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I. THEOLOGY OF THE FUTURE.

Our age, on its religious side, has been characterized as an age of doubt. We are constrained to admit that there is a propriety in this characterization. Doubt with regard to religious matters is more widespread at present than it was in days gone by. This is not saying that the Christian religion has not a stronger hold upon men to-day than ever before, for it has. The mustard seed sown in the ground and springing up into an herb is growing yet, though already the greatest of all herbs. The leaven hid away in the meal is still permeating the mass, and will continue till the whole is leavened. The doubt of our age does not furnish sufficient ground to justify the believer in entertaining pessimistic views of the future. But there is none the less a widespread spirit of questioning and uncertainty concerning things religious. It is not confined to the student's cloister, but is found among the masses. It appears in a good deal of the popular literature of the day, and tends to create for itself a congenial soil, if that be not already found. But as has been remarked by those observant of the trend of theological thought in our day, while doubt is more general than it was in a former age, it is not of the same intensity. It is not so much a positive denial as it is an enquiry. A century ago unbelief was very sure of itself. It sneered at faith, and assumed a happy, even a lightsome attitude. But such self-complacency has largely disappeared from the theological world, and in its place there is more of earnest investigation.

NOTE.

A SIGNIFICANT CONFESSION.

The leading article in the *Homiletic Review* for January is an exceedingly interesting and instructive one. It is written by William M. Ramsay, D. C. L., L. L. D., Professor of Humanity, Aberdeen, Scotland. It is on the subject of the historical trustworthiness, and the date of the composition of the Acts of the Apostles.

He tells us that "twenty or fifteen years ago there was a large body of learned opinion in Europe which regarded the question as practically decided and ended, with the result that the Acts was a work composed somewhere toward the middle of the second century after Christ, by an author who held strong views about the disputes taking place in his own time, and who wrote a biased and colored history of the early stages in Christian history with the intention of influencing contemporary controversies. The opinion was widely held in Europe that no scholar who possessed both honesty and freedom of mind could possibly dispute this result." We would naturally suppose that the learned opinion, to which the writer here alludes, must have had a very solid foundation for its decision. Nothing but a very solid foundation would seem to justify such a radical departure from the hitherto unchallenged tradition of the Church. We cannot believe that a learned opinion would impeach the veracity of a writer without being driven to do so by strong, if not indeed by irresistible, reasons. The book of Acts bears on its face the character of an artless and exceedingly interesting narrative. It is written in a style marked by simplicity, naturalness and directness of purpose. The author discloses his aim in the outset, viz., to supplement a previous narrative addressed to the same friend Theophilus, to whom he addresses this writing. He had given his friend a carefully prepared account of "all that Jesus began both to do and to teach, until the day in which he was taken up;" and he evidently

means it to be inferred that he proposes to trace the movement which Jesus inaugurated to a further stage of its development. In keeping with this aim he mentions the course which Christ had mapped out for the movement to take. By appointment of Christ, the disciples were to witness for him in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria and unto the uttermost parts of the earth. Now, it has seemed to the readers of the book, in all ages of the Church, that the author stuck to his theme, and described in simple yet graphic phrase the marvellous beginning of apostolic labours in Jerusalem, and then the ever-expanding circle of their activities and influence, over Judea, over Samaria, and out into the limitless field of the world. He writes as an eye and ear witness of much that he tells, and his tone is ever that of an honest and earnest soul. Why not accept the book for what it purports to be? Do we not feel the need of just such a narrative to put us in touch with the apostles? to account for the beginnings of the church? to bridge over the gap between the departure of Christ and the history of the church in the second century? Certainly the scope of the book as defined by the author was a worthy one, and the book, if it can be regarded as veracious history, is a valuable one. But the learned opinion of Europe felt constrained to reject the author's own account of his work, to charge him with a covert purpose regarding the controversies that were dividing the church, and with coloring the history, i. e., falsifying the history, in the interest of this covert purpose. So confident were those, representing this learned opinion, in the justness of their conclusion that they made it the test of fairminded scholarship. "If you do not agree with us," they said, "it is either because you are ignorant, or dishonest, or hampered by tradition."

On what ground was this very dogmatic and revolutionary conclusion based? The chief interest of Mr. Ramsay's article is in the answer which it furnishes to this question: "For many years critic after critic discussed the question of imperial persecution of the Christians, examined the documents,

rejected many indubitably genuine documents as spurious, and misinterpreted others, with the result that with quite extraordinary unanimity the first idea of state persecution of Christians was found in Trajan's famous "Rescript," written about A. D. 112 in answer to a report by the younger Pliny. Now observe the result. If there never was any idea of state persecution before that year, then all documents which allude to or imply the existence of state persecution must belong to a period later than 112. At a stroke the whole traditional chronology of the early Christian books is demolished, for even those which are not directly touched by it, are indirectly affected by it. The tradition lost all value and had to be set aside as hopelessly vitiated. Here then is the reason for such positive denial of the historic veracity of Acts. It represents the Christians as persecuted by the state until the reign of Trajan. Hence the writer of Acts lived after Trajan's reign, and ascribed to the early period of the Church about which he wrote conditions which did not exist till later. How did learned opinion arrive at the conclusion that "the first idea of state persecution of Christians was found in Trajan's famous Rescript." By "rejecting many indubitably genuine documents as spurious, and by misinterpreting others." This is Mr. Ramsay's explanation of the matter. It is not surprising that he should characterize the unanimity of these critics as "extraordinary." It is somewhat remarkable that even one scholar, deserving the name of a critic, should reach a conclusion by such a method. It can be nothing less than extraordinary when a number unite in that conclusion, especially when they proclaim it and make it the touchstone of scholarship. Gibbon has been regarded as none too credulous touching the documentary history of the early Christian church. But Gibbon was credulity itself compared to these critics who reached their conclusion by "rejecting many indubitably genuine documents."

After quoting the familiar passage from Tacitus, describing the persecutions of the Christians by Nero, Gibbon says "the most sceptical criticism is obliged to respect the truth

of this extraordinary fact, and the integrity of this celebrated passage of Tacitus." Obviously Gibbon was not acquainted with the most "sceptical criticism." It had not yet developed. It was reserved for Christian scholars, for high and reverend dignitaries of the church to show the possibilities of sceptical criticism.

But how stands the matter now? Has the learned opinion of twenty or fifteen years ago persisted to the present time in the conclusion that the book of Acts was written about the middle of the second century? By no means. "Such extreme opinions are now held chiefly by the less educated enthusiasts, who catch up the views of the great scholars and exaggerate them with intense but ill-informed fervor, seeing only one side of the case, and both ignorant and careless of the opposite side." So says Mr. Ramsay. The learned opinion that was once the badge of scholarship has now come to be the badge of ignorance. How did this happen? Have any new documents been discovered? Any new light thrown on the subject from outside sources? No, indeed, and yet, according to Mr. Ramsay, "it is now universally admitted, as the fundamental fact in the case, that Pliny and Trajan treat state persecution of the Christians as the standing procedure. Pliny suggests, in a respectful, hesitating, tentative way, reasons why the procedure should be reconsidered. Trajan reconsiders it, and affirms again the general principle; but in its practical application he introduces a very decided amelioration." Note that learned opinion has not only abandoned its conclusion, but has done so for the reason that a right interpretation of the documents, on which it rested, overthrows it.

The critics "with extraordinary unanimity rejected many indubitably genuine documents as spurious" in order that they might make Trajan's famous "Rescript" the solid, immutable basis of their critical theories. Now the critics find that this same famous Rescript furnishes no basis whatever for their critical theories, but on the contrary furnishes a solid and immutable support for the many indubitable documents which they had rejected. Having read

thus far in Mr. Ramsay's article we are beginning to lose our respect for learned opinion. Still it may be possible to find an apology for the critics. May it not be that Pliny's letter, and Trajan's reply are easily liable to misinterpretation? That their natural, and obvious meaning would justify the interpretation of the critics? And that the critics are not, therefore, much to blame for their mistake? Mr. Ramsay gives us an answer to these questions. "The only marvel is that any one could read the two documents and not see how obvious the meaning is. Yet a long series of critics misunderstood the documents, and rested their theory of early Christian history on this extraordinary blunder. Beginning with this false theory of dating and character, they worked it out with magnificent and inexorable logic to conclusions which twenty years ago the present writer, like many others, regarded as unimpeachable, but which are now seen to be a tissue of groundless fancies."

I think we are entitled to regard this as a significant confession on the part of Mr. Ramsay. It is not his object to discredit the critical school by showing them up in a bad light. He belongs to that school, and is regarded as an expert touching the early history of the Christian Church. He is in sympathy with the spirit in which they conducted their studies even in this particular case. "We honor many of those whose views we treat as so mistaken more highly than we do some whose opinions seem to us to approximate practically much more closely to the truth, but whose spirit showed little of the enthusiastic devotion to historical method which characterized the great critical scholars." Yet he confesses that those men whom he admires for their "enthusiastic devotion to historical method," and he along with them, rested their conclusions on what are "now seen to be a tissue of groundless fancies." They did this after careful and repeated scrutiny of the questions in debate. They did it with extraordinary unanimity. They did it with a dogmatic assurance which did not hesitate to brand dissent with the accusation of dishonesty or ignorance.

They did it when "the only marvel is that any one could read the two documents," on which their conclusions were based, and not see that they destroyed, instead of supporting, these conclusions.

It would be manifestly unjust and irrational to say that this one blunder of the critical school, however extraordinary, and absurd it may be, should destroy absolutely our confidence in all other results of this critical school, when those results differ from traditional views of Scripture. It is not a case where the legal maxim holds, *falsus in uno, falsus in omnibus*. But certainly this one blunder, considering the painstaking deliberation with which it was arrived at, the persistency with which it was held, the dogmatic offensiveness with which it was paraded, and withal the preposterous character of it, should make us unwilling to follow this critical school with a bandage over our eyes. Certainly again, this one blunder should palliate our sin if we refuse to be enamored of a historical method that conducts its enthusiastic devotees to such results. These erudite critics have, by the confession of one of their own number, shown themselves capable of "rejecting many indubitably genuine documents as spurious, and of misinterpreting others" in order to maintain a theory which is now seen to rest on a "tissue of groundless fancies." They may not have done the like of this in any other case. They may never do the like again. But they have done it once, and this justifies us in saying to them, "Gentlemen, we can not trust you implicitly. You must be at pains to point out your reasons. You must also be patient with us if we are not always satisfied with the reasons that govern your own minds. You have shown that you are sometimes easily satisfied. You still have the faults for which you chide us. At one time, you are too skeptical; at another too credulous."

Are we not justified from this confessed blunder to draw the inference that freedom from the trammels of a traditional faith does not certainly secure one from falling into errors, arising out of preconceptions? Macaulay, in his

essay on History, mentions as the fault of certain historians that "they arrive at a theory from looking at some of the phenomena, and the remaining phenomena they strain, or curtail to suit the theory." Is it not evident that the historians of the early church, belonging to the critical school, are capable of committing this very fault?

One other use we would make of this significant confession. Learned opinion is intolerant of dissent. As Mr. Ramsay tells us it brands dissent with accusations that are hard to bear. No one who aspires even to a modest measure of scholarship is pleased to have learned opinion rate him as dishonest or ignorant. When we find that this same learned opinion can blunder as egregiously as ignorance itself, this should rob its verdict of at least a part of its terrors. This blunder is clear demonstration that it may be more to our credit to fall under the ban of learned opinion than to follow blindly its lead. R. C. REED.

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