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ARTICLE VII.

THE NEW THEOLOGY.

BY THE REV. J. A. BIDDLE.

I. THIS is the title of a notable book by President Bascom.¹ The book is profound and clear. Through it we begin to see what there is in this new theology. This book clearly reveals the strength and weakness of this theology as a theology. "It is not a theology at all," remarks Dr. Bascom, "but a tendency." "It is not a creed but a movement." Then as he proceeds, we see that the tendency is away from the "traditional theology." The movement is toward something supposed to be better. What that something is it is quite impossible to tell. It is believed to be something not new but old, something that will be a better exposition of the truth than the traditional theology.

From this we gather that the new theology is an exploring party, dissatisfied with the old home, going forth in search of a better; going no one knows where. "Whither," is an open question. It has no organization, but a vast deal of life and confidence; it has no particular rallying-point, no discipline, no plan of campaign. It is a movement in religion resembling the movement of the Germanic tribes across the Rhine. There is an impulse to move, and that impulse is followed. It is full of vigor and confidence, but lacking in foresight, discipline, and aim. With the fate of the Germanic tribes in mind, one can easily predict the fate of this new theology, when it comes to mortal combat with the well-disciplined and as valiant sol-

¹ G. P. Putnam's Sons. 1891.

diers of traditional theology. A tendency is no match for a well-ordered theology. A movement will always be stopped by a compact creed. Unless the new theology can state itself clearly and definitely, as John Calvin stated Protestant theology, it will go with Cain into the land of wanderings, and never be heard of more. It stands now between two giants—traditional theology and natural science. It seeks to be a friend of both. At present it pleases neither. It is in danger of destruction from both. Its imperative need is an Augustine or Calvin who can clearly state it, and organize it to hold its place in the minds of men. For such a man it still waits. As yet, Dr. Bascom tells us, it is not a theology.

II. The source of its dissatisfaction with traditional theology is its second weakness.

Who awakened this discontent in the old home? Who told this new theology that it was naked? Was it a friend of the old theology, or of any theology? Not at all. It was the most powerful enemy that traditional theology has ever met,—natural science. We all know that natural science has looked with disfavor upon traditional theology. The controlling power in natural science is evolution; while theology holds to creation. The one is agnostic, the other is positively gnostic. The universe of natural science is a mechanism, the universe of theology is an organism. The one is run by a force; the other is controlled by a free will, a person. It is very plain that between these parties there is no peace. Here is an irrepressible conflict. As they stand, one or the other must be destroyed. It must be borne in mind that both natural science and traditional theology are systems of thought. Both seek to interpret the universe of matter and spirit. The one says the universe was evolved, the other says it was created. We must take sides in this contest. There is a higher unity that will comprehend both evolution and creation. But the

present conflict is not for that higher unity, but between the two opposites. Now if this tendency of the new theology were toward that higher unity it would be well. But it is not. It is a movement away from traditional theology toward natural science.

Its dissatisfaction with traditional theology has been awakened by natural science, while its rebellion is against its own father. Already it begins to read history in the evolutionary spirit. Well we know that history written in the modern scientific spirit gives the direct lie to biblical history as read by traditional theology. Scientific history says that man began with the lowest form of being, and has advanced steadily forward to his present high estate. Theological history says Adam was at the first endowed with high advantages, that he fell by disobedience, that his sin brought death upon him and all his posterity, that out of this fallen state he has been redeemed by the humiliation, life, and death of his great son, Jesus of Nazareth. "By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all, for all sinned." That is the way Paul read the history of the race up to his time. He sees in Jesus a crucified Redeemer of the race from this awful curse of sin and death. He makes an intelligent man, Adam, by his voluntary disobedience, the author of sin and death, and an intelligent man, Jesus, by his obedient suffering unto death, the Redeemer of the race from sin and death. Here is no evolution of a blind force in the history of man. Augustine and Aquinas, Calvin, Luther, Wesley, and Edwards, all agree with Paul in this reading of biblical history. The new theology is dissatisfied with this. It would rewrite not only traditional theology but biblical history, to meet the demands of natural science.

Mr. Savage of Chicago outlined the result of this tendency in his celebrated article entitled "The Surrender of Orthodoxy." He at once rejects the story of the fall

of Adam and the inherited sin of his descendants. Of course, the theology built upon that fall goes with it. The condition of the race is not one of sin. There is no need of a suffering Redeemer. The race needs a glorious leader, but not a crucified leader. So passes the story of the cross also. The cross is a necessity only as the fall is a fact, but there is no place for a fall of man in evolution, and, of course, there is no place for the death and resurrection of Jesus. I do not stop to ask, whether this evolutionary history tallies with real history or not. That is a question by itself. It is certain it does not tally with biblical history as the church has always read it. This dissension in the ranks of the church has been caused by the enemy. That of itself is a very bad sign. It necessarily throws suspicion on the new movement. It appears to be a virtual surrender to the enemy, an acknowledgment that the church of Christ has never known how to read its own books.

III. The one fatal weakness in the new theology is its subjective character: it appeals to no objective authority or fact: it appeals alone to the subjective experience of each man.

This appears most prominently in Dr. Bascom's treatment of inspiration. He is dissatisfied with the traditional view of the inspiration of the Bible. He thinks, and properly, that inspiration is a property of a man, and of a book only as the book is the work of an inspired man. He says, "Inspiration stands for the normal hold of the human mind on truth under all the liabilities and limitations which belong to its power." That is, there is no inspiration in the book; inspiration is in the mind of him who reads the book. It is all subjective. The judge of all things is the reason of man. Man, not the Bible, is the court of last resort; which, being interpreted, means not the man Christ Jesus, not the man Moses, Paul, Peter, or

John, but any man. Of course these men did make the Bible. It was their grasp of the truth which made them capable of writing the Bible. And if President Bascom means that inspiration is the normal hold of the mind of Paul or Jesus on the truth, nobody will object: Moses, the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles are the court of last resort. In that sense, man, not the Bible, is the final authority. But that is not what he means.

The Bible is all we have as our authority in religious truth. We have no Jesus or Paul to tell us the truth. But we have their words. If they were present, we would appeal to them. As they are not, we appeal to their written words. Their inspiration inheres in their words, and makes them words of inspiration. So there is inspiration in the Bible. Of this the new theology makes nothing. Inspiration is only in the mind of the reader. So, not the Bible, but Dr. Bascom, is inspired. Well, in a sense Dr. Bascom is inspired. His mind does get a hold on truth. But is it certain that he is inspired of the Holy Spirit as Bible writers were? Must we give the same authority to the books of the new theology men that we give to the books of the Bible? No new theology man would claim as much.

Neither they nor we must look within to find the truth. If we do, we make our thought the measure of all things. Then, the Bible is not what the writers made it, but what we think it to be. It does not tell the unchanging truth, but what my reason holds to be truth. There is no objective Bible before whose word my reason bows with absolute and unwavering submission. The Bible must bow to my "hold upon the truth." What I think, not what the Bible says, is true. My thought is the measure of all things. This leads to the annihilation of all objective realities. God is not an objective Being, independent from age to age: he is what I conceive him to be. So every

man makes his own God, as already he has made his own Bible. *The Faith* is not an objective statement of fact to which I humbly conform my faith. Faith is my subjective conception of the truth. It is not one and unchanging for all time. It is ever changing with the development and apprehension of men. Jesus Christ is not "the same yesterday, to-day, and forever," but the ever-changing, as men think of him,—now as a God, now as a man, now as a God-man, now as the highest of all creatures, now as an impostor.

How easily this passes from theology to science! What I think of a thing, that it is. The sun is not an objective orb, but it is what John Smith thinks of it. If I say the moon is green cheese, the moon is green cheese. If my hold upon the Bible makes it to say that Jesus is a man like other men, the Bible does make him so. If I think that heaven is only a state of the soul, and hell only remorse, I at once annihilate the old heaven and hell of God's making, and my heaven and hell remain. My fiat is almighty. If the Bible history is not to my liking, I make a new history, and at once what I make is real, and Bible history fades away into myth. That is the plain English of Dr. Bascom's conception of inspiration. Any one can see how awfully wrong it is. Inspiration is a quality of the Bible which makes it an absolute authority on religious truth. That is what traditional theology asserts. My inspiration is the hold my reason gets of this truth. The inspiration of the Bible is of the Holy Spirit. My inspiration may be of the Holy Spirit or a most unholy spirit. This tallies with the observation of mankind.

So the God, Christ, church, faith, heaven, and hell of the Bible remain, no matter what I or any man think of them. They are objective realities. If I think correctly concerning them, it is well with me. If I think falsely, woe unto me: I believe a lie. The hold my reason may get on these

things may and will change. The interpretation which men put upon the Bible varies from age to age. The Bible does not change. Alas, for the man who puts his conception of God, Christ, the faith, sin, or the Bible in the place of the reality !

This is the deep condemnation of men: "When they knew God, they glorified him not as God, . . . but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like unto corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things." That is what came of the new theology in the days of old, when it made inspiration to consist in the hold of the reason of man upon the truth. We are always putting our conception of God and the objects of sight in the place of the objects themselves. The result is error and degradation; for what a man thinks of a thing, that it is *to him*. If I think a stone is a god, it is a god to me, and I will pay it divine honors. In the dusk I see a stump; I think it a lion crouching for a leap; I run from it as if the stump were a lion. My conception affects my action as much as the thing itself.

We must ever keep separate the external object and our conception of it. The one is objective, and authoritative for all time. The other is subjective, and authority for me only for one hour. The object is true, my conception may be false. Now the Bible, the God, Christ, church, sacraments, and teachings of the Bible are objects; they do not change. The faith once delivered unto the saints is an unchanging faith. It is a body of truth, to be read and believed by me. It remains the same, whatever be my conception of it. The Bible is an objective fact. It stands for what it was when it was finished, no matter what men may think of it.

On the other hand, the faith and apprehension of men

are subjective, and ever changing. Our theologies, our creeds, our churches, our sciences, our conceptions of God, must be reformed about once in so often. This must be until they conform to the reality. *The faith* is something *given*, to be believed and kept, not to be thought out and reformed. My faith by which I grasp and hold the truth is also a gift of God; that is in my possession; I can abuse or misuse it, even destroy it. But the faith is far beyond my reach, eternal and unmodified.

The Bible contains the writings that were inspired of the Holy Spirit. The prophets and apostles were the subjects of this inspiration. This inspiration was both objective and subjective. It came from the Holy Spirit. It was received and used by men. The men wrote. The power to write such things came from the Holy Spirit. "Moved by the Holy Spirit" is the account they give of themselves. So when Dr. Bascom says inspiration is the hold of the reason of man upon the truth, he describes only the subjective part of inspiration. The chief part, the objective influence of the Holy Spirit, which is necessary to complete inspiration according to traditional theology, he leaves out. Having omitted the supernatural part, he quietly objects to the words supernatural inspiration.

Supernatural inspiration is the inspiration which the Bible writers claim. That is real inspiration. By it we test the inspiration of all other men and writings. If any man thinks or writes anything contrary to what they wrote, we know it is untrue. What they say, is knowledge to be at once believed. What other men say, is speculation or theory. The Book is the standard. My subjective state must correspond to its objective statement, or I know that my hold of the truth is false.

So we have always been taught that we come to knowledge of eternal things not by thinking, but by believing what is written. The Bible has said the final word upon

religion. After Moses and Jesus have spoken, what is there for me to say? I do not get my astronomy by original investigation. Other men have done that for me. My way is easy. I read and believe. I know all they have written. I do not get my theology by my own thought. Moses and Jesus have spoken. They tell me all I need to know concerning God and my relations to him, and concerning man and my relations to him. It is folly and insanity to attempt to do for myself what Moses and Jesus have done for me. My strong hold is to believe what they say, to believe and obey. To dream for one moment that I can improve upon them is the height of self-conceit. But when my subjective faith grasps the old objective "faith once delivered unto the saints," by Moses and the prophets, by Jesus and the apostles, life, light, and peace come to me.

It follows, that when this movement has crystalized, when it does become a creed, it will not meet the needs of men as well as the traditional theology. Its creed will be based upon the evolutionary reading of biblical history. The fall and inherited sin of man will be eliminated. The supernatural origin of Jesus and his vicarious suffering will go also. Sin and its consequences, disease and death, will remain as the natural condition of man. With the supernatural removed from the inspiration of the apostles, there will be no room for the supernatural in the teaching and church of the apostles.

Out of the Apostles' Creed must go: "Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, . . . the third day he rose again from the dead, he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead, . . . the forgiveness of saints, the resurrection of the body." The utmost that its master, natural science, will permit it to retain will be: I believe in God the Father, and in Jesus of Nazareth; in the spirit of truth; in

human society, and in a shadowy life everlasting, a choir invisible. For a reconstructed history means a reconstructed creed. As natural science reconstructs the history, it will also reconstruct the creed. The new Bible and the new creed will be the hold of natural science upon the old Bible and the old creed.

Again, this new creed will contain all that is bad in the old creed, and little of the good. The one profound defect of traditional theology from Augustine down, is its speculative character. A theology, like a science, is only a man's interpretation of the objective world. It is not a sacred thing. Sacredness belongs to the universe and all it contains.

Traditional theology begins, not with God, but with a conception of God. Augustine did not know God as John knew him. Augustine knew his conception of God.¹ I do not criticise that conception; it was a conception worthy of the man. To this conception he pointed all men. From this followed logically, conceptions of Christ, of man, of sin, of the church and its ordained sacraments, of human society, of holiness, of heaven and hell. The universe which Augustine constructed is the universe of traditional theology. It is not God's universe, but Augustine's; it is Augustine's science. As a work of constructive imagination it is beyond praise. Its weakness is that it is the work of a well-ordered imagination. It is the hold that Augustine's reason got of the truth. It is a logical series of magnificent conceptions. It is a metaphysical universe. As a statement of biblical fact in terms of pure thought, it will probably never be surpassed. It satisfied the church for a thousand years. It was rewritten by Aquinas, and again

¹ As he says in his *Confessions*: "See what a space I have gone over in my memory seeking Thee, O Lord, and I have not found Thee *outside or beyond it*. Since then I learned Thee, *Thou residest in my memory*." It is manifest that it is only his idea or conception of God that is confined to his memory.

by Calvin, to adapt it to change of philosophy. If Herbert Spencer were a churchman he could rewrite it in terms of modern science, putting his Inscrutable Power in the place of Augustine's God. For he is in the line of succession from Augustine. His Inscrutable Power is just as real as Augustine's theological God.

Now, the new theology is dissatisfied with the Augustinian conception of God and his world. In that it does well. Augustine's universe is not nearly equal to God's universe. But, instead of renouncing the vicious method of Augustine, and asking, Where is the God of the world? it sets itself the task of forming a new *conception* of God and his world by thinking. Certainly no good can come from that. We have no man in the ranks of the new theology, Dean Farrar included, who is the equal of Augustine, Aquinas, or Calvin, in intellectual power. If such men failed, what hope of success is there for smaller men? Besides, Augustine did limit his tremendous imagination by the Bible as it is. So in form and comprehensiveness his theology is both logical and biblical. These new theologians would re-read the Bible. They set no limit to their imaginations. Nothing is authority to them. Their theology will be just as big and comprehensive as themselves. It will partake not only of the weakness and humanity of Moses and Paul, but also of Dean Farrar and Dr. Bascom. On the whole, the church will do better under the intellectual leadership of Moses and Paul, with all their defects, than under the lead of much smaller and far less inspired men.

It does not take a great or strong mind to believe what the prophets and apostles have written. Any child can do that. It takes a supernaturally great mind to think out a true theology. Dean Farrar, Dr. Abbott, Dr. Bascom, and a million such as they cannot compass that. Augustine, that theological titan, tried it. Aquinas, than whom the ages since Plato have produced no superior as a thinker,

tried it. John Calvin and Edwards, the greatest thinkers of Protestantism, tried it. They all failed. After these magnificent failures, who can succeed? Some people never learn anything from the experience of the race. If that experience teaches anything, it teaches that God cannot be known or found by thinking. No human conception of God formed by abstract thought can ever be like him. God has proposed to save all those who *believe*. So the humble Christian need not follow this new theology in its vain chase after a new conception of God. Belief in the words of Jesus and his apostles is easy. Who cares to walk the hard road of his own thinking, which leads nowhere, when the easy way of believing, which leads to life, is ever open to him?