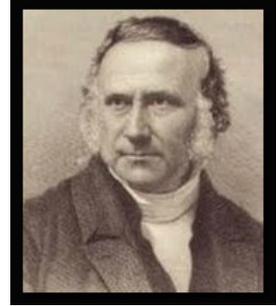


# *Doctrine Reconciled*



I casually met a member of my church in the street, and the nature of some conversation which was introduced, led him to ask me, if I recollected the conversation I had with him, at the time when he first called upon me for conversation upon the subject of religion. I had forgotten it entirely. He then referred to the period of his trouble, before he entertained any hope in Christ, and mentioned the particular subject about which he came to consult me. But I had no recollection of what I had said to him. He then stated the conversation in his own way, and I afterwards solicited of him the favor to write it down for me, which he kindly did, (omitting the name of the minister he mentioned,) and I here transcribe it from his letter, which lies before me.

“At a time when my thoughts were led, as I trust, by the Holy spirit, to dwell more than had been usual with me, on God and eternity in their relations to myself, and I was endeavoring to get light from a more particular examination of the doctrines of the Bible than I had ever before made; great difficulties were presented to my mind by the apparent inconsistency of one doctrine with another. I could believe them, each by itself; but could not believe them all together; and so great did this difficulty become, that it seemed to me like an insuperable obstacle in a narrow path, blocking up my way, and excluding all hope of progress. But I was still led to look at this obstacle with a sincere desire, I believe, for its removal.

“While in this state of mind, a friend solicited me to converse with a minister of much experience and high reputation for learning. I visited

him in his study, and was cordially invited to make known my feelings, with the promise of such assistance as he could render. I then asked, if he could explain to me how God could be the ever-present and ever-active sovereign of all things, controlling and directing matter and spirit, and man be left free in his ways and choice, and responsible for all his actions. He replied, that he thought he could explain and remove this difficulty; and commenced a course of argument and illustration, the peculiar mode and nature of which I have now forgotten, but in which my untrained mind soon became utterly lost and confused, as in a labyrinth. And when, after his remarks had been extended many minutes, he paused, and asked if I now apprehended the matter; I felt obliged to confess to him that I did not understand anything about it. He then (without any discourtesy, however,) intimated that my mind was not capable of mastering a logical deduction of that nature; and I retired somewhat mortified, and in much doubt whether the fault was in myself, the subject, or the reasoning I had heard.

“A short time after this, I called upon another well-known minister, who had invited any to visit him who were desirous of conversing on religious subjects. After a little general conversation, I repeated to him the same question that I had before addressed to the other minister, adding that I had been told that it could be clearly explained, and asking him if he could thus explain it to me. After a moment’s pause he made this reply,—‘No,—nor any other man that ever lived. If any man says he can explain that, he says what is not true.’ This short and somewhat abrupt answer, spoken with great emphasis, produced a remarkable effect upon my mind. A sense of the incomprehensibility of God seemed to burst upon me with great power. His doctrines now appeared to me as parts of His ways, and His ways as past finding out. I felt as if I had suddenly and almost violently been placed on the other side of the obstruction, which, with others of its kind, had blocked up my path. And although they were still there, and still objects of wonder and admiration, they were no longer in the way.

“After a few moments, my instructor added, that he thought he could convince me of the truth of the two doctrines I had named in connection; and by a short and simple course of argument, beginning with God as the Author of all things, he made more clear and distinct to my apprehension the entire sovereignty of God over all His works; and also on the other point, beginning with every man’s consciousness of freedom of will, he showed me the indisputable evidence on which that truth rests. And then alluding to the axiom, that all truth is consistent with itself, and separate truths with each other, he left the subject to my reflections.

“I may be permitted to add, that I do not pretend to judge of the wisdom of the modes adopted by these two ministers, as applied to other minds than my own,—but in my own case I very well know, that the most labored reasonings and explanations could not have been half as effectual in resolving my difficulty, as that plain, direct answer before quoted.

“Although years have elapsed since these conversations occurred, the one last mentioned is still vivid in my memory, and its permanent usefulness to me is frequently realized, when vain speculations on subjects not to be understood intrude themselves upon my mind.”

Things hidden belong to God: things revealed belong to us. Little is gained by attempting to invade the province of God’s mysteries. Every man will attempt it. Such is human nature. Mind will not willingly stop at the boundaries, which God has for the present prescribed for it. But in vain will it strive to overpass them. ‘We know in part. When that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.’

There is one great reason why we cannot know everything—simply because we are not God. The only real religious utility, which grows out of the attempt to understand things not revealed to us, is to be found in the fact that such an attempt may humble us: it may show us what inferior beings we are, how ignorant, how hemmed in on every side; and thus compel us to give God His own high place, infinitely above us, and hence infinitely beyond us.

If I am not mistaken, those men, those ministers, who so strenuously aim to vindicate God's ways to man, to make clear what God has not revealed, do, in fact, degrade our ideas of God more than they illuminate our understandings. They make God appear not so far off, not so much above us. If they suppose that they have shed any light upon those unrevealed things which belong to God, it is quite probable that they suppose so, very much because they have levelled down his character and ways towards the grade of their own. Thus they may lead us to pride, but not to humility; they have not brought us nearer to God, but have done something to make us feel that God is very like one of ourselves; they have not given us more knowledge, but convinced us (erroneously,) that we are not quite so ignorant and limited after all. This is an unhappy result. It would be better to have the opposite one, to make us feel that God is God, and therefore inscrutable. 'He holdeth back the face of his throne and spreadeth his cloud upon it.' Better far to show a sinner 'the cloud,' and hold his eye upon it, and make him stand in awe, and feel his own ignorance and insignificance, than to make him think (erroneously,) that there is no 'cloud' there.

Somewhere the human mind must stop. We cannot know everything. Much is gained when we become fully convinced of this; and something more is gained when we are led to see clearly the line, which divides the regions of our knowledge from the regions of our ignorance. That dividing line lies very much between facts and modes. The facts are on the one side of it, the modes are on the other. The facts are on our side, and are matters of knowledge to us (because suitably proved); the modes are on God's side, and are matters of ignorance to us (because not revealed). "How" God could be an efficient and sovereign Ruler over all things and yet man be free to will and to do, was the question which troubled this young man, when he first began to seek God. It was not a question of fact, but of mode, ("how?"), and therefore, not a thing of duty; and therefore, a thing of difficulty to him, if he chose to meddle with it.

Now what should I say to him? It seemed to me, to be at once honest and wise to tell him the plain truth,—“No,—nor any other man; no man ever did explain it, or ever will. If any man says he can explain it, he says what is not true.” That was the fit answer, because the true one. The young man in his account of that answer, very politely calls it “somewhat abrupt;” but he might very justly have called it by a less gentle name, blunt. In my opinion, that was the very excellence of it—that is the reason why the answer answered its purpose. It was the truth condensed and unmistakable. At a single dash it swept away his army of difficulties. It showed him that he had been laboring at an impossibility—at a thing beyond man—a thing with which he had nothing to do, but believe it and let it alone, and let God take care of it. He says, “a sense of the incomprehensibility of God seemed to burst upon me with great power. His doctrines now appeared to me as parts of His ways, and His ways as past finding out.” Again he says, “the most labored reasonings and explanations could not have been half as effectual in resolving my difficulty, as that plain, direct answer.” Its excellence consisted in this—it was plain, just the whole, blunt truth. He says it was “permanently useful,” to keep him from “vain speculations.” Its utility was just this: it led him to give God the place which belongs to Him, and take his own.

His trouble undoubtedly was, that he could not see “how” the doctrines he mentioned were reconcilable. But they did not need any reconciling. They do not quarrel. *God is an efficient sovereign over all.* That is one of the doctrines; and it was easily demonstrated to his entire satisfaction. Anybody can demonstrate it. *Man is free and accountable.* That is the other doctrine; and it was easily demonstrated. Anybody can demonstrate it. Both the doctrines are true, therefore, and hence they need no reconciling. There is no inconsistency betwixt them. That is enough.

If anyone choose to attempt to go beyond this, and by any metaphysical explanation of God’s sovereign efficiency on the one hand, and man’s freedom on the other, explain “how” the two things can be

true, he will flounder in the mud—he will ‘darken counsel by words without knowledge.’

An unconverted sinner is not reconciled to God, and this is the very reason why he is not reconciled to the doctrines of God. In my opinion these doctrines ought always to be presented in such a manner as to indicate their high origin, as to show they are like God. Then, an unconverted sinner will be apt to see that he dislikes the doctrines, just because he dislikes God; and thus his convictions of an evil heart will become more fixed and clear; or, at least, he will perceive that the doctrines are just such as he ought to expect, because they precisely accord with their Infinite Author. Let him be reconciled to God, and he will find little trouble with the doctrines. But let him be reconciled to God as He is, an incomprehensible sovereign, an infinite mystery to a finite mind, ‘the high and lofty One, who inhabiteth eternity.’ If he is reconciled to false notions of God, all his religion will be likely to be false. A comprehensible God is no God at all, for what is comprehensible is not infinite. Let men beware of ‘intruding into those things which they have not seen, vainly puffed up with their fleshly mind.’