

SATANIC AGENCY

NOT CONNECTED WITH

TABLE-TURNING:

A REPLY TO TWO PUBLICATIONS ON THE SUBJECT,
BY THE REV. N. S. GODFREY.

BY

DANIEL WILSON, M.A.

VICAR OF ISLINGTON.

"SPEAK THOU THE THINGS WHICH BECOME SOUND DOCTRINE."—*Titus* ii. 1.

LONDON :

J. H. JACKSON, 21, PATERNOSTER-ROW,
AND ISLINGTON-GREEN.

SEELEYS, FLEET-STREET; HATCHARD, PICCADILLY.

1853.

[*Price Threepence.*]

SATANIC AGENCY

NOT CONNECTED WITH

TABLE - TURNING.

It is with mingled feelings of grief and shame, that I take up my pen for the purpose of making a few remarks upon two small publications which have recently appeared, by the Rev. N. S. Godfrey, Incumbent of Wortley, Leeds, the one entitled "Table-moving tested, and proved to be the Result of Satanic Agency;" the other "Table-turning, the Devil's modern Masterpiece."

In these works an attempt is made to prove, by a series of experiments, that Satan is permitted in these days to communicate with our world by a direct and sensible agency, and that certain persons have the power of calling up and holding converse with the lost spirits of the dead, through a newly-discovered movement which is communicated to tables.

The supposed discovery, I believe, originated in America, where it has proved a source of much dangerous speculation,

and has given encouragement to scepticism and infidelity. From America the delusion has passed to Germany, and other parts of Europe, and is now creating no little stir in our own country.

While this practice of table-turning remained a matter of mere curiosity and experiment, it was harmless. We live in an age of discovery. The wonders of the locomotive steam-engine and the electric telegraph are but a specimen of what we may expect in future years as human invention and scientific research advance. But when these newly-discovered agencies begin to be ascribed to a miraculous and supernatural power, and to be brought into contact with our holy religion; when our people are encouraged by their spiritual instructors to believe that Satanic influence is exercised; that the spirits of their departed relatives can be recalled to earth; that they can hold intercourse with them; that they can receive information from them respecting their own state, and that of others, in the unseen world, the case becomes totally altered; a new species of revelation is added to that of the Bible, the love of the marvellous is excited, the imagination is called into an unhealthy play, common sense and sober reason are laid aside, the warnings of God's word are neglected, and Christianity receives a blow of the most dangerous character. That we are in some peril from this quarter, at the present time, is obvious. The note sounded at Leeds has been taken up at Bath, where a clergyman asserts that he also has had communication with evil spirits. Within the last few weeks a similar doctrine has been broached in our own neighbourhood.

I shall therefore, I trust, be excused, if I seek to interpose a few calm words of sober thought and reflection, with a view, by God's blessing, to arrest the threatening danger.

And first let us see what are the simple facts of the case. It has been discovered that when three or four individuals place their hands upon a table, and connect them together so as to form a complete circle of communication, a motion is given to the table around which they are sitting. It begins, after a longer or shorter interval, to revolve, at first, slowly; as the motive power increases, it whirls round with increased rapidity—one or more of the legs will rise and fall—sometimes a shaking or trembling motion is produced. The movement is not unfrequently so violent as to overturn the table. In addition to this, it would appear that it is possible to regulate these curious movements by the will of one or more of those touching the table.

Now here we have a series of experiments which any one can try for himself. There is no mystery about them. I have myself assisted in performing them; I have been present when they have been practised by my children. The facts are undeniable. A hat can be thus set in motion in a few minutes,—a small table in the course of half or three-quarters of an hour. The precise cause of this movement remains, I believe, at present unexplained. Our scientific men have not had sufficient time to investigate it, and are backward to hazard a hasty opinion. Some, with Professor Faraday, ascribe it to involuntary muscular action, others to electricity. It appears that we must wait, as we have often had to do before, when discoveries were first made, for the true solution. But this does not satisfy Mr. Godfrey, and those who think with him. He has brought himself to believe that all this is the result of direct Satanic agency, that these movements have no connection with the application of the hands to the table, except as indicating to the wandering spirits of the dead that those sitting round it wish to hold converse with them; he therefore interposes certain questions of the

most grave and solemn character between these risings and rappings of the table leg on the floor, and regards the knock or series of knocks which follow each question, as a reply made to him by the lost spirit which has entered the table for this purpose.

Let us look a little more closely into his account of these experiments, and see whether, from his own admissions, we cannot detect the fallacy of his conclusions.

I begin with his first pamphlet entitled "Table-moving Tested." He commences by assuring us that we may reasonably expect that the supernatural powers and agencies which are about us, should be sometimes made evident to our senses, and quotes certain instances recorded in Scripture, in which this was the case. In reply to this part of the subject, I would refer the reader to an able pamphlet, just published by the Rev. F. Close, of Cheltenham, entitled "Table-turning not Diabolical," in which he shows that "Satan has never been permitted to work physical miracles, except when God has also wrought them, and then in order only to make it apparent that he was in all cases to be defeated;" further, that "miracles have invariably been wrought, either to authenticate a new revelation, or to attest a message or a messenger sent by God;" and lastly, "that the express object of the Divine will in the introduction of the Christian dispensation was the final overthrow of the power of the wicked one, and especially his diabolical influence over the bodies of men, or the power of working physical miracles." I will only add to these remarks, that we do not find any instance in Scripture of the spirits of wicked men being recalled to earth by Satanic power; the possessions recorded in the Bible were obviously those of demons, fallen angels, who "kept not their first estate,"

not the souls of the departed. The conclusion to which I am led is this, that so far from having reason to expect sensible Satanic agency in the present day, the probabilities are all against it.

I am aware, indeed, that the study of prophecy has led some to look for an increased power of the great Deceiver in our world, as one of the signs of Messiah's approaching advent; but I have yet to learn that the passages of Scripture quoted in support of this view, have reference to any act of Satan made visible to our senses, and not rather to those pretended miracles wrought in the Romish Church, or to those erroneous doctrines which he inculcates by means of false teachers. I need hardly remind the classical student of Scripture that the Greek word *πλάνος* is never used in the New Testament, in the sense of a wandering, but always a deceiving, spirit, one that causes to wander.*

But to proceed to the first series of Mr. Godfrey's experiments: "On Thursday evening," he tells us, "the 16th of June, my wife, my curate, and myself, sat down at a quarter past nine P.M., and placed our hands on a small round mahogany table. At ten o'clock the table began to move." It then made a series of curious movements in obedience to his command, indicating, I think clearly, that either some involuntary muscular action, or the exercise of the mind and will, or both combined, were connected with the movement. Nor is there anything past belief in this; we cannot raise the hand, or move the foot without an unconscious action of both the will and the muscles. I do not pretend to say that this fact fully explains the present phenomena, but

* In Hebrews xi., 38., the confessors of old are said to wander *πλανώμενοι* "In deserts and in mountains;" but this does not affect the subject now before us.

it will serve as an illustration of what I mean. Mr. Godfrey next proceeded to address the table, that is, to interpose questions between the risings and fallings of its legs when in this state of motion. Now what, I ask, can be more unsatisfactory than this course of proceeding; what right had he to take it for granted that these knocks were replies to his questions, or given by an intelligent agent? The increased excitement in the minds of those touching the table at that late hour, would obviously give a more rapid motion to the table, if the movement were communicated through them. The results of the first experiment were, however, anything but satisfactory. To the command, "If you move by electricity, stop," the table instantly stopped. To the direction, "If an evil spirit cause you to move, stop;" it moved round without stopping. Surely this was a failure. At length the Bible is produced, and laid on the table,—the table instantly stopped. "We were horror-struck," he adds. But cannot this be easily explained upon the hypothesis just suggested? Their minds are full of anxious curiosity, mingled probably with other emotions; this might give a check to the motive power, and the table would instantly be at rest. Mr. Godfrey then proceeded to questions of the most solemn character, taking it for granted, it seems, that he was addressing a lost spirit. It was now midnight. To many of these questions he could obtain no answer,—"the table was motionless." To the command, "If there be not a devil, knock twice," the leg slowly rose, and knocked as it was directed. In this, and some other cases, the table fully responded, he assures us, to his wishes.

I now turn to the second and larger work of Mr. Godfrey, which goes more into detail, called "Table-turning, the Devil's Modern Masterpiece."

He begins by asserting the personality of Satan, a truth in which all sober-minded Christians will agree with him. He then proceeds to give in detail a series of experiments which he made at a friend's house on the evening of July 4th. Before his arrival he candidly tells us that various questions had been put, some of which the table answered correctly, some incorrectly; again, then, a partial failure had been experienced. He then proceeds to explain the course which he adopted in the investigation. "I discovered," he says, "that the leg only knocks an affirmative, consequently, when a question is put, and there is no answer, it is immediately put in a negative form, for instance, 'Can you spell your name?' The leg motionless. 'Can you not spell such a name?' No movement. 'Does anything prevent you from spelling that name?' The leg rises. This question and answer would be written thus:—'Are you prevented from spelling such a name.' Yes." Mr. Godfrey's mode of spelling words was by an alphabet placed on the floor, to the several letters of which he pointed in succession until the leg rose and struck the ground; the letter at which he was pointing when the leg moved was the one selected to form the reply. He afterwards appears to have counted the letters from the beginning or end of the alphabet, in accordance with the number of knocks given in succession by the table. The dates were calculated in a similar way.

Now, it must be obvious, I think, to any thoughtful mind, that nothing could be less satisfactory than this course of proceeding. He acknowledges that it was "both tedious and laborious,"—he might have added, one full of confusion and perplexity. But here, again I ask in the name of common sense, what power has Mr. Godfrey to dictate to the supposed spirit, how he will calculate the answers given, and what possible dependence can be placed in a result thus

obtained? A rapid motion is given to the table, the knocks are repeated at longer or shorter intervals, and names, dates, places, hours, years are to be calculated from these knocks. The questions again, selected as the subject of conversation, are chosen on the gratuitous assumption, that the spirit in the table is from the infernal regions; no attempt seems to have been made to frame questions of a different character. A simple negative or affirmative again is all that was required. The single or repeated knocks given, with more or less vehemence, seem to have satisfied the inquirers as to the purport of the answer. In almost all cases, too, I perceive that the answer given is the very one which the mind of the questioner would have dictated.

And yet, with all this arrangement thus arbitrarily selected by himself, Mr. Godfrey is continually at fault. He asks the table, for instance, about a Mr. G. "It told," he says, "a parcel of lies about what he was doing, as we have since ascertained." And again: "We had at first a complete jumble of letters." To the question "Can you move the table without us?" the spirit answered "Yes." But he adds, "We took our hands off and commanded it to move. *It did not.*" Again; when the name of the spirit is asked, a further confusion occurs. At first it spells "Bripa," then "Alfred Brown;" on a subsequent occasion "Bripalet." At length so excited does he become, that *he actually commands the spirit to appear.* To this, of course, there was no response.

These experiments were repeated on the afternoon of Saturday, July 9th. On this occasion he pasted a piece of paper on each leg of the table, writing the words "Yes," "No," "Cannot answer," on each respectively. The table, however, being found inconveniently high was changed, and

no use made of the papers. Why, he does not tell us. Was it that he feared a failure? On proceeding to ask questions, the replies are, in this case, so unsatisfactory, that *he commands the spirit to leave the table, and send another more intelligent.* The succeeding spirit, however, proves as little intelligent as the first. "In spelling its name," he tells us "it was wrong; some questions it answered correctly, others *nonsensically.*" It again contradicted itself about its name. To the question, "Are you telling a pack of lies?" the answer was "Yes." "How many lies have you told us to night?" Answer, "Thirty-eight."*

On Monday, the 11th of July, the trial is again made, but without success. "We could get no answers," he says, "to anything."

Now the first remark that I would make on these experiments, is that even supposing Mr. Godfrey's theory to be true, the trials he made cannot prove it. These repeated knockings of the table are interpreted by him to mean answers of a certain character; but it has yet to be proved that questions of a totally different nature would not bring the same result, supposing the mind of the parties engaged were in a similar state of excitement; the system adopted appears to be so utterly fallacious as to give not the slightest ground for the supposition that spirits were present. The movements of the table, and frequent rapping of the legs, I am willing to admit; a heated imagination supplied the rest. The repeated failures confirm this conclusion.

* If it be said, this only proves that the spirit was a lying one, my answer is, You have been trying to prove the reality of Satanic agency, not by the falsehood, but by the truth of the answers given. To say, when a reply does not meet your wishes, that it must come from a lying spirit, is a mere evasion, not very creditable to common sense and honesty of purpose.

But I now come to a more solemn view of the subject. I not only regard these experiments as fallacious, but sinful. I charge Mr. Godfrey with trifling with sacred things, and thus bringing religion itself into contempt.

The use made of the Bible in the course of these experiments was most unjustifiable, not to say profane. The sacred volume is degraded from its proper office as the revelation from God to man, and used as a charm; a practice which we should not have wondered at in the dark ages, but which creates the utmost astonishment as the act of a Protestant Christian minister in the nineteenth century. Does Mr. Godfrey really suppose that a miraculous virtue attaches to the material paper and type of which the volume is composed, or that the spirits of the dead would pay deference in their lost condition to a revelation which they rejected on earth? The placing of pieces of paper on the table with the names of "Jesus," "Devil," "Satan," written upon them, was an act alike repugnant to Christian principle and piety.

My next objection is to the character of the answers sought to be elicited. I give a specimen.

Are you an evil spirit?—Are you one cast out by Jesus?—Is epilepsy possession?—Do you go into the earth?—Does the Devil send you here?—Does God compel you to answer questions?—Does God compel you to come here now?—Are you tormented in the sight of heaven?—Can you see heaven?—Can Satan enter heaven?—Can we do anything to better your condition?—Have you seen the rich man in hell?—Can you see paradise?—Are literal fire and brimstone the punishment of hell?—What diseases are possession? Answer: "madness," "falling-sickness," "palsy," "murder."

! Now what is this, I ask, but an attempt to introduce a new revelation? I find in the Word of God no mention of the spirits of the dead wandering about our earth. The conclusions we draw from the Bible are that the souls of the wicked are conveyed at death to a place of punishment, there to await the judgment-day. "The dead," says Solomon, "know not any thing." The soul of Judas went "to his own place." When the rich man desired to send a messenger to his unbelieving brethren, he was not allowed; "they have Moses and the prophets," is the reply. The information supposed to be obtained respecting the lost spirits being in sight of heaven, the material fire of hell, the diseases which indicate possession, all this is new. The Bible is silent on the subject.

If any thing can add to the folly, and I must say impiety, of these statements, it is the author's own explanation of the phenomena, which he has so fully described. He tells us "My impression is, that the placing the hands on the table is a sort of incantation. The sitters signify their wish to be brought into communication with the spirit world. They sit until they are observed by one of the wandering spirits, who thereupon enters the table, making it crack at the moment of his entering it." He then adds a suggestion, which I cannot repeat without shame and dismay, that it should be penned by a clergyman of our church, that "*on the imposition of hands the table is endued with power from the Devil, as the Lord's servants, on the imposition of hands, were, in the Apostle's days, endued with power from on high.*" If this be not profaneness, I do not know what is. Surely he who could write such a sentence, must have allowed his mind to be carried away far beyond the regions of sober sense and Christian propriety. It will serve, I trust, as a beacon to others, and convince them of the fearful danger of allowing themselves to be carried away by the workings of an undisciplined imagination.

One word in conclusion. Let me warn the young, and more especially my junior brethren in the ministry, to watch against any speculations which may lead them astray from the written Word. We have there the whole counsel of God revealed; nothing is to be added, nothing taken from it. Let me specially caution the younger clergy against unsettling the minds of their people by these follies. If they should engage the public mind, scepticism and infidelity will spread among us.

I am aware that the publications on which I have been commenting were written with the avowed purpose of discouraging, not promoting, the practice of table-turning; but he must be very ignorant of the character of the human mind, who does not know that the course thus adopted is the very one to foment a morbid curiosity. If the people can be persuaded that they can thus hold converse with the dead, they will leave the written Word, and seek guidance from the world of spirits. Let the minister of religion stand firm by divine grace against these seductions. He has a great work to do. Lost sinners are perishing around him. He watches for souls as one that must give account.

I close with the Apostle's admonition to Titus:

"Young men likewise exhort to be sober-minded. In all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works: in doctrine *shewing* uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity, sound speech, that cannot be condemned; that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you."—Titus ii. 6—8.