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# **Religion and Theology**

**John Tulloch**





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## Religion and Theology: A Sermon for the Times Preached in the Parish Church of crathie, 5th September and in the College Church, St Andrews

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**Author(s):** Tulloch, John (1823-1886)

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**Description:** John Tulloch, a beloved professor at the University of St Andrews, was a moderate liberal theologian who sought to reconcile the insights of higher criticism of the Bible with the tenets of Christian orthodoxy. In his sermon on *Religion and Theology*, he says: "Religion is identified with the tenets of a Church system, or of a theological system; and it is felt that modern criticism has assailed these tenets in many vulnerable points, and made it no longer easy for the open and well-informed mind to believe [...] without hesitation." Even so, Tulloch reminds his readers and listeners, not even the most foundation-shaking discovery of modern science can assail God's truth, which will always make itself available for anyone who has faith.

Kathleen O'Bannon

CCEL Staff

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**RELIGION AND THEOLOGY**

**A SERMON FOR THE TIMES**

**PREACHED IN THE**

**PARISH CHURCH OF CRATHIE, 5TH SEPTEMBER**

**AND IN THE**

**COLLEGE CHURCH, ST ANDREWS**

**BY**

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## Religion and Theology

2 Cor. xi. 3.—“The simplicity that is in Christ.”

THERE is much talk in the present time of the difficulties of religion. And no doubt there is a sense in which religion is always difficult. It is hard to be truly religious—to be humble, good, pure, and just; to be full of faith, hope, and charity, so that our conduct may be seen to be like that of Christ, and our light to shine before men. But when men speak so much nowadays of the difficulties of religion, they chiefly mean intellectual and not practical difficulties. Religion is identified with the tenets of a Church system, or of a theological system; and it is felt that modern criticism has assailed these tenets in many vulnerable points, and made it no longer easy for the open and well-informed mind to believe things that were formerly held, or professed to be held, without hesitation. Discussions and doubts which were once confined to a limited circle when they were heard of at all, have penetrated the modern mind through many avenues, and affected the whole tone of social intelligence. This is not to be denied. For good or for evil such a result has come about; and we live in times of unquiet thought, which form a real and painful trial to many minds. It is not my intention at present to deplore or to criticise this modern tendency, but rather to point out how it may be accepted, and yet religion in the highest sense saved to us, if not without struggle (for that is always impossible in the nature of religion), yet without that intellectual conflict for which many minds are entirely unfitted, and which can never be said in itself to help religion in any minds.

The words which I have taken as my text seem to me to suggest a train of thought having an immediate bearing on this subject. St Paul has been speaking of himself in the passage from which the text is taken. He has been commending himself—a task which is never congenial to him. But his opponents in the Corinthian Church had forced this upon him; and now he asks that he may be borne with a little in “his folly.” He is pleased to speak of his conduct in this way, with that touch of humorous irony not unfamiliar to him when writing under some excitement. He pleads with his old converts for so much indulgence, because he is “jealous over them with a godly jealousy.” He had won them to the Lord. “I have espoused you,” he says, “to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” This had been his unselfish work. He had sought nothing for himself, but all for Christ. That they should belong to Christ—as the bride to the bridegroom—was his jealous anxiety. But others had come in betwixt them and him—nay, betwixt them and Christ, as he believed—and sought to seduce and corrupt their minds by divers doctrines. “I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from *the simplicity that is in Christ.*”

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What the special corruptions from Christian simplicity were with which the minds of St Paul's Corinthian converts were assailed, it is not necessary for us now to inquire. Their special dangers are not likely to be ours. What concerns us is the fact, that both St Paul and Christ—his Master and ours—thought of religion as something simple. Attachment to Christ was a simple personal reality, illustrated by the tie which binds the bride, as a chaste virgin, to the bridegroom. It was not an ingenuity, nor a subtilty, nor a ceremony. It involved no speculation or argument. Its essence was personal and emotional, and not intellectual. The true analogy of religion, in short, is that of simple affection and trust. Subtilty may, in itself, be good or evil. It may be applied for a religious no less than for an irreligious purpose, as implied in the text. But it is something entirely different from the "simplicity that is in Christ."

It is not to be supposed that religion is or can be ever rightly dissociated from intelligence. An intelligent perception of our own higher wants, and of a higher power of love that can alone supply these wants, is of its very nature. There must be knowledge in all religion—knowledge of ourselves, and knowledge of the Divine. It was the knowledge of God in Christ communicated by St Paul that had made the Corinthians Christians. But the knowledge that is essential to religion is a simple knowledge like that which the loved has of the person who loves—the bride of the bridegroom, the child of the parent. It springs from the personal and spiritual, and not from the cognitive or critical side of our being; from the heart, and not from the head. Not merely so; but if the heart or spiritual sphere be really awakened in us—if there be a true stirring of life here, and a true seeking towards the light—the essence and strength of a true religion may be ours, although we are unable to answer many questions that may be asked, or to solve even the difficulties raised by our own intellect.

The text, in short, suggests that there is a religious sphere, distinct and intelligible by itself, which is not to be confounded with the sphere of theology or science. This is the sphere in which Christ worked, and in which St Paul also, although not so exclusively, worked after Him. This is the special sphere of Christianity, or at least of the Christianity of Christ.

And it is this, as it appears to us, important distinction to which we now propose to direct your attention. Let us try to explain in what respects the religion of Christ is really apart from those intellectual and dogmatic difficulties with which it has been so much mixed up.

I. It is so, first of all, in the comparatively simple order of facts with which it deals. Nothing can be simpler or more comprehensive than our Lord's teaching. He knew what was in man. He knew, moreover, what was in God towards man as a living power of love, who had sent Him forth "to seek and save the lost; "and beyond these great facts, of a fallen life to be restored, and of a higher life of divine love and sacrifice, willing and able to restore and purify this fallen life, our Lord seldom traversed. Unceasingly He proclaimed the reality





of a spiritual life in man, however obscured by sin, and the reality of a divine life above him, which had never forsaken him nor left him to perish in his sin. He held forth the need of man, and the grace and sacrifice of God on behalf of man. And within this double order of spiritual facts His teaching may be said to circulate. He dealt, in other words, with the great ideas of God and the soul, which can alone live in Him, however it may have sunk away from Him. These were to Him the realities of all life and all religion. There are those, I know, in our day, to whom these ideas are mere assumptions—“dogmas of a tremendous kind,” to assume which is to assume everything. But with this order of thought we have in the meantime nothing to do. The questions of materialism are outside of Christianity altogether. They were nothing to Christ, whose whole thought moved in a higher sphere of personal love, embracing this lower world. The spiritual life was to Him the life of reality and fact; and so it is to all who live in Him and know in Him. The soul and God are, if you will, dogmas to science. They cannot well be anything else to a vision which is outside of them, and cannot from their very nature ever reach them. But within the religious sphere they are primary experiences, original and simple data from which all others come. And our present argument is, that Christ dealt almost exclusively with these broad and simple elements of religion, and that He believed the life of religion to rest within them. He spoke to men and women as having souls to be saved; and He spoke of Himself and of God as able and willing to save them. This was the “simplicity” that was in Him.



Everywhere in the Gospels this simplicity is obvious. Our Lord came forth from no school. There is no traditional scheme of thought lying behind his words which must be mastered before these words are understood. But out of the fulness of His own spiritual nature He spoke to the spiritual natures around Him, broken, helpless, and worsted in the conflict with evil as He saw them. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” He said at the opening of His Galilean ministry, “because He hath anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised.”<sup>1</sup> These were the great realities that confronted Him in life; and His mission was to restore the divine powers of humanity thus everywhere impoverished, wounded, and enslaved. He healed the sick and cured the maimed by His simple word. He forgave sins. He spoke of good news to the miserable. All who had erred and gone out of the way—who had fallen under the burthen, or been seduced by the temptations, of life—He invited to a recovered home of righteousness and peace. He welcomed the prodigal, rescued the Magdalene, took the thief with Him to Paradise. And all this He did by His simple word of grace: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”<sup>2</sup> “If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto



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1 Luke, iv. 18.

2 Matthew, xi. 28.

your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask Him!”<sup>3</sup>

This was the Christianity of Christ. This is the Gospel. It is the essence of all religion—that we feel ourselves in special need or distress, and that we own a Divine Power willing to give us what we need, and to save us from our distress. Other questions outside of this primary range of spiritual experience may be important. They are not vital. What is the soul? What is the divine nature? What is the Church? In what way and by what means does divine grace operate? What is the true meaning of Scripture, and the character of its inspiration and authority? Whence has man sprung, and what is the character of the future before him? These are all questions of the greatest interest; but they are questions of theology and not of religion. I do not say that they have no bearing upon religion. On the contrary, they have a significant bearing upon it. And your religion and my religion will be modified and coloured by the answers we give or find to them. We cannot separate the life and character of any man from his opinions. It is nevertheless true that our religious life, or the force of divine inspiration and peace within us, do not depend upon the answers we are able to give to such questions.

It is the function of theology, as of other sciences, to ask questions, whether it can answer them or not. The task of the theologian is a most important one—whether or not it be, as has been lately said,<sup>4</sup> “the noblest of all the tasks which it is given to the human mind to pursue.” None but a sciolist will depreciate such a task; and none but a sceptic will doubt the value of the conclusions which may be thus reached. But all this is quite consistent with our position. The welfare of the soul is not involved in such matters as I have mentioned. A man is not good or bad, spiritual or unspiritual, according to the view he takes of them. Men may differ widely regarding them, and not only be equally honest, but equally sharers of the mind of Christ. And this is peculiarly the case with many questions of the present day, such as the antiquity of man, the age and genesis of the earth, the origin and authority of the several books of Scripture. Not one of these questions, first of all, can be answered without an amount of special knowledge which few possess; and secondly, the answer to all of them must be sought in the line of pure scientific and literary inquiry. Mere authority, if we could find any such authority, would be of no avail to settle any of them. Modern theology must work them out by the fair weapons of knowledge and research, with no eye but an eye to the truth. Within this sphere there is no light but the dry light of knowledge.

But are our spiritual wants to wait the solution of such questions? Am I less a sinner, or less weary with the burden of my own weakness and folly? Is Christ less a Saviour? Is there less strength and peace in Him whatever be the answer given to such questions? Because

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3 Matthew, vii. 11.

4 Mr Gladstone, ‘Contemporary Review,’ July, p. 194.

I cannot be sure whether the Pentateuch was written, as long supposed, by Moses—or whether the fourth Gospel comes as it stands from the beloved apostle—am I less in need of the divine teaching which both these Scriptures contain? Surely not. That I am a spiritual being, and have spiritual needs craving to be satisfied, and that God is a spiritual power above me, of whom Christ is the revelation, are facts which I may know or may not know, quite irrespective of such matters. The one class of facts are intellectual and literary. The other are spiritual if they exist at all. If I ever know them, I can only know them through my own spiritual experience; but if I know them—if I realise myself as a sinner and in darkness, and Christ as my Saviour and the light of my life—I have within me all the genuine forces of religious strength and peace. I may not have all the faith of the Church. I may have many doubts, and may come far short of the catholic dogma. But faith is a progressive insight, and dogma is a variable factor. No sane man nowadays has the faith of the medievalist. No modern Christian can think in many respects as the Christians of the seventeenth century, or of the twelfth century, or of the fourth century. No primitive Christian would have fully understood Athanasius in his contest against the world. It was very easy at one time to chant the Athanasian hymn—it is easy for some still; but very hard for others. Are the latter worse or better Christians on this account? Think, brethren, of St Peter and St Andrew taken from their boats; of St Matthew as he sat at the receipt of custom; of the good Samaritan; the devout centurion; of curious Zaccheus; of the repentant prodigal; of St James, as he wrote that a man is “justified by works, and not by faith only;”<sup>5</sup> of Apollos, “mighty in the Scriptures,” who “was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord,” and yet who only knew “the baptism of John;”<sup>6</sup> of the disciples at Ephesus who had “not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost;”<sup>7</sup> think of all the poor and simple ones who have gone to heaven with Christ in their hearts, “the hope of glory,” and yet who have never known with accuracy any Christian dogma whatever,—and you can hardly doubt how distinct are the spheres of religion and of theology, and how far better than all theological definitions is the “honest and good heart,” which, “having heard the Word, keeps it, and brings forth fruit with patience.”<sup>8</sup>

II. But religion differs from theology, not only in the comparatively simple and universal order of the facts with which it deals, but also because the facts are so much more verifiable in the one case than in the other. They can so much more easily be found out to be true or not. It has been sought of late, in a well-known quarter, to bring all religion to this test—and the test is not an unfair one if legitimately applied. But it is not legitimate to test spiritual

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5 James, ii. 24.

6 Acts, xviii. 24, 25.

7 Acts, xix. 2.

8 Luke, viii. 15.

facts simply as we test natural facts; such facts, for example, as that fire burns, or that a stone thrown from the hand falls to the ground. The presumption of all supernatural religion is that there is a spiritual or supernatural sphere, as real and true as the natural sphere in which we continually live and move; and the facts which belong to this sphere must be tested *within* it. Morality and moral conditions may be so far verified from without. If we do wrong we shall finally find ourselves in the wrong; and that there is a “Power not ourselves which makes for righteousness” and which will not allow us to rest in wrong. This constantly verified experience of a kingdom of righteousness is a valuable basis of morality. But religion could not live or nourish itself within such limits. It must rest, not merely on certain facts of divine order, but on such personal relations as are ever uppermost in the mind of St Paul, and are so clearly before him in this very passage. Moreover, the higher experience which reveals to us a Power of righteousness in the world, no less reveals to us the living personal character of this Power. Shut out conscience as a true source of knowledge, and the very idea of righteousness will disappear with it—there will be nothing to fall back upon but the combinations of intelligence, and such religion as may be got therefrom; admit conscience, and its verifying force transcends a mere order or impersonal power of righteousness. It places us in front of a living Spirit who not only governs us righteously and makes us feel our wrong-doing, but who is continually educating us and raising us to His own likeness of love and blessedness. We realise not merely that there is a law of good in the world, but a Holy Will that loves good and hates evil, and against whom all our sins are offences in the sense of the Psalmist: “Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight.”

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So much as this, we say, may be realised—this consciousness of sin on the one hand, and of a living Righteousness and Love far more powerful than our sins, and able to save us from them. These roots of religion are deeply planted in human nature. They answer to its highest experiences. The purest and noblest natures in whom all the impulses of a comprehensive humanity have been strongest, have felt and owned them. The missionary preacher, wherever he has gone—to the rude tribes of Africa, or the cultured representatives of an ancient civilisation—has appealed to them, and found a verifying response to his preaching. St Paul, whether he spoke to Jew, or Greek, or Roman, found the same voices of religious experience echoing to his call—the same burden of sin lying on human hearts—the same cry from their depths, “What must I do to be saved?” It is not necessary to maintain that these elements of the Christian religion are verifiable in every experience. It is enough to say that there is that in the Gospel which addresses all hearts in which spiritual thoughtfulness and life have not entirely died out. It lays hold of the common heart. It melts with a strange power the highest minds. Look over a vast audience; travel to distant lands; communicate with your fellow-creatures anywhere,—and you feel that you can reach them, and for the most part touch them, by the story of the Gospel—by the fact of a Father in heaven,

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and a Saviour sent from heaven, “that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.”<sup>9</sup> Beneath all differences of condition, of intellect, of culture, there is a common soul which the Gospel reaches, and which nothing else in the same manner reaches.

Now, in contrast to all this, the contents of any special theology commend themselves to a comparatively few minds. And such hold as they have over these minds is for the most part traditionary and authoritative, not rational or intelligent. There can be no vital experience of theological definitions, and no verification of them, except in the few minds who have really examined them, and brought them into the light of their own intelligence. This must always be the work of a few—of what are called schools of thought, here and there. It is only the judgment of the learned or thoughtful theologian that is really of any value on a theological question. Others may assent or dissent. He alone knows the conditions of the question and its possible solution. Of all the absurdities that have come from the confusion of religion and theology, none is more absurd or more general than the idea that one opinion on a theological question—any more than on a question of natural science—is as good as another. The opinion of the ignorant, of the unthoughtful, of the undisciplined in Christian learning, is simply of no value whatever where the question involves—as it may be said every theological question involves—knowledge, thought, and scholarship. The mere necessity of such qualities for working the theological sphere, and turning it to any account, places it quite apart from the religious sphere. The one belongs to the common life of humanity, the other to the school of the prophets. The one is for you and for me, and for all human beings; the other is for the expert—the theologian—who has weighed difficulties and who understands them, if he has not solved them.

III. But again, religion differs from theology in the comparative uniformity of its results. The ideal of religion is almost everywhere the same. “To do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with God.”<sup>10</sup> “Pure religion” (or pure religious service) “and undefiled, before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.”<sup>11</sup> Where is it not always the true, even if not the prevalent type of religion, to be good and pure, and to approve the things that are excellent? “Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things” and do them, says the apostle,<sup>12</sup> “and the God of peace shall be with you.” Christians differ like others in intellect, disposition, and temperament. They differ also so far, but never in the same degree, in

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9 John, iii. 15.

10 Micah, vi. 8.

11 James, i. 27.

12 Philippians, iv. 8, 9.

spiritual condition and character. To be a Christian is in all cases to be saved from guilt, to be sustained by faith, to be cleansed by divine inspiration, to depart from iniquity. There may be, and must be, very varying degrees of faith, hope, and charity; but no Christian can be hard in heart, or impure in mind, or selfish in character. With much to make us humble in the history of the Christian Church, and many faults to deplore in the most conspicuous Christian men, the same types of divine excellences yet meet us everywhere as we look along the line of the Christian centuries—the heroism of a St Paul, an Ignatius, an Origen, an Athanasius, a Bernard, a Luther, a Calvin, a Chalmers, a Livingstone; the tender and devout affectionateness of a Mary, a Perpetua, a Monica; the enduring patience and self-denial of au Elizabeth of Hungary, a Mrs Hutcheson, a Mrs Fry; the beautiful holiness of a St John, a St Francis, a Fenelon, a Herbert, a Leighton. Under the most various influences, and the most diverse types of doctrine, the same fruits of the Spirit constantly appear—“Love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.”<sup>13</sup>



All this sameness in diversity disappears when we turn to theology. The differences in this case are radical. They are not diversities of gifts with the same spirit, but fundamental antagonisms of thought. As some men are said to be born Platonists, and some Aristotelians, so some are born Augustinians, and some Pelagians or Arminians. These names have been strangely identified with true or false views of Christianity. What they really denote is diverse modes of Christian thinking, diverse tendencies of the Christian intellect, which repeat themselves by a law of nature. It is no more possible to make men think alike in theology than in anything else where the facts are complicated and the conclusions necessarily fallible. The history of theology is a history of “variations;” not indeed, as some have maintained, without an inner principle of movement, but with a constant repetition of oppositions underlying its necessary development. The same contrasts continually appear throughout its course, and seem never to wear themselves out. From the beginning there has always been the broader and the narrower type of thought—a St Paul and St John, as well as a St Peter and St James; the doctrine which leans to the works, and the doctrine which leans to grace; the milder and the severer interpretations of human nature and of the divine dealings with it—a Clement of Alexandria, an Origen and a Chrysostom, as well as a Tertullian, an Augustine, and a Cyril of Alexandria, an Erasmus no less than a Luther, a Castalio as well as a Calvin, a Frederick Robertson as well as a John Newman. Look at these men and many others equally significant on the spiritual side as they look to God, or as they work for men, how much do they resemble one another! The same divine life stirs in them all. Who will undertake to settle which is the truer Christian? But look at them on the intellectual side and they are hopelessly disunited. They lead rival forces in the march of Christian thought—forces which may yet find a point of conciliation, and which may not be so widely



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13 Galatians, v. 22, 23.

opposed as they seem, but whose present attitude is one of obvious hostility. Men may meet in common worship and in common work, and find themselves at one.. The same faith may breathe in their prayers, and the same love fire their hearts. But men who think can never be at one in their thoughts on the great subjects of the Christian revelation. They may own the same Lord, and recognise and reverence the same types of Christian character, but they will differ so soon as they begin to define their notions of the Divine, and draw conclusions from the researches either of ancient or of modern theology. Of all the false dreams that have ever haunted humanity, none is more false than the dream of catholic unity in this sense. It vanishes in the very effort to grasp it, and the old fissures appear within the most carefully compacted structures of dogma.



Religion, therefore, is not to be confounded with theology, with schemes of Christian thought—nor, for that part of the matter, with schemes of Christian order. It is not to be found in any set of opinions or in any special ritual of worship. The difficulties of modern theology, the theories of modern science (when they are really scientific and do not go beyond ascertained facts and their laws), have little or nothing to do with religion. Let the age of the earth be what it may (we shall be very grateful to the British Association, or any other association, when it has settled for us how old the earth is, and how long man has been upon the face of it); let man spring in his physical system from some lower phase of life; let the Bible be resolved into its constituent sources by the power of modern analysis, and our views of it greatly change, as indeed they are rapidly changing,—all this does not change or destroy in one iota the spiritual life that throbs at the heart of humanity, and that witnesses to a Spiritual Life above. No science, truly so-called, can ever touch this or destroy it, for the simple reason that its work is outside the spiritual or religious sphere altogether. Scientific presumption may suggest the delusiveness of this sphere, just as in former times religious presumption sought to restrain the inquiries of science. It may, when it becomes ribald with a fanaticism far worse than any fanaticism of religion, assail and ridicule the hopes which, amidst much weakness, have made men noble for more than eighteen Christian centuries. But science has no voice beyond its own province. The weakest and the simplest soul, strong in the consciousness of the divine within and above it, may withstand its most powerful assaults. The shadows of doubt may cover us, and we may see no light. The difficulties of modern speculation may overwhelm us, and we may find no issue from them. If we wait till we have solved these difficulties and cleared away the darkness, we may wait for ever. If your religion is made to depend upon such matters, then I do not know what to say to you in a time like this. I cannot counsel you to shut your minds against any knowledge. I have no ready answers to your questions, no short and easy method with modern scepticism. Inquiry must have its course in theology as in everything else. It is fatal to intelligence to talk of an infallible Church, and of all free thought in reference to religion as deadly rationalism to be shunned. Not to be rational in religion as in everything else is



simply to be foolish, and to throw yourself into the arms of the first authority that is able to hold you. In this as in other respects you must “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,” remembering that it is “God which worketh in you.” You must examine your own hearts; you must try yourselves whether there be in you the roots of the divine life. If you do not find sin in your hearts and Christ also there as the Saviour from sin, then you will find Him nowhere. But if you find Him there, Christ within you as He was within St Paul, your righteousness, your life, your strength in weakness, your light in darkness, the “hope of glory” within you, as He was all this to the thoughtful and much-tried apostle,—then you will accept difficulties and doubts, and even the despairing darkness of some intellectual moments, when the very foundations seem to give way—as you accept other trials; and looking humbly for higher light, you will patiently wait for it, until the day dawn and the shadows flee away.



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