

THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY.

VOL. VI.

FEBRUARY, 1926.

No. 2.

Dangers Lurking in Reformed Literature.¹⁾

MARTIN S. SOMMER, St. Louis, Mo.

At Marburg Luther said to Zwingli, "You have a different spirit from ours."

By listening to Zwingli and other Reformed theologians, Luther discovered that there was a very deep and essential difference between his own principles and those of Zwingli and Zwingli's companions. Luther recognized that the course which the Zwinglians were pursuing was diverging very decidedly from the road into which the Lutherans had turned.

Sad to say, to-day many Lutherans fail to note the width of the gulf which separates the Lutheran from the Reformed theology. The greater is the danger. This peril is the more imminent because of the situation which at present confronts our Church here in America. In language we are turning English very rapidly. In fact, the process is nearing completion. Only thirty or forty years ago the preacher in the Missouri Synod who could preach a good orthodox Lutheran sermon in acceptable English was a *rara avis in terris, nigroque simillima cygno*. I remember the time when some stared at such a man as a prodigy. To-day there are so few men in our country who can preach fluently in correct German that one hears complaints against the damaged German which is used in many a pulpit. This condition has produced a very urgent and ever-growing demand for sound English Lutheran literature. Even now the demand cannot nearly be satisfied by the supply. The consequence is that many preachers of the Lutheran Church are seeking help from Reformed literature. I do not hesitate to state that there is no Lutheran minister who preaches English regularly that has not delved into the religious

1) Notice that the heading does not read: Why Lutheran Pastors Should Not Read Reformed Theology.

literature of the Reformed Church.²⁾ In the very output of present-day English Lutheran literature one can at times notice the influence of the Reformed models which have been used. Nor can we hope that this situation may be perfectly relieved within the near future; the best literature is rarely, if ever, turned out to order. However, English Lutheran literature is being produced. Wherefore both those who are producing it as well as those who are using it, while also seeking matter and stimulation from Reformed sources, should work circumspectly and remain conscious of the dangers which lurk in the writings of Reformed theologians. It will therefore not be amiss to mark these pitfalls and erect a few signals to warn the traveler.

The first and, perhaps, the chief ill which afflicts Reformed theology is its *rationalism*. At times this is so gross that it is easily detected. But again it is so completely masked and so interwoven with the very manner of the treatment of a subject, with emphasis, figures of speech, quotation, or phrasing, that it may escape the notice of the reader.³⁾

It is because of this rationalism that among Reformed theologians we find scarcely any, I might almost say, that we find no appreciation of the true Scriptural position on the doctrine of predestination and of grace. Reformed theologians are such

2) I am aware of the fact that German pastors also studied, or browsed in, the writings of German Reformed preachers. But there was proportionately little of this; for in German the Reformed are forced to look to Lutheran literature rather than *vice versa*.

3) Note the sophistry in the following extract from one of Dean Farrar's most eloquent sermons: "On such a question as this I care but little for individual authority; but this much at least is proved by the many differing theories of wise and holy men, that God has given us no clear and decisive revelation on the final condition of those who have died in sin."—In the following from the great Jeremy Taylor's sermons the error is more veiled: "Suppose a man . . . resolve to leave the puddles of impurity and walk in the paths of righteousness, can this resolution alone put him into the state of grace? Is he admitted to pardon and the favor of God before he hath in some measure performed actually what he so reasonably hath resolved? By no means. For resolution and purpose is, in its own nature and constitution, an imperfect act and therefore can signify nothing without its performance and consummation."—A Methodist writes the following bit of misleading confusion: "'Ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.' These are they who 'have a form of godliness, but deny the power thereof.' They never put into practise what they learn and have no benefit of either knowledge or grace. Jesus said: 'He who does the will of God shall know the doctrine.' Such a one in character-building shall have the solidity and strength of a house founded upon a rock."

thoroughgoing rationalists that they believe that every one must either be a Calvinist or an Arminian.⁴) Spurgeon, for instance, insisted that Jesus could not have died for all men because it is impossible to conceive that Jesus came to save any one and then failed to save him. The rationalism of Spurgeon is the more dangerous because Spurgeon very often stands four-square upon the exact statements of Scripture, just as all Reformed theologians (who, according to Reformed standards, are orthodox) stand upon Scripture when they teach truth. For if they consistently followed their own rationalism, they would oppose all revealed articles of faith. The Modernists among them do this. Through the subtle rationalism in Reformed literature many of their preachers have also come to say that the real benefit of prayer is entirely subjective, that prayer is a blessed creative activity in the soul of man, but that we should not imagine that it can influence God's action, since God knows things better than we, and that we cannot conceive that God would be influenced by the more or less foolish requests which come from the lips of man. Here their rationalism first of all perverts prayer, changing it from a childlike request into a kind of fanatic raving, and then teaches that prayer has no other than a subjective effect. God, however, has expressly told us what kind of prayer is pleasing to Him and has asked us to believe His Word, which says that, if we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us. 1 John 5, 14.

Again, it is this rationalism which has led them into their own foolish doctrine concerning the person of Christ and of the Sacraments. It is not our purpose to enter upon the discussion of all of these false doctrines. It is our purpose for the present to call attention to the vicious and dangerous influence of this rationalism upon all Reformed literature. All this should cause us, when we read the writings of such able men as Spurgeon, Guthrie, Maclaren, Dean Farrar, Canon Lightfoot, Jeremy Taylor, Dr. Barrows, Bishop Atterbury, and a host of others, to be constantly on our guard against this poisonous adulteration of divine truth, which any one of us may absorb unconsciously.

I have heard a Lutheran preacher in the pulpit ridicule the appellation of "mother of God" for the Virgin Mary.⁵) Such and many other misstatements and errors which may deface sermons

4) Cf. *Concordia Triglotta*, Historical Introductions, p. 205.

5) Cf. *Con. Trigl.*, p. 348, 27; 820, 12; 1022, 24.

that are otherwise orthodox are no doubt to be attributed to the fact that the preacher has read the sermons of Reformed sermonizers instead of studying the Confessions of the Lutheran Church and the writings of reliable theologians.

Another poisonous ferment which permeates much of the output of Reformed theologians is *Pietism*. One symptom of Pietism is a more or less veiled contempt for purity of doctrine and a false emphasis on life, works, and sincerity. The Pietist loves the show of great fervor; he has been impressed with it, and he would like to impress others. Now, sincerity dwells in the heart and cannot be seen. But the Pietist will see to it that it is not overlooked. He selects certain works, certain outward practises and observations, or the omission of certain outward actions as infallible marks of the presence of the Spirit of God. Pietism is not satisfied to fast and to pray in secret, nor is it satisfied to allow Christian liberty. Whatever it has selected and determined upon as a mark of true godliness, that it will dictate as obligatory upon all Christians, even though God's Word makes no such demands. The Puritan observance of Sunday, the celebration of the Lord's Supper on every Sunday (Campbellites), immersionism, the refraining from all use of tobacco, card-playing, etc., or the participation in certain works is dealt with as if the observance of rules issued by a Church were of equal importance with obedience to the Moral Law.

Another mark of Pietism which is found among the Reformed is the confusion by which *natural* gifts are lauded as gifts of *grace*. One sect will demand that every Christian be able to pray *ex corde* in public; another sect demands that every Christian have the gift of healing; another one demands that every Christian be able to proclaim the Word of God upon the highways. At times the distinction between a weak Christian and a strong Christian is entirely ignored; at times a fervency of speech and demeanor or some other arbitrary characteristic is deemed the only essential which distinguishes a true Christian.

Such legalistic insistence upon outward conformity, together with the legalistic hedging of the Gospel, appeals to those who imagine that they are to make the Gospel "safe for morality." And Reformed theology, even that which is not of the worst type, is full of just such legalism.

Even where no gross error is found in a number of sectarian sermons, they may yet exhibit a corrupting *eccentricity*. By this

term we mean to say that the whole of Reformed theology is out of center. The central truth of Christianity, that article of faith upon which the whole of Christian doctrine turns as upon its center, is the article concerning our Lord Jesus Christ and justification by faith in His vicarious atonement alone. Where this *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* is not allowed to occupy the chief place in doctrine and is not made to carry the whole structure of doctrine and application, there all other Christian teaching is out of center and loses its peculiar place and relative importance. It is just this eccentricity, which the novice rarely detects, that plays the mischief with sectarian preaching. Even an occasional erroneous statement will not do as much harm as teaching in which no single sentence can be objected to, but which fails to give justification by faith alone its place as the material foundation of Christian faith and the sun which illuminates all other teachings of Holy Writ. The preacher who imbibes this fault of slighting God's best becomes a veritable pestilence that walketh in darkness.

In pointing out dangers which lurk in Reformed literature, we dare not overlook the danger of *fanaticism*. All Reformed clergymen and theologians are more or less tainted with the notion that God effects His gracious work in man without the Word and without the Sacraments.⁶⁾ Therefore they are all much given to new movements, from which they expect great things. They are on the lookout for new methods; they are especially prone to give ear to all manner of novel schemes, attractive suggestions, by means of which great things are to be accomplished. It is just this kind of fanaticism which lacks confidence in the simple proclamation of God's Word in public and private. Hence their hankering after novelties and thrills and sensationalism; hence the staging of spectacular revivals introducing high-pressure methods. We dare not forget that in the very instant in which we surrender our entire and sole dependence upon the Word of God alone, in that very moment we open our doors either to skepticism, which paralyzes, or to revelations, visions, and messages from God without and beyond the Word of Scripture, by which not a healthy, Christian, godly life is produced and fostered, but satanic seizures are engendered and sustained. The Word of God is the bread from heaven and is the water of life. Fanatical appeals are the drugs which at first seem to produce so much quicker and larger results than wholesome food, but in the end enslave and destroy.

6) Cf. Pieper's *Christl. Dogmatik*, III, p. 139 sqq.

In mentioning the children of Zwinglian theology, we dare not fail to mention the twins — *Sectarianism* and *Unionism*.

Sects are essentially anticatholic. A sectarian church-body has not remained faithful to those doctrines of the Church which are clearly taught in the Scriptures as fundamental, but has left the common path clearly laid down in the Word of God and has followed the by-paths of some opinionated heretic, who claims to have found something more excellent than the general catholic Christian truth.⁷⁾ The origin of a sect is the infatuation which causes men to forget the paradise of the Bible in order to gaze with rapture and feast with delight upon the forbidden fruit of the wisdom of the world. 1 Cor. 20, 21; Rom. 1, 22. We are not saying that all members of a sectarian body are to be classified with idolaters and atheists; we are simply pointing out that which genders the sect. God is not its Father; God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness. 1 John 1, 5. Satan is the father of error. John 8, 44. And while truth is one and always agrees with truth, error is multiform, various, of untold number, well-nigh infinite in kind and species; nor need it agree with itself; nor does it agree with the truth. Therefore the great number and variety of sects. Every one of them has its own brand of folly. It holds true of them: "*Jedem Narren gefaellt seine Kappe.*" Each of them has its own gnat at which it strains and its own camel which it swallows. Thus we have some who *insist* on immersion in baptism, but connive at the denial of the deity of Jesus Christ. In another sectarian body fervency in public prayer, large gifts for education, eloquence in the pulpit, are lauded out of all proportion, whereas the denial of the efficacy of the Sacrament is rather praised than reprov'd. A man's or a woman's prayer is made much of. God's Word is carelessly set aside.

Now, "like begets like" holds good also of these sects. Sectarianism breeds sectarianism and schism, and therefore, while the sects seem to be very tolerant, they are, nevertheless, the fruitful soil in which grow all manner of divisions, parties, sects, and schismatic bodies.⁸⁾ May we incautiously feed on such matter without danger of infection? One thing we may observe if we are observant: those who prefer the reading of Reformed literature soon show signs of dissatisfaction with Lutheran confessionalsm.

7) Luther, IX, 726.

8) Luther, IV, 826: "There has never arisen a sect from which others did not soon spring up."

Strange to say, the twin of this scattering sectarianism is herding *Unionism*. We could imagine that these two would be mutually repellant, but they are not. They are generally found together and thrive together. We see that in the fold of Rome. In the Roman communion almost every vagary, idiosyncrasy, and strange religious aberration and notion are fostered, and yet all are taught that they may very well live together in harmony under the Pope. Rome swarms with sects as a dog with fleas and a leper with sores.⁹⁾ Just so the immersionist with his immersion, the Methodist with his peculiar *method*, the Episcopalian with his apostolic succession, the Campbellite with his fanatical devotion to a name, the Broad, the High, and the Low, the narrow and the wide, the Southern and the Northern, in the sectarian communions finally meet together in the *National Council of Churches*. For, after all, these sects are not sure that they are right, and yet they love their little sectarian byway. Therefore they insist on their self-willed additions or subtractions from the catholic faith, but, at the same time, make a great show of outward union and fraternity. The results of this unionism we now see in the denominations about us as they struggle hither and thither between Fundamentalism and Modernism. This false tolerance and this ridiculous narrow-mindedness cannot but influence their literature, and those who *habitually feed* there for the sake of getting food, stimulation, and thrill will scarcely escape uninfluenced.¹⁰⁾

In conclusion, attention must be called to a phenomenon the pernicious influence of which has been much underestimated. I mean the tendency of false doctrine to vitiate and corrupt language. A false teacher may use the same words and phrases which faithful pastors use, but at the same time he may so arrange his phrases, statements, and paragraphs as to inject another meaning into these words. Thus false doctrine has been taught in the very words of Scripture itself.¹¹⁾

9) Luther, XII, 273. 1460 sq.

10) "Proinde nullum adhuc apophthegma philosophorum memini legere, quod mihi videatur cum illo conferendum, quod Ioannes Coletus meus, vir pariter et eruditus et incorruptus subinde dictitare consuevit: Tales nos esse, qualia sunt quotidiana colloquia; tales evadere, qualia frequenter audimus. Iam vero quod de colloquio dictum est, idem oportet et de studiis accipere. Qui vitam omnem in Ethnicis conterunt literis, gentiles evadunt: qui praeter obscenos autores nil evolvunt moribus obscoenis reddantur oportet. Etenim lectio colloquium quoddam esse videtur." (Erasmus, *Adagiorum Chiliades*, 1322.)

11) Luther, VIII, 462. — Cf. Ritschlianism.

Romanism has thus corrupted language. A Roman Catholic does not mean what we mean when he says that we are saved by grace.¹²⁾ A Roman Catholic does not mean what we mean when he calls Joseph a saint. A Roman Catholic does not mean what we mean when he speaks of justification. A Roman Catholic does not mean what we mean when he speaks of holiness. All Methodists do not mean what we mean when they say that we are saved by grace. All Methodists do not mean what we mean when they speak of Christians as saints. All Methodists do not mean what we mean when they speak of the necessity of being born again, or regeneration. All Methodists do not mean what we mean when they speak of conversion. An Old School Presbyterian does not mean what we mean when he speaks of election. A Baptist does not mean what we mean when he speaks of Baptism. And thus one could run through half a dictionary of religious words and point out the immense difference between the meaning which false teachers attach to certain words, and the true meaning, which the Bible and faithful teachers attach to these words. This difference in denotation and connotation of terms which exists between Reformed and Lutheran theologians makes the dangers which lurk in Reformed literature all the more subtle and difficult of detection. One who reads and studies much in Reformed literature may thus little by little imbibe all manner of false notions and gradually come to look at many things through the colored glass provided by those who have not applied God's meaning to the words which they use, but have injected their own dreams into the very vocabulary of the Christian Church.

It is very natural for us to ask, What are we to do to meet the demands of present conditions? First, we are to become thoroughly convinced that good English Lutheran literature is a necessity. Secondly, just because we are now to produce reliable English religious literature, it is all the more important that those who are working at this undertaking be on their guard against the subtle errors which lurk in the writings of Reformed theologians. For if the literature which we now produce is snarled with the tangles and eccentricities of sectarian preachers, if what we write and speak now is tinctured with the hues of Reformed dreaming, then we shall have another epidemic such as the *Lutheran* (December 12, 1918) describes as follows: "In the absence of a Lutheran college or seminary young men preparing for the ministry [in 1820]

12) De Harbe's *Catechism*, p. 239.

had no other course left but to secure their education at Reformed schools. Muhlenberg, who had planned for such a school and had already purchased a lot, was left without a succession to carry his plans into execution. There was no Lutheran literature in the English language to which young pastors could have access, and they read and studied books which breathed the Reformed spirit and spoke the Reformed faith. It need surprise no one that under such circumstances the Lutheran Church should have lost its anchorage and slipped its moorings, and that its faith and life and practise should have borne the marks of a mongrel Protestantism."

In the third place, all who are engaged in fitting the old truth with a new outfit of language must beware of idolizing the language while they despise the truth. The truth is God's and is unchangeable and eternal; the language is man's and changes every day. This is not the place to discuss the uncertainties and variations of the English language, a subject upon which books have been written. It ought to suffice to say that this very language which we are now using more and more every day, the English language, is spoken in various ways in different countries and by different people. It is ridiculous to be overnice about linguistic distinctions and overcritical of the style of those who are now addressing us in the English tongue, and at the same time to show little concern for the most precious possession which man can enjoy on this earth. Paul, Peter, and Luke did not write in exact imitation of the Greek of Demosthenes and Thucydides. Tertullian, Augustine, and Jerome were not overcareful to preserve all the niceties of Ciceronian Latin. Luther, as far as language was concerned, boldly struck out into paths of his own, took some liberties with the vernacular of his own country, and succeeded in creating a magnificent speech vehicle for Biblical truth. And yet all these men accomplished great things for God and for the Church. How small is he to whom man's phrasing looms so large and God's truth appears an insignificant thing!

We would not be understood to encourage slovenly speech. We are fully conscious that he who handles the most precious thing which God has given to men should use the best language, the most exact order, and the most careful manner. Of language also it holds good: "He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much." Luke 16, 10. But we are contrasting God's truth and man's language. Jesus, at the very moment when He seemed

to need bread most, spoke as if food and drink were matters very indifferent to Himself and amounted to very little. Matt. 4, 4. And at another time, when His omnipotence had demonstrated its independence of all human calculation of supply and demand, this same Man commanded men to gather even the broken meat after a meal. John 6, 12. And just so, though we are ever so careful in the selection of words and phrases, yet when it comes to making our choice between purity of truth and purity of language, we do not hesitate a moment, but prefer the first to the second. And whoever does otherwise is an idolater, and a very silly and childish idolater at that.¹³⁾

Lutheran pastors, speakers, and writers have the *Bible* and the inexhaustible treasures of Luther's writings; let them not commit the desperate error of the man who lost his *Acres of Diamonds*.¹⁴⁾
