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Leaders of Religious Thought. I.—Luther: Dogmatic Thought.

BY THE RIGHT REV. THE BISHOP OF BURNLEY.

IN this series of papers the persons and work of four leaders of typical religious thought shall pass in review. Those chosen are Luther, Cranmer, Hooker, Butler. In general terms, these may be said to represent severally dogmatic thought, liturgical thought, distinctively Church or Anglican thought, evidential thought. It is needless to say that, by selecting them, we do not imply the persuasion that they monopolized leadership over these provinces of religious thought. In the spiritual succession, Luther lived after Huss, Cranmer after Leo and Gelasius, Hooker after the founders of the Anglican settlement, Butler after John Howe. Luther supplies the matter for our first study.

We invite to no foolish hero-worship. The Reformer, Martin Luther, was a strong tower on the walls of Zion; a grand bulwark, to whose great work we can hardly measure what we owe. But he was not perfect, and his imperfections were recognized by no one more than by himself. Would that those who have dipped pen in venom had perceived that they were poisoning one of the greatest and best of God's chosen instruments. Would that, while they were smirching one of the noblest of souls, they had a tithe of his humility. Here is a little scene for them. Friend Melancthon bids the students rise when Luther enters to deliver his lecture. "I wish," says he, "Philip would give up this old fashion; it compels me to offer more prayers to keep me humble. If I dared, I would almost retire without reading my lecture." Utter ignorance might say this was affectation. Calumny itself would not say so. Warmth on this point may be forgiven when the dispassionate verdict of the late Professor Froude goes thus far: "That any faith," he writes, "any piety, is alive now in Europe, even in the Church he humbled, is due in large measure to the

poor miner's son, who was born in a Saxon village four hundred years ago."

Some may say that Luther in no sense belongs to us. We freely say, We feel bound to think otherwise. It is true that the Lutheran Church of Germany is sundered from ours by some important divergences of tenet, which make intercommunion of the stricter kind neither possible nor desirable. But listen again to the historian, as he touches Luther's relation to the reformed teaching wherever it took root. "Without Luther, there would have been either no change in England in the sixteenth century, or a change purely political. Luther's was one of those great individualities which have modelled the history of mankind, and modelled it entirely for good. He revived and maintained the spirit of piety and reverence, by which alone real progress is possible. He belongs not to Germany alone, but to the human race."

In 1483, on November 10, at Eisleben, in the electorate of Saxony, he first saw the light. "I am," he wrote, "the son of a peasant: my father, my grandfather, my great-grandfather, were all peasants." Hans, the father, worked in a copper-mine, and was an industrious, thrifty fellow. We catch a glimpse, in passing, of the honest, healthy life of the simple family: the mother, careful and busy and good; the father gathering wood in the Thuringian forest for the cottage, and the little Martin, with his small bundle, by his side. A happy childhood must have been behind that grown-up sympathy and love for childhood and its ways. See him, in middle life, stopping in his Bible studies to write a letter to his own little son, in which he tells him that Heaven is a bright home for little lads, where they may have their toys, and wander in sunny gardens where the fruit is always ripe, and the flowers may be plucked without fading.

A strange, medieval world it was into which the child was born. The rotten age, with its tyrannies, political, ecclesiastical, was struggling in a death-grip with a younger and a better. The old Papacy, of which (thank God) that of the twentieth

century is no true successor, was fulminating its Bulls and its decretals, which should serve to hasten its downrush: trying to rock off to fresh slumbers the awakened manhood of an untoward generation that was daring to think for itself. Will a narrow Protestant tenacity decline to recognize a difference between the Rome of 1507 and that of 1907? I am not given to minimizing the gravity of our quarrel with her. But simple justice demands the thankful acknowledgment that, though her boast is that she is *semper eadem* (ever the same), she has changed for the better since Luther was born, and he was the means, though unowned, of her moral betterment. Let the picture be held up for a moment's view.

While Luther was still a son of Rome, trying harder than ever mortal man tried to find soul-rest in her pale, Leo X., half-pagan, half-dilettante, was crowned. He conceives the idea of signalizing his reign by building the greatest church ever seen. "Christianity," he said, "was a fable, but a profitable one." The devout pilgrim, standing to-day beneath the dome of St. Peter's, happily forgets that it had for its founder a forerunner of the modern mythical school. To obtain the vast sums needed, Indulgence sales were set on foot. A monk named Tetzel was despatched to Saxony to remit sins, and collect. This was the spark that fired Luther's heart and head. Something before this he had seen, had heard, to shake his faith, to raise his doubts. Six years back affairs of his Order—the Augustinian—had called him to Rome. Dreaming of a heaven on earth, he had gone; alas! he found no heaven. The very name "Christian" was a by-word. Piety was openly ridiculed. A mock was made at the mysteries of the Faith.

But Luther was still in fetters. His comment, as he turned homeward, was: "So much more need of a pure and a holy life." And home he went, bravely to try and lead it. It was Tetzel and the Indulgence traffic that turned him to a Reformer of reformers.

Then came his theses, nailed to the Wittenberg church door, ninety-five of them challenging defence of the sale of pardons;

then came the burning of the Pope's Bull; then, later, the central scene of all—on which, if time permitted, we would fain linger—the Diet of Worms and its memorable climax. "Here I stand, I can no other. Prove to me out of the Scripture that I am wrong, and I submit. It is not meet that a man should go against his conscience. God help me. Amen."

Then followed the episode of the Wartburg—that hiding away from the gathering together of the froward and from the insurrection of wicked doers—a captivity so fruitful in service to the whole of reformed Christendom: producing his inestimable gift to his country of the German vernacular Bible, to be pored over in gratitude and wonder by tens of thousands as soon as published, and to be prized, as no book is ever prized, by the greater Germany of to-day.

Sad scandals to the great cause were not wanting. Castle-burnings and bloodshed, wild peasant wars—what lies behind such names as Carlstadt and Münzer? This poor, silly world that seldom wins a blessing but it does its best to spoil it! For these things it is simple dishonesty to hold Luther responsible. Bitterly they grieved him. His last days were beclouded. Elijah's mission had failed. He was no better than his fathers.

But with the advancing ages it has become possible to separate the leader and his work from the mistakes, and even crimes, of his followers, and to accord this great man his just due, as one of the noblest and bravest of mankind.

In 1546 the life that had turned the current of human history closed. It was a fitting end to such a life. In the month of January in that year he journeyed in bad weather to his birth-place, Eisleben, to act as peacemaker in a dispute in the family of the Counts of Mansfeld. On February 17 he knew that his call had come; the next day he died. His latest prayer, for which he collected the failing remnants of his strength, has been preserved: "Heavenly Father, eternal merciful God, Thou hast revealed to me Thy dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Him I have taught: Him I have confessed: Him I love as my Saviour and Redeemer. Take my poor soul up to Thee." The question

was then put by two friends, "Reverend Father, do you die in Christ, and in the doctrine you have constantly preached?" A joyous, just audible "Yes" came, and then, repeating the commendation, "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit," he expired without a struggle.

To estimate the results of Luther's work is not easy. These were so far-reaching and the indirect were of such a varied nature. Emancipation of mind followed that of soul, and we of to-day are still reaping the harvest for which Luther sowed.

If it is possible with Christians to-day to go straight to their God and Father, with none between their spirits and Him but the one Mediator, Christ; if our consciences are the freest of possessions, sold to no one; if the Bible can be read by all, without the right being challenged by any man; if the primitive doctrines, in their plain acceptance, as found in the early creeds, and attested by certain warrants of Holy Writ, are anywhere taught, upheld, believed in, under God, we owe it to the honest, fearless heart, the splendidly courageous action, the passionate devotion to an ideal, the strong, indomitable will of the great Reformer.

We say not that had he never lived and wrought, the Reformation would never have been; but we do say that we cannot refuse to acknowledge the hand of God in raising him up, in furnishing and arming him and sending him into the field to do valiantly for Him. It is an easy, and not an over-noble, task to find flaws in a giant's handiwork. Which of those who sit to judge him could have done his work with his obstacles and with his weapons? And who of his own day could have done it? His was no work for smooth, supercilious Erasmuses; no work for temporizing, timid Melancthons. "Old Adam was too strong for young Melancthon."

And there was more of him left in Erasmus than his best apologists could wish. Such a one as grace made Luther could not but stand alone.

It is needless to remind the reader that our Church is not Lutheran. Luther's sacramental teaching was, if anything,

more profoundly enigmatical than Rome's. We stay not here. The light does not break in all at once. And the links which happily unite us to antiquity have been broken in the Lutheran communities of the Continent. Another Martin, Bucer, was too near. His influence with our English Reformers was brief and weak, and the continuity of the Anglican position was unshaken. Bucer died at Cambridge two years after he arrived amongst us.

From things that sunder us, how thankfully we turn to our great common heritage in the "pearl of great price," bought for us at such a cost by the Gospel merchantmen: "The just shall live by faith." This mighty word was the formative word of the Reformation—its fiat. "Let there be light, and there was light." Picked from the treasury of old Habakkuk it meets us thrice in the New Testament. Picked from the dust and rubbish of ages of accumulated tradition, it met and arrested Luther thrice in his career; and it now lies safe in our Article XI., where long may it remain.

Our Articles themselves call up another obligation, which we will not let slip. In 1530 the Wittenberg Reformers drew up and presented to the Emperor Charles V. a declaration of their faith. This is familiar to readers of the history of the Settlement as the Augsburg Confession. We have no space for an abstract of this document. Twenty-two of its twenty-nine articles deal with doctrine.

With the fate of this Confession we have no present concern. Our interest in it lies in its relation to our own Articles. No treatise on these can afford to ignore that. It is the first page of their history. It had been before the world six years when the Thirteen Articles testified to our struggles *towards* the light. The Articles of Edward VI. paid it similar respect; while the Forty-Two Articles of 1553 (substantially our own) drew largely both upon its thoughts and its wording.

A word or two more before we close. It has long been the fashion in certain quarters to decry the Reformation and belittle its originators. A hasty, often a conceited, judgment is passed

upon a chapter of history which has not been read, and upon men of whom little else is known but their names. But reasonable men, who have, moreover, read some history, keep silence while the voluble censors have their say, lest they should be tempted to answer fools according to their folly. Trent and the Armada were Rome's double answer to the Reformation. No man can pretend to understand the last until he has studied, stage by stage, the preliminaries which led to the first two ominous events. Luther was the father of our political, as of our religious liberties.

We may not pursue the subject further. Let us see to it that, by the help of God, we keep for the after-time the trusts committed to us by our forefathers. We are a richly blessed communion. Take we heed our blessings do not suffer in our hands. While we walk about this Zion of ours, and tell her towers and mark her bulwarks, let us not suffer any of them, through our neglect, to crumble into decay. Let no part of our walls open a treacherous breach to the foes—foes advancing under more banners than one.

God keep our loved Church blameless, true to herself and her charter, pure in doctrine, pure in morals; her chief defence, the lowly self-forgetting lives of her children. Constant may she remain to her duty, to her Lord. When we slumber beneath her shadow she will doubtless shift to do without us. But while we are here, within her pale, may we “stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free,” and “provoke one another to love and to good works.”

