

**VEXED QUESTIONS
IN THEOLOGY: A
SERIES OF ESSAYS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649050352

Vexed Questions in Theology: A Series of Essays by James Freeman Clarke

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JAMES FREEMAN CLARKE

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A SERIES OF ESSAYS

BY

JAMES FREEMAN CLARKE



BOSTON

GEO. H. ELLIS, 141 FRANKLIN STREET

1886

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The Five Points of Calvinism and the Five Points of the New Theology.

"And thou shalt make . . . five pillars, and overlay them with gold, . . . and shalt cast five sockets of brass for them."—EXODUS xxiv., 37.

THE number five has acquired as great significance in theology as it has in nature. The largest family of plants is that of which the flowers have five petals; and the most popular theology of modern times is that of Calvin with its five points of doctrine, which relate to Absolute Decrees, Atonement by Christ for the Elect only, Original Sin, Effectual Calling, and the Perseverance of Saints.

Such have been the main and essential doctrines of Orthodoxy in the past. These doctrines have revolved around the ideas of sin and salvation. The creeds are as remarkable for what they omit as for what they assert. They scarcely allude to those truths which Jesus makes the chief burden of his teaching,—love to God, love to man, forgiveness of enemies, purity of heart and life, faith, hope, peace, resignation, temperance, and goodness. It is certain that the theology of the future will dwell on something else than

the five points of Calvinism, and I have thought it well to consider the counterparts of this ancient system in five points of the coming theology. Let us endeavor to see what they will be.

1. I believe the first point of doctrine in the theology of the future will be the *Fatherhood of God*. The essence of this is the love of the father for his children. Fatherly love is a wise love, a firm love, and a pure love, which seeks the best good of the child. Thus this idea of fatherhood includes that of the holiness, the truthfulness, and the justice of God,—in a word, all the divine attributes. The justice of God as a father is not, as in the old theology, an abstract justice, which has no regard to consequences. God's justice is only another form of mercy. It is the wise law which brings good to the universe, and is a blessing to every creature.

Jesus has everywhere emphasized this truth, that God is a father. We find it pervading the Gospels and coloring all his teaching. We find it already in the Sermon on the Mount, which tells us that we are to let our light shine, not to glorify ourselves, but to glorify our Father in heaven; that we are to love our enemies, that we may be like our heavenly Father, who loves his enemies, and makes his sun rise on the evil and the good. Jesus tells us that, when we pray, we are to pray to our Father, not to infinite power or abstract justice or far-off sovereignty. We are to forgive others, because our Father in heaven forgives us. We are not to be anxious, remembering that our heavenly Father feeds the little birds of the air. We are to pray, confident that our heavenly Father will

give good things to those who ask him. Thus, this idea of God pervades the earliest as it filled the latest teachings of Jesus.

This idea of the divine fatherhood goes down so deep into the human heart that it becomes the source of a childlike obedience, trust, submission, patience, hope, and love. It brings consolation to us in our trials, gives us earnestness in prayer, makes it less difficult to repent when we have done wrong. We look up out of our sin and weakness and sorrow, not to an implacable law, not to an abstract king, but to an infinite and inexhaustible tenderness. Thus, this doctrine is the source of the purest piety.

2. The second point of doctrine in the new theology will be, I think, the *Brotherhood of Man*.

If men are children of the same father, then they are all brethren. If God loves them all, they must all have in them something lovable. If he has brought them here by his providence, they are here for some important end. Therefore, we must call no man common or unclean, look down upon none, despise none, but respect in all that essential goodness which God has put into the soul, and which he means to be at last unfolded into perfection.

As from the idea of the fatherhood of God will come all the pieties, so from that of the brotherhood of man will proceed all the charities. This doctrine is already the source of missions, philanthropies, reforms, and all efforts to seek and save those who are surrounded by evil. It leads men to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, to teach the blind, to soothe the madness of delirium, to diffuse knowledge, and carry glad tid-

ings to the poor. And this doctrine, when fully believed, will be the source of purer moralities and nobler charities.

This truth, also, Jesus has taught by his words and his life. He went about doing good, feeding the hungry, making the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the lame to walk, cleansing the leper, preaching the gospel to the poor. He was the friend of publicans and sinners, of the Roman centurion, the woman of Phœnicia, the woman of Samaria. He was the friend and helper of all who needed him. In the story of the Good Samaritan, he taught that all men are brethren. And his last recorded words were the command to preach the gospel to every creature.

3. The third point of doctrine in the new theology will be, as I think, the *Leadership of Jesus*.

The simplest definition of a Christian is one who follows Christ. This was his own definition: "My sheep hear my voice, and follow me." "I am the way and the truth and the life." "Come to me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden." When Mary sat at the feet of Jesus, and heard his words, he said that she had chosen the good part, and had done the one thing needful.

A Platonist is one who studies the teachings of Plato, and takes him for his teacher and guide in philosophy. A Swedenborgian is one who studies the teachings of Swedenborg, and takes him for his guide in theology. A Christian is one who takes Jesus as his guide in religion, and who goes directly to his teachings for religious truth.

But hitherto, instead of considering those as Chris-

tians who have studied the words of Jesus, and sought to know the truth, the name has usually been given to those who accepted some opinion about him. Not what he himself teaches, but what the Church says he teaches, has been made the test of Christian fellowship. Men have been told to go to Jesus, but on the understanding that they shall learn from him only the same thing which the Church has already learned. Instead of sending us to the teacher himself, we are sent to our fellow-students. We, therefore, in reality take them, and not Jesus, for our leader.

The Athanasian Creed asserts as unquestioned verities certain metaphysical statements in regard to the nature of the Deity and the relations which existed between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit before the creation. These speculations are read four times a year in the Church of England, and the people are told that those who do not believe these superhuman mysteries shall without doubt perish everlastingly. Is it not evident that the Church, in doing this, takes the unknown author of the creed as its leader and teacher instead of taking Christ himself? All human creeds which are made the tests of what Christ taught are in reality put in his place. Compared with his teaching, they are all narrow and unspiritual. They emphasize some purely intellectual statements which chanced to be popular when they were written. The makers of these creeds tell us to call Jesus teacher, but to learn from themselves what he teaches. They show thus that they dare not trust us to go to him; and they show that they have no real faith in him as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.