

A Statement of Reasons for Not Believing the Doctrines of the Trinitarians: Sections Six and Seven*

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Andrews Norton (1786-1853), unitarian scholar and theologian, graduated from Harvard at the age of seventeen. He was tutor at Bowdoin College (1809-1811) and then tutor in mathematics at Harvard (1811-1813). He was Dexter Professor of Sacred Literature at the Harvard Divinity School (1819-1830). Dr. Norton was, after Dr. Channing, the most distinguished exponent of unitarian theology, maintaining against the school of Theodore Parker a firm belief in miracles as central to Christian belief. Norton's most significant work was his Statement of Reasons for Not Believing the Doctrines of Trinitarians, Concerning the Nature of God and the Person of Christ, first published in 1833 (Boston, Hilliard, Gray, and Co.). In this work Norton recognized Jesus as the unique teacher from God. Jesus' authority, however, did not make him ontologically one with God. Norton considered the traditional doctrine of the union of two natures in Christ more incredible than the Trinity itself: "No words can be more destitute of meaning . . . than such language as we sometimes find used, in which Christ is declared to be at once the Creator of the universe, and a man of sorrows; God omniscient and omnipotent, and a feeble man of imperfect knowledge" (Statement, 58). He was equally skeptical of a Christology which implied that: "Christ prays to that being who he himself was. He declares himself to be

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ignorant of what (being God) he knew, and unable to perform what (being God) he could perform” (Statement, 60).

Small editorial changes have been made in punctuation, spelling and paragraphing to facilitate reading. We have also inserted subsection headings.

SECTION VI: DIFFICULTIES THAT MAY REMAIN IN SOME MINDS RESPECTING THE PASSAGES OF SCRIPTURE ALLEGED BY TRINITARIANS

As I have endeavoured to express myself as concisely as possible, I shall not recapitulate what I have written. If anyone should think the arguments that have been urged deserve consideration, but yet not be fully satisfied of their correctness, it will be but the labor of an hour or two to read them over again. The time will be well spent should it contribute toward freeing his faith from an essential error and giving him clearer, more correct and, consequently, more ennobling and operative conceptions of Christianity.

Here, then, as I have had occasion to say before, I might close the discussion. But even if the truth for which I am contending be fully established, still difficulties may remain in some minds which it is desirable to remove. Like a great part of Scripture the passages adduced in support of the Trinitarian doctrines have been interpreted upon no general principles, or upon none which can be defended. But many persons have been taught from their childhood to associate a false meaning with words and texts of the Bible. This meaning, borrowed from the schools of technical theology, is that which immediately presents itself to their minds when those words and texts occur. They can hardly avoid considering the expositions so familiar to them as those alone that would be obvious to an unprejudiced reader. He who would break the associations which they have between certain words and a certain meaning, and substitute the true sense for that to which they are accustomed, appears to them to be doing violence to the language of Scripture.

Now these prejudices, so far as they are capable of being removed, can be removed only by establishing correct principles of interpretation, applying them to the subject in hand, and pointing out the true or the probable meaning of the more important passages that have been misunderstood. This, therefore, I shall endeavour to do in the sections that follow.

SECTION VII: ON THE PRINCIPLES OF THE INTERPRETATION OF LANGUAGE

Supposing the doctrines maintained by Trinitarians to be capable of proof, the state of the case between them and their opponents would be this. They quote certain texts and explain them in a sense which, as they believe, supports their opinions. We maintain that the words were intended to express a very different meaning. How is the question to be decided? We do not deny that there are certain expressions in these texts which, nakedly considered, *will bear* a Trinitarian sense; how is it then to be ascertained whether this sense or some other was intended by the writer?

In order to answer this question it is necessary to enter into some explanation concerning the nature of language and the principles of its interpretation. The art of interpretation derives its origin from the *intrinsic ambiguity of language*. What I mean to express by this term is the fact that a very large portion of sentences, *considered in themselves*, that is, *if regard be had merely to the words of which they are composed*, are capable of expressing not one meaning only but two or more different meanings; or (to state this fact in other terms) that in very many cases the same sentence, like the same single word, may be used to express various and often very different senses. Now in a great part of what we find written concerning the interpretation of language, and in a large portion of the specimens of criticism which we meet with — especially upon the Scriptures — this fundamental truth, this fact which lies at the very bottom of the art of interpretation, has either been overlooked or not regarded in its relations and consequences. It may be illustrated by a single example.

1 John 2:20

St. John thus addresses the Christians to whom he was writing, in his first epistle, 2:20: “*Ye have an anointing from the Holy One, and know all things.*”

If we consider these words in themselves merely, we shall perceive how uncertain is their signification, and how many different meanings they may be used to express. The first clause, “*Ye have an anointing from the Holy One,*” may signify:

1. *Through the favor of God, ye have become Christians or believers in Christ*; anointing being a ceremony of consecration and Christians being considered as consecrated and set apart from the rest of mankind.

2. Or it may mean, *Ye have been truly sanctified in heart and life*: a figure borrowed from outward consecration being used to denote inward holiness.

3. Or, *Ye have been endued with miraculous powers*: consecrated as prophets and teachers in the Christian community.

4. Or, *Ye have been well instructed in the truths of Christianity*.¹
I forbear to mention other meanings which the word *anointing* might be used to express. These are sufficient for our purpose.

The term *Holy One*, in such a relation as it holds to the other words in the present sentence, may denote either God, or Christ, or some other being.

Ye know all things, literally expresses the meaning, *Ye have the attribute of omniscience*. Beside this meaning it may signify, *Ye are fully acquainted with all the objects of human knowledge*; or, *Ye know every truth connected with Christianity*; or, *Ye have all the knowledge necessary to form your faith, and direct your conduct*; or the proposition may require some other limitation; for *all things* is one of those terms the meaning of which is continually to be restrained and modified by a regard to the subject present to the mind of the writer.

This statement may afford some imperfect notion of the various senses which the words before us may be used to express; and of the uncertainty that must exist about their meaning when they are regarded without reference to those considerations by which it ought to be determined. I say “imperfect,” because we have really kept one very important consideration in mind: that they were written by an Apostle to a Christian community. Putting this out of view it would not be easy to fix the limit of their possible meanings. It must be remembered that this passage has been adduced merely by way of illustration and that, if it were necessary, an indefinite number of similar examples might be quoted.

Principal Causes of the Intrinsic Ambiguity of Language, and Some Examples

I will mention, and I can barely mention, some of the principal causes of the intrinsic ambiguity of language.

1. Almost every word is used in a variety of senses, and some words in a great variety. Now as we assign one or another of these senses to different words in a sentence we change the meaning of the whole sentence. If they are important words and the senses which we assign differ very much from each other we change its meaning essentially.

2. But beside their common significations words may be used in an undefined number of figurative senses. A large proportion of sentences

¹See Wetstein’s notes on this passage, and on 1 Timothy 4:7.

may therefore be understood either figuratively or literally. Considered in themselves they present no intrinsic character that may enable us to determine whether they are literal or figurative. They may often be understood in more than one literal, and in more than one figurative, sense; and a choice is then to be made among all these different senses.

3. A very large proportion of sentences which are not what rhetoricians call figurative are yet not to be understood strictly, not to the letter, but with some limitation — and often with a limitation which contracts exceedingly their literal meaning. “I do not,” says Mr. Burke, addressing the friend to whom he is writing, in his *Reflections on the French Revolution*,

I do not conceive you to be of that sophistical, captious spirit, or of that uncandid dullness, as to require for every general observation or sentiment, an explicit detail of the correctives and exceptions, which reason will presume to be included in all the general propositions which come from a reasonable man.

Sentences that are general or universal in their terms are often to be regarded merely in relation to the subject treated of, or the persons addressed; and their meaning is often to be greatly limited by a regard to one or another of these considerations.

4. In eloquence, in poetry, in popular writing of every sort, and not least in the Scriptures, a great part of the language used is the language of emotion or feeling. The strict and literal meaning of this language is, of course, a meaning which the words may be used to express; but this is rarely the true meaning. The language of feeling is very different from that of philosophical accuracy. The mind, when strongly excited, delights in general unlimited propositions, in hyperboles, in bold figures of every sort, in forcible presentations of thought addressed indirectly to the understanding through the medium of the imagination, and in the utterance of those temporary false judgements which are the natural result, and consequently among the most natural expressions, of strong emotion. Different senses in which such language may be understood often present themselves, and it is sometimes not easy to determine which to adopt.

But, further, language is conventional and the use of it varies much in different ages and nations. No uniform standard has existed by which to measure the expressions of men’s conceptions and feelings. In one state of society language assumes a bolder character, more unrestrained, and more remote from its proper sense; in another the modes of speech are more

cool and exact. The expressions of compliment and respect, for instance, in France or Italy, and the expressions of the Orientals generally, are not proportional to our own. A sentence translated verbally from one language into another will often convey a stronger or more unlimited meaning than was intended by him who uttered it.

“John,” says our Savior, “came neither eating nor drinking” (Matt. 11:18). These words, as spoken by him, had nothing of the paradoxical character which would belong to them if now uttered for the first time in our own language. They meant only that John, leading an ascetic life, refrained from taking food after the common fashion at regular meals.

“Work out your salvation,” says St. Paul, “with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12). The Apostle, who elsewhere exhorts Christians to “rejoice always,” did not here intend that their life should be one of anxious dread; and we may express his purpose by saying, “with earnest solicitude.” He tells the Corinthians that they had received Titus with “fear and trembling,” (2 Cor. 7:15) by which words, in this place, he means what we might call “respect and deference.”

Christ says that he who would be his follower must “hate father and mother” (Luke 14:26). The genius of our language hardly admits of so bold a figure, by which, however, nothing more was signified than that his followers must be prepared to sacrifice their dearest affections in his cause.

But even where there is no peculiar boldness or strength of expression in the original we are liable to be deceived by a want of analogy to our modes of speech. Figures and turns of expression familiar in one language are strange in another; and an expression to which we are not accustomed strikes us with more force and seems more significant than one in common use of which the meaning is in fact the same. We are very liable to mistake the purport of words which appear under an aspect unknown or infrequent in our native tongue.

The declaration “I and my father are one” (John 10:30) may seem to us at first sight almost too bold for a human being to use concerning God, merely because we are not accustomed to this expression in grave discourse. But in familiar conversation no one would misunderstand me if while transacting some business as the agent of a friend I should say “I and my friend are one”; meaning that I am fully empowered to act as his representative. The passage quoted is to be understood in a similar manner; and the liability to mistake its meaning arises only from our not being familiar with its use on solemn occasions.

“The Son of Man came to give his life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). We do not express the intended figure in this particular form, the *noun* “ransom” being commonly employed by us only to denote a price paid to him who has had power over the ransomed. The passage has, consequently, been misunderstood; but the *verb* “ransom” has a wider significancy, corresponding to the sense of our Savior; and by a very slight change in the mode of expression the occasion of mistake is removed: “The Son of Man came to give his life to ransom many,” that is, to deliver them from the evils of ignorance, error, and sin.

“Whatever,” said our Savior to St. Peter, “thou shalt bind on earth will be bound in Heaven, and whatever thou shalt loose on earth will be loosed in Heaven” (Matt. 16:19). This passage and another corresponding to it, in which the same authority is extended to the Apostles generally (Matt. 18:18), have been perverted to the worst purposes. The figure in which our Savior expressed his meaning is not found in modern languages but was familiar to the Jews. “To bind” with them signified “to forbid” and “to loose” signified “to permit”;² and the meaning of Christ was “I appoint you to preach my religion, by which what is forbidden is forbidden by God and what is permitted is permitted by God. As its minister you will speak in his name and with his authority, forbidding or permitting on earth what is forbidden or permitted in heaven.”

It is further to be remarked that in some cases where there is this want of correspondence between languages the verbal rendering of a passage may be unintelligible and even offensive; as in the address of St. Paul to the Corinthians, thus translated in the Common Version: “Ye are not straitened in us, but ye are straitened in your own bowels” (2 Cor. 6:12).³ The meaning of St. Paul, which a reader of those words might hardly conjecture, is this: “You do not suffer from any deficiency in us, but you are deficient in your own affections.”

Sometimes a verbal rendering gives a sense altogether false: “Now I beseech you, brethren, that ye all speak the same thing” (1 Cor. 1:10).⁴ So St. Paul is represented as addressing the Corinthians in the Common Version. But “to speak the same thing” was a phrase used in Greek in a sense

² See Wetstein’s note on Matthew 16:19.

³ To one acquainted with the French language, the character of the rendering in the Common Version may be illustrated, by supposing a verbal translation of the following account of a tragic actress: “Elle sait émouvoir et toucher: jamais comédienne n’eut plus d’entrailles.”

⁴ Dr. Thomas Chalmers. See the conclusion of the article “Christianity,” in the *Edinburgh Encyclopaedia*.

unknown in English, to denote “agreeing together”; and the exhortation in fact was that they should “all agree together.”

These examples, few as they are, may serve to illustrate the mistakes to which we are exposed from the want of analogy between languages; and to show that the true meaning of a passage may be very different from the sense which, without further inquiry, we should receive from a verbal rendering of it into English. A verbal rendering of an ancient author must be often false, ambiguous, or unintelligible, and when not exposed to graver charges will commonly fail in preserving the full significancy, the spirit and character, of the original.

Those which have been mentioned are some of the principal causes of the ambiguity of language or, as we may say in other terms, they are some of the principal modes in which this ambiguity manifests itself. But a full analysis of the subject, accompanied by proper examples, would fill many pages. From what has been already said the truth of the propositions maintained will, I think, appear at least sufficiently for our present purpose.

It is, then, to the intrinsic ambiguity of language that the art of interpretation owes its origin. If words and sentences were capable of expressing but a single meaning no art would be required in their interpretation. It would be as a late writer¹³ (thoroughly ignorant of the subject) supposes, a work to be performed merely with the assistance of a lexicon and grammar. The object of the art of interpretation is to enable us to solve the difficulties presented by the intrinsic ambiguity of language. It first teaches us to perceive the different meanings which any sentence may be used to express, as the different words of which it is composed are taken respectively in one sense or another; as it is understood literally or figuratively; strictly and to the letter, or popularly and in a modified sense; as the language of emotion, or as a calm and unimpassioned expression of thoughts and sentiments; as the language of one age or nation or that of another; and it then teaches us (which is its ultimate purpose) to distinguish among *possible* meanings the *actual* meaning of the sentence, or that meaning which in the particular case we are considering was intended by the author. And in what manner does it enable us to do this? Here again a full and particular answer to this question is not to be comprised in the compass of a few pages. The general answer is that it enables us to do this *by directing our attention to all those considerations which render it probable that one meaning was intended by the writer rather than another.*

Some of these considerations are: the character of the writer, his habits of thinking and feeling, his common style of expression and that of his age

or nation, his settled opinions and belief, the extent of his knowledge, the general state of things during the time in which he lived, the particular local and temporary circumstances present to his mind while writing, the character and condition of those for whom he wrote, the opinions of others to which he had reference, the connection of the sentence or the train of thought by which it is preceded and followed, and, finally, the manner in which he was understood by those for whom he wrote — a consideration the importance of which varies with circumstances. The considerations to be attended to by an interpreter are here reduced to their elements. I cannot dwell long enough upon the subject to point out all the different forms and combinations in which they may appear. But where the words which compose a sentence are such that the sentence may be used to express more than one meaning its true meaning is to be determined SOLELY by a reference to EXTRINSIC CONSIDERATIONS such as have been stated. In the case supposed (a case of very frequent occurrence) all that we can learn from the mere words of the sentence is the different meanings which the sentence is capable of expressing. It is obvious that the words, considered in themselves, can afford no assistance in determining which of those different meanings was that *intended by the author*. This problem is to be solved solely by a process of reasoning, founded upon such considerations as have been stated.

Certain Examples

I will illustrate this account of the principles of interpretation by an example of their application.

Of Milton, Dr. Johnson says: “He had considered creation in its whole extent, and his descriptions are therefore learned.” “But he could not be always in other worlds, he must sometimes return to earth, and talk of things visible and known.”

Addison tells us that “he knew all the arts of affecting the mind.”

Bentley, in the preface to his edition of *Paradise Lost*, speaks of him thus: “He could expatiate at large through the compass of the whole universe, and through all Heaven beyond it; could survey all periods of time from before the creation to the consummation of all things.”

“Milton’s strong pinion now not Heaven can bound,” are the words of Pope.

“He passed,” says Gray, “the flaming bounds of space and time, and saw the living throne of God.”

In the age subsequent to his own, "he continued," says Aikin, "to stand alone, an insulated form of unrivalled greatness."

Why do we not understand all this language strictly and to the letter? Why, without a moment's hesitation, do we put upon the expressions of all these different authors a sense so very remote from that which their words are adapted to convey when viewed independently of any extrinsic consideration by which they may be explained? The answer is, because we are satisfied (no matter how) that all these writers believed Milton to be a man, and one not endued with supernatural powers. This consideration determines us at once to regard their language as figurative, or as requiring very great limitation of its verbal meaning.

Let us attend to another example of the application of those principles which have been laid down. Our Savior says, "He who lives through his faith in me shall never die" (John 11:26); and similar declarations, as everyone must remember, were often repeated by him. I recollect to have met with a passage in an infidel writer in which it was maintained that these declarations were to be understood literally; and that Christ meant to assure his disciples that they should not suffer the common lot of man. Why do we not understand them literally? Because we are satisfied that our Savior's character was such that he would not predict a falsehood. An infidel, likewise, might easily satisfy himself that his character was such that he would not predict what the next day's experience might prove to be a falsehood.

I will give one more example: "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, ye have no life in you" (John 6:53). He who will turn to the context of the passage may see that this declaration is repeated and insisted upon by our Savior, in a variety of phrases and in different relations. The Roman Catholics understand this passage, when viewed in connection with the words used in instituting our Lord's supper, as a decisive argument for the doctrine of transubstantiation. If either doctrine were capable of proof I should certainly think that there was no passage in Scripture which went so far to prove the doctrine of the Trinity as this does to prove the doctrine of transubstantiation. Why then do we not understand the words in the sense of the Roman Catholics? Why do we suppose a figure so bold and to our ears so harsh, as we are compelled to suppose, if we do not understand them literally? Solely because we have such notions of the character and doctrines of our Savior that we are satisfied that he would not teach anything irrational or absurd; and that the declaration in question would be very irrational if understood literally without reference

to the doctrine of transubstantiation; and altogether absurd if supposed to imply the truth of this doctrine.

It is upon the same principle that we interpret a very large proportion of all the figurative language which we meet with. We at once reject the literal meaning of the words, and understand them as figurative, because if we did not do this they would convey some meaning which contradicts common sense; and it would be inconsistent with our notions of the writer to suppose him to intend such a meaning. But this principle, which is adopted unconsciously in the interpretation of all other writings, has been grossly disregarded in the interpretation of Scripture. If one should interpret any other writings (except those in the exact sciences) in the same manner in which the Scriptures have been explained he might find as many absurdities in the former as there are pretended mysteries in the latter.

Upon the principle just stated we may reject the literal meaning of a passage when we cannot pronounce with confidence what is its true meaning. The words of our Savior, just quoted, are an example in point. One may be fully justified in rejecting their literal meaning who is wholly unable to determine their true meaning. To do this is certainly no easy matter. Similar difficulties, that is passages about the true meaning of which we can feel no confidence though we may confidently reject some particular meaning which the words will bear, are to be found in all other ancient writings as well as the Scriptures.

If the facts and principles respecting interpretation which have been stated are correct, anyone who will examine what has been written concerning this subject may perceive how little it has been understood by a large proportion of those who have undertaken to lay down rules of exposition, and how much it has been involved in obscurity and error. There are many writers, who appear neither to have had any distinct conception of the truth, that sentences are continually occurring which may severally express very different senses *when we attend only to the words of which they are composed*; nor, of consequence, any just notions of the manner in which the actual meaning of such sentences is to be determined. Yet it is to such sentences that the art of interpretation is to be applied; and its purpose is to teach us in what manner their ambiguity may be resolved.

Conclusion

We are now then prepared to answer the question formerly proposed. Certain passages are adduced by Trinitarians in support of their opinions. We do not deny that there are expressions in some of these passages which,

the words alone being regarded, *will bear* a Trinitarian sense. How is it to be ascertained whether this sense or some other was intended by the writer?

Now this is a question which, as we have shown, is to be determined solely by extrinsic considerations; and all those considerations that have been brought into view in the former part of this discussion bear directly upon the point at issue. My purpose has been to prove that the Trinitarian doctrines were not taught by Christ and his Apostles. If this has been proved it has been proved that they were not taught by them in any particular passage. All the considerations that have been brought forward apply directly to the interpretation of any words that may be adduced; and if these considerations are decisive then it is certain that the Trinitarian exposition of every passage of the New Testament must be false. Their force can be avoided but in one way, not by proving positively that certain words will bear a Trinitarian meaning — that is conceded — but by proving negatively that it is impossible these words should be used in any other than a Trinitarian meaning — that they admit of but one sense, which under all circumstances they must be intended to express. But this no man of common information will maintain. If, then, there be not some gross error in the preceding reasonings, the controversy respecting the Trinitarian exposition of those passages is decided. Whatever may be their true sense, the Trinitarian exposition must be false.

But I will now recur to the essential character of the Trinitarian doctrines, for the purpose of showing that though there are words in the New Testament which, abstractly considered, will bear some one or other Trinitarian sense, yet that this sense can be ascribed to them only in violation of a fundamental principle of interpretation.