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## ARTICLE III.

## CRITICISM AND THE COMMON LIFE.

BY THE REV. A. A. BERLE, BRIGHTON, MASS.

AMONG all the chapters of change which the progress of the scientific spirit in all forms of inquiry has wrought, none is more remarkable or full of moment than that which has to do with the religious opinions of our generation. The causes which have brought this about are many, but it is enough to enumerate three; viz. the revival of critical science in all its forms, the rapid succession of objective and experimental examples of the method, and the changes within the domain of biblical criticism itself. The almost universal acceptance of the doctrine of evolution in one or another of its modes has affected not only the stupendous results that have appeared in natural history and biology, but also others of like importance in the literary, critical, and historical fields as well, and the whole circle of human knowledge is at this present moment groaning under the attempt to force it all, and all at once, into the evolutionary mould. Theology, also, has been brought into this curious spectacle, as the latest captive to be dragged after the triumphant chariot of the evolutionary creed.<sup>1</sup>

The mental activity thus engendered could not but be productive, and a vast literature has accumulated in a few years, all of which has for its problem the reconciliation of traditional views with the new doctrine, or the annihilation of the old views and the presentation of the supplanting

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Lyman Abbott's "Evolution of Christianity" is the most interesting of the recent works. It is a curious collection of theological definitions and scientific generalities, but none the less a stimulating book.

new ones. The outflow of this material has not yet quite ceased, though there seems to be a cessation in the volume, even if the quality is little improved. The introductory passages in all these works are exactly alike. They begin by lauding the progressive spirit of the times, the critical nature of the period through which we are passing theologically and otherwise, and urge the need of bringing the religious thinking of the time into line with the new movements that are demonstrating their presence so effectively in other sciences. Universal theological unrest and the undeniable insufficiency of traditional theology are the assumed but unproven postulates of this class of productions. It is always the representation of absolute atheism in the future, that moves these saviours of religion to their sacred task of rehabilitating the religion of the Christians of this generation.

The spectre is not a new one. It is as old as the beginnings of the Hebrew priesthood, and has survived ever since. No age but has fancied itself one of general and unprecedented scepticism. At no period has the church lacked a sufficient number of zealous advocates who predicted her utter ruin unless certain changes were instantaneously incorporated into her creeds. The rather peculiar fact must here be noted, that while the new doctrine usually was based upon such dire predictions as to the future of faith, all it usually asked for itself was tolerance alongside of the deadly errors which it sought to correct. Simultaneously it has always been the case that the new view was resisted with courage and power begotten of the equally secure belief that the general adoption of the view was fully fraught with all the calamity that its progenitors feared in the event of its rejection. Meanwhile the verdict of history has been that the cause of true religion has not been endangered by any one view, and that the calm judgment of the Christian church, arising from her appeal to experience and practical worth,

has been nearly, if not quite, correct as to the real force of the ideas brought to her notice. It has sometimes taken considerable time for this consensus of judgment to crystallize, but it has never failed to do so when the issue was of sufficient importance to command general attention.

#### THE RE-EXAMINATION OF THE BASES OF FAITH.

Meanwhile we cannot lose sight of the fact that the church is making the most widespread and exhaustive re-examination of the fundamental truths of Christianity which she has ever made. The popular conception of the truths of Christianity is permeated by a spirit which cannot be called otherwise than scientific. The spread of intelligence, which but a few years ago was the exclusive possession of the few, has induced the opinion that the average man can, with but little technical equipment, sufficiently scrutinize the logic, if he may not question the facts, of the expert. This is recognized in the popular interest in scientific questions, as evidenced in the attendance at lectures, the discussions in magazines, and the attention of the daily press to subjects until recently all but completely ignored. Christianity is being examined with a view of determining what its form should be, and what its popular presentation should include. But it must not be supposed that Christianity itself is on trial. Except in spots the civilized world has become so convinced of that practical utility of the Christian church, and the necessity of the general adoption of Christian ethics, that it would not in this rapid age give its time to any discussion respecting the merits of Christianity itself. The question before it is, What is Christianity, and how shall we at the earliest possible moment secure its world-wide adoption? For this reason the bases are being examined for the purpose of discovering what are the permanent, and what are the transitory, elements of Christian belief; for the existence of both no one will seriously question.

Naturally such an inquiry must begin with the Scriptures. It could not begin otherwise, and if it could, it would soon find itself here, with precisely the questions agitating that are the topics of current discussion at the present time. The reason for this is also very clear. Upon the ground of Christian experience the church can readily see that no final statutes can be enacted. Upon the phases of the spiritual activity which from time to time make their appearance, no argument can be builded. Against the various benevolent enterprises no word of criticism, except as to method and results, can be raised. Hence, if the church would at all register her wish and opinion as to the adequacy or inadequacy of this or that doctrine, she has been forced to attack its biblical basis or authority. No attack is thus made upon the Bible itself, but upon the biblical basis of the received doctrine, and it is the misconception of this fact that has given rise to the acrimonious discussions which have so disastrously affected the church in recent years. The faith of the church is that body of truth which in general finds acceptance among Christians, and in the last analysis is the belief in the divine authority of the Bible. Any attack upon the Bible is a renunciation of Christian faith, since upon the basis of biblical ideas and biblical requirements the whole rationale of the Christian church rests. But this acceptance of the divine authority of the Bible does not, cannot, and never did involve the acceptance of any given view of the character, authorship, or purpose of any book in the Bible, and cannot be affected by any such view, except as such a view distinctly and unmistakably has for its conclusion the rejection of the Bible as the divine standard of faith.

Under these conditions, there must be periods when the church, for her own understanding of the contents and the ideas apart from their connection with the sacred text of this book, must exhaustively re-examine all the material which she has woven into her garment of common life. She

will be so doing constantly, especially in the periods of greatest spiritual activity, and when great questions press heavily for solution. Just in proportion as this or that doctrine has played an important part in the common religious life, will the critical gaze be fastened upon it, and its right to continue as a part of the common life be questioned. The healthfulness of this process cannot fail to be evident to any intelligent observer. It enables the church to keep her vital doctrines from being encrusted with error, or being superseded by simply fleeting impressions which for the time obtain an unworthy pre-eminence. It forms, if one may so speak, a clearing-house for biblical ideas of all sorts, good, bad, and indifferent, after hearing which, the church "proves all things, and holds fast that which is good."

Such examination inwardly before the tribunal of the Holy Spirit and the private conscience has always been the source of the vitality of the spiritual life of believers, and has the apostolic warrant. It is not atheism there any more than it is atheism when the same process is applied to the external standards. If Paul was warranted in urging the kind of scepticism which makes the believer question whether he is a Christian at all, it can surely not be amiss if one question such intellectual conceptions as he may be possessed of, from time to time, with a view to determining their force and truth. Such questioning is now undoubtedly the habit of the church. It is not unbelief. It does not propose to land in atheism. It does, however, propose to know what it believes, and why. And if, in the carelessness of indifferentism, she has misrepresented the gospel by false and unusual requirements for Christian discipleship, she proposes to simplify them until they accord with the spirit of Him who called and created the first disciples, and so far as the changed conditions of life and civilization permit apply with exactness and energy the principles which He laid down. She cannot always be trusted in the first drafts of such exam-

ination and study, but the spirit and object of her undertaking is beyond any possible challenge or adverse criticism.

#### THE BIBLE THE FIRST-FRUITS OF CRITICISM.

That the critical study of the Bible is no novel thing is shown in the striking fact that it is itself the product of the process which we have been describing. The writings which were submitted to the judgment of the early church as possessing divine sanction and authority are almost numberless, and doubtless many have been lost. Indeed there can be little doubt that for a long period there was nothing resembling a canon of Scripture, and the writings of the apostles were read in the company of many other writings, some of which have not survived. Whether this sifting process began early or late is not here to the purpose. It came at any rate, and the result is that certain books are canonical and others are not so considered. The only possible basis upon which this discrimination could have been made, must have been that which took into account the correspondence of the facts in the writings with the experience of the church. Thus writings which were without signature, and remain so to this day, were accepted as of divine authority solely because they met the spiritual need and corresponded to the spiritual type of the churches accepting them. This could be the only test, and certainly the only rational test. But here must be observed that in some of the books thus accepted were doctrines and ideas which were diametrically opposed to doctrines and ideas found in others. In the battle for canonicity it was soon discovered that there was no fixed type of Christian experience, and that the rejection of the doctrine of a book involved the rejection of the Christians who held the doctrine. From this the church recoiled naturally, even though it was engaged in the solemn work of making a final rule of faith. The only thing which could happen in a truly Christian church did happen, and both

were admitted, and the book of Hebrews stands in the canon as well as the book of Romans, and the Epistle of James is of equal rank with the Epistle to the Galatians. Nor was this variety confined merely to the great outlines of Christianity, but in a multitude of minor points and local peculiarities the same differences were recognized and tolerated. Hence the New Testament is a mosaic, with certain fundamental elements of unity, to be sure, which are never to be mistaken, but also, and in harmony with these great doctrines, an innumerable array of minor and subordinate differences, which crop out everywhere, and in the full understanding of which alone can the types of Christian experience be discovered and described. It is interesting to observe that during the Reformation precisely this question presented itself and was settled in exactly the New Testament way.

Now there seems to be no good reason for supposing that there will not be questions of various kinds perpetually appearing and requiring the judgment of the church as to their bearing upon the faith of Christendom. Indeed there is every reason for believing that they will continue to arise until the end of time. If the questions which thus come under the critical notice of the church are distinctly seen to be renunciations of the Bible or parts of the Bible, the only conclusion she can come to is, that they are contrary to the faith of Christendom, since apart from the Bible Christendom has no faith. So, also, if certain ideas are seen to be contrary to the great fundamental truths which are everywhere recognized throughout the Bible, the church has no alternative but their rejection, since these give the Bible its rationale, and constitute it what it is. But no idea or doctrine claimed to be in the Scriptures and a part of them can be pronounced against the historic faith, unless with such classification goes a decree of rejection of Christianity itself, as represented in the Bible, its sole objective standard.



There is another very important fact to be kept in mind in connection with the method by which the Scriptures have come into existence. The method which we have described is really the only one by which the unity of the church could be preserved, for it was the experience in the collection of both testaments that almost immediately after they were gathered into canons, first the Jews, and then the Christians, were scattered all over the face of the known earth. What preserved the unity of the Jewish national feeling was its Bible; similarly what kept Christianity one in the midst of the hundreds of sects which sprang into existence almost at once after the formation of the canon was its Bible, and this only because all could appeal to it as the source and justification of their faith and the expression of their experience. The principle adopted was manifestly one of inclusion, not of exclusion. Whatever sect was seen to be sufficiently within the broad lines laid down by the diversity of judgment and experience was recognized and was called Christian. It will be seen how important the question of the formation of the canon becomes under this view.

The science which has dealt with this question has generally gone under the name of Biblical Introduction. But for a hundred years at least this term, first used by Adrianus, a writer of the fifth century, has had no definite limits, though its general significance has always been understood. Thus Schleiermacher held it to include everything, and anything, but still thought it a science; on the other hand Delitzsch denied its capacity for scientific treatment, since it has not the organic nature commonly supposed to belong to a true science. The tendency of the later criticism has been constantly to limit its application, by division of the work, and the differentiation of the various problems usually classed together under the name Introduction. This confusion has not been without effect upon the course of theology, as evidenced in the discussions for several decades.

The questions of a critical nature, such as that of the canon, the text, and the like, have been almost invariably mixed up with questions of practical religion in a way astounding to the student who has arisen within the last ten years, and has been trained in the newer scientific methods of biblical criticism. The pastor of forty years ago was not only a preacher, but something of a philosopher and theologian, and not a little of a critic in a general way. To-day this is a practical impossibility. The literature of criticism has become so enormous, that first-hand opinions may be said to be absolutely out of the reach of men not located at the centres of learning, and to these, if they be at the same time pastors, only in the most general way. And if this were not enough, the tremendous strain upon the churches in their endeavor to grapple successfully with changing social conditions has made almost every efficient pastor in the land a practical sociologist, just as it did Chalmers and Kingsley and a host of others in their times. The pastor can be, in times like these, only an expositor, a fact which is illustrated by noteworthy examples.<sup>1</sup> He cannot be, and should not attempt being a critic in the technical sense. But this seems to have been overlooked in the current discussions. The fault lies largely with the loosely defined lines of differentiation, marking the proper material for biblical introduction.

#### THE RISE OF HISTORICAL CRITICISM.

The historic method of criticism is the practical application of the theory of natural development applied to the literature of religion. It in general declines the deductive method and begins with the collection of data for the formation of ground theses as to the historical environment and

<sup>1</sup> The Rev. W. M. Taylor, D. D., of the Broadway Tabernacle, New York, whose popular biographies of Paul, Peter, David, Joseph, and the rest, are made up of expository sermons originally delivered to his congregation. Critical work is not attempted, though accuracy of course is carefully sought.

sources of the documents under discussion. It presupposes exegesis, as well as archæology and history, to have supplied materials with which its work is to be done. Its lesson is chiefly one of arrangement by the discovery of the priority of ideas. It therefore also assumes conclusions in the comparative study of religions. It is thus seen to stand at the top of the scale of the biblical critical sciences, ready to use the resources of all, and yet having its work clearly demarcated from that of all the rest.

In this brief outline sufficient is indicated to show the immense resources required for the application of the historic method successfully, and the danger involved in announcing conclusions upon fragmentary and insufficient data. Nowhere in the whole range of the sciences, are erudition and the judicial spirit so much and so perpetually required as in the performance of this task. The advocate is by his nature wholly unfitted for it. The zealot, whether he be a radical innovator, or a conservative defender of the faith, has no place in the circle of those who are to be trusted with the problems which here offer themselves for solution. This will be seen more fully as the elements of the problem, and the qualifications, are more completely set forth. But it is enough here to state that the critic who ventures to arrange the ideas found in the Scriptures in the order of their development has before him a work of the greatest magnitude. Especially is this true because the logical development is not always or necessarily the natural or actual development. Merely because a crude civilization follows one of higher order does not prove that its product must have preceded it in time. Nothing has so persistently been forgotten by the newest critics as the fact that reversion of type is one of the commonest occurrences in the world. Any ordinary man of affairs can see the process taking place under his eyes daily. The presumption certainly is that higher forms succeed lower, and that this is the logical necessity cannot be

questioned for a moment. But life and the progress of the world have shown the most magnificent defiance of logic imaginable. This may also be said of some critics.

The simple fact sought to be established here is, that the requirements for sound and enduring criticism are increasing with remarkable rapidity, and that the academic temper, with judicial capacity and boundless memory and patience, are the absolute conditions under which alone the work can be attempted.

It will be seen at once that great importance must attach to any conclusions which may be arrived at in this field. It is not therefore surprising that the modern critics have sought to identify their textual criticism and interpretation, together with such history as they could command, with that science capable of offering the conclusions at which we have hinted. Thus Reuss, and Baur, and Kuenen, and some others introduce the term history into their works on biblical introduction. But it can be readily seen that for the conclusions, as we have defined the task of historical criticism, they are lacking in a multitude of elements. A glance at the difficulties will make this clear.

Religious ideas, like other ideas, usually come in the natural order, and are provoked by some obvious need. Custom and the constant performance of a rite soon leads to both priesthood and ritual. With increasing power and clientage this priesthood itself develops new ritual or transforms the old, retaining, changing, or abolishing, as the case may be. The unscientific character of the early races, and the naturalness of such changes are obvious. To endeavor to reproduce the earliest ideas after centuries of modification and many incrustations, reforms, reversions, and changes in priesthood and civilization, is next to impossible. In the first place, the data are almost wholly wanting. Even such facts as there are, are rarely well authenticated, and rest upon the casual observations of travellers, who often had

but the remotest contact with the things they sought to describe, and, as has been shown again and again, drew largely upon the imagination for such facts as they pretended fully to present. A long residence among the Zuni Indians, covering years, failed to indicate to an intelligent observer the presence of religion, to say nothing of its character and rites. Similar testimony may be secured from many other authorities. When, therefore, an approach is made to the institutions of the Old Testament, the difficulties in the way of full understanding are almost insurmountable. Mere analogies may prove nothing; but, even when these exist, the course of development, and the vicissitudes of a given ritual or other religious practice, can almost never be correctly traced. And yet, before any final conclusion can be laid down, these must be at least approximately known. Hypotheses are doubtless necessary, and conjectures, especially when bold and clearly expressed, are interesting, but they are far from being material upon which enduring conclusions may be based.

The flexibility of language and the difficulties of true interpretation constitute another monumental difficulty. Where a literature is established and voluminous, this difficulty is greatly reduced. But, in the case of the Old Testament for example, where it with its commentaries forms almost all the literature we possess of the Hebrew language, with only collateral light from other allied tongues, though the meaning in word and phrase may be certain, yet the content of the language thus revealed is fully as much a problem of psychology as of exegesis. There are cantons in the republic of Switzerland where contemporary populations, separated only by a few mountains, are utterly unable to understand each other's speech. The blunders of expert translators, even in our day of philological efficiency, are so common as to excite almost no comment. The varieties of interpretation, and the ludicrous spectacle which they pre-

sent when taken together, is admirably shown in a work by one of the most advanced critics himself on the 148th Psalm.<sup>1</sup> The same thing could be repeated with almost every book in the Bible.

Once more we remember, that criticism of religious literature introduces elements which are found nowhere else. Religious ideas are, more than others, dependent for their interpretation upon the sympathetic appreciation of them and their merits by the interpreter. A disciple, however biassed in the direction of undue favor, is a better critic than a known and conspicuous opponent. Authorities from the opposing side always have more weight, because these do not represent the judgments of a friend. The principle holds equally true in the most scientific criticism. Bias there will undoubtedly be, and we have already shown that it is one of the greatest of dangers to sound judgment. But if there must be some predisposition, it would better be on the side of the word under judgment than against it. A spurious passage must be held genuine until rational and good grounds are found for its rejection. So also of the books. It will be argued that this closes the gate to progress, but it is not true. It will be said that this affords a shelter for many errors, and this is true. But the errors can never be vital errors in a living church, and in a church devoid of living experience there is not power of judgment in any case. Reasons that are verified in the last court of appeal, that is, the experience of the church, will prevail whether they have logic upon their side or not. The transitory never can supplant that which is permanent, and, similarly, that which has vitality will live in spite of all conspiracies to suppress it. The vitality of theories or doctrines is the best evidence that they have the element of truth somewhere contained in them.

<sup>1</sup> Der 148 Psalm, Ein Denkmal, exegetischer Noth und Kunst, zur Ehre unserer ganzen Zunft. Eduard Reuss. 1867.

From these causes we must demand of the critic that he be a religious man. This is not requiring his bondage to any creed, or compelling him to conform to certain churchly usages. But it is requiring that he, too, shall have knowledge of the court before which he pleads, and be acquainted with its ethics, its procedure and rules. This at least can be and must be expected. An atheist might discover a fact in astronomy as well as, and perhaps better than, a Christian could; but when he offers his astronomical discovery, as overruling a religious conception of its office of declaring the glory of God and showing his handiwork, we must be excused if we decline the companionship. This method is not applicable to theological sciences alone. It is the common habit and practice of all scientists in their respective branches. Now this spirit is not easily held with growing knowledge. The heights often daze the beholder with their outlook, and he must needs be hid in the cleft of the rock. At least one eminent critic used habitually to remark to his students that he differed with the progressives more in their spirit than in their facts. The habits of personal piety are usually not strenuously observed by men of critical instincts. Some notable exceptions there are, but they are such as prove the rule. An impious or flippant spirit will never produce a truly religious truth, or much material out of which one may be builded. The recoil of many from the unsympathetic and savage onslaughts upon traditional ideas which have been made in recent years was but natural. Advanced thinkers who are accustomed to plunge boldly forward, often pause themselves, doubting if this is the real method of progress. The church here, too, offers an instructive history. She has usually preferred to learn the truth more slowly from sympathetic expositors, than grasp it wholly at once from the hands of rude and radical iconoclasts.

## CRITICISM AND FAITH.

Objectively speaking, the faith of Christendom is its Bible. It may be argued that there was faith before the existence of the Bible, but the Bible alone gives us the record concerning it. It is barely possible that some profound thinker might evolve for himself something corresponding to the biblical scheme, but none of the kind has yet appeared. Simply then, the church and the future of Christianity is inseparably linked to the fate of its Bible. And this, of course, means the canon of Scripture, as the experience of centuries has defined it. There it must look for the record of the types of Christian living, and there it must expect the revision of its religious ideas. It will be observed, that in the recognition of this latter fact an important addition has been made to the power hitherto ascribed to the Bible. Originally the books appealed to the experience of the church for their acceptance. All types were represented. They all had their literature, and offered it to the collective judgment of the church for incorporation into its authoritative canon. The church weighed the evidence in each case. We have already shown that there was every reason for including everything not positively opposed to the great common truths, and that this spirit must have prevailed to a large degree. This fact therefore constitutes the Scriptures themselves a kind of court, to which the church may appeal for the revision of her ideas and the better understanding of her faith. What was thus dependent upon experience, now becomes the standard of it. Not to be biblical must mean not to be Christian. The result which thus appears, and naturally too, is that the Bible has become the final authority within the church for the standards of her own life and practice. This could not have been otherwise. It is hard to see how else the church could have recognized herself in different places, transformed as she was by local coloring and conditions. She looked to a common standard.



She asked a sign and received it in the shape of the Bible, her common authority. Now the practice of centuries has created a vast set of presumptions with reference to the authority which the church has thus erected for herself. One is, that essentially it will not and cannot be changed. It is very difficult to see just how any change can ever occur in the canon, for example. To change the canon would be to nullify the experience of the church, since the canon grew out of it, and was so constituted because out of a great mass of conflicting claims just these books were selected as representing what the church felt and knew. Whether they are literally infallible, or in all details historically accurate, cannot affect this question at all. It may be said, however, that even on these questions certain very strong presumptions have been created. But that the Bible must remain substantially what it is, and as such must remain the final rule of faith for Christendom, seems to be firmly fixed, both from the manner of its origins and from the continuous testimony of the church.

If this be true, then we have an interesting fact appearing which throws light upon the office of criticism in the exercise of its proper function. It would seem, therefore, that the work of the critic has nothing to do with the Bible itself, considered with reference to its divine authority and power. His work seems to have to do merely with the arrangement of the material in its best form, so that the Christian judgment may most easily know just what its Bible contains. As to what the Bible is, or how much she shall accept or reject, the church does not ask her critics at all; she settles these questions in the court of experience. All that her critic as such can do, is to work over the material with a view to presenting it in the best light. More than this he is not competent to do. The church of to-day, while she is interested in whatever discoveries are made, bearing upon the authenticity and credibility of the various books of the Bible,

cannot, and does not, raise these questions because she has the slightest doubt on these points. They are in her Bible, and for all practical purposes this settles the matter of authority. To reject a book would be like rejecting a part of her own body. When this is remembered, much of the importance hitherto supposed to belong to some discussions vanishes. As regards the faith of the church, the question whether Moses ever saw the written documents now comprising our Hexateuch, amounts to nothing. The same is true about the Psalms or the second Isaiah. It is true of almost every one of the leading critical questions under discussion. All these documents are in the Bible; they are the product of the church; the church cannot deny herself.

Thus it will be seen how little the faith is dependent upon criticism as to the rule of its life. That great mental confusion may be produced, and grave spiritual disasters may be brought about, by a hostile and unsympathetic criticism, must be acknowledged. But fear for the ark of God is founded upon the appearance of a spectre of the imagination, which has no substance and can do no permanent damage. Nothing in all the experience of the church is so well established as this.

Meanwhile the question is perpetually presenting itself, whether or not the uncritical majority in the church has anything to do with the state of critical opinion. The answer to this question is clear from what we have already stated. It will be the corrective power to which the critical opinions, so far as they affect the life and spiritual interests of the church, go for examination on this side. They will be a critical force, but not a technical one. They will as really, certainly as effectively, command the attention of the church as the critics themselves. They are the makers of the faith in the generation in which they live. Indeed they are the church forever at work building the foundations upon which their successors must build. It is a somewhat peculiar fact

that to this large class the critics have almost always stood in an attitude more or less of opposition. The reason for this is probably because, unable to comprehend the exact bearing of the statements made by the critics, and conscious that the spirit of evangelical piety was not usually the ruling spirit, they have assumed hostility to the types of experience which they themselves represented, and hence to Christianity itself. In this they have been consistent, whatever else they may have been besides.

The critics, on the other hand, have usually had little but contempt for the multitude, and have not hesitated to express it with more or less freedom. The opposition they have themselves often wantonly provoked has often forced out the slight residuum of truly Christian spirit remaining, and the result has been something not unlike persecutions and mediæval heresy trials. But the most casual examination of the grounds of faith and the natural and legitimate work of the biblical critic fails to reveal justification in even the slightest degree for the spirit which has usually and unfortunately prevailed.

#### THE NORMAL ELEMENTS OF CRITICISM.

We may now inquire, What are the legitimate elements of the criticism from which the church may be expected to derive profit and inspiration, together with material for the furtherance of her task of saving the world? The answer is not a simple one, for so many things are necessary, and so many qualifications are required of the critic himself, that it would be difficult to select any few as representative of all the rest. But it is possible to classify the elements which should enter into critical judgment, under groups which may be more or less intelligible. These are the groups which may be said to contain the normal elements of criticism, for the reason that, whatever special questions a particular problem may present, these are always to be considered. It is to

be remembered that these are made with reference to the literary historical method, and assume the preliminary work of exegesis and the kindred prefatory studies which furnish the material for elaboration and arrangement.

I. First, then, is the historical element. That there is a philosophy of history must be recognized as equally true with the remaining philosophies. All religious literatures are more or less the products of a united national feeling. The right understanding of the historical processes by which the national unity was secured and maintained, together with the national religious peculiarities and racial tendencies, is of the supremest importance. It will reveal, for example, what elements are native to the race, and those which have been acquired from contact with other nations. It will illustrate the normal order of development and the deviations from that order. It will show, by analogy, from the history and practices of peoples of allied blood and tongue, the precise force, and the relative importance, of the various dogmas embodied in the working theology. It is, in fact, the labor of discovering origins and the search for primary principles. It will view the successive stages of the ethical-spiritual development as the march of a regular organic development which has a rationale extending throughout the whole. It will assume this rationale to be the obvious course of historical development, rather than an abstruse mixing of incongruous factors. There is no corrective, for the false placing of ideas, like the study of the conditions out of which they emerge. It is the business of the historical element to supply these conditions, and verify them by the exactness with which the literature shall represent the spirit and the ethical and religious tone of the time.

The motives of the literary works will thus, also, be best understood. A writing which is alien to its time, and obviously an intrusion upon the normal order, can more certainly be detected by this means than by any other. But it

must not be supposed that no allowance is made, or recognition is taken, of the great figures of history and their influence in turning back or overturning the tide of opinion in their times. Not the least of the achievements of historical science has been its observance of the influence of so-called world-figures, and their proper classification as historical forces. The biographical elements thus introduced are of the supremest value, and may be among the most productive powers of knowledge. History is so much of it biography, at the best, that it much resembles human life, not only in its orderly and intelligible points, but in its contradictory and obscure factors as well. And the adjustment of the mass of material thus offered orderly and disorderly, following in natural succession, and easily interpreted or contradictory and isolated, constitutes the problem of finding the historical origin and purpose of a literary work. When to this is added the problem of the religious order or ritual, it is simply multiplied by two, and becomes a task the vastness of which can be understood only by attempting its mastery.

II. Secondly, we call attention to the psychological element. Here again we have a vast unexplored field. Indeed, we venture the assertion that the Old Testament presents the finest collection of illustrations for psychological experimentation found anywhere in literature. The study of the varieties of imagination there found will reveal wonders to those not initiated. The forms of astral worship, of demon worship, of necromancy, and magic, the rationale of animal and human sacrifice, the significance of the various offerings, cereal and animal, the origin and meaning of the sacred trees and stones and caves, supernatural and semi-supernatural beings, and a host of such like questions, are all intimately connected with the understanding of the rites of the Old Testament ritual. The reading of many of the incidents in the Old Testament sounds strangely like some

chapters in the proceedings of the Society of Psychological Research. It will be seen at once that these are largely problems which fall into the domain of psychology, and the competent critic must possess the needful discipline and training to enable him to recognize the exact nature of the problem before him from this point of view.

All literature is, in a sense, the expression of an inner impulse which seeks literature as the medium of communicating with the world. It is this inner impulse of the scripture writers which is the most necessary, and the most elusive, of all the elements of sound critical judgment. The tide of feeling, the anguish, the zeal and the discouragement, the impassioned denunciation and the pathetic plea, are all phases of human psychology, which are of utmost importance to the theologian and critic alike. It is that which enables him in a measure to reproduce in imagination the conditions, and thus interpret aright. It is the fuel of the productive power. Not to be thus able to feel this inner impulse, is to bring to the problem merely the cold instincts of reason and the judgments of logic, fatally inefficient for the task in hand. The life must be rekindled, and the dead must be raised to life, and speak their lines on other stages than those upon which they were first delivered. But this involves laborious and patient waiting and the nicest discrimination of feeling. It requires the critic almost to be a poet, and certainly compels him to be a seer. Happy if he is both, for then he hears on ancient battle-fields the clash of contending arms, he sees the charging hosts of armed battalions, while no smoke bedims his view, and no thunder of artillery causes him to lose the faintest gasp of the wounded and the dying. Then, too, he is moved by the sad strains of the captives' song, and shares in their triumphant hope of deliverance; the mighty Coming One is not a figure two thousand years removed, but the man of Edom who tramples down the enemies of his people, and brings in the

reign of God. It is hard to appreciate the fine feelings which these things require. But can we accept the judgment of those who cannot command them? The critic must be that, but much more. He should be a historian and a psychologist, and especially the latter, if the bare externals of expiatory sacrifice shall have anything of their real significance. What if he undertake to reveal the meaning of the life of the Master in the ministry of his life? As much may be fairly gained by this means as by any other one element of critical study. But the psychology of most critics is not only crude, but often a caricature of the sentiments which must have produced a given passage. The common life understands it better, and responds more quickly to the inner motive, even though it knows less technically. "Life is your Master beloved, and the Understanding is its servant." It is this response of the living to the life of the Book which has given it its undying hold upon the people, renewed throughout generation after generation. This is no less true when we examine the pathological forms of the moral-spiritual life contained in the Scriptures. Thus moral disease is recognized and the remedy suggested. The antidotes to moral vagaries are as clearly thus to be found, as those to material poisons. But these are essentially psychological questions, for the understanding of which the critic needs the most careful technical and personal preparation. Here, as much as anywhere, the element of personal piety and high spiritual purpose count for much. This is the magical power which takes the dryest facts, and dresses them into life and motion. It will often seem like taking a backward step, especially when the pathway of the reason is for the time abandoned for that of the imagination; but we remember the words of Ferrier, "Men have supposed that in philosophy they could advance only by going forward, whereas the truth is they can advance only by going

in a manner backward."<sup>1</sup> What Ferrier thus affirms of philosophy is not less true of criticism.

It is the privilege of this psychological element in critical work that it enables the critic to maintain consistently the anthropocentric point of view which should be that of the critic. It is the only scientific method which we can imagine for a proper approach to the true interpretation of the constantly recurring questions where the mental images governing the expression are the first requirements for clear exposition.

III. Again, rational criticism has a necessary practical element. The search after truth in the abstract, simply for its own sake, has in times past given rise to the almost universally accepted theory that the scholar had little or nothing to do with the practical outcome of his studies. The truth must be told, and the course of logic and discovery must be followed, irrespective of consequences. Any who have doubted on the point have generally been supposed to be afraid of the truth. But no more pernicious fallacy has ever lived to vex the church and the world than precisely this stupid misapprehension of the scholar's work. To be sure, he must have leisure and freedom from the entanglements that hinder patient and continuous investigation, but to fancy that rational scientific study requires absolution from practical duties and participation in the obligations of the common life, a kind of dehumanization, is in the highest degree absurd. This has probably made the church at large distrustful of her scholars more than any other one thing. Hence the real leaders of progress in thought, as well as in practical benevolence, have almost universally been the preachers of the church, rather than her profound thinkers. What names have produced the ecclesiastical differentiations of the church universal? They are the names of Augustine, of Calvin, of Luther, of Zwingli, of Wesley, of Edwards, and

<sup>1</sup> Ferrier, *Inst. of Met.* § 16.



others, all of them preachers who added to this function remarkable scholastic powers of one kind or another. The reason why the early church in her wrath and fanaticism could destroy almost completely the works of Celsus, probably the most powerful antagonist Christianity ever encountered, is, as the fragments remaining clearly show, such a complete alienation from the practical instincts of the people, as to excite hatred, but no interest. Modern scepticism is wiser, and employs fiction as its instrument.

There is, however, another reason why the scholar must be a practical man, apart from the fact that thus alone he is a real influence in the church. It is a philosophical reason. It was Kant, we believe, who divided all knowledge into *cognitio ex datis* and *cognitio ex principiis*. From the nature of the critic's task his knowledge derived from principles will in general greatly exceed that which comes from facts. Especially is this the case with that class of facts which are the product not of the rational progressive, but of the impulsive reactionary, ideas of men. In literature these ideas are exceedingly hard to discern, from the fact that they are almost never stated with their true aim in view. They are best if not exclusively discovered, by immediate contact with them, as illustrated in the daily life of men. Feeling the public pulse is not the business of the critic in weighing evidence, but feeling the public pulse is a part of the evidence to be weighed. Of this there cannot be the slightest doubt. The pulse in this case is the spiritual ethical consciousness of the church. The critic who would risk the unbalancing of the faith of a bucolic who had based it upon a spurious text, without first surrounding him with other and stronger supports, impeaches thereby not only his practical tact, but his scholastic soundness as well. He shows himself clearly a stranger to the spiritual impulses which lead to sympathetic and healthful interpretation. He is simply a logical machine or a critical treadmill. Life and the human

feelings and weaknesses he does not comprehend, and he lacks a necessary element of real effective critical power.

"The specifically human character of our views lies less in the breadth and clearness than in the warmth of coloring imparted to them by the constant co-operation of the emotions."<sup>1</sup> It was the failure to recognize this truth, that gave rationalism a blow from which it has never yet recovered. The religious feeling under proper and careful discipline becomes the most productive of all the faculties, being not only fruitful in larger and more human conceptions, but corrective of the steady and often heedless flow of the stream of logical formulae. But this feeling is found in its purest forms, in the assemblies of the church, at her sacramental supper, and in her ordinary life and work. In social science, this law has already been discovered and applied. It is being appreciated more and more by the church. Hence criticism must have the practical touch which makes the critic, co-worker with the expositor, and the fellow-laborer with his brethren in the church. It is this practical power which connects the critical product naturally with the religion whose interests it is intended to further, and the truth which it is to fully reveal. What the limit of the practical element will be, is of course determined by individual and local considerations.

#### THE COMMON ELEMENT IN CRITICISM AND LIFE.

"All history and our own experience tell us," says Principal Caird, "that there are irrepressible instincts which point to something above the domain of nature—to a realm of mystery which transcends the finite and phenomenal world."<sup>2</sup> This common experience which belongs equally to all rational minds, is the link which ought to bind criticism and the common life together. After all the various

<sup>1</sup> Lotze, *Microcosmos*, ii. 306.

<sup>2</sup> *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 8.

sources of human knowledge have been searched through, whether satisfactorily or not, the retreat is upon the personal life and the inward witness. This personal element is one factor always common to criticism and the common life. The recognition of the value of the personal life with its infinite capacity and yet its singular dependence, constitutes the most unique of all the forces which move the mind of man. It is the one recurring theme of the poets and prophets of the Old Testament, it is the perpetual reminder of Christ to his disciples, it is the one subject around which the apostolic preaching continually revolves. It eludes the definitions of science, and is comprehended only in feeling, by its effects. It is the common hope and pain which makes for human fellowship. There is no more pathetic plea in the New Testament than that which urges discipleship on the ground that "we have not a high priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but one that hath been in all points tempted like as we are," and then little later represents Christ as "enduring the cross, despising shame," for the [sake of] the joy that was set before him. The humanness of both these appeals is striking in the extreme. There is here the most naïve expression of perfect understanding of the discouragement and the causes of it, of hope and the motives that inspire it, that one could desire. This unity of all life in a common dependence and looking to a common redemption should be the ruling element of criticism, as it is already the dominant thought in the common life. The brotherhood of all men, and their common banishment from the favor of God through sin and transgression, are mighty motives to a man who, under the fear of God, undertakes the interpretation of the Bible. Faith under the best of conditions is never too strong, and the religious grasp upon the personal saving work of Christ, as the mediator between God and men, never too clear to be beyond peril of weakness and loss. The thoughtful minds

in their best moments have always observed this the world over. When this has governed his thought, and the Christian critic has come to the work of interpretation, then have been the great currents of spiritual insight which have illuminated the world. It does not require a pietism which obscures the judgment, or limits the critical power, though it will modify and enrich both. It is the demonstration to the church, that all have received the Holy Ghost alike, and in that enlightenment are proclaiming the truth. Every man will thus hear in his own tongue the wonderful works of God. Pietism without critical insight must produce intellectual degradation, but criticism without piety means sterility of thought and lifelessness. The common life is the great storehouse of the facts that most nearly relate to life and its culture and nurture. It should be the place where the critic can with most freedom and most safety present his deepest thought and rely securely upon a sound and abiding verdict. It is the *plebiscite* by means of which he asks for endorsement or rejection. The technical forms out of which his knowledge comes, must indeed be thrown aside, and the thing stand bare under the scrutiny of all. But the eye that looks upon the new thought is kindly and tolerant. It is more ready to include than to exclude. It has sympathies and patience. But its judgment is true and from it there is no appeal. This the Bible has been doing ever since it has asked the submission of the world to the Lord and Master whom it proclaims. What the Bible has done before him, the critic must do likewise. He must come with the marks of fellowship and wear the insignia of a common brotherhood. There are no heretics where a common peril threatens and a single hope moves all alike. Filled with the joy of a discipleship alike derived from a crucified and risen Lord, they both go from glory to glory in the common task of working out their salvation with fear and trembling, God working in both, willing and doing his good pleasure.