

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bib-sacra\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php)

## ARTICLE VII.

DR. DORNER'S CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY.<sup>1</sup>

BY DR. D. W. SIMON, SPRINGFIELD COLLEGE, BIRMINGHAM, ENGLAND.

In the last Number of the *Bibliotheca Sacra* we promised to give a more extended notice than was then possible of the new *System der Christlichen Glaubenslehre*.

According to some of our contemporaries, theology is a moribund, if not an altogether dead science, if indeed it ever deserved to be regarded as a science. Theologians have now a hard time of it with the leaders of public opinion. Under these circumstances it is unusually refreshing to come across a work like this new one from the pen of the celebrated author of the "History of the Doctrine of the Person of Christ," and the "History of Protestant Theology,"—a work which, for compass, method, and thoroughness cannot fail to attract attention.

It is the first instalment of a *System of Christian Theology* that Dr. Dörner presents us with. His own title is *Christliche Glaubenslehre*, a title whose literal translation, *Doctrine of the Christian Faith*, fails to represent the German in one direction as much as *System of Christian Theology* does in another.

At the very outset the author takes his stand on the platform of modern scientific thought; he accepts the principle that all knowledge—and science is primarily concerned with knowledge—presupposes experience, either outward or inward. The experience he demands for the Christian theologian is Christian faith. Faith is for him the experience which sight or hearing or taste or touch is to the scientist. He defines the task or goal of Christian theology to be the conversion of the immediate matter-of-fact certitude which inheres in Christian faith into scientific knowledge, or, in other words, into the consciousness of the inner connection and objective validity of its contents. To require specific experience of him who undertakes to pronounce a judgment on Christian matters is quite in harmony with the spirit and practice of modern science. With the question whether such experience is possible or real neither Dr. Dörner nor we have now to do. As a Christian theologian writing for the Christian church he rightly takes both for granted. Herein, too, he follows the example of scientists who, as scientists, would surely be very much amazed

<sup>1</sup> *System der Christlichen Glaubenslehre*. Von Dr. J. A. Dörner. Erste Band *Grundlegung oder Apologetik*. Berlin. Verlag von Wilhelm Hertz. 1879.

if they were called upon to prove that the experiences on which they were working were possible and real.

This first volume, which Dr. Dörner entitles *Apologetic or Ground-laying*, treats, in a comprehensive introduction, first, of faith as the condition of the knowledge of Christianity as the truth; and, secondly, of three phases of the relation of the human mind to Christianity — that of merely historical faith, that of estrangement from historical faith, and that of a certitude in harmony with the nature and substance of Christianity. The genesis and specific nature of faith, of doubt, and of certitude, the relations and significance of the historical and the ideal, and the functions of science and philosophy in connection with the Christian faith, are the important questions here discussed; discussed, too, for the most part, we are free to say, with remarkable candor, depth, and subtlety.

After the introduction begins what is termed "The Doctrine of Fundamentals." Assuming Christ to be the central point of the Christian faith, its objective, real, active principle, then the scientific establishment thereof in the unity of its two aspects, the divine, or eternal, and the human, or historical, will be the scientific establishment of Christianity. The aim of fundamental theology is to bring about the scientific conviction that Jesus is the God-man. To exhibit his necessity is to accomplish the main object of apologetics. For this reason this first part of our dogmatic system may also be designated the apologetic part; its second part will be occupied with the building up of the special portion of the Christian system.

In pursuance of this object the following topics are discussed: first, the doctrine of the Deity, the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of God's relation to the world; second, creation, especially man and the angels; third, the unity of God and man, under which head are treated religion in general, including revelation and the consummation of revelation and religion in God-manhood, and historical religion, including non-Christian religion and religion and revelation in their historical completion.

Dr. Dörner rightly lays great stress on the proper treatment of the doctrine of God. Fundamentally important as it unquestionably is, this point has undergone less revision and development than perhaps any other during the entire history of the church. As he briefly points out in the present work — more fully in the remarkable essays on the "Unchangeableness of God," published some years ago in the *Jahrbücher für deutsche Theologie*<sup>1</sup> — the doctrine of God originally worked out to a large extent under the influence of Neo-Platonism, has remained substantially unaltered down to the present day. This has been a misfortune of Christendom; a misfortune whose significance Dr. Dörner teaches his readers properly to appreciate. Specially weighty is the section on the objectivity of the divine attributes.

The treatment of the arguments for the existence of God is as philo-

<sup>1</sup> A summary of these Essays recently appeared in the *Bibliotheca Sacra*.

sophical as it is sound. Dr. Dorner shows how the several proofs, the ontological, the cosmological, the physico-teleological, the juridical, and the moral proofs, instead of being as, according to the common representations they seem to be, so many distinct proofs running alongside each other, are rather momenta of one great argument, each adding its quota not merely of evidence for the existence of an absolute, but also of knowledge as to the nature of the absolute beginning of things. From this point of view he naturally and justly criticises the custom of first demonstrating the existence of God and then relegating the discussion of his attributes — already included in the conception of the God whose existence is proved — to a later part of the system.

Dorner's treatment of the ontological argument is both new and profound. Indeed, he seems to us to have rehabilitated it. After pointing out its strength and weakness, the form given to it by Anselm, its originator, and Descartes, and criticising Kant's criticisms, he opens the way for his own reconstruction by the acute observation that "whilst prior to Kant it was allowed that being *per se*, that is, existence, belongs to the conception of the highest conceivable nature, though not that this conception itself is a necessary one; Kant, on the contrary, shows that it is a necessity of our reason to form the idea of the highest being, but denies that a knowledge of the actuality of this conception is involved therein." Kant's objections to the objective actuality of that which is thus necessarily thought, he maintains, however, are rooted in the subjective sceptical character of his system, and are not valid in themselves. Taking, therefore, as his starting-point, Kant's concessions as to the necessity of thought, he shows that "the absolute is necessary as the primal possibility of thought and being, of volition and knowledge, and that not as a mere possibility, but as the real potency for all actual thought, being, volition, and knowledge. Consequently it may be said, that for thought which aims at becoming knowledge — and morally it cannot but have this aim — the thought of God as the primal, real possibility is in every respect so necessary that to shut it out would involve the shutting out the possibility of thought, being, volition, and knowledge." "Unless we renounce reason — which we may not do — and if we think according to the inner necessity of thought, we come to recognize the ground of the constitution of our being; that constitution which compels us to think an Absolute Being. We have not posited this necessity. It is a foregoing power over our thought." We have not space either for a full exposition of the turn given to the ontological argument, or for an account of Dorner's very remarkable use of the other links in the chain of reasoning which leads the intellect to the conviction of the existence not merely of a First Cause, or *primum movens*, but of the Christian God. No student of the work, however, can fail to be amazed at the wealth of thought and the logical subtlety constantly displayed by the author in his thorough, though rapid, passage across this most important field.

It is refreshing to take up a system of theology which has the courage to grapple, in the light of modern thought, with the mystery of the Trinity. The religious mind, both of this country and of Great Britain has shrunk too much from the effort to explore its depths, forgetful or ignorant of what Dr. Dorner so wisely urges, that faith is not merely a principle of action, but also a principle of knowledge, and that Christ intended those who believe in him not merely to believe as servants, but to know as sons. The remark made above, concerning the *doctrina de Deo*, holds specially true of the *doctrina de Trinitate*. For although there have been numerous and highly interesting efforts to exhibit its *rationale* by means of various analogies, a beginning was not made where it needed to be made, with the essential divine attributes. Now this is Dr. Dorner's starting-point. His point of view and final result — and more than this we cannot touch upon — will be best indicated in his own words: "The doctrine of the divine attributes leads back, as into its deeper truth, into the divine Trinity. In order to be the actual and absolute primal life, knowledge, and good, Deity must be conceived as at once self-grounding, self-conscious, and also self-willing love. But this is only possible if it eternally distinguish itself from itself, and eternally return out of its alterity to itself, i. e. if God be a Trinity, not only must God be trinitarian in all his attributes, but the divine attributes also first form a harmonious unity by means of the Trinity. In the same way, too, Pantheism and Deism are avoided, on the one hand, and, on the other, the transcendence and immanence of God positively blended. The eternal result of the eternal self-distinction of God and his equally eternal return into himself is the organism of the divine personality; so that he alone can truly think the personal God who thinks him as triune." With regard to this God-organism he says further on: "The system of the divine life is an organism which constantly produces itself through the members of the Trinity, and which subsists by virtue of the fact that they mutually condition each other. Its unity and eternal result is the absolute personality. But, on the other hand, this result is an eternal fact, and is therefore a co-operative factor in the self-production. How are these two things reconcilable? The individual members or constituted factors of every organism known to us contribute to the production or reproduction of the whole; this is one side of the matter. The other and complementary side, however, is that the whole, the organism which comes out as the result, also precedes the parts. In other words, that which is effected and reproduced by the members in its turn conditions, posits, and maintains the members in which it lives as the force of the whole, and on which it confers participation in itself. The ever-present result precedes the eternally self-renewing process; it works with and lives in the function of the individual members as the force that conducts the whole to its goal. It thus appears, not that each one of the trinitarian factors by itself is identical with the entire, personal

God who is in it; for the three together constitute the one true God, the absolute personality; nor, again, that there are three separate personalities, or a threefold repetition of the one, entire God; but that the distinctions continue conformed by the divine personality, and that this personality is in them all, only in each of the hypostases after a different manner."

We have done Dr. Dorner very scant justice in thus quoting merely a few disconnected sentences; but, at all events, some glimpse will have been given of the line of thought pursued. We are of opinion, indeed, that this idea of Deity as an organism may be followed out in the light of analogy even more thoroughly than it has been done by Dr. Dorner, and with correspondingly satisfactory results for the intelligibility of the Trinity.

We are tempted to linger over other parts of the work; as, for example, those relating to the cardinal problems of God's relation to the world, of miracles, of inspiration, and of the incarnation, in connection with each of which new and striking points of view are opened up; but our space is exhausted. In conclusion, we commend the work most heartily; not only to those who are already interested in systematic theology, but also to such as are disposed to think that the subject is one on which there is now nothing new to be said. When the second volume appears we shall hope to give a more connected *résumé* and estimate of the whole, both as to its form and substance.

---

## ARTICLE VIII.

### RECENT GERMAN WORKS, AND UNIVERSITY INTELLIGENCE.

#### THEOLOGICAL.

*Dr. C. H. Cornill*: De Psalmi sexagesimi octavi indole atque origine. 8vo. pp. 42. Marburg. 1878.

An inaugural dissertation on receiving the *venia docendi* (licentiate's degree). Not at the booksellers'. Very favorably noticed by E. N. in the Leipzig Lit. Centralblatt.

*Dr. Joel Müller*: Massecheth Sopherim. The Talmudic tract concerning Scribes. An introduction to the study of old Hebrew modes of writing the Masorah and the Old Jewish Liturgy. Edited from the mss. and annotated by Dr. Joel Müller. 1. 8vo. pp. 33, 305. Leipzig: Hinrichs. 1879. 6 Marks.

*Prof. Dr. W. Weiffenbach*: The Papias Fragments concerning Mark and Matthew (Die Papias-Fragmente über Marcus u. Matthäus). An