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The Endeavor after a Philosophical Faith.*

PROF. JOHN H. C. FRITZ, St. Louis, Mo.

Not human reason, but divine revelation is the source of faith. It is the very nature of faith to accept what God has revealed. The object of saving faith is Jesus, the Lord, the Savior.

“Abraham against hope believed in hope that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be. And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah’s womb; he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully persuaded that what He had promised He was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness. Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him, but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on Him that raised up Jesus, our Lord, from the dead; who was delivered for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification.” Rom. 4, 18—25.

Abraham’s faith is set forth in the Scriptures as an example for our faith. The source of Abraham’s faith was *not his own reason*. His reason told him that he and Sarah must remain childless. But God said, “So shall thy seed be.” That was a wonderful revelation to Abraham. Abraham believed what God had *revealed* to him; he “against hope believed in hope.” “He was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that what He had promised He was able also to perform.” God’s promise was that of the Woman’s Seed, the Savior. This promise Abraham believed. The *promised Messiah* was the object of his faith. “This was not written for his sake alone, but for us also.”

* A Review of *Die Grundwahrheiten der christlichen Religion*, by Reinhold Seeberg. Seventh edition, 1921. Deichertsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, Leipzig and Erlangen. 182 pages, 5¼×8½.

Paul warns against any endeavor after a philosophical faith when he writes to Timothy: "O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called; which some professing have erred concerning the faith." 1 Tim. 6, 20. 21.

The faith which obtains the kingdom of God is not a faith which results from dialectic reasoning and speculative philosophy, but is the simple, childlike trust of the Christian in the promises of God in His Gospel. "Verily, I say unto you," says Jesus, "whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein." Mark 10, 15.

Over against the Christian's simple, childlike faith, which accepts the words of God at their face value, and rests assured that all mysteries in the Christian religion are such only because man with his finite and sinful reason cannot comprehend the infinite God, there has ever been the endeavor on the part of man after a philosophical faith, an endeavor to reduce the eternal verities of God to a philosophical system, so as to make them appeal to man's reason. In this attempt truth has always been sacrificed, and the floodgates have been opened to a multitude of human opinions and false doctrines in the realm of religion.

Church history amply bears witness to this attempt. This attempt has been renewed in every age, and will continue to the end of days. It has appeared under different names and different forms, but it has always resulted in the denial of the truth, either in whole or in part. The thinker who supposed that he had solved a problem in reality undermined the doctrine.

During the period of Scholasticism, from Anselm to Aquinas, the theologians of the Church collectively endeavored to rationalize Christianity and to construct a philosophy of religion. Anselm stated his own position thus: "Neque enim quaero intelligere, ut credam; sed credo, ut intelligam." Faith was to be given first place and reason second place; but in giving reason a place at all in matters of faith he was treading on dangerous ground and actually recommended the endeavor after a philosophical faith. In his tract, *Cur Deus Homo*, he calls it a neglect of duty, if, after we are confirmed in our belief, we do not study to *understand* what we believe — "negligentia mihi videtur, si postquam confirmati sumus in fide, non studemus quod credimus intelligere."

And what else than deference to human reason was it when Aquinas, the great teacher of Roman Catholic theology, restricted

his dictum that the attainments of reason are inadequate for the apprehension of the knowledge of God and must be augmented by divine revelation, by saying that the Scriptures must be understood in the light of the *interpretation of the councils and the Fathers?*

Not all scholastics, however, acknowledged the *priority of faith* in the attempt to rationalize the Christian religion. The dictum of Abelard: "Non credendum, nisi prius intellectum," is the exact reverse of Anselm's "Credo, ut intelligam." Abelard was the first one who formally set forth the so-called *moral influence theory* of the atonement, according to which Christ's Passion was not the atonement for man's sin, the *satisfactio vicaria*, but simply an exhibition of the greatness of God's love as a means of winning the sinner.

The attempt of Rationalism, during the last half of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century, to substitute a system of ethics for the doctrine of redemption, was but another, though cruder, endeavor after a philosophical faith; it was another attempt, in its final analysis, at deceiving mankind by setting aside the "Thus saith the Lord."

The same speculative and rationalistic tendency in matters religious is clearly to be seen in so-called *modern theology*. Much of the theology that is taught in the theological universities of Europe and of this country, and much of the preaching which is heard from modern pulpits, is of this type. Reinhold Seeberg, whose book, *Die Grundwahrheiten der christlichen Religion* (The Fundamentals of the Christian Religion), has prompted this article, is one of its exponents.

The title of Seeberg's book is promising. So is also his brief preface to the latest edition. He writes: "May the book be of service in maintaining the old truth at a time when it is sorely needed." And in the opening paragraph of the first chapter or lecture (the book contains sixteen lectures, delivered to the students at the University of Berlin) Seeberg promises to give to his readers a real treat, saying, "Nil carum nisi quod prodest."

We cannot, however, long remain in the company of a man whose words and behavior we closely observe without finding him out. Seeberg does not long deceive us. The very first sentence in the second paragraph of his book arouses within us the suspicion that the title of the book is misleading. He says: "My purpose is to present Christianity as a religion as I understand it, and as,

according to my opinion, it can and should be made accessible to the understanding of the learned of our day."

Seeberg uses the terminology of the Bible: he speaks of God, of Christ, and of the Spirit; of sin and grace; of repentance, regeneration, and conversion; of faith and love; of justification and sanctification; of the means of grace, the Word, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper; of prayer; of hell and heaven.

Seeberg uses the phraseology of Christian literature. He says: "Jesus gives life, for He is the Life," p. 114; "The cross of Christ is in the very center of the Christian religion," p. 141; "The way of salvation is the way of the cross of Christ," p. 138; "They saw Jesus alone'—these are the real builders of the Church," p. 157; "Whatsoever stands in the way of the message of Christ must be most emphatically opposed," p. 158; "Not men, but God gave faith and love. God alone it is who can and will keep these for us," p. 163; "The Christian prays in the name of Jesus," p. 163; "No one will be saved who in this life was not found in faith and love," p. 181.

Seeberg refers to Jesus, to Paul, to Luther, to the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, and to Luther's Small Catechism, and makes them sponsors for his doctrines. He denounces all false religions, saying that the Christian religion alone is true, alone will satisfy the needs of the soul, alone will endure.

But Biblical terminology is not used by Seeberg in its original Biblical sense; and the phraseology of Christian literature is not employed by him in its usual meaning. He comes to us in sheep's clothing. This is characteristic of his kind. He belongs to the most radical type of modern theologians. The title of his book ought to read: *A Total Denial of All the Fundamental Truths of Christianity.*

Seeberg shall be permitted to speak for himself. It is not just to condemn a man unheard. "Does the Christian religion teach realities?" (*Sind es Realitäten, die das Christentum verkündigt?*) To this question, which Seeberg himself propounds, he answers:—

"There was a time—and it still exists for some to-day—when it seemed very easy to answer this question. The doctrines of the Christian religion are realities for 'they are found in the Bible.' The Bible is verbally inspired, God cannot lie; therefore, what the Bible declares to be true is real. So it has been said; and many generations of Christians have been satisfied therewith.

"Why should we to-day not be satisfied with this answer? Two conclusive reasons are against it. It is an acknowledged fact that the Bible

contains errors of the writers and contradictions in its narratives. As little as this can shake the faith of the pious Christian, just so destructive it is for that theory," *i. e.*, that the Bible is the inspired Word of God; "for then God would be the author of errors. But this is not the main issue. In various apologetical ways an attempt has been made to uphold the theory, but we cannot let our faith depend upon such trickery. It is more important to know that our question cannot be answered in this manner.

"The argument has been advanced that the contents of the Christian religion are realities because the authors of the Holy Scripture have believed them to be such, being of the opinion that they were inspired by God. But how do *we* know that those men were really 'inspired'? If we rest our faith upon this, then we must be able to assure ourselves, beyond a doubt, of this historical fact. Again, as it is possible that we to-day err as to the reality of the Christian religion, even so those men of the Bible could also have erred. Finally, is it not possible that the sovereignty of God was at one time actually manifested, and that it is now no longer manifested? We learn that in this wise we make no headway. In all questions pertaining to the life of the soul, the soul cannot be satisfied with a certainty from without (*genuegt dieser eben niemals cine fremde Gewissheit*), but the soul must by its own experience have arrived at a certainty (*sie muss aus eigener Erfahrung der Sache gewiss geworden sein*).

"What do we call real? It is a well-known fact that philosophy, since the days of Kant, has labored hard to answer this question. The educated Christian cannot ignore this fact. It is rude (*es ist ungezogen*) to set aside in religious matters that sharp and careful thinking which is deemed proper to be applied to the small things of this life. . . .

"The difficulty for us increases in a field where we are not, first of all, concerned with historical facts, which could be 'seen' or 'heard,' but with the reality of metaphysical quantities (*uebersinnlicher Groessen*) — the sovereignty of God and the kingdom of God. Here it will not suffice to rely upon miracles and signs which once upon a time were performed. We are, first of all, concerned with such things as are done at the present time." (pp. 37. 38.)

These words of Seeberg leave no room for doubt as to his attitude toward the Bible; toward the great historical facts in the life of Christ: His birth, death, and resurrection; toward the miracles; and even toward the absolute assurance that any religion is the true one. After such an acquaintance with Seeberg we are not surprised that he speaks of God's appearing in the garden of Eden as a "pious legend," p. 8; and that he refers to the story of the Fall as "an old rationalistic fairy-tale," p. 110.

Abelard's "Non credendum nisi prius intellectum" is the measuring-rod which also Seeberg applies to the Christian religion. Conformably, he says, "There are three tests to which all religious

systems must be subjected: logic, history, and the intellectual needs of the soul." (p. 22.)

The Bible has no place in Seeberg's metaphysical speculation as to religion. *Pasa graphē theopneustos*, writes Paul to Timothy, 2 Tim. 3, 16; and Jesus says, "The Scripture cannot be broken." John 10, 35. But Seeberg says, "How do we know?" — "To the Law and to the Testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." Is. 8, 20. But Seeberg says, Not to the Law and the Testimony, but to "logic, history, and the intellectual needs of the soul." — The psalmist says: "I have more understanding than all my teachers, for Thy testimonies are my meditation. . . . Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." Ps. 119, 99. 105. But Seeberg refers to an "educated Christian," to Kant, who labored hard to tell us what is real. — Paul says: "If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain, ye are yet in your sins. . . . But now is Christ risen from the dead." 1 Cor. 15, 17. 20. But Seeberg informs us that such a great historical fact does not concern us first of all; we should rather be first concerned about the "reality of metaphysical quantities."

Seeberg is making great demands upon us when he asks that we cast aside our Bible, given us by God, and such trustworthy witness as the prophets, evangelists, and apostles, and accept his philosophy instead. He is asking much of us when he suggests that we ignore the entire history of the Christian Church in its trials and victories from Christ and the apostles down to the present time and our own realization of the blessings of Christianity, and, instead, accept his musings in a matter of such vital importance. Or does he not ask this of us? Then *we* ask, What does Seeberg *really* mean when he closes his book by saying, "Gentlemen, we have now finished. I hope that we have not labored in vain"?

After these premises we know what we may not expect of Seeberg in answer to the great question of the ages, "What think ye of Christ?" To Seeberg Christ is not the God-man in the sense of the Scripture; not the Savior, who by His *satisfactio vicaria* redeemed us and all mankind from sin and eternal death. Seeberg, moreover, reminds us of that ancient enemy of Christianity, Porphyry, a Neo-Platonic philosopher of the third century, who said that Jesus should not be blasphemed, but that the Christians who worship Him as their God are to be pitied.

Seeberg must again be permitted to speak for himself. He devotes a special chapter to "The Person of Christ," and another to "The Work of Christ." In the opening paragraph of the first of these two chapters he says:—

"There are two historical facts which we must try to understand. How could the Humblest among men feel Himself to be the Lord and Judge of the world, and how could He who died on the cross be confessed and worshiped by His followers as Lord and God?—for both of these two terms are applied to Him in the New Testament." (p. 116.)

Seeberg's endeavor after a philosophical faith will not permit him to let the case rest there. He continues:—

"As long as there have been Christians, both of these facts have been acknowledged, and both questions have been thought over. What, then, does history"—logic, history, and the intellectual needs of the soul, not the Bible, are Seeberg's three measuring-rods applied to religion—"teach us as to these questions? Paul and John have presented the facts as above stated, and their congregations did not think otherwise. For them the Man Jesus, who was a genuine and true man, was at the same time, in some way, the only-begotten Son of the Father, who, in heavenly glory, had been with God, and who, after He had here on earth taught, labored, suffered, died, and arisen, again was in possession of divine glory and power" (the *kenosis*, which the New Testament does not teach), "so that He, the Eternal, lives as the Lord of His Church, and governs the hearts of men.

"These thoughts represent the religious faith of the time of the apostles, but they do not offer a theoretical solution of our questions." (p. 116.)

Seeberg then calls attention to the teachings of the Gnostics and the apologists of the early Church, to Arius and Athanasius, and then continues:—

"But also this mental process did not go beyond mere religious statements. As a mere assertion it was great, for it took in the whole case. As a theory it remained incomprehensible— simply one, and yet three—; but incomprehensible theories will not do, for they do not explain. One can understand that the practical application soon arrived at this thought: Father, Son, and Spirit are three persons, as three angels or three men, who, nevertheless, are one, inasmuch as they are of a similar kind and similar essence. Only by means of various trickeries (*durch allerhand Kuenstleien*) could this conception be defended against the objection of teaching tritheism." (pp. 117. 118.)

Thereby the doctrines of the deity of Christ and of the Trinity are sacrificed as far as Seeberg is concerned. Why? All in the attempt to bring the infinite God and His wonderful works within the narrow compass of finite and sinful human reason.

For his denial of Christ's deity Seeberg introduces Luther as sponsor. He makes him say, without quoting him:—

“No one will suspect that Luther sacrificed in any part the deity of Christ. But to him the essence of God is not an infinite substance, but God is the personal, intellectual will of love, the almighty sovereignty of love. This eternal energy of love (*ewige Liebesenergie*) filled the human soul of Jesus, so that it became its content. That is the deity of Christ.” (pp. 119. 120.) *Sic!*?

Seeberg then proceeds to say that the indwelling of God in Christ and in the Christian is different only as to quantity and not as to quality. “Was uns durch ihn wird, wird ihm aus Gott; und was in uns klein und bruchstueckweise, gehemmt und zerstreut geschieht, geschah in ihm ganz.” (p. 121.)

“The will of God leading men unto salvation, or the redeeming spirit of God,” says Seeberg, “has in Jesus entered into history; He” (*i. e.*, “*der die Geschichte der Menschheit zum Heil fuehrende Gotteswille oder der erloesende Gottesgeist*”) “was made man in Jesus and worked in a human-historical way (*menschlich-geschichtlich*) in the words and deeds of Jesus. This special divine will of history (*besondere goettliche Geschichtswille*) used the Man Jesus as His organ and as the clear and precise expression of His essence. This is done by the Divine Spirit, who, at the baptism of Jesus, enters into Him for perpetual communion. But already before this did the Divine Spirit prepare and equip Jesus for such communion and for the mission therewith implied. He created the Man Jesus, as He did the first man, for His organ,—that is the final and deepest meaning of the ancient historical tradition that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary,—and He, from the very first moment of the existence of the Man Jesus, entered into union with Him, influenced Him, and permeated His sensibility, thinking, and desire. In this manner the Man Jesus was made ‘Son of God,’ being made the vehicle of the divine spirit and of His work of salvation among men.” (p. 122.)

Seeberg is very frank and bold in his denial of the deity of Christ and of the Trinity. The Biblical doctrine of the Trinity he says is “mythology” and “unchristian polytheism”; and he accuses the believer in the Trinity of sophistical reasoning. (p. 127.)

Denying the *satisfactio vicaria*, Seeberg says:—

“By permitting all sufferings to come upon Him, without wavering in His righteousness, Jesus Christ, the Righteous, proved the inherent power of that which is good (*bewachte er die Kraft des Guten*), and thereby—suffering and dying—He atoned for the sins of men.” (p. 141.) “The idea of a sacrifice,” says Seeberg, “has been borrowed from the religion of paganism.” (p. 143.)

What, then, according to Seeberg, is the essence of Christianity? It is “sovereignty and faith, the kingdom and love.” Christ works faith in us, says Seeberg, by “making the sovereignty of God effective in our hearts,” and teaches us to love by “showing us the kingdom of God.” (p. 134.)

Of course, Seeberg would not lead men to salvation by the preaching of the old Gospel of the crucified Savior, but every one, he says, who speaks of the sovereignty of God speaks the Word of God and expresses God's will; and such speaking of the sovereignty of God has the inherent power to lead men to God, to salvation, for inasmuch as man's speaking of God "is heard and becomes psychologically effective, it operates as the almighty will of God." (p. 149.)

Finally, of the bliss of heaven, which the Bible depicts to us in beautiful language and thus awakens in us the desire to enter into the eternal mansions which Christ has prepared for all who believe in Him, Seeberg says:—

"Phantasy may have its own musings as to it,—you may think of Dante or of various other books which speak of heaven or of hell,—and this is your privilege. Let me not speak of it, for I would rather, also in this case, apply the words of the poet who said that we should not *magna parvis tenuare modis*, that is, we should not speak of sublime things in our own small way (*einem grossen Text eine kleine Melodie geben*)." (p. 181.)

We suggest that a more fitting close would have been if Seeberg had said, Why make much ado about nothing? For, surely, to a man of Seeberg's type of theology the heaven which Christ has dearly bought for us must mean nothing. Seeberg's religion is simply "Diesseitsreligion," and of a very poor type at that.

We cannot argue with Seeberg on the basis of the Bible. He made it very clear to us from the outset that the Bible is not to him the inspired Word of God and not the norm according to which he tests whether a religion is true or false. He did not prove, nor did he even make any serious attempt to prove, that the Bible is not the Word of God. He simply sets it aside, and in place of God's revealed religion puts his own philosophical system. That this is true and worthy of acceptance he also does not prove. On the contrary, he says: "*As it is possible that we to-day err as to the reality of the Christian religion*, even so also those men of the Bible"—he is speaking of the inspired writers—"could have erred."

Seeberg reminds us of another prominent German theologian, whom we heard a number of years ago make the remark: "This is what we teach to-day; whether or not we shall so teach twenty years hence we do not know," and who closed his lecture with the words: "So, meine Herren, nun haben Sie gehoert, wie in einer deutschen theologischen Studierstube gedacht wird."

But can that help us any in our religion to know what or how a German theologian thinks in his study? There is too much at stake! Life is short, and eternity is without end! To know what will become of me in eternity, and whether or not I am now in God's favor and am serving Him in a manner acceptable to Him, I must have a more sure ground for my faith. The Bible, or the Christian religion which it teaches, has stood every test to which it has been put, and has given unto many, many thousands that peace of God which surpasseth all understanding and which Christ, the Son of God, purchased for us with His blood; while the philosophical religious systems of men have never satisfied the spiritual needs of the soul and have, for this very reason, been undergoing continual changes from age to age in their vain attempt to improve upon God's order of salvation. As the mysteries of salvation did not and could not originate in the mind of man, but in the heart of God, so it will ever be beyond man to bring them within the narrow compass of his human, finite, and sinful reason. "Fides non est contra rationem, sed supra rationem."

Christ says: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no man cometh unto the Father but by Me." John 14, 6. This Christ, however, is He of whom John says: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him; and without Him was not anything made that was made. In Him was life; and the life was the light of men. . . . And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the Only-begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth." John 1, 1—4. 14. "The blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, cleanseth us from all sin." 1 John 1, 7. This is the Christ whom "the Jews sought the more to kill because He had said also that God was His Father, *making Himself equal with God,*" John 5, 18, but who answered the question of the Jewish Sanhedrin, "Art Thou, then, the Son of God?" by replying, "Ye say that I am." Luke 22, 70.

In the light of the Bible, then, Seeberg's religious system, denying the deity of Christ and the *satisfactio vicaria*, is destructive criticism of the worst type, for under the guise of Christianity it annihilates the very fundamentals of the Christian religion. Yet it is the kind of theology which is taught in many theological universities here and abroad, and which is preached, either in the same crude or in a more "refined" form, from many so-called Christian pulpits of our day. For this reason we have devoted

more than ordinary space to Seeberg's book. Such a sample of *modern theology* as Seeberg gives us, coming from Germany even in the year 1921, will help us to understand how the minds and hearts of men are being poisoned with subversive teachings, and why the visible Church of our day has been reduced to its deplorable condition, as also what we must look for, if this crime-wave in theology will be permitted to spend its force.

On the other hand, such effusions of unbelief ought to arouse us to a greater appreciation of our heritage of the truth and to a greater activity in proclaiming by word, spoken and written, and by deed, within and without our circles, as the many opportunities present themselves, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the God-Man and only Savior, saying with Paul: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth." Rom. 1, 16.

As Luther, on April 18, 1521, four hundred years ago, stood four-square on the Bible, and therefore refused to recant, so may God in His grace help us ever to remain true to His Word and be not "removed from Him who called us into the grace of Christ unto another gospel, which is not another," though "some trouble us, and would pervert the Gospel of Christ." Over against such Paul says: "Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed." Gal. 1, 6—9.
