

the formation and the union to the soul—which they generally held to have been, during the intervening period, in a state of insensibility—of a different body. Eternal punishment, of course, was inconsistent with all their notions of the divine character and government, of the nature and demerit of sin, and the design and end of punishment. But they have been a good deal divided among themselves between the two theories of the entire destruction or final annihilation of the wicked, and the ultimate restoration of all men to the enjoyment of eternal blessedness after a period, more or less protracted, of penal suffering. The older Socinians generally adopted the doctrine of the annihilation of the wicked, though they sought somewhat to conceal this, by confining themselves very much to the use of the scriptural language, of their being subjected to eternal death;* while modern Socinians, with very few exceptions, advocate the doctrine of universal restoration, or the final and eternal happiness of all intelligent creatures, and hold this to be necessarily involved in, and certainly deducible from, right views of the Divine perfections.

I need not dwell upon the views of Socinians, in regard to the nature of the Christian church, and the object and efficacy of the sacraments. As the sole object of the appearance of Christ upon earth, and of the whole Christian scheme, was merely to communicate to men instruction or information, and not to procure for them, and bestow upon them, the forgiveness of their sins,—the enjoyment of God's favour,—and the renovation of their natures,—of course the objects of the church and the sacraments, viewed as means or instruments, must be wholly restricted within the same narrow range. The church is not, in any proper sense, a divine institution; and does not consist of men called by the almighty grace of God out of the world, and formed by Him into a peculiar society, the constitution of which He has established, and which He specially governs and superintends. It is a mere voluntary association of men, who are naturally drawn together, because they happen to have adopted somewhat similar views upon religious subjects, and

* Wakefield held the doctrine of annihilation; while Priestley, after hesitating long between the doctrines of annihilation and universal restitution, finally adopted the latter.

Estlin's Discourses on the Universal Restitution, pp. 69-72.

Dr Lant Carpenter's Examination of Magee's Charges against Unitarians and Unitarianism, 1820, c. iii., pp. 40-44.

who seek to promote one another's welfare, in the way that may seem best to their own wisdom; while the sacraments are intended to *teach* men, and to impress divine truth upon their minds, and are *in no way whatever* connected with any act on God's part in the communication of spiritual blessings.

I have thus given a brief sketch of the Socinian system of theology, and I would now make one or two reflections obviously suggested by the survey of it. It is manifestly, as I formerly explained, a full scheme or system, extending over all the leading topics of theology. It is plainly characterized throughout by perfect unity and harmony, by the consistency of all its parts with each other, and by the pervading influence of certain leading features and objects. It might, we think, be shown that the Socinian system of theology is the only consistent rival to the Calvinistic one; and that when men abandon the great features of the scriptural system of Calvinism, they have no firm and steady resting-place on which they can take their stand, until they sink down to Socinianism. It is very evident that the Socinian system presents a striking contrast, not only to the views of doctrine which have been generally professed and maintained by Christian churches, but to what seems *prima facie* to be plainly and palpably taught in Scripture. It must present itself to the minds of men, who have become at all familiar with scriptural statements, in the light of an opposition scheme, fitted and intended to counteract and neutralize all that Christianity seems calculated to teach and to effect; and a thorough investigation of the grounds of the attempts which Socinians have made to show that their system of theology is consistent with Scripture and sanctioned by it, will only confirm this impression. Socinianism has been openly and avowedly maintained only by an inconsiderable number of professing Christians,—many of those who held the leading principles of the Socinian scheme of theology having thought it more honest and straightforward to deny at once the truth of Christianity, than to pretend to receive it, and then to spend their time, and waste their ingenuity, in labouring to show that the scheme of scriptural doctrine was, in almost every important particular, the very reverse of what the first promulgators of the system plainly understood and intended it to be. The churches of Christ, in general, have held themselves fully warranted in denying to Socinians the name and character of Christians; and the ground of this denial

is quite sufficient and satisfactory,—namely this, that Socinianism is a deliberate and determined rejection of *the whole substance of the message* which Christ and His apostles conveyed from God to men. The Racovian Catechism * asserts that those who refuse to invoke and worship Christ are not to be reckoned Christians, though they assume His name, and profess to adhere to His doctrine,—thus excluding from the pale of Christianity the great body of those who, in modern times, have adopted the leading features of that scheme of theology which the old Socinians advanced. And if the denial of worship to Christ was, as the old Socinians believed, a sufficient ground for denying to men the name of Christians, it must surely be thoroughly warrantable to deny the name to men who refuse not only to pay religious worship to Christ, but to receive and submit to anything that is really important and vital in the revelations which He communicated to men.

Mr Belsham, the leader of the English Socinians in the last generation, has distinctly stated that the only thing peculiar in Christianity, or the Christian revelation,—the only point in which it differs from, or goes beyond, the natural religion that may be discovered and established by men in the exercise of their own unaided powers,—is simply *the fact of the resurrection of a dead man*, and the confirmation thereby given to the doctrine of a future immortality. Now, perhaps we are not entitled to deny that Socinians are really persuaded of the sufficiency of the evidence by which it is proved that Christ rose from the dead, and that they hold the doctrine of a future immortality more firmly and steadily than it was held by Plato or Cicero. But if, professing to receive Christ as a divine messenger on the ground of the proof of His resurrection, they yet reject the whole substance of the message which He professed to bring from God to men, we cannot concede to them the character or designation of disciples or followers of Christ. A Christian must, at least, mean one who believes Christ to have been a divine messenger, *and who receives as true the substance of the message which He bore*; and in whatever way we explain the entire dissolution and breaking up, in the case of the Socinians, of the right and legitimate connection that ought to subsist between the admission of the authority of the messenger and the reception of His message, we cannot recognise as Chris-

* Sec. vi., p. 92.

tians men who refuse to believe almost everything which Christ and His apostles taught, and whose whole system of theology,—whose leading views of the character and government of God, the condition and capacities of men, and the way in which they may attain to final happiness,—are just the same as they would be if they openly denied Christ's divine commission,—not only uninfluenced by the revelation He communicated, but directly opposed to it.

But while Socinianism has not been, to any very considerable extent, openly avowed and formally defended in the Christian church, and while those who have avowed and defended it have commonly and justly been regarded as not entitled to the designation of Christians, yet it is important to observe, that there has always been a great deal of latent and undeveloped Socinianism among men who have professed to believe in the truth of Christianity; and the cause of this, of course, is, that Socinianism, in its germs or radical principles, is the system of theology that is natural to fallen and depraved man,—that which springs up spontaneously in the human heart, unenlightened by the Spirit of God, and unrenewed by divine grace. It has been often said that men are born Papists; and this is true in the sense that there are natural and spontaneous tendencies in men, out of which the Popish system readily grows, and which make it an easy matter to lead unrenewed men to embrace it. Still it does require *some* care and culture to make a natural man, who has not been subjected to the system from his infancy, a Papist, though the process in ordinary cases is not a very difficult or a very elaborate one. But it requires *no* care or culture whatever to make natural men Socinians,—nothing but the mere throwing off of the traditional or consuetudinary respect in which, in Christian countries, they may have been bred for the manifest sense of Scripture. The more intelligent and enlightened Pagans, and the followers of Mahomet, agree in substance with the whole leading features of the Socinian theology; and if we could bring out and estimate the notions that float in the minds of the great body of irreligious and ungodly men among professing Christians, who have never thought seriously upon religious subjects, we would find that they just constitute the germs, or radical principles, of Socinianism. Take any one of the mass of irreligious men, who abound in professedly Christian society around us,—a man, it may be, who has never entertained any doubts of the truth of Christianity, who has never

thought seriously upon any religious subject, or attempted to form a clear and definite conception upon any theological topic,—try to probe a little the vague notions which lie undeveloped in his mind about the divine character, the natural state and condition of man, and the way of attaining to ultimate happiness; and if you can get materials for forming any sort of estimate or conjecture as to the notions or impressions upon these points that may have spontaneously, and without effort, grown up in his mind, you will certainly find, that, without being aware of it, he is practically and substantially a Socinian. The notions and impressions of such men upon all religious subjects are, of course, very vague and confused; but it will commonly be found that, in their inmost thoughts,—in the ordinary and spontaneous current of their impressions, in so far as they have any, in regard to religion,—Christ, as the Saviour of sinners, and the atonement as the basis or ground of salvation, are virtually shut out, or reduced to mere names or unmeaning formulæ; that the Christian scheme, in so far as it is taken into account, is viewed merely as a revelation or communication of some information about God and duty; and that their hopes of ultimate happiness, in so far as they can be said to have any, are practically based upon what they themselves have done, or can do, viewed in connection with defective and erroneous conceptions of the character and moral government of God, while a definite conviction of the certainty of future punishment has no place in their minds. Now, this is, in substance, just the Socinian system of theology; and if these men were drawn out, so as to be led to attempt to explain and defend the vague and confused notions upon these subjects which had hitherto lurked undeveloped in their minds, it would plainly appear,—*provided* they had intelligence enough to trace somewhat the logical relation of ideas, and courage enough to disregard the vague deference for the obvious sense of Scripture, and for the general belief of Christian churches, to which they had become habituated,—that they were obliged to have recourse to Socinian arguments as the only means of defence; unless, indeed, they should reach the higher intelligence, or the greater courage, of openly rejecting Christianity altogether, as teaching a system of doctrine irrational and absurd.

This is, I am persuaded, a correct account of the general state of feeling and impression, in regard to religious subjects, existing in the minds of the great body of the ignorant, unreflecting, and

irreligious men around us, in professedly Christian society; and if so, it goes far to prove that, while there is not a great deal of open and avowed Socinianism maintained and defended among us, yet that it exists to a large extent in a latent and undeveloped form, and that it is the natural and spontaneous product of the depraved, unrenewed heart of man, exhibiting its natural tendencies in the formation of notions and impressions about God and divine things, and the way of attaining to ultimate happiness, which are not only unsanctioned by the revelation which God Himself has given us in regard to these matters, but are flatly opposed to it.

In these circumstances, it is perhaps rather a subject for surprise that there should be so little of open and avowed Socinianism among us; and the explanation of it is probably to be found in these considerations:—that in the existing condition of society there are many strong influences and motives to restrain men from throwing off a profession of a belief in Christianity;—that there obtains a strong sense of the impossibility, or great difficulty, of effecting anything like an adjustment between the Socinian system of theology, and the obvious meaning and general tenor of Scripture;—and that an attempt of this sort, which should possess anything like plausibility, requires an amount of ingenuity and information, as well as courage, which few comparatively possess. It is in entire accordance with these general observations, that the strain of preaching which prevailed in the Established Churches of this country during the last century,—in the Church of England during the whole century, and in the Church of Scotland during the latter half of it,—was in its whole scope and tendency Socinian. It is admitted, indeed, that the great mass of the clergy of both churches, during the period referred to, were guiltless of any knowledge of theology, or of theological speculations and controversies; and that their preaching, in general, was marked rather by the entire omission, than by the formal and explicit denial, of the peculiar and fundamental doctrines of the Christian system. Still this is quite sufficient to entitle us to call their system of preaching Socinian, as *it left out* the doctrines of the natural guilt and depravity of man,—the divinity and atonement of Christ,—justification by His righteousness,—and regeneration and sanctification by His Spirit; and addressed men as if they were quite able,—without any satisfaction for their sins,—without any renovation of their

moral natures,—without any special supernatural assistance, to do all that was necessary for securing their eternal happiness, and needed only to be reminded of what their duty was, and of the considerations that should induce them to give some attention to the performance of it. And we find likewise, as we might have expected, if the preceding observations are well founded, that whenever any man arose among them who combined superior intelligence, information, and courage, and who was led to attempt to explain and defend his views upon religious subjects, he certainly, and as a matter of course, took Socinian ground, and employed Socinian arguments.

Sec. IV.—Original and Recent Socinianism.

Before concluding this brief sketch of the Socinian system in general, viewed as a whole, it may be proper to advert to the differences, in point of theological sentiment, between the original and the modern Socinians. Those who, in modern times, have adopted and maintained the great leading principles of the theological system taught by Socinus, commonly refuse to be called by his name, and assume and claim to themselves the designation of Unitarians,—a name which should no more be conceded to them, than that of Catholic should be conceded to Papists, as it implies, and *is intended* to imply, that they *alone* hold the doctrine of the unity of God; while, at the same time, it does not in the least characterize their peculiar opinions as distinguished from those of the Arians, and others who concur with them, in denying the doctrine of the Trinity. They hold all the leading characteristic principles of the system of theology originally developed and compacted by Socinus; and therefore there is nothing unfair, nothing inconsistent with the well understood and reasonable enough practice that ordinarily regulates the application of such designations, in calling them Socinians. They are fond, however, of pointing out the differences, in some respects, between their views and those of the original Socinians, that they may thus lay a plausible foundation for repudiating the name; and it may be useful briefly to notice the most important of these differences.

Socinus and his immediate followers displayed a great deal of ingenuity and courage in devising and publishing a series of plausible perversions of Scripture statements, for the purpose of

excluding from the Bible the divinity and the satisfaction of Christ; but there were some of the views commonly entertained by the orthodox, connected with these matters, which,—though tending rather to enhance our conceptions of the importance of Christ and His work, viewed in relation to the salvation of sinners,—they had not sufficient ingenuity and courage to explain away and reject. These were chiefly His miraculous conception; His having been literally in heaven before He commenced His public ministry; His being invested after His resurrection with great power and dignity, for the government of the world,—for the accomplishment of the objects of His mission, and the final judgment of men; and His being entitled, *on this ground*, to adoration and worship. Socinus and his immediate followers, though certainly they were not lacking in ingenuity and boldness, and though they could not but feel the inconsistency, at least, of the adoration of Christ with the general scope and tendency of their system, were unable to devise any plausible contrivance for excluding these doctrines from Scripture. The miraculous conception of Christ they admitted, but contended, and truly enough, that this of *itself* did not *necessarily* imply either His pre-existence, or any properly superhuman dignity of nature. The texts which so plainly assert or imply that He had been in heaven before He entered upon His public ministry on earth, they could explain only by fabricating the supposition that He was taken up to heaven to receive instruction during the period of His forty days' fast in the wilderness. And they were unable to comprehend how man could profess to believe in the divine authority of the New Testament, and yet deny that Christ is now invested with the government of the world; that He is exercising His power and authority for promoting man's spiritual welfare; that He is one day to determine and judge their final destiny; and that He is entitled to their homage and adoration.

But modern Socinians have found out pretences for evading or denying all these positions. They deny Christ's miraculous conception, and maintain that He was the son of Joseph as well as of Mary, mainly upon the ground of some frivolous pretences for doubting the genuineness of the first two chapters both of Matthew and Luke. Dr Priestley admitted that he was not quite satisfied with any interpretation of the texts that seem to assert that Christ had been in heaven before He taught on earth; but

he gravely assures us that, rather than admit His pre-existence, he would adopt the exploded interpretation of the old Socinians, or make any other supposition that might be necessary, however absurd or offensive.* Mr Belsham, while he admits that "Christ is now alive, and employed in offices the most honourable and benevolent," yet considers himself warranted in believing that "we are *totally ignorant* of the place where He resides, and of the occupations in which He is engaged;" and that, therefore, "there can be no proper foundation for religious addresses to Him, nor of gratitude for favours now received, nor yet of confidence in His future interposition in our behalf;"† while he contends that all that is implied in the scriptural account of His judging the world, is simply this,—that men's ultimate destiny is to be determined by the application of the instructions and precepts which He delivered when on earth. This was the state of completeness or perfection to which Socinianism had attained in the last generation, or in the early part of this century. There was but one step more which they could take in their descent, and this was the entire adoption of the infidel anti-supernaturalism of the German neologians; and *this* step most of them, within these few years, have taken, both in the United States and in this country. Professor Moses Stuart of Andover, in his Letters to Dr Channing,‡—a very valuable little work on the Trinity and the Divinity of Christ, though not to be implicitly followed,—expressed, in 1819, his apprehension that the Socinians, as soon as they became acquainted with the writings of the German neologians, would embrace their principles, would abandon their elaborate efforts to pervert scriptural statements into an apparent accordance with their views, and adopt the bolder course of openly rejecting the doctrines taught by the apostles as erroneous, while still pretending, in some sense, to believe in the Christian revelation. This apprehension was speedily realized to a large extent in the United States, and is now being realized in this country; so that there seems to be ground to expect that Socinianism proper, as a public profession, will soon be wholly extinguished, and the pantheistic infidelity of Germany, though under a sort of profession of Christianity, be substituted in its place. Perhaps it would be more correct to say

* Magee's Works, vol. i., p. 59.

† Magee, vol. ii., p. 32; Belsham, "Calm Inquiry," pp. 325, 345.

‡ Letter v., pp. 134-5.

that this has already taken place; for we are not aware that any of those amongst us who used to assume the designation of Unitarians, now openly reject or oppose the pantheistic infidelity which is being so largely circulated in this country.

When this change began to show itself among the American Socinians, it was avowedly advocated by themselves on the ground of the necessity of having some system of religion more spiritual and transcendental,—more suited to the temperament and the aspirings of an earnest age,—than the dry, uninteresting intellectualism of the old Socinians. It was with this view that they had recourse to the pantheism and neology of Germany, which, combining easily with a sort of mystical supersensualism, was fitted to interest the feelings, and to bring into exercise the emotional department of our nature. This is the sort of religion that is now obtruded upon the more literary portion of our community instead of the old Socinianism, which was addressed exclusively to the understanding, and was fitted to exercise and gratify the pride of human reason. It is well to know something of the peculiar form and dress which error in religious matters assumes in our own age and country; but it may tend to guard us against the deluding influence of transcendentalism in religion, if we are satisfied,—as a very little reflection may convince us,—that, with a considerable difference in its dress and garnishing, with a larger infusion of Scripture phraseology, and with much more of an apparent sense and feeling of the unseen and the infinite, it is just, *in its substance*, the old Socinianism, both with respect to the way and manner of knowing divine things, and with respect to the actual knowledge of them obtained in this way. It does not constitute an *essential* difference, that, instead of giving to reason, or the understanding, a supremacy over revelation, and making it the final immediate judge of all truth, the new system extends this controlling power to man's *whole* nature, to his susceptibilities as well as his faculties, and assigns a large influence in judging of divine things to his intuitions and emotions; and the vague and mystic style of contemplation in which it indulges about God, and Christ, and eternity, does not prevent its actual theological system from being fairly described as involving a denial of the guilt and depravity of man, the divinity and atonement of Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit, and an assertion of man's full capacity to work out for himself, without any satisfaction for his

sins, or any renovation of his moral nature, the full enjoyment of God's favour, and the highest happiness of which he is capable; while the only point in which it does differ essentially from the old Socinianism,—namely, the denial of a supernatural revelation, attested by real miracles, which are established by satisfactory historical evidence,—should remove at once every feeling of doubt or difficulty about the propriety of denouncing it as a system of open infidelity.

Sec. V.—Distinction of Persons in the Godhead.

Though I have thought it of some importance to give a brief sketch of Socinian theology in general, viewed as a system, and embodying positive doctrines and not mere negations, in regard to all the leading topics which are usually discussed in theological systems, yet I do not mean to enter into anything like a detailed examination and refutation of all the different doctrines of which it is composed, but to confine myself to those with which, in popular apprehension, the name of Socinianism is usually associated,—namely, the Trinity, and the person and atonement of Christ. Their doctrines upon these points may be said to form the chief peculiarities of the Socinians; and their whole system of doctrine is intimately connected with their views upon these subjects. Besides, I have already had occasion to consider most of the other branches of the Socinian system of theology under other heads,—as in examining the Pelagian controversy, where we met with errors and heresies, substantially the same as those taught by modern Socinians, in regard to the natural character and capacities of man, and the operation and influence of divine grace in preparing men for the enjoyment of happiness;—and still more fully in examining the Popish system of doctrine as contrasted with the theology of the Reformation. The Church of Rome teaches defective and erroneous doctrines concerning the natural guilt and depravity of man, his natural power or ability to do the will of God, regeneration by the Holy Spirit, and everything connected with his justification, or the way and manner in which men individually obtain or receive the forgiveness of sin and admission to the enjoyment of God's favour,—although the formal Popish doctrine upon most of these subjects is not so flatly and plainly opposed to the word of God as that held upon the same points by Socinians, and even

by many who have passed under the name of Arminians. But as we then endeavoured not only to point out the errors of the Church of Rome upon these topics, but also to explain and illustrate the true doctrines of Scripture respecting them, as taught by the Reformers and laid down in our Confession of Faith, we have said as much as is necessary for the purpose of exposing Pelagian and Socinian errors regarding them. The subject of the Trinity and the person of Christ we have also had occasion to consider, in adverting to the Arian, Nestorian, and Eutychian controversies in the fourth and fifth centuries. We have not, however, discussed these doctrines so fully as their importance demands in some of their general aspects; and we propose now to devote some space to an explanation of the way and manner in which these important doctrines have been discussed in more modern times.

We proceed, then, to consider the doctrine of the distinction of persons in the Godhead. This is commonly discussed in systems of theology under the head "*De Deo*," as it is a portion of the information given us in Scripture with respect to the Godhead, or the divine nature; and the knowledge of it is necessary, if the commonly received doctrine be true, in order to our being acquainted with the whole of what Scripture teaches us concerning God. If there be such a distinction in the Godhead or divine nature, as the received doctrine of the Trinity asserts, then this distinction, as a reality, ought to enter into our conceptions of God. We ought to be aware of its existence,—to understand it, as far as we have the capacity and the means of doing so; and we ought to take it into account in forming our conception of God, even independently of its connection with the arrangements of the scheme of redemption, though it is in *these* that it is most fully unfolded, and that its nature and importance most clearly appear.

There are one or two obvious reflections, suggested by the general nature and character of the subject, to which it may be proper to advert, though it is not necessary to enlarge upon them. The subject, from its very nature, not only relates immediately to the infinite and incomprehensible Godhead, but concerns what may be regarded as the *penetralia* or innermost recesses of the divine nature,—the most recondite and inaccessible department of all that we have ever learned or heard concerning God. It is a subject about which reason or natural theology,—in other words, the works of nature and providence, with the exercise of our

faculties upon them,—give us no information, and about which we know, and *can know* nothing, except in so far as God Himself may have been pleased to give us a direct and immediate revelation concerning it. These considerations are surely well fitted to repress any tendency to indulge in presumptuous speculations with respect to what may be true, or possible, or probable, in regard to this profoundly mysterious subject; and to constrain us to preserve an attitude of profound humility, while we give ourselves to the only process by which we can learn anything with certainty regarding it,—namely, the careful study of God's word,—anxious only to know what God has said about it, what conceptions He intended to convey to us regarding it,—and ready to receive with implicit submission whatever it shall appear that He has declared or indicated upon the subject.

The way in which this question ought to be studied is by collecting together all the statements in Scripture that seem to be in any way connected with it,—that seem, or have been alleged, to assert or to indicate some distinction in the Godhead or divine nature,—to investigate carefully and accurately the precise meaning of all these statements by the diligent and faithful application of all the appropriate rules and materials,—to compare them with each other,—to collect their joint or aggregate results,—and to embody these results in propositions which may set forth accurately the substance of *all* that Scripture really makes known to us regarding it. It is only when we have gone through such a process as this, that we can be said to have done full justice to the question,—that we have really formed our views of it from the word of God, the only source of knowledge respecting it,—and that we can be regarded as fully qualified to defend the opinions we may profess to entertain upon it.

The first point which we are naturally called upon to advert to is the *status questionis*, or what it is precisely that is respectively asserted and maintained by the contending parties. And here we may, in the first instance, view it simply as a question between Trinitarians on the one side, and anti-Trinitarians on the other, without any reference to the differences subsisting among the various sections of the anti-Trinitarians, such as the Arians and the Socinians, about the person of Christ. The substance of what the supporters of the doctrine of the Trinity contend for is, that in the unity of the Godhead there are three distinct persons,

who all possess the divine nature or essence, and that these three persons are not three Gods, but are the one God; while the doctrine maintained on the other side is, that the Scripture does not reveal any such distinction in the divine nature, but that God is one in person as well as in essence or substance; and that the divine nature, or true and proper divinity, is really possessed by no person except by Him who is styled in Scripture the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now here, before going further, it is to be observed that there is brought out an *intelligible difference of opinion*, even though the subject treated of be in its nature and bearings incomprehensible, and though we may not be able to give a precise and exact definition of all the terms employed in the statement of the proposition,—such as the word person in the application here made of it. These two opposite propositions are at least intelligible thus far, that we can form a pretty definite conception of what is the general import of the affirmation and the negation respectively, and can intelligently bring them both into contact and comparison with the evidence adduced, so as to form a judgment as to whether the affirmation or the negation ought to be received as true. But the opponents of the doctrine of the Trinity are accustomed to press us with the question, What do you mean by *persons*, when you assert that there are three persons in the unity of the Godhead? Now, the answer commonly given to this question by the most judicious divines is this: First, they maintain that they are not bound to give a precise and exact definition of the word persons as here employed,—namely, in its application to the divine nature,—since this is not necessary to make the proposition so far intelligible as to admit of its being made the subject of distinct argumentation, and having its truth or falsehood determined by the examination of the appropriate evidence,—a position this, which, though denied in words, is practically conceded by our opponents, when they assert that they can prove from Scripture that no such personal distinction as Trinitarians contend for attaches to the divine nature. Secondly, they admit that they cannot give a full and exact definition of the import of the word *persons*, or of the idea of distinct personality, *as predicated of the divine nature*; and can say little more about it than that it expresses a distinction not identical with, but in some respects analogous to, that subsisting among three different persons among men.

Many of the defenders of the doctrine of the Trinity, following the example of the schoolmen, have indulged to a very great and unwarrantable extent in definitions, explanations, and speculations upon this mysterious and incomprehensible subject; and these attempts at definition and explanation have furnished great advantages to the opponents of the doctrine,—both because their mere variety and inconsistency with each other, threw an air of uncertainty and insecurity around the whole doctrine with which they were connected, and because many of them, taken singly, afforded plausible, and sometimes even solid, grounds for objection. Anti-Trinitarians, in consequence, have usually manifested some annoyance and irritation when the defenders of the doctrine of the Trinity took care to confine themselves, in their definitions and explanations upon the subject, within the limits of what strict logic required of them, and of what the Scriptures seemed to indicate as the real state of the case—the whole amount of what was revealed regarding it. They have laboured to draw them out into explanations and speculations upon points not revealed; and with this view have not scrupled to ridicule their caution, and to ascribe it—as, indeed, Mr Belsham * does expressly—to “an unworthy fear of the result of these inquiries, and a secret suspicion that the question will not bear examination.” This allegation, however, is really an unfair and unworthy artifice on his part. It is indeed true, that one or two defenders of the doctrine of the Trinity, in their just disapprobation of the extent to which some friends of truth have carried their definitions and explanations upon the subject, have leant somewhat to the opposite extreme, and manifested an unnecessary and unreasonable shrinking even from the use of terms and statements commonly employed and generally sanctioned upon this point, as if afraid to speak about it in any other terms than the *ipsissima verba* of Scripture. But nothing of this sort applies to the great body of the more cautious defenders of the doctrine of the Trinity. They do not pretend to know anything upon this subject but what they find asserted or indicated in Scripture. They aim at no other or higher object than just to embody, in the most appropriate and accurate words which human language furnishes, the substance of what Scripture teaches; and they are under no obligation to explain or defend anything but

* “Calm Inquiry,” p. 529.

what they themselves profess to have found in Scripture, and only in so far as they profess to find in Scripture materials for doing so. They find the doctrine of the divine unity clearly taught in Scripture, and therefore they receive this as a great truth which they are bound and determined to maintain, resolved at the same time to admit no doctrine which can be *clearly demonstrated* to be *necessarily* contradictory to, or inconsistent with, the position that God, the Creator and Governor of the world, the object of religious worship, is *one*. But then they profess to find also in Scripture, evidence that Christ is truly and properly God, a possessor of the divine nature; and that the Holy Ghost is also God in the highest sense, and not a mere quality or attribute of God. These two positions about Jesus Christ the Son of God, and about the Holy Ghost, constitute the main and proper field of controversial discussion, in so far as the investigation of the precise meaning of scriptural statements is concerned; but at present, *in considering the state of the question*, we must assume that the Trinitarian doctrines upon these two points have been established from Scripture; for the discussion as to the state of the question really turns substantially on this—Supposing these positions about the Son and the Holy Ghost proved, as we believe them to be, in what way should the teaching of Scripture upon these points be expressed and embodied, so as, when conjoined with the Scripture doctrine of the divine unity (if they can be combined), to bring out the *whole* doctrine which the Scripture teaches concerning the Godhead, or the divine nature? God is one; and therefore if Christ be God, and if the Holy Ghost be God, they must be, with the Father, in some sense, *the one God*, and not separate or additional Gods.

This general consideration seems naturally to indicate or imply, *and of course to warrant*, the position that, while there is unity in the Godhead or divine nature, there is also in it, or attaching to it, some distinction. But Scripture, by affording materials for establishing these positions about the Son and the Holy Ghost, enables us to go somewhat further in explaining or developing this distinction. There is no indication in the Scriptures that proper divinity, or the divine nature or essence, belongs to, or is possessed by, any except the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and therefore we say, in setting forth the substance of what Scripture teaches, that the distinction in the Godhead is a

threefold distinction, or that there are three, and neither more nor fewer, who are represented to us as having the divine nature, or as possessed of proper divinity. Assuming it to be proved that Christ is God, and that the Holy Ghost is God, it seems necessary, and therefore warrantable, if any expression is to be given in human language to the doctrine thus revealed, to say that there are three which possess the divine nature, and are the one God.

It may, indeed, be contended that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, though divinity is ascribed to them, are merely three different names of one and the same object, and do not designate three realities which are in any respect different, except merely in name or in verbal representation. And this is the doctrine which commonly passes under the name of Sabellianism. But then it is contended, on the other hand, that this does not come up to, or correspond with, the representation which the Scripture gives us of the nature and amount of the distinction subsisting in the Godhead or divine nature. It seems very manifest that, if we are to submit our minds to the fair impressions of the scriptural representations upon this subject, the distinction subsisting among the three of whom proper divinity is predicated, is something more than a nominal or verbal distinction,—that it is a reality, and not a mere name,—and that it is set before us as analogous to the distinction subsisting among three men, or three human beings, to whom we usually ascribe distinct personality; and *as there is nothing else within the sphere of our knowledge to which it is represented as analogous or similar*, we are constrained to say,—if we are to attempt to give any expression in language of the idea or impression which the scriptural representations upon the subject seem *plainly intended* to make upon our minds,—that in the unity of the Godhead there is a personal distinction,—there are three persons. And this, accordingly, is the form in which the doctrine of the Trinity has been usually expressed. It is not intended by this form of expression to indicate that the distinction represented as subsisting among the three who are described as possessing the divine nature, is the *same* as that subsisting among three persons among men. On the contrary, the identity of the distinction in the two cases is denied, as not being suitable to the divine nature, and more especially as this would be inconsistent with the doctrine of the divine unity; for as three distinct persons among men are three

men, so, were the distinction in the Godhead held to be identical with this, the three persons in the Godhead must be three Gods. It is merely contended that the threefold distinction in the Godhead is *analogous* or similar in *some respects* to the distinction between three human persons; and the ground of this assertion is, that the scriptural representations upon the subject convey to us such an idea or impression of this distinction subsisting in the Godhead or divine nature,—that this language we cannot but regard as making the nearest approach to expressing it correctly,—that, in fact, from the nature and necessities of the case, we have not the capacity or the means of expressing or describing it in any other way.

We cannot define or describe positively or particularly the nature of the distinction subsisting among the three who are represented as all possessing the divine nature, because, from the necessity of the case, the nature of this distinction must be incomprehensible by us, and because God in His word has not given us any materials for doing so. We just embody in human language the substance of what the word of God indicates to us upon the subject,—we profess to do nothing more,—and we are not called upon to attempt more; to do so would be unwarrantable and sinful presumption. We are called upon to conform our statements as much as possible to what Scripture indicates, neither asserting what Scripture does not teach, nor refusing to assert what it does teach,—though ready not only to admit, but to point out precisely, as far as Scripture affords us materials for doing so, the imperfection or defectiveness of the language which we may be obliged to employ because we have no other; and to apply, as far as our powers of thought and the capacities of the language, which we must employ in expressing our conceptions, admit of it, any limitations or qualifications which Scripture may suggest in the explanation of our statement. It is not from cowardice or timidity, then, or in order to secure an unfair advantage in argument, as our opponents allege, that we refuse to attempt definitions or explanations in regard to the distinction which Scripture makes known to us as subsisting, in combination with unity, in the divine nature. We assert all that Scripture seems to us to sanction or to indicate; and we not only are not bound, but we are not warranted, to do more. We assert the unity of the Godhead. We assert the existence of a threefold distinction in the Godhead,

or the possession of the divine nature and essence by three,—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and that these three are represented to us in Scripture as distinguished from each other in a manner analogous to the distinction subsisting among three different persons among men. We express all this, as it is expressed in our Confession of Faith, by saying that, “In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity,—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost.” This is the whole of what our Confession sets forth as the doctrine of Scripture on the subject of the Trinity in general,—for I omit at present any reference to the personal properties by which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are distinguished from each other,—and this is all which any judicious supporter of the doctrine of the Trinity will consider himself called upon to maintain or defend. All that he has to do is just to show that Scripture, fairly and correctly interpreted, warrants and requires him to assent to these positions; and that there is nothing in the clear deductions of reason, or in the teaching of Scripture, either in its particular statements or in its general assertion of the divine unity, which requires him to reject any of them.

The reason why the opponents of the doctrine of the Trinity are so anxious to draw its defenders into definitions and explanations in regard to the precise nature of the distinction alleged to subsist in the Godhead, is because they hope in this way to get materials for involving them in difficulties and contradictions,—for showing that the doctrine of the Trinity necessarily leads either to Tritheism on the one hand, or to Sabellianism on the other,—or, more generally, that it necessarily involves a contradiction, or is inconsistent with the divine unity; while the unwarrantable and injudicious extent to which the friends of the doctrine have often carried their attempts to define the nature of the distinction, and to propound theories for the purpose of explaining the consistency of the distinction with the unity, have afforded too good grounds for the expectations which its opponents have cherished. Anti-Trinitarians are fond of alleging that there is no intermediate position between Tritheism and Sabellianism,—that is, between the view which would introduce three Gods, and thereby flatly contradict the doctrine of the divine unity,—and that which, in order to preserve the unity unimpaired, would virtually explain away the distinction

of persons, and make it merely nominal. And it cannot be disputed, that some who have propounded theories in explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity, have exhibited symptoms of leaning to one or other of these sides—have afforded some plausible grounds for charging them with one or other of these errors.

Tritheism is, of course, a deadly and fundamental error, as it contradicts the doctrine of the divine unity, and accordingly it has scarcely ever been openly and formally taught; but there have been men who, entering into presumptuous speculations about the nature of the distinction subsisting in the Godhead, and being anxious to make this distinction clear and palpable, have been led to lay down positions which could scarcely be said to come short of asserting practically, to all intents and purposes, the existence of three Gods. And as the enemies of the doctrine of the Trinity usually allege that it involves or leads to Tritheism, they catch at such representations as confirm this allegation. And when other divines, leaning to the other extreme, and being more careful to preserve the unity than the distinction, have so explained and refined the distinction as to make it little if anything more than a merely verbal or nominal one,—a tendency observable in the present day in some of the best and soundest of the German divines, such as Neander and Tholuck,* and of which there are also to be found not obscure indications among ourselves,—then anti-Trinitarians allege, with some plausibility, that this is just abandoning the doctrine of the Trinity, because, as they say, it cannot be maintained. Indeed, Sabellianism, when it is really held, is consistent enough both with Arianism and Socinianism; for neither the Arians, who believe Christ to be a superangelic creature, nor the Socinians, who believe Him to be a mere man, need contend much against an alleged *nominal* distinction in the divine nature, as this does not necessarily exclude anything which their peculiar opinions lead them to maintain; and, accordingly, Mr Belsham says,† that Sabellianism “differs only in words from proper Unitarianism.” Unitarians, indeed, are accustomed to distort and misrepresent the views of Trinitarian divines, in order to have more plausible grounds for charging them with a leaning either to Tritheism or Sabellianism; and Mr Belsham formally classes the

* Vide Knapp's Lectures on Christian Theology, p. 142.

† “Calm Inquiry,” p. 504.

great body of the Trinitarians* under the two heads of Realists and Nominalists, insinuating that the doctrine of the first class is virtually Tritheistic, and that of the second virtually Sabellian; while it would be no difficult matter to show, in regard to some of the most eminent divines whom he has put into those opposite classes, that they did not really differ from each other substantially in the views which they held upon this subject.

A good deal of controversy took place in England, in the end of the seventeenth century, upon this particular aspect of the question,—Dr Wallis, an eminent mathematician, having propounded a theory or mode of explanation upon the subject, which had somewhat the appearance of making the distinction of persons merely nominal; and Dean Sherlock, in opposing it, having appeared to countenance such a distinction or division in the Godhead, as seemed to infringe upon the divine unity, and having been, in consequence, censured by a decree of the University of Oxford. Unitarians have ever since continued to represent this decree as deciding in favour of Sabellianism, and thereby virtually sanctioning Unitarianism, or being a denial of a real personal distinction in the divine nature; while the truth is, that, though both parties went into an extreme, by carrying their attempts at explanation much too far, in different directions,—and were thus led to make unwarrantable and dangerous statements,—they did not differ from each other nearly so much as Unitarians commonly allege, and did not afford any sufficient ground for a charge either of Tritheism or of Sabellianism. Neither party, certainly, intended to assert anything different from, or inconsistent with, the scriptural doctrine laid down in the first of the Thirty-nine Articles, that “in the unity of this Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity,—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,” though it would have been much better had they confined themselves to an exposition of the scriptural evidence in support of the specific positions which make up, or are involved in, this general statement, and restricted their more abstract speculations to the one precise and definite object of merely bringing out what was indispensable to show that none of the positions taught in Scripture, and embodied in this general statement, could be *proved* necessarily to involve a

* P. 516.

† Belsham's “Calm Inquiry,” p. 51.

contradiction or a denial of the divine unity. The controversy to which I have referred engaged the attention and called forth the energies of some very eminent men,—South supporting Wallis, and Bingham, the author of the great work on Christian Antiquities, defending Sherlock; while two greater men than any of these,—namely, Stillingfleet and Howe,—may be said to have moderated between the parties. This discussion afforded a handle to the enemies of the doctrine of the Trinity at the time, who made it the subject of a plausible pamphlet, entitled “Considerations on the different explications of the doctrine of the Trinity,”* and it is still occasionally referred to by them with some triumph; but it seems, in its ultimate results, to have exerted a wholesome influence upon the mode of conducting this controversy, leading to more caution, wisdom, and judgment on the part of the defenders of the truth,—a more careful abstinence from baseless and presumptuous theories and explanations,—and a more uniform regard to the great principles and objects which have just been stated, as those that ought to regulate the exposition and investigation of this important subject.

Sec. VI.—Trinity and Unity.

The importance of attending carefully to the true and exact state of the question in regard to the doctrine of the Trinity, is fully evinced by this consideration, that the opponents of the doctrine, base, *directly and immediately upon the state of the question*, a charge of its involving a contradiction, and of its being inconsistent with the admitted truth of the unity of God. The duty of Trinitarians, in regard to this subject of settling, so far as they are concerned, the state of the question, ought to be regulated by far higher considerations than those which originate in a regard to the advantages that may result from it in controversial discussion. The positions which we undertake to maintain and defend in the matter,—and this, of course, settles the state of the question in so far as we are concerned,—should be those only, and neither more nor less, which we believe to be truly contained in, or certainly deducible from, the statements of

* This pamphlet is discussed in the Preface to Stillingfleet's Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity.

Scripture,—those only which the word of God seems to require us to maintain and defend, without any intermixture of mere human speculations or attempts, however ingenious and plausible, at definitions, explanations, or theories, beyond what the Scripture clearly sanctions or demands. The defenders of the doctrine of the Trinity have often neglected or violated this rule, by indulging in unwarranted explanations and theories upon the subject, and have thereby afforded great advantages to its opponents, of which they have not been slow to avail themselves. And when, warned of their error by the difficulties in which they found themselves involved, and the advantages which their opponents, who have generally been careful to act simply as defenders or respondents, seemed in consequence to enjoy, they curtailed their speculations within narrower limits, and adhered more closely to the maintenance of scriptural positions, their opponents have represented this as the effect of conscious weakness or of controversial artifice. The truth, however, is, that this mode of procedure is the intrinsically right course, which ought never to have been departed from,—which they were bound to return to, from a sense of imperative duty, and not merely from a regard to safety or advantage, whenever, by any means, their deviation from it was brought home to them,—and which it is not the less incumbent upon us to adhere to, because the errors and excesses of former defenders of the truth, and the advantages furnished by these means to opponents, may have been, in some measure, the occasion of leading theologians to see more clearly, and to pursue more steadily, what was in itself, and on the ground of its own intrinsic excellence, the undoubted path of duty in the matter.

But though anti-Trinitarians are much fonder of dealing with the particular definitions, explanations, and theories of individual theologians upon this subject, than with those general and well-weighed statements which we have quoted both from the English Articles and our own Confession of Faith,—and which certainly contain the substance of all that Scripture teaches, and consequently of all that we should undertake to maintain and defend; yet it must be acknowledged that they commonly allege that the doctrine of the Trinity, even when most cautiously and carefully stated, involves a contradiction in itself, and is inconsistent with the doctrine of the divine unity; and to this we would now advert.

It will be understood, from the exposition of principles formerly

given, that we do not deny that such allegations are relevant, and that they must in some way or other be disposed of; and it will also be remembered, that sufficient grounds have been adduced for maintaining the two following positions upon this point: First, that when the Scripture is admitted in any fair sense to be the rule of faith, *the first* step should be simply to ascertain, in the faithful and honest use of all appropriate means, what it teaches, or was intended to teach, upon the subject,—that this investigation should be prosecuted fairly to its conclusion, without being disturbed by the introduction of collateral considerations derived from other sources, until a clear result is reached,—that an allegation of intrinsic contradiction or of contrariety to known truth, if adduced against the result as brought out in this way, should be kept in its proper place *as an objection*, and dealt with as such,—that, if established, it should be fairly and honestly applied, not to the effect of *reversing* the judgment, already adopted upon competent and appropriate grounds, as to what it is that Scripture teaches (for that is irrational and illogical), but to the effect of rejecting the divine authority of the Scriptures. Secondly, that in conducting the latter part of the process of investigation above described, we are entitled to argue upon the assumption that the doctrine of the Trinity has been really established by scriptural authority,—we are under no obligation to do more than simply to show that the allegation of contradiction, or of inconsistency, with other truths, has not been proved; and we should attempt nothing more than what is thus logically incumbent upon us. As we are not called upon to enter into an exposition of the scriptural evidence, we have no opportunity of applying the principles laid down under the former of these two heads, though it is very important that they should be remembered. It is chiefly by the positions laid down in the second head, that we must be guided in considering this allegation of our opponents.

We assume, then,—as we are entitled, upon the principles explained, to do, in discussing this point,—that it has been established, by satisfactory evidence, as a doctrine taught in Scripture, that true and proper divinity is possessed by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; that the divine nature and perfections are possessed by three; and that, while there is only one God, and while these three, therefore, *are* the one God, there is yet such a distinction among them, *as is, in some respects, analogous* to the