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BACK TO THE REFORMED THEOLOGY

AMID the kaleidoscopic changes in thought and belief in the modern religious world there has been no more remarkable movement than the recrudescence of the Reformed Theology of which every observer is so deeply cognizant. From all sides there comes evidence of a deepening and widening adhesion to the robust and logical belief in the divine supremacy and the authority of the records of revelation. Of course, no movement in the realms of faith ever originated with dramatic suddenness. The faiths of the world never sprung into being, Athene-like, fully grown and fully armed. Nor is the modern interest in the Calvinistic doctrines any exception; rather does it reach back by a long line of loyalty that bridges the centuries to the theological genius of the great divine of Geneva and the halcyon days of the Reformation when Lutheran and Reformed divines sought, from their varying intellectual standpoints, to state in logical form the grounds of their common revolt against the hard ecclesiasticism of Rome and their return to the Christ of the Scriptures. There were giants in those days in the Protestant camp. But even in the hearts of the lesser men who followed them there glowed the loyalty of deep conviction in the Genevan attitude towards God and man. Later on, when the currents of time bore the Church into the secularist twentieth century and the light of scientific and literary scholarship was brought to bear upon the faith, together with the radiance of a quickened religious experience, the germs of the Reformed faith manifested anew their perennial vitality. The remarkable volume of belief represented at the International Congresses only served to reveal the unsuspected strength in the number of those who adhered to the Reformed Confessions, and undoubtedly new popularity has been given to our advocacy of the Calvinistic setting of the faith by the keen and luminous expositions of Dr. Karl Barth. Hence we feel ourselves called upon to account for this recrudescence of belief in our beloved and revered Reformed faith in these days of scientific unbelief and rampant secularism.

I

Now, it may be confidently affirmed that the whole trend of modern intellectualism adds strong support to the fundamental bases of our Reformed Theology.

In the realm of science no theory of fortuitousness stands the slightest chance of gaining a hearing amongst the foremost scientists. Our leaders have made common cause in shattering any remnants of the old Democritan theory, which attributed the origin of an ordered universe to the chance collision and adherence of falling atoms. And, even if the first phase of the evolutionary hypothesis seemed to afford support for such thoroughgoing materialism as found expression in Tyndall and Huxley and in the shallow scepticism of Ernest Haeckel, such deductions from the Darwinian theory are entirely discredited by the very evolutionists of to-day. That all matter and all motion must ultimately be referred to Force is a universal conclusion, and the spiritual basis of the universe is acknowledged alike by physicist, chemist and biologist. On the whole the tendency is to adopt the belief in a final single Force, sufficient to account for all the varied phenomena of the universe, working everywhere, always and harmoniously—a Force both transcendent and immanent in the universe. The laws of nature are more unchangeable than those of the Medes and Persians. We live in a scientific age in which men learn instinctively to think along scientific lines. Thus the mentality of the educated public somehow tends to lose any hostility to the faith that asserts its belief in a supreme Being whose will prevails and whose will is sovereign. While, then, we theologians would scarcely make our appeal to the scientist for his sanction in our dogmatic teaching, we acknowledge and welcome the deep intellectual sympathy displayed in his emphatic assertion of the supremacy of Force. Whereas science was formerly regarded as one of the strongholds of unbelief, to-day it has become at least a tacit advocate of the faith.

To some extent we find the latest trend of thought amongst the prominent teachers of philosophy and psychology equally favourable to our Reformed position. Probably not many of us would be prepared to subscribe to the entire body of recent psychological theories, if our philosophy harks back through Kant to Plato. But through all the most acceptable theories there

runs a strong denial of the reign of irresponsible freedom and mere individual chance in moral questions. There is so strong an emphasis laid upon the results of heredity and association and habit that the boasted freedom of the will seems regarded in their eyes as the "law of children". When, however, it comes to a mere bald determinism we voice our protest; yet we again recognize features which run parallel to our theology till we welcome it amongst the positive forces making for a more ready acceptance of the Calvinistic position in the modern intellectual world.

An unprejudiced observer would almost certainly conclude that there is further support of our position in the modern reading of history. None but the shallow thinker really believes that the calamitous war of our generation was a final and irrefutable proof of the bankruptcy of religion. Such temporary infidelity was due to the fact that the nations were too near to the horrors of the conflict which bulked so largely in their experience to permit of a just interpretation; but it has long ceded place to a deepened quest of religious satisfaction throughout the nations. Sane historians realized that cataclysmic campaigns and tottering empires are but episodes in the advancing flood—the temporary backwash of the rising tide—for the wider view of history compels the belief that "through the ages one unceasing purpose runs". In other words there is a wise, gracious, resistless Providence. And Deism is out of date. The historian is forced to fall into line with the Reformed position.

Surely we are not wrongly reading the contemporary religious public if we discern in its attitude the same sympathy. The wave of Arminian evangelism has spent its force—and we are far from discounting the splendid impulse it gave to the religion of the masses. But believers seem to be becoming increasingly thoughtful amid the rising average level of public education and they no longer surrender to blind emotionalism in conversion. The gospel which has the strongest appeal to-day is penetrated with reason and pregnant with thought. Believers are prone to analyse their religious experiences. None who know the reality of saving grace and the power of spiritual things will ever refer them to any source save God Himself. They know that a man could as easily lift himself from the ground by his own belt as save his own soul. "Salvation is of the Lord."

Now the force of such contentions as these lies not in their individual testimony, but in their accumulated evidence. And they are found in every department of our intellectual medium.

II

Here we come to a consideration of serious import—that certain sincere believers declare the chiefest form of hostility to the older Calvinism to lie in the ranks of the theologians themselves. They single out the literary critic of the Bible and stigmatize him as guilty of denying the authority of Scripture. Now, against this attitude we are bound to raise a protest; for it is not only untrue, but it reveals ignorance of the aims of Christian criticism which is prejudicial to the cause we all have at heart. We doubt whether anyone has a right to imperil the acceptance of the Scriptures by linking them to any merely human theory of inspiration whatever. And the authority of the Bible does not depend upon its agreement with Victorian concepts of inspiration, of which the written word certainly knows nothing. It will undoubtedly be a sorry day for our loved Reformed Theology when we compel it to stand or fall according to its adoption of a cast-iron literalism. We state this point forcibly, because there is a real danger—which we are sure the advocates of literalism do not wish to intensify—in misrepresenting the splendid services which modern believing scholarship has rendered in elucidating the Scriptures. Both Luther and Calvin vindicated the authority of the Scriptures; yet they never surrendered the right to treat those Scriptures intelligently. Hence we put forward the contention that difference of intellectual attitude on questions of literary criticism must not be permitted to vitiate our united advocacy of the acceptance of the authority of the Scriptures as the record of the very word of the living God.

Truth is God Himself. Him we are bound to contemplate with reverence which lifts us above the petty differences of theological outlook and leaves human theories apart from the question. When the seeker after God appreciates justly the insignificance of the human in comparison with the divine and feels himself constrained by a pure love for the Eternal Spirit then all elements of self vanish, consumed in the passion of love for God, and we fall back upon the satisfying affirmation that

God alone is the great reality, the sovereign Lord, the Source of redeeming grace. But this is the point at which we break with the assumptions of the Roman church and repudiate the glamour of its gorgeous ecclesiasticism—it is a church in which the human element takes precedence of the divine. It may be questioned whether our modern Protestantism makes it sufficiently clear that it is just here that we find the parting of the ways and that no return to any kind of reconciliation to the Roman church would be conceivable until that church reconstructed the whole fabric of its organization, putting God before man. Perhaps, then, we need to lay a new stress upon the three fundamentals of our position—our belief in the absolute supremacy of God, in the authority of the Scriptures through which we hear His voice, and in the duty of man to live to glorify God.

When the mind of the believer is wholly taken up with God, till the thought of the majesty of the divine blends with that of beauty, the justice, the love of God, then the doctrine of Predestination—that alleged stumbling-block of modern self-esteem—is freed from its seeming harshness and we cease to quarrel with the will of God. Then, too, it may prove possible to lead the people back to the lost appreciation of the great truths of law and divine calling and responsive obedience, which gave such strength to the seventeenth century reformers and engendered the heroism of the Covenanters and the Puritans. Realization of these facts, these fundamental truths, might even yet lead to the building of character with something of the adamant strength of the fathers in place of the compromising shallowness with which we are surfeited to-day.

Whether the weakness of our Reformed churches, such as it is, in their hold upon the people is to be traced to the pew, or the pulpit, or the seminary, may be a matter of opinion. Probably it is a question of divided responsibility. There has been a certain luke-warmness of advocacy on all sides. But better conditions prevail of which we are called to take advantage. It is not to be alleged that the seminaries are free from responsibility in this connection.

And our pulpits have their own share of responsibility. There has been a shrinking from the proclamation of the strong meat of the Gospel before modern audiences, although the excuses for such slackness are weak. The pulpit had been sadly too prone to pander to the public craving for sensationalism and

too eager for a lightly-won popularity—at least we deem this to be the case in the pulpits of the American continent. Perhaps our preachers, who fear to alienate the fleeting populace by presenting Calvinistic doctrines, need again to learn the lessons of history. George Whitfield and Jonathan Edwards were outstanding Calvinists; yet they drew the multitudes and led souls to Christ—the one by mighty emotional preaching, the other by almost repellant philosophy. And if there be any truth in the contention that the modern mind is becoming disposed by the undoubted trend of cultured thought to the doctrines of law and order, then the times are ripe for the recrudescence of Calvinism in the pulpit, with the belief that there will be a sympathetic response in the pew. Nay, may it not be that to-day, as in the sixteenth century, this is the very thing that the unsatisfied heart of the masses is waiting for?

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