemed faultless. . . . But some were found to dispute them. These persons had little in the way of argument to offer. They rejected these doctrines because they were unreasonable. Men urged the unreasonableness of the result against the truth of the reasoning by which this result had been reached.'

"Now 'reason' in this comprehensive sense of the term is close akin to or embraces what we call 'intuition,' 'religious feeling,' 'Christian consciousness,' and I cannot see how the most orthodox Presbyterian can pick any serious quarrel with the Unitarian when he says that reason in this sense has its rightful place among religious authorities.

THE CHURCH AND THE BIBLE.

"The same acknowledgment may frankly be made of the claims of the church and the Bible respectively. But to which of these shall we give first place? The old question arises:—Did the Bible make the church or did the church make the Bible? The facts of history demand that we give first place in order of time to the church. The Hebrew church gave us the Old Testament, and the members of the Christian church wrote and collected into their present shape the books of the New Testament. Thus the Bible owes its existence to the church, and so far the church has the advantage over the Bible in its claim to be the seat of authority in religion. But has not the church been continued in existence by the Bible? We are surely not going too far when we say that the church has been nourished and kept alive by the scriptures—that the church almost owes its present existence to the Bible. The only way out of the confusion is to recognize the fact that the church and the Bible, which are sometimes put forth as rival candidates for supreme authority, are mutually dependent. The scriptures depend upon the church and the church depends upon the scriptures. This has been well illustrated by Professor Thayer, of Harvard, as follows: 'There is a young mother carrying her boy who cannot yet walk alone. Years passed on. There is a woman leaning on the arm of a strong man whose strength has been born of her and now supports her. It is the same mother, the same child.'

CHURCH NOT ALWAYS CONSISTENT.

"Is the church, however, a guide which is absolutely worthy of confidence? The decisions of the church have not always been consistent with one another, and the character of the men who have made decisions has sometimes been such as to weaken our faith in the truth of their verdict. If a man is selfish and impure, however high his office in the church, we cannot trust his judgement on religious things. It is only the pure in heart who see God, and only those who do the will of God can know His doctrine. Moreover, where is 'the' church to be found?

IS THE BIBLE INFALLIBLE?

"The Bible has a better claim, some of us think, to make on its behalf. But the Bible, too, is not always self-consistent. It contains the history of the revelation of God to humanity, and that revelation was gradual and progressive. Here a little and there a little—from strength to strength—the Bible grew. In the Old Testament we find a revelation which is comparatively dim, an imperfect thought of God and crude ideas of morality. The claim that the Bible as a whole is the infallible guide is being gradually replaced in evangelical circles so-called by the claim that the teaching of Jesus in the gospels, the words of Christ, the 'mind of the Master,' is the norm according to which every other scripture is to be tested and is our ultimate source of appeal in matters of religion. To our minds, perhaps, this absolute supremacy of Jesus may be entirely satisfactory; but there are those who will go further and ask: Why do you believe the teachings of Jesus? Is it on the authority of the Bible or of the church, or of reason? Thus we are brought again face to face with the ultimate question. Moreover, they ask, how do we know what Jesus said? How do we know what the Master's mind was? Are we not dependent for his teaching on the evangelists? They do not always pretend to give us His literal sayings, in their exact chronological order. Why do you accept their interpretation of Christ's mind as an infallible guide? Because they were inspired, you say? On whose authority do you believe that they were the divinely inspired interpreters of Jesus' thought? Is it on their own authority, that is, the authority of the Bible, or on the authority of the church, or on the authority of reason? Thus, you see, there is no possible escape from this fundamental question: What is our ultimate source of religious authority? The only satisfactory answer to my mind is this: God Himself is the supreme authority and the ultimate seat of appeal in matters of religion, and if you ask how are we to know where God has revealed his will, my reply is in the words of St. Paul: 'The word is nigh thee, even in thy heart and in thy mouth.'

HOW DID PAUL PREACH?

"St. Paul preached the gospel of Jesus Christ as an entirely new revelation to mankind, and how did he preach it? Did he appeal to the authority of the church? He sometimes did for reasons of diplomacy, but the teachings of the Hebrew Fathers did not bulk prominently in the sermons of St. Paul. He was regarded by many, indeed, in the church as a heretic, as one who had broken away from the historic faith, as a radical teacher who had no right to be called an apostle. He certainly did not quote the other apostles in favor of his gospel, for some of them, St. James, for instance, could have lent very little support to his presentation of Christianity.

"Did he quote the Bible in support of his message? Our text illustrates his method. He made a free paraphrase of a passage in Deuteronomy, which referred originally to the law of Moses, and he took the liberty of applying it to the gospel of Jesus. St. Paul,

in short, did not ultimately rely on any such external authority. He simply declared the gospel, assured that his hearers by virtue of the word in their own hearts could intuitively recognize its truth. This was the method, too, of the prophetic author of Deuteronomy, whose words St. Paul freely quoted. He declared the law. He did not argue for it. He did not bolster it up with external authorities. He let it carry with it its own evidence, conscious that the law engraven on the hearts of his readers would instinctively bear witness to its binding and necessary authority. This was also the method of Him who spake as never man spake. Jesus preached, proclaimed, declared. He did not argue, or quote authorities, or appeal to tradition—not at least for his essential principles. He simply declared what he had seen—what he knew to be the first principles of religion, its necessary truths, its fundamental ideas; and these were self-evident to every sane mind and heart.

"He argued not, but preached,
And conscience did the rest."

The word of God within His hearers responded to His teachings, and all healthy-minded people ever since acknowledge the supreme authority of the teaching of Jesus.

A UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLE.

"This is in accordance with a principle which holds good in all departments of knowledge. How do I know that the sun is shining in the heavens? My physical senses say so, and I accept their deliverance as final. How do I know that twice two is four? My mental sense says so, and I accept its testimony. How do I know that honesty is right? My moral sense makes the deliverance, and I accept it. Precisely so, we are endowed with a spiritual sense, a religious faculty, which yields us knowledge of the spiritual world, which brings to us the facts of religion. We have an inner eye which discerns the phenomena of religion, of the life of God in the soul of man. Its deliverances need no argument in their support, save the witness of our own religious consciousness. This then is the ultimate source of authority in religion—God who dwells within us—the Eternal Word which is in the heart of humanity and lighteth every man that cometh into the world—the pure soul which sees God face to face—the odyssey which knows divine doctrine—the sixth sense, the faculty of faith, which yields spiritual knowledge.

"It is not difficult then for us to understand why the church, the Bible and reason hold their own as well as they do, as sources of religious authority. If the best people are in the church, men of piety and goodness and obedience, their decision is of great authority. If the Bible was written by holy men of old who were inspired by the spirit of God, we must give their writings a high place in spiritual affairs. If reason be accepted as embracing intuition, then the poets and prophets who see God and declare his will to us may be taken as safe guides in religion.

CHRISTIAN CONSCIOUSNESS A SAFE GUIDE.

It is on the same principle that we appeal to the best people among ourselves in matters of religious difficulty. We feel sure that their grandeur of character—their largeness of faith—their highly enlightened Christian consciousness—eminently qualify them to be just judges of religious things. If a boy knows not which turn to take at some crossing of the ways, let him confide his difficulty to his pious mother, and she will guide him safely. If a minister is in doubt as to the truth of some religious teaching which he is about to give from his pulpit, he might do worse than consult some layman of truly religious character or some mother in Israel whose supreme prayer is 'Thy kingdom come.' Their unsophisticated opinion may be of more value to him than all the treatises of theologians or all the arguments of commentators. The pure in heart who see God, the poets who declare not what they have reasoned out but what their own eyes have seen of the Word of Life, the prophets who preach 'truth absolute,' what they have intuitively perceived of the things of God, are great authorities in religion. The Christian consciousness of the church, when it is pure and earnest, for the same reason is a safe religious guide. The Bible for the same reason occupies, I believe, the highest place, because it contains the teaching of Him who had the truest reverence, the largest faculty of faith, the richest spiritual consciousness of any teacher the world has ever seen.

WHY WE ACCEPT THE BIBLE.

"The Bible is the religion of Protestants' has become a proverb. The church to which I belong gives it first place among religious authorities; but why do we accept it as being or containing the word of God? It is not because the church commands us so to believe. It is not because the Bible makes the claim to be inspired. It is because the word of God within our own hearts bears witness to the word of God in Holy Scriptures. Here is a common meeting place for Presbyterians and Unitarians. This is no new doctrine of modern liberalism. It was the teaching of St. Paul. The word of God is not far from any one of us. It is not entrusted to some high dignitary of the church that we

should say:—Who will go up to him and bring it down to us? It is not buried in the depths of the Bible that we should send critics and exegetes to dig it up for us. But the word is nigh thee, even in thy heart and in thy mouth. It is a principle which was clearly recognized by the Westminster divines more than two and a half centuries ago, when they put into their great confession of faith, 'One full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority of scripture is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts.' God's voice within us testifies to God's voice in the Bible. Holy scripture, therefore, needs no defence at the hands of men. It needs no argument in favor of its divinity. It carries with it to every healthy mind its own evidence that it came from God. He that is of the truth will perceive its truth. He that is of God will hear God's word in the Bible. If a man can see no beauty in the Bible, nothing to inspire and uplift and ennoble his life, he needs not argument but spiritual eyesight. If a man cannot see the sun shining in the heavens, you need not argue with him; take him to an oculist. If a man cannot distinguish colors, he needs not argument but color education. If a man cannot distinguish between Old Hundred and God Save the King, there is no proof you can give him; he needs musical education or lacks musical capacity. So in religion, you cannot prove to a man what he does not see. He who scoffs at the Bible—who fails to catch its inspiration—the majesty and beauty of its thought—its power to quicken faith and hope and love—will ask in vain for any argument as proof that Holy scripture contains the Word of God. Such an one needs life not logic—eyesight not argument.

ALL SORTS OF BAD REASONS.

"In these days of criticism and controversy, even Presbyterians are giving all sorts of bad reasons for their faith in the Bible as the inspired word of God; but we really believe in it because the word of God within us witnesseth to the word of God in the Bible; because the Bible inspires us to sublime faith and surer hope and larger love. We do not believe in God because the Bible declares His existence, but we believe in the Bible because we are conscious of God and hear His voice in holy scripture. We do not believe in human duty because the Bible teaches it, but we believe in the Bible because its revelation of duty agrees with the deliverances of our own moral consciousness. This then is the bedrock of religious belief—our Christian consciousness, or, if you prefer, God dwelling within us. This was the test to which the books of the Bible were originally put. Various pieces of religious literature were scattered among the churches. These were gathered together and tested by the church. Those that did not appeal to the Christian consciousness of the church were rejected. Those which the Christian consciousness of the church accepted as useful religious guides were placed in the canon of the New Testament. This is one of the outstanding principles of the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther called the epistle of St. James a 'right strawy epistle,' and denied its right to be in the sacred canon. We may accept the collective consciousness of the church as of greater authority than the individual consciousness of Luther, but to deny such liberty today is to be false to the Protestant spirit. If we believe that the spirit of God still guides His church, the general assembly now in session has a perfect right to declare in favor of or against any part of the Old or New Testament. Men are clamoring loudly for the inspiration of the Bible—and it is a truth worth contending for—but let us never forget that the inspiration of the Bible reader is just as necessary as the inspiration of the Bible writer.

AN UNMOVABLE FOUNDATION.

"If we take our stand on the inspired Christian consciousness, we shall remain unmoved amid the storms of modern criticism. But if we pin our faith to any external authority, even to the letter of an inspired book, when any new discovery is made or any new theory of scholars is advanced which seems to threaten the trustworthiness of the book, we are panic-stricken, and the cry goes up: 'They have taken away my Bible and with it my God and my Christ and my immortality, and I know not where they have laid it.' To a deeper faith—to a far more sure and certain authority—let us all pass, even to the eternal verities of religion, the permanent truths of the Christian consciousness. Theology may change, but religion abides. Theories of inspiration come and go, but the work of God remains, attested by the abiding facts of the religious consciousness. The word of God is in our hearts and one jot or tittle of that word shall never pass away."

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