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ARTICLE XII.

AN OBERLIN INTERPRETER OF ALBRECHT
RITSCHL.¹

BY THE REVEREND A. A. BERLE, D.D.

PRESIDENT FAIRCHILD, in an interesting conversation with the present writer a few years ago, said, that the time was ripe for a revival of apriorism in philosophy, and a new emphasis upon supernaturalism—possibly with the meaning of mysticism—in religion, especially in Christian preaching. This remark was induced, without doubt, by the prevalence of the experience doctrine and the accentuation of Christian experience as the *terminus a quo* in Christian theological thought. The remark is even truer to-day than it was when it was uttered; and, before we see the hoped-for epoch of new life in the Christian churches, and the desired awakening of spiritual feeling, it is safe to say, that in some form there will be a revival of the *a priori* method in the thought of theologians and of the dogmatic method in Christian preaching. All the signs of the times seem to point to this conclusion with unmistakable clearness.

It was the late Dean Everett of the Harvard Divinity School, who remarked, in his essay on the "Distinctive

¹The Theology of Albrecht Ritschl. By Albert Temple Swing, A.M., Professor of Church History in Oberlin Theological Seminary. Together with Instruction in the Christian Religion. By Albrecht Ritschl. Translated by permission from the Fourth German Edition. By Alice Mead Swing, A.B. 12mo. Pp. xiv, 296. New York and London: Longmans, Green & Co. 1901. \$1.40, net.

Mark of Christianity," that "the truth of history may be violated by too much catholicity as truly as by too great exclusiveness," and, after pointing out the distinctive mission of Greece in sculpture and the necessity of regard for perspective, says, "there is no reason why the highest form of religion should not proceed from one portion of the world (i.e. human race), than why the highest art should not proceed from a special people." And this discrimination points out a fact, which apparently much of the thought of to-day seems to overlook, that, having determined that the high-water mark of religious development has been found in a certain portion of the human race, it is not needful in the interest of a supposititious catholicity to tear up and work over, every time somebody thinks he would like to see the thing done, the great established facts of the religious life of that favored part of the human race in which the highest point of development and religious expression has been reached.

The historical method of criticism and investigation has certainly wrought great and wonderful results since it first began its work, and has laid Christian theology under deep and lasting obligations. It may be said to have engrafted into the consciousness and thought of the church certain moods of insight and certain methods of approach which will be permanent. Historical science has achieved the greatest victories of the last century of development, great as the victories in other departments of human effort have been. And the effect of all this has been, that we now have, as the preliminary work of almost every science, the history of the science to master, before we can be said to be ready for the science itself. This is well. But there needs to be a qualification and a caution suggested, in the use of the historic method, which, while not valid against the method itself, is none the less extremely necessary for the right use of doctrines and documents alike. This is,

that what we call historical interpretation is, after all, the mind of the historian acting upon and analyzing the facts which are set before him.

Historical interpretation involves all the errors, all the pitfalls, all the prejudices, and all the possibilities of misinformation and misinterpretation, that lie in the nature of fallible humanity. The historic method is not synonymous with infallibility. When one sees the enormous fund of assumption which accompanies the use of historical science in the realm of theology, for example, to-day, one is irresistibly reminded of the use which used to be made of the word "science"; when to say "Science says," was somehow to give the impression that the last word was being spoken, and that the human reason and all interrogative instincts were at once to surrender to the thing which "Science" was supposed to say. The term "evolution" has had a similar "run," to use a theatrical phrase, in the thinking of the world. Theologians are prone to use "historic method" in much the same way. Now against the right use of the historic method we have nothing to urge. Indeed, the historic method is among the most useful and powerful adjuncts of theological investigation. But let us not be misled by it. History when interpreted is merely the opinion—good, bad, or indifferent, as the case may be—of the historian.

The need of this injunction in the matter of biblical theology is peculiarly pressing. When, for example, by the historic method, certain documents of the New Testament are alleged to be invalidated and their authority destroyed or vitiated, one can readily see what will happen, if, when endeavoring to work out a system of doctrine, the previous question is constantly urged as an indisputable fact. Thus, a doctrine being under discussion, some one cites a text from St. John, and immediately the historian claims that the Gospel does not belong to St. John; if this assumption

is to stand as history, biblical theology stands in a fair way to drop into the hands of text-mongers and others who have no knowledge of the great sweeping movements of the catholic church, and who are thus utterly incapable of measuring the validity of the doctrine, whatever its biblical basis. We cannot consent to have mere text-investigators tell us what history is. Language is representative of humanity as a whole, quite as truly as it is of grammar and race connections.

And it may be supposed that in all language there is a very considerable admixture of the *a priori* element. In other words, the theologian must be historian, but very much more. He must be textualist, but very much besides. And he will sacrifice the value of his calling, and the only hope of his appealing in a thorough way to the perpetually recurring aspects of human thought and experience, if he ties himself to the chariot-wheels of any specialist, be he historian or otherwise. That this is no illusion is seen in the fact, that many Unitarian ministers of New England now decline to be called "Christian" ministers, but call themselves ministers of "religion." They are, in the judgment of the writer, correct in their particular situation to make the distinction. But the Christian minister stands in a totally different relation, not merely to the gospel of Christ, but to the sciences which are the instruments of its correct and helpful interpretation. The conspicuous danger everywhere evident, in the historic method, is that which Dean Everett so clearly pointed out, "that the truth of history may be violated by too much catholicity as truly as by too great exclusiveness."

This thought lies uppermost in the mind of the American evangelical preacher every time he strikes a thorough-going work of the historico-theological school. He has no prejudices against it, and ought to have none. He does not fear what it can bring forth; for his own Christian ex-

perience, and his constant touch with the text of the Scriptures and its verification in the experiences and life of the Christian congregation, will make him secure in what he knows to be the truth as it is in Christ Jesus. If there is one criticism which the present writer would make upon Professor Swing's book, it is that every time he touches this point, he seems to be afraid that the evangelical gospel preacher in America is fearful for his gospel, and looks only with suspicion and fear upon interpretations and elucidations which are novel to him. Sixteen years in the ministry of the gospel convince us that this is not the case. The spirit of the American ministry is conspicuously one of inclusive catholicity. If it errs, it errs in this direction. But let us hope it also proves all things, and tries to hold fast to that which is good.

Albrecht Ritschl stands, in a peculiar and exceptional sense, for the thorough application of the historic method to the science of biblical theology. His foremost representative and disciple is Dr. Adolf Harnack, of the University of Berlin. There are many others who could not be classed in theological outlook and spirit with Harnack, but we think it is hardly open to successful dispute, that Harnack is a pretty thoroughgoing representative Ritschlian. That school of Ritschlians which dissents from Harnack, and does not share his conclusions, may, however, justly find shelter under the name of the great theologian. And when the two extremes of Ritschlians are looked upon, one is reminded of the Great Divide of the Northwest, where on one side of the hill the streams flow northward, while on the other they flow south. Ritschl seems to have had exactly this effect, and to stand in this relation to his followers and interpreters. One stream of influence flows distinctly, let us say, northward, into the frozen regions of glaciated Socinianism, while the other flows southward, into the genial warmth and liberating grace of New Testa-

ment evangelicalism. The teacher stands there like the Great Divide. Both streams find their, to them, sufficient source and inspiration in him. If Ritschl had no other claim to greatness, he would acquire it in the tenacity and the loyalty with which both these streams of thought and interpretation confess their allegiance to him. And both appear to be as ready to deny the validity of the other, as they are to announce and support the greatness of the master himself.

Professor Swing is one of those who has found himself on the southward side of the slope, and who, having drunk deeply from the water that flows from the heights above, and being in the warm atmosphere of that southland of loyalty and love to Jesus Christ as Redeemer and Saviour, finds it easy to attribute to Ritschl all that evangelicalism holds sweet and dear. There is a positive pleasure, amounting almost to fascination, to read through the joyous loyalty of these pages. Professor Swing does more in his book than interpret Ritschl,—he reveals himself; and this is not the least of the excellences of a book which every Christian pastor in America ought to read. He has made himself so at one with the Ritschlian ideas, as he understands them, that his indignant footnotes on those who make other interpretations than his own, have a sort of apostolic fervor, as of one whose master rude philistines are about to steal away from him. Nor is this pleasure lessened by certain "Germanisms" which abound, here and there, throughout the volume. They show how deeply he has steeped himself in the German terminology, and perhaps they reveal also a caution in using terms which have already a content on this side of the water which is not co-equal with that of his subject. It is a royal, enthusiastic, and high-minded tribute from a loving disciple. It will be understood only when regarded as such. This not only accounts for its great excellences, but it also vacates criti-

cism at certain points, where criticism might legitimately be made.

An illustration of this may be seen in what Professor Swing says in his preliminary remarks about his plan and purpose in the interpretation and presentation of Ritschl. He says, "We are to seek what Ritschl stood for in his own thought and purpose, to sketch him as nearly as possible as he is. The true student of history—and may we not say of theology also?—can never write for a party." But in the very next paragraph, apparently conscious that his task is that of a disciple, rather than that of a critical historian, he says, "From the point of view of the critics, therefore, I shall seem to be an advocate, while from Ritschl's own point of view I shall be attempting to do only the work of a *sympathetic expounder* [the italics are ours]." This is precisely the point. Sympathetic exposition in most men is so like discipleship, that the difference can rarely be detected. But we have no reproach for Professor Swing in this attitude. Our own opinion concerning historical interpretation, expressed again and again in this review, is, that only a disciple, a sympathetic expounder if you please, can give us a true picture of the master. Is there a better definition of a disciple's presentation of his master's views, than to call it a "sympathetic exposition"? We think not. It is in this very fact that the great charm of Professor Swing's book lies. And we think he comes nearer to the heart of his subject, and the truth too, let us say, for this very reason. This is not according to the dicta of historical science quite, but it is in accord with the verdict of mankind everywhere and always. It is a safe appeal from history to man, who makes it. "We need," says Professor Swing, "not only the analytical spirit, but we need it sympathetically directed," which is precisely the point. True historical interpretation requires "sympathetic direction" in the interest of

truth. It is for this reason that the opinions of Mr. Huxley on Christian theology are worth nothing.

The true and inexorably faithful test of every system of Christian theology lies in its doctrine of sin. And it is the faithful test that it is, because the greatness of salvation and the greatness of the Saviour will be proportionate to the conception of sin and guilt in the heart of the believer. It may be claimed that it is as true in theological reasoning and thinking as it is in practical life, that he will love most to whom most has been forgiven. The concomitant thought to this is, that where the knowledge of sin is clear and penetrating, and where the conception of guilt is vivid and disturbing, the grasp upon the nature and power of the Redeemer will be correspondingly clear and satisfying. The judgment of the Christian world on this point is so absolute and so final that it is not open to question. Where sin did abound, grace did much more abound, is not merely a Pauline argument. It is a descriptive statement of Christian history and experience. On this account the Christian preacher always, and the wise theologian usually, asks himself, "What view does he hold of sin? How will men sinning against God receive his interpretation of their acts, and what are the natural effects to be looked for if the doctrine as he presents it, is accepted, and made a rule of life?"

We think this a thoroughly reasonable and natural gateway to a sound and evangelical system of doctrine. We think the New Testament places the emphasis upon this, as the primary presupposition of the gospel. His name shall be called Jesus, for he shall save the people from their sins! This is the practical working out of the gospel everywhere and always. He is not called Jesus for that he shall give them a correct view of life, or for that he shall reveal to them the glories which he had with the Father before the world was, but for that he shall save the

people from their sins. And this, again, not because of the sin *per se*, but because in the sin lies also the sinner's thought of God, his view of life and the world. We are quite aware that this has been stigmatized as the police-court view of the world. But it was exactly this police-court view of the world which made the revelation of Christ a necessity.

No Saviour, certainly no Christ as revealed in the New Testament, is required for a supreme-court view of the world. Cultivated lawyers, erudite and skilled counsel, great libraries, silken gowns, plaintiffs who represent great wealth, power, and influence, and defendants, not less opulent and full of strength and might, do not afford the materials out of which one would naturally draw an illustration of the world into which God sent his Son as Redeemer and Lord. But the police court does just this. The drunkard, staggering in pain and wretchedness and misery, the debauchee in nakedness and shame, the libertine, the gambler, the sodden victims of passion, whether of mind or belly,—these do suggest the imagery and the status *quo ante* of the Incarnation. And it needs no particularly subtle analysis to transfer these characteristics from the befouled atmosphere of the police-court room to the gilded palaces, where the same things under more refined conditions pass under different sociological classification, but remain, as before, the “lusts of the flesh and the fulfillment thereof.” It is for this that the nature of its doctrine of sin is so fundamental in any system of doctrine. It may glow with the beauty and admirableness of the Saviour, and the admiration of some men is still greater than the worship of others. It may have great encomiums for the church, and may abound in philanthropies and benevolences; but the true Christian preacher will always ask what it teaches of sin, because that tells precisely what is to be expected from the eulogies of Christ and the admi-

rations and philanthropies which accompany them. We were therefore specially anxious to see what Professor Swing had to give us, as the Ritschlian doctrine of sin, and to this point alone we must confine our criticism and discussion. Our view-point of the whole system will inevitably take its coloring from our estimate of Ritschl's doctrine of sin.

Now let us adopt the rule of procedure which, according to Professor Swing, Ritschl himself lays down for the discovery of the positive element of a Christian theology. "The theology," says he "which is to set forth the authentic content of the Christian religion in a positive form, has to obtain the same from the books of the New Testament, and from no other source." This is a simple, straightforward, and thoroughly intelligible rule. Moreover, it is one which almost any man can practically apply, and that without much technical training. The New Testament grew out of the Christian experience of redeemed men; and their recital of their experience, being originally the norm of Christian experience, became, with the repeated confirmations of it, finally the rule of judgment, and ultimately the corrective authority, for the normative original attitudes of the mind and heart toward Christ as Saviour and Redeemer. To the New Testament, then, we will go for certain characteristic examples of its idea and estimate of sin. And then, by the side of these we will place the presentation of Ritschl's doctrine of sin as interpreted by Professor Swing.

Let us first look upon the striking elements in the teaching of Jesus on this subject, especially upon those which point out the contrast between righteousness and sin with greatest clearness. The vocabulary alone will tell the story. In the course of his public ministry, the epithets Jesus applied to the sinners of his generation are singularly bold, vigorous, and memorable. Here is a list of them, in

part: hypocrites, adulterers, liars, thieves, ravening wolves, dogs, swine, false prophets, persecutors, faith-breakers, blasphemers, corrupt, unclean, evil thinkers, fornicators, murderers, false witnesses, faithless, perverse, vipers, betrayers, and, by implication direct and indirect, many more. Now these are the words which Jesus used. They are not the inventions of theologians, they are not the property of any system. They are the necessary background to the motive and purpose of God as revealed in the revelation of his Son and that Son's sacrificial death for the salvation of man, as given by Jesus himself.

All these things, according to the words of Jesus, proceed out of the heart. This, then, is the state of things into which the love of God projected the Redeemer. This is the Son of God's own description of what he felt himself sent to remove. And that there might be no ambiguity as to the characteristic product of the sinful heart, he noted *these* things. No man who is familiar with the ills of the modern world will venture to assert that this language is not as descriptive to-day of the characteristic output of the sinful heart, as it was then. All these are the normal fruits of sin. I have purposely chosen words which occur in the discourses of Jesus alone. If we extend the inquiry into the remaining books of the New Testament, we shall find many more. But what we are anxious to know, as Christian preachers and theologians, is, what Jesus' own idea of the sinful world was, and hence his conception of the nature and work of those who are outside the Kingdom of God.

Nor must it be inferred that Jesus' discourses do not contain allusions and attacks upon the sinful heart, when it does not manifest itself in these more hideous forms of crime and wrong. His rebuke to the rich young man, his reproach of the spiritual ignorance of Nicodemus, are no less incisive and searching, than these, though the subjects of them were not personally so repugnant.

Now, from all these the framing of a doctrine of sin is not very difficult, and St. Paul very promptly and effectively accomplished it in his doctrine of sin. The latter's assertion of the universality of sin and the general condemnation of God and the necessary alliance in rebellion against God of all sinners, the utter unreliability of the flesh and the constant war of the flesh and the spirit, the natural man and the spiritual man, are all so very familiar that to mention them brings at once to mind the Pauline conception. Now the Pauline formulation of the doctrine of sin, while it is true, as Professor Gould says, that he rationalizes it and to some extent accomplishes a revolution in the thought of Judaism, nevertheless remains planted always and everywhere upon the teaching of Jesus, as described in the terms chosen above, and these expressions are all from the Synoptic Gospels, let it be noted. Without these descriptive terms, the Pauline doctrine of sin never could have been framed. So that when we have the assertion, that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, and that there is none that doeth good, no, not one, we have again more than a Pauline argument; we have a statement of the natural and habitual attitude of the human heart until moved upon by the Holy Spirit to self-surrender to God through Jesus Christ.

Turning now to Professor Swing's presentation of Ritschl's doctrine, we are impressed, first of all, with its lack of positiveness; that is, positiveness in its announcement of sin as the voluntary act of the free-will directed against the purpose and the will of God. Otto Ritschl is quoted, indeed, as saying, "Now Ritschl understands sin as the opposite of the Kingdom of God, it is conceived of in the later editions according to the double-sidedness of the Christian ideal of life: first in adherence to the Reformation doctrine as religious defect, that is, as lack of reverence and confidence in God, and second as the direc-

tion of the will of man against the right." Now this is all true enough. But in his adherence to what he calls "the Reformation doctrine as religious defect," he shows most clearly the bent of his doctrine of sin, which begins not with the positive quality of rebellion against God, the direct antagonism of the sinning soul against the Father, but with "religious defect," which means, as interpreted later on, ignorance. Now this is the real complaint which is to be lodged against the Ritschlian doctrine of sin, namely, that it emphasizes the aspect of sin which is defect as against that aspect which is accentuated in the New Testament, which is rebellion and revolt against the will of God. Ritschl, indeed, recognizes the latter, but his emphasis is on the former; and, indeed, so much on the former, that the latter substantially disappears in practical effect and influence.

Again says Ritschl, speaking of sin as a religious conception, "Now sin is the opposite of good, in so far as proceeding from indifference to or distrust of God. It is self-seeking, and directs itself toward the blessings of a subordinate nature, without taking into view their subordination to the highest good. Sin does not deny the good altogether, but, inasmuch as it runs counter to the subordination of temporal blessings to the good, it is practically opposition to the good." Now against this there is not a single word of reproach to be uttered. But let us ask ourselves candidly, Is this the form and mode of approach of the distinctively Christian theologian to the question of sin? Does this make upon us the impression of the preaching of Jesus as depicted in the Gospel of Matthew, for example? Do not these temporizing phrases "in so far" and "inasmuch," and the conclusion "*practically* opposition to the good," give one a sense of sin which is calculated to make the man who is wasting his life, and running counter to the will and purpose of God as revealed in the Bible

and in his own conscience, feel that, after all, sin is not a matter that calls for very prompt attention and disposition? Is there not here a very striking contrast between the immediateness and the searchingness of the teaching of Jesus and the mild flavor of academic argumentation which *in effect* controverts the New Testament?

And note again the qualifying tone of this: "Ritschl considers ignorance to be 'an essential condition to the conflict of the will with the order of society as the rule of good,'" but hastens to add, "Ignorance is itself not the sufficient ground for the establishing of the will in sin." Now this is a gracious concession. And again we cannot say, that Ritschl has left out any essential point in the doctrine and analysis of sin; but can it not be said with absolute truthfulness, that the emphasis is so placed that the primary ground of sin—the rebellious will, the revolt against God—is obscured and qualified by the ignorance conception to such a degree that the New Testament doctrine is to no little extent nullified? We think this is a fair indictment of the doctrine even as Professor Swing presents it, manifestly its most evangelical side.

Stated positively, according to Professor Swing, the doctrine is, "In so far as men as sinners individually or altogether are objects of redemption and reconciliation, possible through the love of God, sin is judged by God *not as a final determination of opposition to the recognized will of God, but as ignorance* and therefore forgivable." Now all this serves to confirm what we have been previously saying. It does not assert, let it be understood, that sin is ignorance, nor that ignorance interprets sin adequately; but it does so mix up the element of ignorance that the rebellion of the will against God is hopelessly obscured. The particular conception, that ignorance must be presupposed if the sinner is to be in the category "forgivable," is wholly at variance with the New Testament conception.

Paul brings this out with downright clearness in the first chapter of the letter to the Romans. Neither mere ignorance, nor ignorance at all, can produce sin.

Moreover, the phrase "final determination of opposition" in this connection is utterly misleading, and again contrary to the New Testament idea. All sin is conceivable only as sin when it has in it the element of "final determination of opposition," or are we to hold that sin is possible with the thought in mind to-day that it is going to be forgiven to-morrow? This is hopeless moral confusion. The nature of sin is just "the final determination of opposition." To the degree of the contrast, in the sinner's mind, between the sin and its corresponding opposite act of righteousness, it is just this final determination. That constitutes it sin. And if the career were ended at that point, the judgment would have to be one of final opposition. It is this very conception which moves Christ to urge men to agonize to enter in at the strait gate. It is the peril and the shame of rebellion against God, that Jesus has in mind in all sin. And let us add the glory of the gospel is, that it provides forgiveness, not merely for what are thus called sins of "ignorance," but for those which are recognized as rebellion and revolt against God, and are always regretted as such. It would be a poor salvation that was offered to a sinning world which alleged that forgiveness was for those sins only which we could justly or truthfully feel were sins of "ignorance." Men rarely feel deep penitence, and are rarely moved to deep repentances, for sins which are in any degree chargeable to their lack of knowledge, culture, or ethical training. The New Testament takes little account of such sins, even if they exist. The problem of known, recognized, brutal, persistent rebellion against the love, providence, and benevolence of God, is astounding and appalling enough apparently for the preaching of Jesus.

The power of the truth lies in the degree of the contrast which it presents to falsehood. Great sinners have always magnified their Saviour, and great faith has ever followed great skepticism and unbelief. The power of Christ for salvation is always revealed in the greatness of sin from which he rescues men. What we have shown to be the lassitude of Ritschl's sin doctrine in a general way pervades the entire system. On the Socinian slope of the stream of influence, it becomes pure subjectivism, as a number of critics have justly alleged. With men like our author, warm and deep in the mighty tide of evangelical fervor and conscious grasp upon the Redeemer as Master and Lord, the negations of Ritschlism are overborne and sustained by the power of Christ in the soul of the disciples.

But having said all this, it must be added, that Ritschl has given us many noble and uplifting corrective sidelights upon the rigidity and stiffness of formal and purely objective notions of redemption, and has, in his emphasis upon the non-mechanical elements of Christianity, helped us into a deeper understanding of our gospel. Professor Swing has served his author well in this noble book. No man with a warm heart or an open mind can read it without feeling a glow of enthusiasm, in which one wonders whether the subject is not more fortunate in his expositor than the expositor in his subject. But even here we can accept with gratitude and hospitality the earnest heartening discussion of the great themes of biblical theology, and the light which is shed upon them, even if we must feel, as the present writer does feel, that many of the most convincing passages spring not from the words of his subject, but from the quick intelligence, the Christian experience, and the full knowledge of New Testament ideas of the author himself. We are glad to acknowledge our debt to him.

Mrs. Swing's translation of Ritschl's "Instruction in the Christian Religion," a beautiful and thoroughly admirable piece of work, may well accompany her husband's exposition of the Ritschlian theology. In this Ritschl appears at his best; and one cannot rise from its perusal without a feeling of strength and encouragement which must necessarily make for light and progress. The book is preëminently one which the students in our theological seminaries should have put into their hands, and should read carefully; while Christian pastors and others theologically inclined will have in Professor Swing's book, one view of a great peak in the mountain range of German theological thought, which may, and probably will, stimulate to other and further investigations.