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THE PRESENT OPPORTUNITY FOR REFORMED WITNESS

by F. S. LEAHY

THIS paper was read by the Rev. F. S. Leahy, Minister of Cregagh Road Reformed Presbyterian Church, Belfast, at a public meeting held last April in Westminster Chapel, London, under the auspices of the Reformation Translation Fellowship.

ANY witness worthy of the name must be relevant, and present trends within the Church at large and the world in general serve to present a unique opportunity for the proclamation of the Reformed Faith, and to apply its doctrines to the present needs of mankind. That there are current trends inimical to Calvinism we do not deny. These have been listed by Professor John H. Gerstner, of Xenia Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh, as follows:

The ecumenical movement in its present attitude and mood; Neo-Calvinism or Barthianism. Despite its professed admiration for Calvin, neo-orthodoxy is by its very nature hostile to definite creeds and propositional revelation. That some have become true Calvinists as a result of their introduction to Calvin by neo-Calvinists, does not alter the basic non-correspondence between Barthianism and Calvinism.

The third adverse factor for Calvinism today, noted by Professor Gerstner, is what he terms "modern indeterminism," which tends to encourage some thinkers to suppose that certain events are undetermined. Such an attitude of mind is not congenial to the doctrine of Predestination. When modern thinkers do turn to determinism, as in modern psychology, it is a determinism which destroys human responsibility, and is, therefore, devoid of any affinity for Calvinism. But the Reformed Faith engenders invincible optimism. We cannot believe in the sovereignty of God and fail to be optimists. And if the climate of modern thought is as uncongenial to the Reformed Faith as Romanism in the sixteenth century or German rationalism in the nineteenth, the challenge of our dishevelled world should awaken us to our remarkable opportunity and arouse us to more concerted action.

Even a superficial analysis of our present situation will reveal the salient features of a world-order estranged from God, features which in themselves are unwitting pointers to every herald of the truth. We shall briefly consider our Reformed witness in relation to these symptoms.

I. IN RELATION TO COMMUNISM

In Marxist Communism we have a system of materialism based

on atheism and buttressed by the doctrine of economic determinism, the belief that man can only think and act according to his economic environment; because this is evil man is said to be depraved; therefore, it is argued, he can only be regenerated by cleansing the entire social order. It is precisely at this point, apart from its atheism, that Communism is in violent collision with the world and life view of the Reformed Faith. Christians believe that while environment is a *factor*, it is by no means all, and before society can be cleansed, men must be renewed by the grace of God. The doctrines of total depravity, human inability and regeneration were never more relevant than today. Do we proclaim them faithfully? Do we apply them to the beliefs and programme of Communism?

One of the most alarming features of the Communist advance in the last few decades has been the comparative ease with which ancient Churches have been subjugated to the Communist party—not only have the Orthodox Churches succumbed, but some professing allegiance to the Reformed position have also been guilty of compromise. At present the leaders of the Communist Party seem content to let Churches exist, provided their teeth have been pulled, and that they become the servile vassals of the Party.

Reformed theology has always stressed the headship of Christ over His Church and the consequent independence of that Church. This doctrine should be greatly emphasized throughout the Reformed world, lest the day arrive when we, too, will succumb.

In lands such as America and Britain, we must see in secularism a great weakness in view of the Communist threat. No man whose life is governed by secularism can be anti-marxist, no matter how much he dreads Communism as a way of life or economic system, because his own life is founded on identical atheistic presuppositions. Calvinists must be quick to proclaim the Lordship of Christ over a man's whole life—and must do so in the context of the Communist advance.

Time forbids an examination of the present opportunity to witness in connection with family life and education; suffice it to say that the scope for such witness is very great.

In our whole approach to Communism, it is imperative to emphasize the social implications of the gospel and to display in *our* day the keen social consciousness of John Calvin, as evidenced by his preaching, writing and influence in Geneva. If we betray that vital dimension of Calvinism, we betray the truth itself, and fail to sense the burden of prophets, apostles and our Lord Himself, for social justice.

II. IN RELATION TO CHRISTLESS CAPITALISM

When Capitalism is divorced from Christianity, and governed instead by self-seeking, greed and lust, it inevitably produces a bitter harvest of exploitation and human misery. We do not overlook the fact that poor work and "loafed" hours are equally the employee's exploitation of his employer. Yet it must be realized that Christian doctrine is as much opposed to the laissez-faire theories of liberal economics (i.e., the "free economy" advocated by Adam Smith, defined as the "let people do as they choose" economic theory), as it is to the economic determinism of Karl Marx. God speaks in Scripture a word concerning economics; if the Church fails to make that voice heard, hers is the greater shame. Many Christians see Communism as God's judgment upon the sins of men in the world of economics. In that event, we should look first to our own sins before denouncing those of others. If the professedly Christian peoples had been faithful to the social implications of the gospel, and if Capitalism had taken evil seriously and not built on the sands of materialism, Communism would never have had its appeal. When the first seeds of Marxism were sown, the ground had been well prepared by men who had disobeyed the word of the Christ whose name they had taken.

It was gratifying to read the statement of Professor C. Gregg Singer, in his article, "Calvin and the Social Order" (*John Calvin, Contemporary Prophet*, p. 241), in which he affirmed:

In general we may conclude that Calvin taught a Biblical capitalism as distinguished from that theory of capitalism which is generally associated with Adam Smith and the laissez-faire philosophy. Its norm was the law of the Bible rather than the law of nature, and its moral safeguards were not those provided by the inherent goodness of man which brought Adam Smith to the conclusion that man in seeking his own gain naturally works for the common good. The basic difference between the capitalism of Calvin and that of Adam Smith is *not* to be found in the institutions and practices which comprise modern capitalism and free enterprise, but in the theological and philosophical foundations of their respective systems. The former had a Biblical orientation while the latter looked to the Natural Law philosophy of the eighteenth century with its rationalistic presuppositions as to the nature of man and sin. Modern capitalism reflects to a much greater degree the influence of Adam Smith than it does the theology of John Calvin . . .

Those who have understood the Reformed Faith have been foremost in the cause of social justice since the days of Calvin, and today it is heartening to see the increased awareness of Reformed leaders, as they seek to counter the march of Communism, the Christlessness of much world Capitalism and the spurious "social gospel" of Liberalism.

III. IN RELATION TO MODERNISM

The terms "Modernism" and "Liberalism" are not adequate descriptions of the non-redemptive, anti-supernatural religion which has infected much of modern Protestantism. Professor J. G. Machen preferred to call it "naturalism (in a non-philosophical sense), because of its denial of any entrance of the creative power of God (as distinguished from the ordinary course of nature) in connection with the origin of Christianity." We shall now use the terms "modernism" and "liberalism" with that connotation.

We are acutely conscious of the corrosive influence of modernism during the past century. It would be difficult to exaggerate the confusion of modernism today; it virtually has as many Bibles, as many Christs and as many Gods as it has prominent thinkers. On all crucial questions, such as the authority of Scripture, the person of Christ, the death of Christ, even the being and character of God, "Liberalism" confronts us with confusion, uncertainty and constant alteration. The alleged contradictions of the Bible are infinitesimal trifles in comparison to the contradictions of "Liberalism." Such confusion and fluctuation are the inevitable fruit of what is really subjectivistic humanism. Over against the mists and speculation of modern theology we have the tremendous and exciting opportunity of proclaiming the gospel of sovereign grace, clearly and passionately, as it has been proclaimed by the historic Christian Church since Pentecost.

IV. IN RELATION TO ROMANISM

The writings of the Reformers show that they regarded the Papacy as an anti-Christian organization. That there were many Christians within the Roman Church they never questioned, but both Calvin and Knox repeatedly refer to the Papacy as "the Roman Antichrist," and write of her as a counterfeit Christianity. Only thus could they justify their severance from her fellowship. That attitude was dominant amongst Reformed thinkers until the end of last century—we only have to think of men like Charles Hodge, J. A. Wylie, J. McDonald, William Cunningham, William Anderson, Edward Stillingfleet, and many more, to realize that fact. Now all has changed; Rome has been recognized as a Christian Church in error, the neutralizing effects of her false dogma and her method of salvation by works being overlooked. Those who hold to the position of the Reformers in this respect now constitute a small minority. In the larger branches of the Church this new attitude to the Papacy has been taken to its logical conclusion, and Rome is invited as a sister Church to enter into ecumenical correspondence and fellowship. Prominent lead-

ers in the Protestant world have hailed the Roman Church as a sister Church, deplored the Reformation, and some have hastened to fraternize with the Pope. But they can only be criticized if this new attitude to Rome is false; if Rome really is a Christian Church, showing the essential marks of Christ's Church, then their attitude to her can hardly be condemned. Personally, I cannot regard the Papacy as Christian; its whole system of theology and practice, *taken as a system*, is foreign to the gospel of sovereign grace—its remaining deposit of orthodoxy is neutralized by false dogma. The Papacy has not changed its position since the Council of Trent, which reaffirmed all the errors exposed by the Reformers.

That some Roman Catholics are now studying the Scriptures with new zeal is an encouraging sign, and in an hour of official fraternization with the Papacy, we have the opportunity of maintaining our Protestant and Reformed witness and seeking to encourage Roman Catholics to read the Word of God.

Those of the Reformed Faith who share the new and prevalent attitude to the Roman Catholic Church, should take serious thought about the matter, and carefully consider the implications of this Romeward trend.

In conclusion, we note that the Reformation Translation Fellowship stands unflinchingly for a wholehearted witness to the Reformed Faith, especially seeking to address the peoples of the Far East. Excellent Reformed writing has been translated into Chinese, including Calvin's *Institutes*, and up-to-date literature on Modernism, Romanism and Communism. In view of the sufferings of Christians in Communist China, and the menace of that nation to the world, this witness is supremely important. A splendid range of literature has been distributed in U.S.A., Japan, Indonesia, Korea, Hong Kong, and in other lands: those reached include students and sailors.

When we consider our Reformed witness in relation to Communism, Modernism, Romanism and Christless Capitalism, it becomes abundantly clear that much of our present serious situation stems from a decadent Church. The collapse of Orthodox and Reformed bodies in Russia and the satellite countries makes this plain.

Within professedly Evangelical circles, we see the prevalence of Arminianism, pietism, and other influences which tend to produce non-combatant Christians—i.e., Christians anxious to avoid theological controversy. This is one of the big weaknesses of British evangelicalism. The Reformation Translation Fellowship has sought to counter this trend. Professor B. B. Warfield declared

at the beginning of this century, "Calvinism is evangelicalism in its pure and only stable expression." The present state of affairs in evangelical circles where Reformed theology has been discarded fully confirms his words.

Let us, then, join hearts and hands on a consistently Reformed footing, face up to the challenge of the hour, and go forward in God's strength to seize the opportunity of witnessing which, in Providence, confronts us.

Belfast.