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### THE CHARACTERISTIC AND DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA.

BY REV. DAVID JAMES BURRELL, D. D.

THE *Reformed Church in America* has no noteworthy "characteristic features" to distinguish it from the larger branches of the "Alliance of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System." It is, to all intents and purposes, identical in doctrine and polity with the Northern and Southern Presbyterian Churches.

Nevertheless it holds a separate existence, because of a belief, more or less prevalent among its adherents, that it has a real *raison d'etre*. There are those who aver that its power for good—which is not inconsiderable—would be greatly increased by an alliance with one of the larger Presbyterian bodies. Overtures looking to such a union have been made more than once, but for various reasons have come to naught.

I. The Reformed Church has an honorable history. It is the oldest evangelical organization in America. The first Dutch immigrants came over in the *Half-Moon*, Hendrik Hudson, skipper, in 1609. This was the year of Holland's armistice with Spain after a century of bloody conflict for religious liberty. The *Half-Moon* returned to Holland the following year, reporting an exploration of the Hudson River in vain search for the fabulous open passage to the Orient. An allusion to "fertile lands and fur-bearing animals" tempted the thrifty spirit of the Dutch

# THE RESTORATION OF PETER.

A SERMON.

BY REV. WALTER L. LINGLE.

John xxi. 15-17: "So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs. He saith unto him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep. He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep."

The text contains three verses; each verse consists of three parts. In each there is a question, an answer and a command. No doubt the Saviour by repeating his question three times meant to remind Peter of his threefold denial.

To the casual reader of King James' Version there is a monotonous repetition of questions and answers in these three verses. The three verses seem to be just one verse thrice repeated with little variation. To the careful student of the original there is a very considerable difference between these verses. They move towards a climax. This you will see as we proceed with the exposition.

In order to understand this passage thoroughly we must look at its setting. One evening as the sun was fast sinking behind the western hills seven of the disciples of Jesus stood on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. It was the time of day when fishermen put out to sea for a night of fishing. No doubt these disciples saw among the fishermen many of their old companions. One by one these entered their boats and launched away. At length the seven men were left alone. Those were sad thoughts that filled their hearts as they looked out over the waters of "blue Galilee." They had been fishermen too; but some three years before, Jesus had called them to be his disciples. They left all and followed him, hoping and believing he was the Christ. They

had expected to see him set up his kingdom. However, instead of seeing him sit on a throne, they had seen him nailed to a cross. Then he was laid in a tomb. To be sure the tomb was now empty. It was believed by some that he had arisen from the dead. Indeed they had seen him upon too occasions with their own eyes; but there was something so strange and so mysterious about him. He had appeared suddenly in their midst when all the doors and windows of the house were fastened; then he had vanished as suddenly. He no longer stayed with them as of old. Perhaps after all it was only his spirit which they had seen. It was no further use to hope that he would set up his kingdom. Why then hope any longer? They must earn a living for themselves and families. Some such thoughts as these must have coursed through the minds of those seven disciples. Then Peter, the impulsive Peter, the natural born leader, said, "I go a fishing." This is a declaration that he is ready to give up a forlorn hope and go back to his old calling. The other six were ready to follow their leader, and said, "We also go with thee." So they entered a ship and pushed away.

All night long they toiled, but caught nothing. Sometimes failure is better than success. Failure in this case prepared them for the experiences of the morrow. As the morning dawned Jesus appeared on the shore. They did not recognize him. He called, "Sirs, have ye any meat?" That is, have you caught anything? They answered, "No." He called back to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find." They obeyed. Still they did not recognize him. The net was soon so full of large fish they could not land it. John said, "It is the Lord." That was enough for Peter. Girding his fisher's coat about him, he plunged into the sea and swam ashore. Later the other six came with the fish. Jesus had already kindled a fire and prepared a breakfast of toasted bread and fish. Jesus well knew it was not worth while to talk to hungry men about things unseen and eternal. But notice the simplicity of the meal he provided. Whenever God supplied food miraculously it was simple fare. This we learn from the manna in the wilderness, from the story of Elijah at Kedron, and from the feeding of the multitudes by Christ. We are taught to pray for our daily *bread*. All the wealth of heaven and earth belong to God, but he is no spendthrift.

When they had breakfasted (so says the Greek), Jesus turned

to Peter and said, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?" The very look of the Saviour must have startled Peter. His words startled him more. There seems to be a rebuke in the very name by which Jesus called him. It was no longer, Peter, the rock, the Gibraltar. He had forfeited that name by his fall. It was the old Simon; and then it was a startling, a heart-searching question he asked. No wonder if it took Peter some moments to frame an answer. Before we look at his answer, let us study the question.

The phrase "than these" is ambiguous and gives two meanings to the text, either of which may be correct. The first meaning is this, Lovest thou me more than these other disciples love me? If we might, without irreverence, paraphrase the meaning of Jesus, it is this: "Simon, do you remember that on the night before I was crucified I said, 'All ye shall be offended because of me this night'? You replied, 'Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended. Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee.' That sounded as if you loved me more than these other disciples loved me. Now, in the light of your denial and of subsequent events, do you still think you love me more than they do?"

The second meaning, the one I prefer, is this—Lovest thou me more than thou lovest these other disciples and these other things? Again we may be able to catch the meaning better by paraphrasing: "Simon, you remember you denied me the night of the crucifixion. Not only so, but it was only yesterday that you forgot me in so far as to go back again to fishing. You seemed to love these disciples and your old companions and your old haunts and your old occupation and your old boat and nets more than you did me. Yet when you saw me this morning you left them all and swam ashore with all your might. That looks as if you love me still. Tell me, is that the meaning of your action? Does it mean that you love me more than you do your old boat and nets, and your old haunts and companions? Does it mean that you love me more than you do these disciples, among whom is your brother? In short, does it mean that you love me better than all else besides? You left them all and swam to me."

The latter I believe to be the true meaning. The Greek favors it. The circumstances favor it.

Now look at Peter's reply, "Yea, Lord, thou knowest that I

love thee." There is a beautiful distinction in the original Greek at this point which the English reader fails to catch. The translators could find no method of expressing this distinction in the English version. In Greek there are two words for the verb to love. Jesus uses one of these words in his question. Peter uses the other in his answer. The word which Jesus used (*ἀγαπάω*) means "a love founded in admiration, veneration and esteem" (*Thayer*). It is the word used when it is said the Father loves the Son or the Son loves the Father. It carries with it the idea of permanency, as contrasted with a passing emotion. The question then amounts to this, Do you love me with a love that is steady and unwavering?

Peter carefully uses the other word (*φιλέω*) in his reply. This is a love that may be even more tender, but it is an emotional love which may burn warmly to-day and suffer chill to-morrow. Peter remembers the past. It has humbled him. He is not prepared to make such an unqualified statement as he made on the night before the crucifixion; so he says in substance, "Lord, I love you tenderly, even passionately; yet it may be only a passion, an impulse. I cannot use your word and say that my love is permanent and unwavering. As to that point I must cast myself upon your omniscience." Not only did Peter avoid using Christ's word for love, but he also failed to answer the last part of the question contained in the phrase "more than these." He was not prepared to make any comparisons. A positive statement was enough now. The past was too vividly before his mind for him to indulge in comparatives and superlatives.

Turn now to our Lord's command, "Feed my lambs." What does he mean by lambs, the little ones, or the weak ones? It is more probably the latter. Peter's experience had especially fitted him to help others who were weak or had fallen. Hence he is sent to them. A man who has fallen can better sympathize with the fallen ones, and in so far is better prepared to help them.

This brings us to the next verse. Here again is the question, the answer and the commission. As I have said, most casual readers suppose this verse is a repetition of the preceding one; but there is considerable difference. In this verse Jesus leaves off "more than these" in his question. He no longer asks Peter to make any comparisons with other things and other people. The word he uses for *love* is the same as he used in the preceding

verse. In short Jesus says, "Simon, separating yourself and me from all others, looking straight and simply at me only, is *love* the right name for that which connects us? Is it love and not mere impulse? Is it love and not sentiment or fancy? Is it love and not sense of duty of what is becoming? Is it love and not mere mistake?" (*Dods.*)

There is also in this question an appeal to Peter to adopt Christ's word for love. Simon, reconsider, and see if you cannot drop your word (*φιλέω*) which may mean only an emotion, and adopt mine (*ἀγαπάω*), which implies a love that is permanent and unwavering.

But Peter in his reply does not vary a hairbreadth from his original reply, "Yea, Lord, thou knowest that I love thee." He sticks to his old word (*φιλέω*). He cannot conscientiously go further. This time the commission is "shepherd my sheep." Before it was feed, now it is shepherd. Before it was lambs, now it is sheep. So there is a difference in the two commissions. He is now to take oversight of the entire flock, both weak and strong. Before he was simply to *feed* the lambs. The second commission is broader in its scope; but notice he is not yet prepared to feed the whole flock. He is to *shepherd* the flock. This is not as great work as feeding them. The feeding is reserved for the last commission. Thus we see the verses moving to a climax.

This brings us to the next verse, which contains the last of the series of questions and answers. In this verse the Lord's question is, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?" In the English version it is exactly the same, word for word, as the question in the preceding verse; but in the Greek there is a vast difference. This time Jesus uses Peter's word for love (*φιλέω*). The record says, "Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me?" Some suppose Peter was grieved because Jesus thought it necessary to repeat the question so often. Others suppose he was grieved because he was thus reminded of his three denials. There may have been an element of grief in both these thoughts; but the real cause of his grief was that the third time Jesus adopted Peter's word for love (*φιλέω*). That cut Peter to the heart. It called into question the profession Peter had so earnestly made. In substance the Lord says, "You refuse to use my word for love; now let me adopt your word. Simon, are you sure that you love me even with that kind of love? Remember the past; you forsook me; you denied me;

you went so far as to swear you never knew me. Just yesterday you gave up hope and went back to your old calling, old haunts, and old companions. In the face of these facts, can you truly use your word? Can you say with assurance that you love me even in that sense of the word?" What a heart-searching question! No wonder Peter was grieved. There is nothing left for him to do but throw himself upon the mercy and the omniscience of Jesus, "Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love *(φιλέω)* thee." There is the appeal of an honest heart. The hypocrite would not dare throw himself upon the omniscience of God.

Now the commission is, "Feed my sheep." This is the climax. To shepherd the sheep, to be a pastor, is a great work; but the crowning work of the ministry is to feed the flock, leading them into pastures that are ever fresh and green.

I have dwelt at length upon the exposition of the text. I have done so because it is the preacher's duty to unfold the scriptures, also because this passage has puzzled a great many Bible readers, but chiefly because it is rich in food for us to-day. Let us turn and gather up the lessons we learn from this remarkable passage of scripture.

1. The loving Christ is ready and waiting to restore again the fallen ones. There is nothing that can bring more hope and cheer to those who have fallen than our Saviour's treatment of Peter. At first glance these questions of Jesus seem a little sharp and even cruel. They were like a great searchlight thrown upon Peter's soul. The light was so strong that at first it almost dazed him; but in a moment he saw it was all done in love. It not only gave him an opportunity of searching more carefully than ever his own heart, but an opportunity of making another great confession that would stand side by side with his immortal words, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." It also gave Jesus an opportunity of assuring Peter of his love and perfect confidence by entrusting him with the most important mission ever placed in the hands of mortal man. Thus we see the tender love of Jesus shining through the entire conversation.

Back in the Gospel of Mark (xvi. 7) there is a very significant little touch that brings out in a striking way the tenderness of Jesus in dealing with Peter. It was when the two Marys went to the tomb of Jesus on that memorable morning and found it empty. A young man appeared clothed in white. He had a

message from Jesus. Here it is: "Tell his disciples *and Peter* that he goeth before you into Galilee." There is a world of meaning in the words, "*and Peter.*" They must have brought new hope to the heart of the fallen apostle. No doubt Peter was broken-hearted, and felt that he had forfeited all right to be called a disciple. Hence Jesus in sending the message to his disciples makes special mention of the fallen one, lest he might feel that he was not included and that the message was not intended for him. Oh! there is nothing like the tenderness and the love of Jesus. He has that same love for the fallen ones to-day, and is just as ready to restore them again.

That is a beautiful story "Ian Maclaren" tells of Flora Campbell, in the *Bonnie Brier Bush*. The wayward girl left her father's home and wandered off to London. Lachlan Campbell had a stern sense of Scottish justice in his breast. On the Sabbath he moved that his daughter's name be stricken from the church roll; with his own pen he blotted her name from the old family Bible. Yet deep down in that father's heart there was burning a warm love for his wayward daughter. Each night as darkness covered the land a candle was placed in the kitchen window overlooking the path that led to the house. There it burned for many weeks until one night she returned. She faltered at the foot of the hill, not knowing whether to go further or to flee back again to the great city and live a life of sin. At that moment she saw the light of the little candle. She guessed its meaning. It was a warm welcome she received when she fell into her father's arms unable to say anything but "Father." That, I say, is a beautiful story. Yet it is only a version of a story that is more beautiful still. You know what I mean. I mean the story of the Prodigal son, as it came from the gracious lips of our Saviour. In that story Jesus tells us in the tenderest way he knows the welcome that awaits the wayward ones if only they will come back again to their Father's house.

"Though I forget him and wander away,  
Yet he doth love me wherever I stray.  
Back to his dear loving arms would I flee  
When I remember that Jesus loves me."

2. A second lesson that we learn is that Jesus demands our supreme love. He placed before Peter his dearest friends and the things he loved most and asked, "Lovest thou me more than these?" If we would be disciples of Jesus he places before each



of us all that is dearest to us and asks, "Lovest thou me more than these?" Before we have time to answer he adds, "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross and followeth after me, is not worthy of me."

3. A third lesson is this: supreme love to Christ is the highest preparation for his service. Jesus did not ask Peter what he knew about this or about that. He did not ask him what he believed on this point or on that. His first question was, Do you love me?

Now it is very important for a man who wants to work for God to know something. It is just as important for him to believe something. We have no patience with the cry against creeds; but it is far more important that he love God supremely. Read that thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians again, and see the position that is assigned to love. It says that a man is simply nothing if he have not love.

It matters not how wise or how orthodox the minister may be, if he does not love God supremely he had better step down from his pulpit. It matters not how learned or how competent the Sabbath-school teacher may be, if he does not love God he had better resign at once.

On the other hand, it matters not how illiterate a man may be, if only he loves God supremely, God has a place for him in his service. It may not be to preach, it may not be even to teach in the Sabbath-school, yet God has a work for him to do. Love qualifies a man to do service for God.

4. A fourth lesson we learn is that love to God obligates us to do service for him. When Jesus was fully assured that Peter loved him he said, "Feed my sheep." So to-day, when a man loves God the command comes, "Go work in my vineyard," or "Feed my lambs," or "Shepherd my sheep," or "Feed my sheep," or it may be "Preach my gospel." In short, the moment we profess to love God we put ourselves under obligation to work for him, and for the advancement of his kingdom in the earth.

Yet, alas! there are multitudes of professing Christians who never seem to do any service for God, at least so far as the world can see. Let such learn a lesson from the words of Jesus in this text. Let such also remember the words of the prophet of Jehovah when he cried, "Woe unto them that are at ease in Zion."