

THEOLOGY AND EVOLUTION

DR. LYMAN ABBOTT'S SERMON ON
THE IMMORTALITY OF MAN.

"Man Is Not Only the Supreme Result of Evolution, He Is the Final Result—If There Is Not Something That Lies Beyond When the Body Has Gone, All Evolution Ends in One Huge Cul-de-Sac."

"Evolution and Immortality" was the subject of the Rev. Dr. Lyman Abbott's sermon in his series on "The Theology of an Evolutionist," preached last evening in Plymouth Church, Brooklyn, to an audience that listened with the greatest interest and attention.

"If any of you have come here to-night," said Dr. Abbott by way of explanation, "imagining that I expect to prove immortality by philosophical or scientific arguments, I desire to disabuse your minds of that impression at the very outset. I have no such purpose. I shall attempt no such thing. In this series of sermons I have not attempted to prove the truth of evolution, nor of our Christian faith, but I have tried to show you that we may retain our Christian faith, and at the same time believe in evolution—more, indeed, I have tried to show you that we may be evolutionists, and that belief will only widen, deepen, and enlarge our faith in divine redemption."

Dr. Abbott then proceeded to the subject of the evening. The text was from Romans viii., 19, "For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God."

"This is the Pauline statement of the end of evolution," said the speaker. "The whole long process of creation and redemption is to issue in the manifestation of the sons of God."

"I am not going to try this evening to prove immortality from the point of view of an evolutionist. I am going to try to show you that evolution strengthens rather than weakens the belief in immortality; that, indeed, it almost necessitates it."

"Evolution does not prove immortality, though I must confess that I do not see how one can be an evolutionist and not anticipate life beyond the grave."

"Immortality seems to me incapable of demonstration in the exact and scientific meaning of the term. If by immortality we simply mean that those who seem to have died continue to live after death and the existence of ghosts, slates, table-rapping, and the like, we might perhaps afford proof of these not very important facts. But if immortality means that life in the next world exceeds in experience and development all we have known in this world, free from the trammels of the body and in a still higher, grander state, I say it is impossible that this can be proved."

"Science cannot prove it. Science has to do only with the past and the present. It cannot prove the future."

"Let us, then, to-night, look at life from the evolutionary point of view, and see what evolution would naturally lead us to anticipate as to the future."

"I am appalled by the greatness of the subject, and I beg your indulgence and in some sense your pardon for the inevitable inadequacy of the treatment."

Dr. Abbott then sketched briefly the growth of the earth from a nebulous condition.

"Imagine that this church was filled with subtle but visible ether; that as we sat here the ether gathered itself into a globe; that we saw this globe begin to revolve; that we saw the cooling process before our eyes, separating into solids and liquids; that we saw protuberances forming here and there, mists rising and floating away in clouds around it. Imagine that we saw mimic oceans, ponds, and rivers, and all the architectural processes going on, and finally we saw creatures running to and fro, and at last man himself."

Dr. Abbott paused a moment to give his audience time to form the picture.

"Something like this," he continued, "science does see. It sees the great, formless chaos gathering itself together in a globe, and hanging unsupported in the heavens, and it sees all the process I have tried to picture to you. It sees the process of storage proceeding—coal, iron, copper, gold, and silver being stored away in the mountain fastnesses."

"It sees the earth made rich with juices which will feed thousands and thousands in the future. It sees animals, fishes, mammals, birds, and last of all, man."

"And, looking upon man, it sees him taking possession of this globe. He is probably the weakest of all the animals as an infant, and as an adult he does not compare with the majority. But he possesses reason and a set, determined, settled will. In the intellectual and moral nature alone does he transcend the animals, and by virtue of this nature he takes possession of the globe. He conquers, controls, or domesticates the animals, and learns to bring the forces of nature into his service. He is master of the world in which he has been put."

"Looking on this process from the nebular to the present condition, two things seem clear to the evolutionist."

"First, we are in the presence of an infinite and eternal energy, from which all things proceed, and that there is in the heart of this energy one who has shaped and controlled the evolution of this world. We see a design in this creation. We see will and we see purpose."

"The creative process has gone on by forces that have been aiming at some result. We trace life from a single cell to the present complicated state of civilization, and we see evidences of purpose more clearly than ever."

"The evolutionist is not so certain as his fathers were about designs, but he is more certain about design. He is not so sure of the adaptation of particular things to particular ends, but he is sure that the history of the world shows a Divine purpose, which has been definitely pursued. He sees that it is an intellectual energy which has thought something out, and a benevolent energy which has been seeking the happiness of others than himself."

"Secondly, he is sure that, whatever other worlds there may be, this world in which we dwell has been made, built, and constructed to be the habitation of man. It is man who has taken possession of it, who understands it, uses it, comprehends its laws, masters its forces, avails himself of its riches, and dominates all other creatures on it."

"It is not more certain that the cell in the comb was made for the storage of honey by the bee than that this globe was made for the habitation and development of man."

"Moreover, man is not only the supreme result of evolution—he is the final result."

"There is nothing beyond him—nothing conceivable to us. If there is anything we cannot know it. We can only know within the limits and conditions of our knowledge."

"In our attempt to solve the riddles of the universe we must be governed by our reason, and we can see nothing higher than man."

"He may be enlarged, purified, freed, developed, but there never can be anything higher conceivable to us. Nothing can be conceived higher than to will, to think, and to love."

"The inorganic world exists for the vegetable, the vegetable for the animal, the lower animal for the higher animal, and the higher animal for man. There is nothing beyond. The highest rung on the ladder has been reached—to do the right, and to eschew the wrong, to know, to resolve, to love. That is the supreme."

"Is, then, the whole process of evolution that and nothing more? Has all been done? Has this long circle of the ages run its course, chaotic assuming order, out of order the architectural splendors of the heavens and the earth, light and forms of animal life, and out of this the capacity to will and think and love, the capacity to will and think and love to run its course for forty or fifty years and then die? An eternity for an instant—the whole thing ending in nothing?"

Dr. Abbott paused before he attempted to answer these questions. One could have heard a pin drop in the big church, so attentive was his audience.

"When man believed that God made the vegetable world, the animal world, and man by separate voice, I can understand that he might have said, 'God has made man for his little day. Man will decay, and God will make others to take his place.' But even then, if one looked on man and saw how he projected out into the eternal it was difficult to see how he could not live beyond his immortal voice and be himself as ephemeral as an insect that flits for a few brief moments in the sunshine?"

"But, when one believes, not in these separate acts of creation, but that creation focuses on man, when one believes that the whole process of this evolution, purposed in divine love, has been accomplished for the very purpose of producing a thinking, will-

ing, loving man, how is it possible for him to believe that the end of it all is nothing?"

"Man begins in a single cell. He passes through the successive stages of different animals. He is successively reptile, bird, fish, vertebrate, mammal, and man. I don't speak of the race, there may be some question about that, I speak of the individual—there is no question about that. He comes into life through these successive stages of previous life."

"The body is necessary as the means for his development. He learns through the activities of the physical organization. He is educated through it."

"The body then becomes the necessary instrument of his activity. It is the power by which he operates."

"The body, thirdly, becomes a hindrance to his development. It no longer serves him. He still has the same power to perceive truth, but he has grown deaf and cannot hear. His voice has lost its music and its power."

"The soul has outgrown the body. First it was an instrument for development, then for usefulness, now he has not grown old, but the organ he used is old."

"Gladstone and Henry Ward Beecher are not old—their bodies are. Men don't grow old, it is the body that ceases to serve the functions of the spirit. The body has been dying all the time; all the time being repaired, until at length the ravages of time cannot be repaired—the soul has outgrown the body."

"What then? What then?"

"Remember, from the first nebulous days, God had in mind a man, and in every man this body first helped, and then became a hindrance to the service of development."

"What then?"

"Why, if there is not something that lies beyond when the body has gone, all evolution ends in one huge cul-de-sac."

"It is inconceivable that God has been all the ages in making a Gladstone, a Jefferson, merely to fill a grave with."

"There are two alternatives—that of the positivist and that of the Pantheist."

"The positivist tells us there is immortality. It is an immortality of influence. Shakespeare's plays go sounding on. Plato's thoughts still inspire men through all the ages. Lincoln's courage and heroism will make heroes throughout all time. It is for future generations that the present generation lives. But what is the use of future generations? Why, according to the positivist, only like insects, to dance for an hour in the sunshine and then go to fill one great cemetery."

"But, no, God is not like a child, to build a house of cards to blow it down again."

"The Pantheistic alternative is the old Hindu conception. It comes back to us today in theosophy. All things will run their circuit and come back to God. Man is immortal, but not personally immortal."

"The sun draws up the water from the ocean, hangs it in the heavens, allows it to fall on the hills, whence it trickles to the rivers, and thence back again into the ocean. God sends out souls that will travel the circuit of their being and return to Him again. And so God has been working all these ages for nothing."

"Over against these conceptions I put the Pauline conception: 'For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God.'"

"Through all these ages God has been working out something that was worth working out. He has been developing sons of God—creatures that could think, will, and love as He does, and who will carry their independence and individuality into the future life."

"Why should one think it strange? The figures of the poets are not merely figures, they are scientific prophesies. Man himself once dwelt in the prison house of absolute darkness like the seed in the ground. If he has come out of this darkness into light, why should it seem strange that, when the body has ceased to fulfill its purpose, he should throw it off and rise triumphant to the larger life for which the evolutionary process of centuries has been preparing him?"

"Death is a sleep in which we fall into brief unconsciousness because the organ that served us can serve us no longer. It is an exodus. We come out from our prison house as a child from the cradle clothes."

"More than the thoughts of the past, evolution, as the interpretation of creation, looks forward to a life beyond the grave. It puts its indorsement on the promise of the prophet when he cried with a loud amen, 'The earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God.'"

Dr. Abbott will preach next Sunday evening on "Evolution and Miracles."