

THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY.

VOL. I.

JANUARY, 1921.

No. 1.

Confessionalism of the Missouri Synod.

1. INTRODUCTORY.

From the history of those conflicts our descendants will have to form their conviction as to which side had a right to shout, "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!"

PRESIDENT P. BRAND, *in Opening Address at Brooklyn, N. Y., May 4, 1898.*¹⁾

A current definition of confessionalism runs: "Confessionalism is a strict adherence to the confessions of some particular church or sect; it is the conforming in teaching and preaching with scrupulous fidelity to the letter and spirit of the confessional writings of some particular division of the Christian Church. Lutheran confessionalism is the strict adherence to the Lutheran confessions in letter and spirit."²⁾ But for the omission of "and practise" after "teaching and preaching" the definition would be altogether satisfactory. This omission accounts for an illogical division of the subject of "confessionalism," or rather of "confessionalists," to which we shall refer later.

Men of judgment and extensive observation outside of the Missouri Synod, when asked to name the one feature which distinguishes this Synod from others, will invariably name the peculiar type of confessionalism that controls the activities of this body. Not infrequently the statement about the Missouri Synod's confessionalism is qualified by some such phrase as "hyper-" or "extreme." There are situations which few Missourians, if any, are spared, when it is anything rather than a joy and delight to be a Missourian. For to be a Missourian often means to be declared an ecclesiastical and social misfit, to be forced into isolation, and — insult being added to injury — to be told that the isolation was

1) Eastern Dist. Rep., Mo. Syn., 1898, p. 14.

2) Dr. J. Nicum, in *Luth. Cyclop.*, p. 129.

THE THEOLOGICAL OBSERVER.

Ethical Preaching Fails to "Work."

It is putting the finger on the real sore in our religious life of the conventional sort when Dr. Drysdale writes in *The Intelligencer* (Nov. 17): "In religion we have discarded the idea that deep down in human nature there is a tendency to wrong-doing, called by the fathers, for want of a better name, 'original sin,' which needs to be dealt with harshly. We have fostered the idea that men can come into the presence of God in an indifferent, careless, and intermittent manner, without a deep sense of the necessity of being purged with hyssop and made clean. We go out into life with a *sang-froid* which betokens no deep searching of a soul which cries, 'Lead me in the way everlasting.' We do all this because we are not serious about God and God's purpose, or about the motives of life, or about squaring of our business, politics, or pleasure with the eternal moral verities." This literary silhouette of present-day religiousness without religion is herewith put on file as part of the declaration of bankruptcy of the "ethical" method of teaching a "vital" Christianity. Justification by grace through faith, the cardinal doctrine of the Scriptures, in fact, the very Gospel, has been scouted as of inferior moral worth, and its preaching deprecated because of its tendency to enfeeble the aggressive and progressive spirit that wants to "work" in the Kingdom. Now the discovery is made that the ethically funded, ethically oriented, and ethically aimed organization does not work, because it

lacks energy, and representatives of that obsolescent type of Christianity which still preaches Christ and Him Crucified are wondering whether the discovery will lead to the reinstatement of the one power that "works" and is sufficient for all purposes of the Christian religion, the Gospel of the forgiveness of sin for Christ's sake.

It does not seem so; the writer quoted holds that "we need a few healthy pessimists like Elijah and Carlyle, who see life as it is and take us into a solid gloom where one's eyes are given a rest and brought back to normal vision—who also make vigorous battle on the monkeys and the parrots who prate the shibboleths and catch-words of an empty and sickening optimism which has place only in the kingdom of humming-birds." Nay; this will not remedy the evil. One can relish the writer's classical way of expressing a reasonable disgust, just as one can feel in accord with him in his onslaught on the popular modern "Pollyanna Philosophy," which, he says, "consists in the closing of one's eye to all disagreeable things, and going down the way in a sort of ignorant, unseeing, unthinking, jolly, reckless, irresponsible, childish fox-trot. Light-hearted people, to whom nothing serious makes appeal; people who are as ignorant of the great underlying facts of present-day life as they are of the inhabitants of Mars; people who are satisfied with the physical comforts, smile and grimace, and prate the shibboleths of a 'Pollyanna'-Mrs. Eddy-Ralph Waldo Trine-Dr. Frank Crane school of philosophy, and call themselves optimists."

This is all true, but pessimism will not improve the state of affairs. The modern forms of optimism are nothing but a recurrence of the ancient "laughing death," a disease that produced an uncanny mirth and ended in a spasm of hideous grinning, which was the smile of the end and the end of smiling. For this false optimism that is cheating men in our day they should be given, not pessimism, but the true optimism, the joy that comes with the knowledge that God has been reconciled with men by His dear Son. This creates a good conscience—this alone, and nothing else; and a good conscience is a mighty driving power for every good work. D.

Bigots vs. Bigots.

"Bigotry in the South" is viewed with alarm by Charles P. Sweeney in the *Nation* (November 24). The immediate cause is the election as senator of Thomas E. Watson of Georgia, the best-known advocate of racial and religious intolerance in the United States, who, after the suppression of his newspaper, the *Jeffersonian*, now speaks through the *Columbia Sentinel*. "Watson's election, while due to a variety of circumstances and a combination of issues, is essentially the victory of a Fifth Estate, of the sinister forces of intolerance, superstition, prejudice, religious jingoism, and mobbism." Watson's "opposition to the League of Nations has been as violent as his antagonism to the war, but his attacks on the League and the Treaty were neither those of an intelligent seeker after peace nor of an ordinary political dissenter. Watson proclaimed, and induced thousands of his credulous followers to believe, that the League was an agency through

which the Vatican seeks to impress a Romanist and Jesuit super-government upon the world. President Wilson he painted as the tool of the Pope, whose political agent, according to Mr. Watson, is Mr. Joseph P. Tumulty, the President's secretary."

Describing the "anti-Catholic madness of Georgia, Alabama, and Florida," the writer says: "The city of Birmingham, Alabama, has but 10,000 Catholics out of 200,000 population. Nevertheless the good people of Birmingham have been led to believe that Catholics are plotting control of the city, State, and national government in the name of the Pope, that they seek the destruction of the public schools, and that they are a menace to the existence of the home as the basic unit of organized society. So firmly do the great majority of inhabitants believe these things that they go to the polls and elect men to public office on the single issue of protecting the Government and the community from Popery. Thus, the present Governor of Alabama, Thomas E. Kilby, was elected because he induced the voters to believe him a stauncher foe of Catholicism than his opponents. One of the rash pledges he made in his campaign, but has failed to redeem, was a promise to find legal means to compel priests to marry. One pledge that he has kept, was for the enactment of a "Convent Inspection Law." It is now in force. In its original form it directed sheriffs, upon written application of twenty-five citizens, at any time of day or night to proceed to the convent named in the application, thoroughly to inspect the place, and to inquire from every woman there if she was held against her will. There were objections to the form of the bill as presented originally, and a compromise was effected. The bill adopted and signed by the Governor establishes a State Commission to inspect the institutions at regular intervals. In Florida, when the grotesque Governor Sidney J. Catt sailed into office on a wave of anti-Catholic and anti-negro prejudice, a similar law has been adopted. The delusion inspiring this rare statute—that convents are polygamous institutions maintained for the Catholic clergy—is general wherever Watson and his associates have carried their campaigns.

The anti-Catholic prejudice is thoroughly organized. In Birmingham, for instance, if you don't belong to the "T. A.'s," you are suspect. "T. A.'s" means True Americans, a vast and rapidly growing secret organization having the extermination of Catholicism as its sole object. "No Catholics in public office" is its watchword. The present county administration of Jefferson County, which embraces Birmingham, was elected on an issue confined to the dismissal of a Catholic young woman stenographer in the county treasurer's office. The "T. A.'s" had ordered the former treasurer to dismiss her. He refused. The issue was joined. The treasurer and those who stood with him were defeated, and the young woman was promptly dismissed. The present city administration of Birmingham was elected because the "T. A.'s" supported it. When it took office, all Catholics, save two policemen, were dismissed.

The writer concludes his review by describing the methods employed by the anti-Catholic propaganda: terrorism and intimidation that does not shrink from incendiarism, circulating such papers as

Watson's publication and the *Menace*, framing anti-Catholic platforms on which candidates for political office are made to stand, and fraternalism. "Fraternalism is the machinery employed for organizing the anti-Catholic prejudice. The Masonic lodges, American Mechanics, Knights of Pythias, Modern Woodmen of the World, Odd-Fellows, Junior Order American Mechanics, are everywhere in evidence, and besides the 'T. A.'s' there have grown up a number of other societies devoted exclusively and actively to anti-Catholicism, among them the Guardians of Liberty, the Sons and Daughters of Washington, and the Ku-Klux Klan. "These cities and towns are cursed with fraternalism," said a newspaper man in Charlotte. "If you don't belong to one of those orders, you might as well be on your way. I joined the Elks, but refused to join any other club or society. The boss thinks I'm a friend of the Catholics, whereas I merely refused to take part in organized hatred of Catholics or anybody else. The result is, I'm in wrong."

Whoever exposes bigotry, especially the blind and cruel workings of religious fanaticism, renders mankind, and religion in particular, a distinct service. Such papers as the *Menace* constitute a dangerous element in our public life. Not a little of the Watson spirit of religious intolerance dressed in a political garb cropped out lately in the antiparochial school campaign in Michigan. But the *Nation* must not forget to state that there is not only method in this madness, but also a reason for it, and that a compelling one. The most bigoted religious organization in the world is the Roman Catholic Church. Its policies have been unalterably fixed, and summarily reiterated not so long ago in the Syllabus of Pius IX. Even such an "enlightened and liberal" Pope as Leo XIII has deemed it necessary to declare that his Church must be given preferential rights in the United States. The Catholic Missionary Congress at Chicago in 1910 reverberated with the fervid oratory of those who want to "make America Catholic." Is the *Nation* not aware of *this* propaganda? What has it to say on *this* side of the issue? As to the inspection of convents, if no more is intended than to put them on a level with any other public institution, to which our sanitary and police officers must at all times have access, we see no ground for criticism. Nor do we hold that wrong is done by making it possible for inmates of such institutions to quit them if they are held in them against their will. The Catholics themselves ought to be the foremost champions of this inspection.

D.

Pilgrims' Theology.

The theology on which the faith of the Pilgrim Fathers had been fed, chiefly by their pastor John Robinson, is briefly sketched by Dr. H. H. Scullard in the *Hibbert Journal* (October). He doubts "whether the God of the Pilgrims is our God. John Robinson's idea of God was that of the great Egoist of the Universe. . . . 'God loveth Himself first and most, as the chiefest Good.' . . . Unlike Luther and some other of the sixteenth-century reformers, Robinson was a lover of philosophy. To him the universe was a rational order, and 'nothing true in right reason, and sound philosophy is, or can be, false in divinity.' . . . Every doctrine must justify itself in the court of

Reason, or at least be accepted on rationally approved authority. . . . The glory of God is infinitely more than the good of men. It is the cause and ground and substance of all good. How, then, can a rational God love men more than He loves Himself? The love of God for men is the love of His own work in them. God loves all good things, 'as He communicates with them, less or more, the effects of His own goodness.' . . . Unlimited self-realization is the prerogative of Deity, a prerogative not laid aside at the Incarnation, but finding its supreme vindication in the Cross.

"But is not the essence of the divine character self-sacrifice? I do not think Robinson would have said so. He would have scrutinized the word much more closely than we are in the habit of doing before applying it to a holy and omnipotent God. Sacrifice is a dangerous word to use of Deity without qualification or comment. There are meanings of the word which we have no right to accept in thinking about God. 'God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son.' But love is more than sacrifice, and giving cannot impoverish God. The 'sacrifice' of God might have meant not simply the condemnation of the world, which according to Christian theology it did, but the ruin of the world, which it was meant to avert. God loved Himself before He loved the world. Creation and redemption are alike the consequence of the divine self-love. So the same Evangelist who speaks of the love of God for the world records the prayer of Jesus, which looks beyond all sacrifice and all redemption to a far-off divine event, which is neither primarily the salvation of the world nor the perfection of the Church, but the revelation of the glory of God—'That they may behold My glory which Thou hast given Me, for Thou lovedst Me before the foundation of the world.' The glory of God and not the salvation of the race was the prime object of the Incarnation and the Cross.

"So at least it seemed to Robinson. This was the determinative thought in all that he wrote—a God glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing whatsoever He pleased in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. There were no limits to His power. The wills of men He turned whithersoever He would, but always, whether in renewing or in hardening, without doing violence to human freedom. Even sin was no obstacle, but only an occasion for the manifestation of the divine glory. With relentless logic, shattering the distinction between 'permitting' and 'ordering'—for how can God permit what He is powerless to prevent?—he boldly asserts that 'God orders both the sin and the sinner to His own supernatural ends.' Limitations of knowledge or of power, whether proceeding from the divine nature or from the divine will, were derogatory to the glory of God. The Moral Governor of the Universe never for one moment, through lack of power or lack of knowledge, lost control of the vast system of discordant and conflicting wills of men. It was His all-serving eye and all-embracing purpose which directed the whole course of human history. Nothing was done without Him. Even a limited atonement appeared to the Pilgrims more tolerable than the conception of a God powerless to achieve His ends."

The Pilgrims' God, then, was that well-known product of the

one-sided dialectics of Calvinism, developed with inexorable consistency from certain revealed facts in the Scriptures, to the exclusion of other revealed facts. As the "logic" which constructed this God proceeded upon the eclectic method in the choice of its Bible materials, it had to produce a one-sided God — very strong, indeed, but absolutely partial. One-sided "logic" was satisfied with this God, because in this logical God there are no longer any mysteries. And the sovereignty, majesty, and glory which Calvinistic theology celebrates in this God as the most admirable perfection are distinctions for which this God must forever be beholden to Calvinistic logicians, who first made this God "logically," and then crowned Him "logically." Is there cause for wonder why Unitarianism and Universalism afterwards arose in the Pilgrim settlements?

The Pilgrims' Bible "was a convenient summary, but not a complete transcript, of all the oracles of God. Many of the words of men inspired by the Spirit of God had not been committed to writing. What the Canonical Scriptures contained was all that was necessary for 'salvation' and 'obedience.' And these oracles are living oracles, and so, though none may add to them, they have the power of revealing more of the will of God, as men may be prepared to receive it. There is no more frequently quoted sentence in Robinson's works than the words of his parting address to the Pilgrims on leaving Holland, 'The Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of His holy Word.' The Lutherans and the Calvinists had alike forgotten this, and so come to 'a period' in religion. Everything was being stereotyped. In England the laxer church party was turning the Gospel into 'an easier law,' and the Puritan party into a harder law, both forgetting that the Gospel is not a law of commandments contained in ordinances, but a law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus. Against this perversion of the truth Robinson protested. There were no final and infallible interpreters of the Word of God. Let every man remember that 'the Word of God neither came from him nor to him alone.' Least of all were his own interpretations a law to the Church he served. He urged the Pilgrims 'to follow him no further than he followed Christ, and if God should reveal anything to us by any other instrument of His to be as ready to receive it as ever we were to receive any truth by his ministry.'"

It is not easy to sharply delineate Robinson's attitude towards the normative authority of Scripture. His reviewer says: "He had discovered in it the true note of inspiration, which is certitude — 'The truth of God goes not by peradventures, neither needs it any such paper-shot as likelihoods are to assault the adversary withal.' Probability was not for him the very guide of life. The will of God could be known, 'To the Law and to the testimony: if they do not speak according to this word, surely there is no morning for them.'" This sounds reassuring, but how a preacher holding such a view of the authority of the written Word can virtually discredit his own utterances in favor of some one who might receive a greater revelation later — this is perplexing.

Dr. Scullard considers what Robinson says about Scripture "the language of liberalism and of liberty." Of liberalism — yes; but of

liberty — hardly; for the question will not down: What liberty does he mean? Liberty from the Word, which “makes us free,” or from a certain understanding of the Word? The latter appears to be the intended meaning; but, in that case, by what criterion is the reliability of a later understanding tested, and an earlier one rejected? Preaching upon Robinson’s basis, a preacher would have to say to his audience at the same time: Believe me! and: Be ready to disbelieve me! This is psychologically impossible and theologically inadmissible; for “if any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God,” or — that is the implied corollary — hold his peace. There is in Robinson’s position on the authority of Scripture an ingrain of *Schwaermerci*.

“The idea of the visible Church which the Pilgrims had may seem to some narrow, impractical, and insufficient for the needs of our time, but it meant much to them and may not be without instruction for us. ‘Many men have written much about the notes and marks of the true Church, by which it is differenced and discerned from all other assemblies; and many others have sought for it, as Joseph and Mary did for Christ, with heavy hearts, Luke 2, 48, that they might rest there under the shadow of the wings of the Almighty, enjoying the promises of His presence and power. . . . I had thought the Churches and people of God should have been known by His dwelling among them, and walking there, and by Christ’s presence in the midst of them.’ . . . The visible Church becomes recognized by all just in the same way as an individual Christian. Labels are no more necessary in the one case than in the other. The unity of the Church according to Robinson, perhaps with the high-priestly prayer of Christ in mind, was qualitative and not quantitative. The visible Church was ‘one’ because it was one in ‘kind’ and one in ‘nature,’ not because it had one visible head or one common external organization. ‘All true Churches from the beginning to the end of the world are one in nature and essential constitution’; and that which constitutes a Church is the meeting of Christian men in the name of Christ, the actual fellowship of those who have made a public covenant with Christ to do all things to the glory of God.” “Cast in the apostolic mold of the first Church of the New Testament, the Church was to Robinson ‘a spiritual politic body,’ and the ‘spiritual’ character of its members was the *nota ecclesiae*. Because he did not find this character in the Church of England, he said: ‘I cannot but confess and profess, though with great grief, that it is to us a matter of scruple, which we cannot overcome, to give that honor unto it which is due from the servants of Christ to the Church of Christ, rightly collected and constituted.’ The entire conduct by which the members were to display their ‘spirituality’ was regulated with extreme exactness thus: ‘It is to me a matter of great scruple, and conscience to depart one hair’s-breadth (extraordinary accidents ever excepted) from their (the Apostles’) practise and institution, in anything truly ecclesiastical, though never so small in itself.”

The Pilgrims’ Church was a theocracy. That the adoption of its forms of “spirituality” could be an utterly carnal act seems not to have entered their minds.