

CHAPTER IV

ARTICLE III.—*Of the Divine Purpose.*—We believe that the eternal, wise, holy and loving purpose of God so embraces all events that while the freedom of man is not taken away, nor is God the author of sin, yet in His providence He makes all things work together in the fulfilment of His sovereign design and the manifestation of His glory.

1. Its Nature. Older documents spoke of the “decree” of God, or His *decrees*, or even of a *double decree*; and, as explained in the theology of the day, the word *decree* was intelligible, and not inappropriate. But to modern ears, this word suggests something overbearing, imperious, and even arbitrary; and its association with the Divine activity is apt to give rise to unscriptural conceptions of God. Our document prefers the term *purpose*. In doing so, it has in view that conception of the universe, which sees in it no more than the operation of natural law, and of forces working blindly. It confronts this conception, with the Christian doctrine of God as a Person, who has a moral character, and proposes to Himself an end, toward which He unweariedly works. He is not a sultan seated on a remote throne, issuing decrees. He is a Person, who comes near to us, whom we know in Christ, whose mind and will we discern in all the revelations which culminate in Him, who is supremely the Logos, the Reason and the Word of God. Taking its stand at the Cross of Christ where love triumphed

in dying, and surveying thence the vast field, both of nature and of human history, as well as the narrower sphere of individual experience, Christian faith discerns the operation of one all-comprehensive purpose, one all-embracing mind, one supreme will, working amid the infinite complexity of phenomena toward one "far-off Divine event." God has not constructed what has been called a "block" universe. He has brought into being a world of life, and movement; and in it He Himself is at work. The purpose of God is being fulfilled. Blind fate, mindless chance, have no place in the realm we inhabit. From their ruthless sway, and the fears they instil, the Christian believer is forever emancipated. Students of the expansion of Christianity in the early centuries, or in non-Christian lands to-day, know how immense is the relief, when the thought of Divine ruling, and overruling purpose enters and irradiates the mind.

2. Its Aim: The end which God proposes to Himself is described here as the "manifestation of His glory." "Glory" is to be understood as the fulness of the Divine attributes, and specially refers to that, which is the summation of them all, namely, love. Nothing glorifies God which infringes on His love. His "sovereign design" is the triumph of His love. This purpose of love, accordingly, possesses the qualities of Him who is love. Three epithets are here applied to it. (a) It is *eternal*. God's purpose is coeval with Himself. It was not suggested to Him, nor did it occur to Him in view of

unforeseen contingencies. It is not an after-thought. In speaking of that which is above time, all human speech is faulty. If we say that God's purpose antedates creation, and governs providence, we are not submitting God to our time-measurements. Faith is satisfied with any language, if it can only confess the priority and invincibility of God's purpose, which we know in Christ to be redeeming love. It would be well, if theology would exercise the same discretion, and read the record both of creation and of providence, from the point of view of redemption. (b) It is *wise*. The wisdom of God is more than foreknowledge, a term which is entangled in time measures. We may perhaps conceive it more adequately, if we compare it to insight, a knowledge, which goes to the heart of what is, to us, a vast and bewildering mass of unrelated phenomena, and sees in them the conditions, in and through which the Divine will is moving to its predetermined end. Faith is sure that there can be nothing in the field of God's action, which is irrelevant to His design. Before the most baffling situations Christian faith proclaims the victory of the Divine purpose. (c) It is *holy*. The universe ultimately depends on moral values. If they do not enter into the purpose of God, if their conservation is not His primary aim, if He were to tolerate any evil, or make any compromise with it, the universe would be uninhabitable, and history would have broken down ere its course had begun. The deepest scepticism is not intellectual but moral,

and the answer to it is not an argument, but an experience. We know the Father as He is revealed in Jesus Christ, and His holy Father-love is all our confidence. This is no easy faith; but upon it depends an optimism, without which human life would be intolerable.

3. The Ultimate Problem. As soon as the Christian believer tries to bring his thoughts together, he is confronted by two facts of faith, neither of which can be relinquished. The one is the sovereignty of God; the other is human freedom. How to reconcile these two, how to explain their relations, to show how man can be free in a world governed by the will of an almighty God, and how God can be sovereign in a world, where the course of events is, in a thousand ways, determined by the free action of human beings: this constitutes a problem, not less for philosophy than for theology. One thing is certain, that no solution can be reached by selecting one element in the antinomy, and so emphasizing it as to exclude the other. Yet too often has this been done. One type of theology magnifies the sovereignty of God, till human freedom dwindles to extinction, and responsibility disappears. Another glorifies human freedom, till sovereignty drops from God's nerveless fingers, and He is reduced to the rôle of spectator of a drama, whose course is beyond His control, and whose *dénouement* He may have foreseen, but could not avoid. On such lines, debate is meaningless and fruitless; and is besides profoundly irreligious.

In any case, the Christian Church cannot take sides in such a debate. Scripture affirms both the facts whose relationship forms the problem. Christian experience knows and grasps them both. No creed, that claims to be Scriptural and experimental, can do other than confess both. (a) God cannot violate the integrity of human nature. He has created *persons*, not *automata*. Their actions are their own. Responsibility cleaves to them, and cannot be renounced by them. Their sins are their own, and are not chargeable upon God as the author of them. (b) God cannot surrender the reins of government, even to the most exalted of His creatures. In that mystery, unfathomable by any logical formula, of the relation of the infinite to the finite, the eternal to the temporal, God is able to take the free actions of men, even their sins, and weave them into the texture of that purpose of love to whose fulfilment His faithfulness is pledged. Reason *requires*, but cannot by process of the mere understanding *reach*, this position, which is provided and secured only in the revelation of God in Christ. It is a position, which an idealism, like that of the late Sir Henry Jones, states and defends (see his great work, "A Faith that Enquires"). The enquiry, however, would be baffled by the appalling and intractable facts of the universe, had not God in Christ vindicated the supremacy of redeeming love. It is a position, accordingly, which can be held only in a living faith; and by such a faith it ought to be proclaimed above and beyond

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controversial statements, which, in the nature of the case, must be one-sided, and inadequate to the fulness of the truth. The non-controversial statement of Article III moves in the region of faith; and serves the purpose of faith better than the most brilliant dialectic.