

ARTICLE II.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF CURRENT
"NEW THEOLOGY."

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WE hear from time to time references to the "new theology." Certain preachers and authors are spoken of as being in sympathy with modern theological views. There is a good deal of pleading in behalf of keeping up with the results of modern scientific thought, in a way that indicates a desire to make room for some new views which it is implied deserve a favorable reception, though we are generally left in doubt as to what these new ideas really are. It is natural that these things should prompt one to ask: What historic doctrines are assumed to have become effete and obsolete? Is there a new theology? If so, what are its distinguishing characteristics and tendencies? It is somewhat difficult to give definite and satisfactory answers to these questions. It is quite certain that there is no such thing as a new system of doctrines with any claim to supersede the historic teachings of Christianity. None of the great truths of our holy religion have lost their vital interest and adaptation to our human need. Humanity has not outgrown those sacred verities which have inspired the saintly and heroic souls of the ages in their work of faith and labor of love. The Scripture truths concerning God's character, man's condition by nature—his duty and destiny, the divine character and redemptive work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the claims of God's revealed will to our acceptance and obedience, are still "the power of God unto salvation" to every one who receives them with a living

faith. These doctrines are the unwaning guiding stars of the spiritual life of the children of God, for which no earth-born philosophy can supply a substitute.

But, though "the foundation of God standeth sure," every one whose ear is open to the echoes of the day, must hear things which indicate something like a "new departure" in certain lines of theological thought, though the ideas suggested are too negative, indefinite, and discordant to constitute a system of theology. It is freely admitted that there has been in the past a development of doctrine. A restatement of doctrines is justifiable, when the meaning of Scripture is thereby more correctly given. Our methods of teaching and work should be adapted to the times in which we live. We should be ready to receive every truth that is duly attested, whether it agrees with our creeds or not. But those things are not what is meant by a "new theology."

EFFECTS OF SPECIAL EMPHASIS.

There is reason to believe that, in some cases, the idea that there is a new theology in the churches results from the placing of greater emphasis on some truth or doctrine not at all new, but which has been neglected in the past. A clearer and truer apprehension of the import of some neglected truth may seem like the discovery of something unknown before. The teaching of the early Methodists was chiefly distinguished by the special emphasis of doctrines that existed in the creeds of the church, but had been largely ignored and neglected.

There is, however, such a thing as placing an undue emphasis on some one thing, that may be true enough within proper limits, but which may be so exaggerated as not to be true in the sense and degree in which it is applied. In such a case a truth may be so stated as to be untrue. When a doctrine, a method, or a duty is made a fad, which

excludes other truths from the place or consideration which they should receive, some people call this a new theology, though the truth exaggerated may not be by any means new. It also sometimes happens that when a religious teacher obtains new light upon a question, or clearer grasp of some truth, he makes the mistake of fancying that because this truth is new to him, it must be new to other people. Sometimes such a one makes the still greater mistake of regarding his personal opinions as the tide-mark of human progress. He lives so much within the circle of his own thoughts, that he imagines his beliefs must be held by the whole community around him.

It may be safely affirmed of nearly everything that claims to be new theology, that "what is true is not new, and what is new is not true." There must be an element of truth in any teaching that receives the approval of rational men. It is this element that secures adherents. It is a notable fact that the teachers of all new beliefs begin their mission in every new place, with statements that are not likely to provoke opposition, or call forth objections from those whom they seek to influence. A very cursory study of the current theories, that have any claim to be regarded as features of a new theology, will justify what we say of their origin, and show that when they are examined and punctured, there is nothing found to warrant the claim that they are newly-discovered truths; but in nearly every case they will be seen to be exaggerations of familiar ideas.

THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD.

Some things are said about the Fatherhood of God which will not bear examination. It is alleged that all men, saved and unsaved, are children of God; that this truth of the divine fatherhood was not known, or at least was but dimly apprehended, till it was revealed by Christ; and that this revelation by him has been overlooked by the churches

until made prominent in recent times. The facts do not justify these allegations. Though we fully recognize the fullness of "grace and truth" which came by Jesus Christ, we maintain that the Hebrew saints were not ignorant of the fatherhood of God. In the Old Testament we find such statements as these: "Doubtless thou art our Father, though Abraham be ignorant of us, and Israel acknowledge us not; thou, O Lord, art our Father," etc. (Isa. lxiii. 16); "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him" (Ps. ciii. 13); "O Lord, thou art our Father" (Isa. lxiv. 8); "Ye are the children of the Lord your God" (Deut. xiv. 1).

A prominent divine in a recent magazine article says that he remembers, that, when certain preachers began to preach this doctrine of the fatherhood of God, "there was great anxiety lest the foundations of theology were about to be destroyed." This singular statement implies that this doctrine has not been preached till recent times, and has been regarded by some as questionable. The present writer has heard the fatherhood of God preached for over half a century, without ever hearing any objection as to its having any dangerous tendency. It is true, there are ways of representing the divine fatherhood which are justly objectionable. Such views as that this doctrine is at variance with future punishment, or that all men are by nature children of God, only they do not know it, till it is made known to them by baptism or in some other way, may be placed in this class. But objecting to some unscriptural caricature of this kind is not denying the fatherhood of God as set forth in the New Testament.

To assert that the fatherhood of God, in the sense that the wicked and the righteous are alike his children, "is the substance of the truth to which Jesus bore witness" while on earth, is a statement that is not justified by the Gospel records of Christ's teaching; and not in harmony

with the words of the evangelist: "As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name." In the sense of being Creator of all, God is the Father of all; but in the New Testament the divine fatherhood implies a gracious filial relationship, on the part of those who call him Father; "for," says the apostle, "as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God." To the unbelieving Jews who said: "We have one Father, even God," Jesus replied: "If God were your Father, ye would love me. . . . Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do." When, therefore, a conception of the fatherhood of God, which is declared to be inconsistent with the doctrine of future punishment, is represented as having become universally accepted as the faith of the Christian churches, one is forced to conclude, that those who make such a statement have accepted the creed of Universalists, and take the liberty of assuming that their belief is the universal faith. It is not necessary formally to disprove an assumption so contrary to the actual facts.

DISPARAGING INDIVIDUALISM.

All Christians believe in the application of Christian principles to the affairs of communities, as well as to personal conduct and character. Some social reformers, however, disparage individualism, and speak as if in some way society as a whole may be uplifted by the church or the state. But society is made up of individuals, and is just what the character of the individuals who compose it make it. If the members of a church are thoughtful, converted, consecrated men and women, that church will be a powerful agency in the promotion of moral and social reforms. If the people of a nation are intelligent and virtuous, that nation will be distinguished by stability and progress. We have societies enough and to spare. There is no way

of elevating communities, but by uplifting the individuals of which they are composed. The churches should fully recognize and enforce the doctrine of human brotherhood. The ethics of the New Testament should govern communities as well as individuals. But masses of people cannot be raised to a higher plane of life merely by being shown what is right and told to do it. There must be the motive-power of right beliefs, and the gracious ability of godly character, before there can be truly right conduct in the life. It is only the good tree that brings forth good fruit. The greatest need of the church and of the world to-day is, more men and women who will be "living epistles," illustrating the truth and power of Christ's religion in all the relations of human life.

COMING BACK TO CHRIST.

A good deal is written and said about "coming back to Christ." It is generally by no means clear what is meant by this phrase. Some times those who use it seem to mean the acceptance of certain socialist theories, which they ascribe to Christ. The most natural import of these now familiar words is, that the Christian churches have neglected or corrupted the teaching of Christ, and substituted some other authority for "the mind of the Master." Hence it is the duty of Christians to study his teaching, and to make it their standard of faith and conduct in a way that they have not done in the past. Sometimes this going "back to Christ" is put in contrasted opposition to beliefs and dogmas. But beyond question, the belief of what the New Testament teaches, respecting the character, work, and doctrines of Christ, does not tend to render Christians less likely to trust and love him, and to follow his teaching.

We should indeed frankly and fully recognize whatever truth there may be in these allegations. If any Christian teachers have gone away from Christ, and accepted some

other standard of truth and duty, they should by all means come back to him. But there is ground to question the justice of what this phrase commonly implies. It is freely admitted that Christians have not manifested the spirit of Christ's teaching in their lives as faithfully as they ought to have done. No doubt a fuller experience of sanctifying grace would give a truer insight into the mind of Christ, and a more faithful conformity to his will. But if the spotless Example, the unerring Teaching, the atoning Death and Mediatorial work of Christ have been faithfully presented in the preaching in our churches, it is not justifiable to speak of these churches as if they had gone away from Christ and neglected his teaching, until he was "re-discovered" by modern critical study. It is indeed the privilege of all Christians to "grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ"; but those who have trusted in Christ for salvation, and are living by faith in him, cannot justly be spoken of as if they were deserters who had lost the knowledge of Christ. The common Christian conception of Christ may have been comparatively imperfect; but it did not consist of erroneous ideas that should be renounced for new views of his character and teaching. With some theologians "coming back to Christ" seems to imply a questioning of the authority and trustworthiness of prophets and apostles, under the pretext of exalting the Master, who said, "He that despiseth you despiseth me."

DISPARAGING AUTHORITY IN RELIGION.

There is probably nothing so characteristic of the theological trend of the times as the rejection of authority in religion, including that of the Holy Scriptures. We do not mean merely the rejection of the inerrancy of Scripture or any particular theory of inspiration, but the denial of the trustworthiness and authority of the Bible. This drift of

current speculative thought towards the rejection of authority as a ground of belief is fruitful in practical results. There is a widespread restiveness under definite statements of doctrine and duty, and a strong desire for greater latitude in the rejection of old beliefs and rules of conduct. There is an undue exaltation of the human element in the Scriptures, and a corresponding ignoring of the divine, till the latter is largely left out of sight. Nay more, in some cases it has come to this, that prominent teachers within the Christian churches hold that whether the Scripture records, including what the Gospels tell us about the Lord Jesus Christ, are facts or fictions is a matter of minor importance, that need not affect Christian faith or piety. This is as much as to say that those who reject the historic Jesus Christ of the Gospels may still claim to be his disciples. The poet Coleridge counted nothing in the Bible inspired, except what "found him." Some modern teachers appear to hold that nothing in the Bible has any authority for them, but what they choose to indorse. They regard the Scriptures merely as the thoughts and lessons which good men of former times addressed to the people of their day. Many claim that divine inspiration was not peculiar to the sacred writers; but that it is possessed by all devout Christians, in proportion to their piety. Individual opinions are exalted to the level of the teaching of the prophets and apostles, in a way that would make every Christian an oracle of himself.

But it should not be forgotten that, as Christianity is an historic religion, its foundation facts must be received on the evidence of testimony. The rejection of the testimony by which these truths are attested is perilous to Christian faith. As the mariner who discards chart and compass and guiding stars is sure to be swept by adverse winds and waves out of the true course, so Christian preachers and teachers who disparage the truth and authority of the Bible,

and speak not according to the words of "the law and the testimony," are sure to be found "teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." The theology, whether old or "new," which undermines the authority of the Holy Scriptures, or divests our Lord Jesus Christ of those divine attributes which make him an all-sufficient Saviour, is misleading and dangerous, no matter what its claims to superior liberality may be.