

gard to men's sinful actions, combined with the felt difficulty of stating, with anything like fulness, and at the same time explicitness, what this something more is; while another observation I have already made, in regard to the course pursued by the Reformers in discussing this subject, is also illustrated by the fact, that, in the next chapter of the Confession, the word "permit" is used alone as descriptive of what God did in regard to the fall of Adam, from the felt difficulty, apparently, of using any other word without needing to introduce along with it explanations and qualifications, in order to guard against error and misconstruction.

But, perhaps, it may be asked, why maintain anything doctrinally beyond permission, when it seems so difficult practically to explain and develop it with precision and safety? Now, the answer to this question is just that which was given by Calvin,—namely, that no man can believe in a mere permission, unless he be entirely ignorant of the whole doctrine of Scripture on the subject of the providence or agency of God with respect to the sinful actions of His creatures; and that, therefore, any one who professes to give the sum and substance of what Scripture teaches upon the point, must deny the doctrine of a mere permission, and assert that God, in His providence, does something more, in regard to men's sinful actions, than merely resolving to abstain from interfering to prevent what He has certainly prohibited. The evidence to this effect may be said to pervade the word of God. It is found not only in general statements as to the character and results of the providence which God is constantly exercising over all His creatures and all their actions, and more especially His agency and operations in connection with the motives and conduct of wicked men, but also in the views unfolded to us there with respect to the connection that subsists in fact between the sinful actions which men perform, and the actual accomplishment of some of God's purposes or designs of justice or of mercy; and perhaps still more directly in statements which explicitly ascribe to God a very direct connection with certain specific wicked actions, as well as to those who performed them. We may select an instance from this last department of scriptural evidence, and illustrate it by an observation or two, merely to indicate the nature of the proof.

It is said,* "The anger of the Lord was kindled against

* 2 Sam. xxiv. 1.

Israel; and He moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah." With respect to the same transaction, it is said in First Book of Chronicles,* "Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel." Now, this numbering of Israel was undoubtedly a sinful action of David's, done by him freely and spontaneously, without any compulsion, in the cherished indulgence of a sinful state of mind or motive. It stood, in this respect, on the same footing as any other sin which David himself, or any other man, ever committed; and it would be quite just to apply to it the Apostle James's description of the generation of sin, "Every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust" (or evil desire), "and enticed. Then, when lust" (or evil desire) "hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin." And yet this action of David, in which he was doing what God had forbidden,—transgressing God's law, and incurring guilt and the divine displeasure,—is expressly ascribed in Scripture also to God, and to Satan, in terms which, in all fair construction, imply that Satan had some share, exerted some efficiency, in bringing it about, and that God also contributed in some sense, and to some extent, to bring it about,—intending to employ it as a means of executing His just and righteous purpose or design of punishing Israel for their sins. It seems scarcely possible for any man to receive as true the statement of Scripture upon this point, without being constrained to admit that there was, and must have been, a sense in which God willed that David should number the people, and accordingly did something, or exerted some efficiency, in order to bring about this result. If, then, we would fully bring out the substance of what Scripture teaches us upon this point, we must say that God, Satan, and David, were all in some way or other concerned or combined in the production of this sinful action. We are bound, indeed, to believe,—for so the word of God teaches,—that the sinfulness of the action proceeded only from the creature, that is, from Satan and David,—Satan incurring guilt by what he did in the matter in provoking David to number Israel, but not thereby diminishing in the least David's guilt in yielding to the temptation,—and that God was not the author or approver of what was sinful in the action; but we are also bound to believe, if we submit implicitly, as we ought to do, to the fair impression

* C. xxi., v. 1.

of what Scripture says, that in regard to the action itself, which was sinful as produced or performed by Satan and David, God did more than merely permit it, or abstain, even in a positive sense, from interfering to prevent it, and that in some sense, and in some manner, He did do something in the way of its being brought about. From the difficulty, indeed, of conceiving and explaining how God could have moved David to say, "Go, number Israel and Judah," while yet the sinfulness of the action was David's only, *not* God's, we might be tempted to make a violent effort to explain away the statement, were there nothing else in Scripture to lead us to ascribe to God anything more in regard to men's sinful actions than a mere permission. But the inference to which these passages so plainly point is in entire accordance with what Scripture teaches in many places; and, indeed, with all it teaches us generally in regard to God's providence and men's sins.

There are not, indeed, *many* instances in Scripture in which, with respect to specific acts of sin, we have an explicit ascription of some share in bringing them about to God, to Satan, and to man. But we *have* other instances of a precisely similar kind, as in the robberies committed upon Job's property, and in that which was at once the most important event that ever took place, and the greatest crime that ever was committed,—the crucifixion of the Lord of glory. In these cases, the agency of God, the agency of Satan, and the agency of wicked men, are distinctly recognised and asserted; and it is, therefore, our duty to acknowledge, as a general truth, that all these parties were concerned in them, and to beware of excluding the agency of any of them, or perverting its true character, because we cannot fully conceive or explain how these parties could, in conformity with the general representations given us in Scripture of their respective characters and principles of procedure, concur in that arrangement by which the actions were brought about. It is our part to receive each portion of the information which the Scripture gives us concerning the origin of men's sinful actions, and to allow each truth regarding it to exert its own distinct and appropriate influence upon our minds, undisturbed by other truths, kept also in their proper place, and applied according to their true import and real bearing; not allowing the scriptural truth concerning God's agency and Satan's agency, with respect to sinful actions, to diminish in the least our sense of man's responsibility and guilt, and not

allowing the conviction which Scripture most fully warrants,—that God's agency is connected in some way with men's sins,—to lead us to doubt, or to fail in realizing, His immaculate holiness and irreconcilable hatred to all sin,—but employing it only to deepen our impressions of His "almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness."

We cannot dwell longer upon the scriptural proof in support of the doctrine of the Reformers and of our Confession of Faith, and in opposition to that of the Council of Trent, upon this subject. As to any further attempts to explain the kind and degree of God's agency in connection with men's sinful actions, and to unfold precisely what it is that He does in contributing, in some way and in some sense, to bring them about, the Reformers usually confined themselves to the expressions which Scripture itself employs, being aware that upon a subject so difficult and mysterious it became them to abstain from merely human speculations, and to take care to assert nothing about God's hidden and unseen agency but what He Himself had clearly warranted. But while they did not, in general, profess directly to explain, except in scriptural language, the way and manner in which God acted in respect to men's sinful actions, they were sometimes tempted to engage in very intricate discussions upon this subject, in answering the allegation of their opponents, that, by ascribing to God anything more than a mere permission in regard to men's sins, they made Him the author of sin; discussions which too often resulted in some attempt to explain more fully and minutely than Scripture affords us materials for doing, what it was that God really did in connection with men's sinful actions, and what were the principles by which His procedure in this matter was regulated, and might be accounted for.

It would have been much better if the defenders of the truth upon this subject had, after bringing out the meaning and import of Scripture, confined themselves simply to the object of proving,—what was all that, in strict argument, they were under any obligation to establish,—namely, that their opponents had not produced any solid proof, that the doctrine apparently taught in Scripture, concerning God's agency in regard to sinful actions extending to something beyond mere permission, warranted the conclusion that He was thus made the author of sin. It is easy enough to prove, by general considerations drawn from the nature of the subject,—

its mysterious and incomprehensible character, its elevation above the reach of our faculties, its intimate connection with right conceptions of the operations of the divine mind,—that this conclusion cannot be established. And with the proof of this, which is all that the conditions of the argument require them to prove, men ought to be satisfied; as this is all that is needful to enable them to fall back again upon the simple belief of what the word of God so plainly teaches as a reality, while it affords us scarcely any materials for explaining or developing it. The objections and cavils of the enemies of truth should be disposed of in some way; but the conduct of the apostle, when he contented himself with disposing of an objection which was in substance and principle the same as this, merely by saying, “Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?”* combines with the unsatisfactory character of many of the statements of those who have attempted directly to answer such objections in much greater detail, in impressing upon us the necessity of guarding against being led by the objections of adversaries into the minute discussion of matters which lie beyond the reach of our faculties,—with respect to which Scripture gives us little or no information,—and in the investigation of which, therefore, we can have no very firm ground to stand upon. Let us believe firmly,—because Scripture and reason concur in assuring us,—that every sinful action is a transgression of God’s law, justly involving him that performs it in guilt and liability to punishment; and that its sinfulness proceeds wholly from the creature, and not from God, who cannot be the author or approver of sin; but let us also believe,—because Scripture and reason likewise concur in teaching us this,—that God’s providence extends to and comprehends the sins of men, and is concerned in them by something more than a mere permission, and especially in directing and overruling them for accomplishing His own purposes of justice or of mercy; and let us become the less concerned about our inability to explain fully how it is that these doctrines can be shown to harmonize with each other, by remembering,—what is very manifest,—that the one grand difficulty into which all the difficulties attending our speculations upon religious subjects ulti-

* Rom. ix. 20.

mately run up or resolve themselves, and which attaches to every system, except atheism, is just to explain how it is that God and man, in consistency with their respective attributes, capacities, and circumstances, do, in fact, concur, combine, or co-operate in producing men’s actions, and in determining men’s fate.

END OF VOL. I.