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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

A PLEA FOR THE INDUCTIVE STUDY OF THE BIBLE.

BY REV. T. R. ENGLISH, D. D.

The need of a more intimate acquaintance with the word of God on the part of ministers, as well as the people, is freely admitted on all sides, but when we come to the question of methods of study there is not the same unanimity of opinion.

Generally speaking, there are two methods of investigating any subject. For instance, suppose one wishes to become familiar with some interesting city. He might secure a reliable guide-book, and with this in hand make a tour of the city. In a little while he will have seen all the "points of interest," but he has seen them largely through the eyes of another. That guide-book has determined the scope and extent of his investigations, and has largely determined his views. As he checks off those "points of interest" visited, and notes the comments thereupon, all unconsciously his views are colored by this mentor. His views are largely those of the guide-book, and his letters betray its unmistakable aroma.

Another and a better way is to see for one's self. The guide-book is not by any means discarded as useless, but he does not follow it slavishly. He does not fail to see all that his guide-book points out, but he sees them, not because they are pointed out, but because they obtrude themselves upon his attention. He sees them for himself, and through his own eyes, but more important still, he sees much of which there is no trace in his guide-book, and his impressions upon the whole will probably be radically different from those of the average traveller. This is a slow method, and does not suit the ordinary "globe-trotter," but is the most profitable in the end.

These two methods of investigation are applicable to the Bible. We may study it with a Confession of Faith, or a System of Theology or of Ecclesiastical Polity in our hands. We are looking for "the points of interest," and the chances are that we will see them; and the Bible will appear to us Calvinistic or Arminian, Prelatic or Presbyterian, according to the guide-book we carry with us. In other words, we look upon the Bible, not as the

object of our investigations, not as our infallible oracle, but rather as the foundation of our particular system. It is our *witness*, and we go to it not so much for information as for confirmation of our views, and for testimony in defence of our position. It is our armory, and valuable chiefly as it furnishes us with weapons of warfare. It is a collection of proof-texts, and whatever does not avail for this purpose scarcely attracts a passing notice. In the eyes of the average schoolboy, getting the "answer" is the chief consideration. He never loses sight of it, and sometimes begins with it and works backwards. He hesitates about adopting a method which is sound beyond all cavil, because to all appearances it does not promise to bring him to the goal, and follows a method which is more than doubtful if so be it promises to get that "answer." How much Bible study is done just upon this plan!

But there is another and a better way. We can study the Bible, not as our witness and as the basis of our system, but as God's message to us. There is such a thing as putting our system in the background for the time being, and seeing for ourselves. We can wander about in this or that direction, even though our guide-book assures us that there is nothing of interest to be seen there. We can hide our "key" and work at the problem as if it had never been solved by another. We can refuse to adopt methods which are unsound, even though they may bring us directly to the answer, and we may follow sound methods, even though they may seem for the present to lead us in a different direction. We may study it, not knowing in advance what the issue will be, and we may add, little caring, provided only that it is in accordance with the truth; for if one is not loyal to the truth above all things such study is worse than useless.

Let us not be understood for a single moment as undervaluing Confessions and other "forms of sound words," for they are simply indispensable, and we have no sort of sympathy with the senseless outcry against them which is so popular at this time. Nor are we casting any slight upon the noble science of systematic theology, which gathers up and formulates the results of our investigations. It is manifestly impossible for the seminary student to investigate, and then formulate the results, and he is obliged for the time being to avail himself of the labors of others. For the present he must be content with proof-texts pre-

sented in support of the doctrines set forth. He must take it for granted that the interpretations given are in accord with the context, and also with the great body of the scriptures which have not been quoted, and which are to him a *terra incognita*. He must take all this on faith, and hold tentatively; but we contend that he is bound in the end to investigate for himself, and construct his own system of theology, which he holds, not because he has been taught it, but because he has found it in the word of God. We do not maintain that it is possible for one to come to the Bible wholly unbiased, or to lose sight entirely of those truths he has long held as essential; but we do maintain that much depends upon whether we come to this study as seekers after truth, or as "defenders of the faith."

Let us now proceed to point out some of the advantages of the method of study we have been endeavoring to describe.

(1) It takes all of the facts into consideration. In defending a system of theology or polity how small a portion of the scriptures is drawn upon. Take the most elaborate system in existence, and quote under each head all the passages available as proofs of the point in question, and yet what a mighty *residuum*! Whole books even are left out, and are not even noticed, through no fault of the theologian however. Have all these passages no bearing upon these questions? Might not the conclusions reached in this way be materially modified by taking all of the facts into consideration? Analyze a plant and the soil in which it grows, and many of the constituents found in the latter are entirely wanting in the former, and yet for all that they exercise a material influence upon the plant. So it will not do to select the passages available as proofs, and neglect the remainder; and yet this is practically what is done by every one who studies the word of God simply as a warrant for one's theology. Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that so-called "proof-texts" are often misleading, since their meaning can be determined only by the connection, and oftentimes only by the careful study of the book as a whole. Some truths are ingrained in scripture to such an extent that no one familiar with the scriptures as a whole can well miss them, and yet they are not crystallized into definite propositions. We find, for instance, no clear-cut categorical statements touching such important questions as polygamy, infant church membership, the change of the Sabbath from the

seventh to the first day of the week; and yet who can doubt that these questions are dealt with? The *drift* of a book is often more decisive and unmistakable than a categorical statement, for while a mistranslation, or some error, as to a single word may materially alter the meaning of the statement, the *trend* of the book is not disturbed by such mishaps.

(2) It serves as a valuable check upon errors arising from defective reasoning. The deductive process is one largely used in theology. Certain general principles are laid down, and then from these inferences are drawn; but these inferences are not always trustworthy. An infinitesimal error in the sighting of a long range gun makes a very material difference in the destination of the missile. The sailor always distrusts "dead-reckoning," and loses no opportunity of confirming it by soundings, or by taking his bearings at his first opportunity. A mistaken exegesis of a single passage, or a defective or faulty definition, may affect ever so slightly the statement of a principle based upon it, yet this slight and unnoticeable error may lead to an inference wholly aside from the facts in the case. Moreover, we often substitute an inference of our own for a scriptural statement seemingly identical with it, as when certain disciples at Tyre "said to Paul through the Spirit that he should not set foot in Jerusalem," when in fact he had only witnessed to them that 'bonds and afflictions awaited him.' (Acts xxi. 4.)

Especially is *a priori* reasoning to be distrusted, save as it is confirmed by an investigation of the facts. Naaman the Syrian, as he came to Elisha to be healed, decided in his own mind just what would take place when he came into the presence of the prophet. Indeed to his mind there was no other rational mode of procedure, and when he found that the prophet had adopted a different method he went away in a rage. Take the vexed question of *inspiration*, and see what an important part *a priori* reasoning has played in formulating some of the theories concerning it. *A priori*, it would seem not only reasonable, but certain, that if God should see fit to give a written revelation of his will, that it would be expressed in language so simple and lucid that there could be no possibility of misunderstanding it; but how different are the actual facts in the case. Peter puts the case very mildly indeed, when in speaking of Paul's epistles, he says, "In which are some things hard to be understood." It has

been gravely contended by one of the foremost men in our church that the Greek of the New Testament must be faultless, "for surely God would not use bad Greek!" We have also heard it argued that if a word was spelled in a certain way in an inspired writing, that the orthography of that word was thereby settled beyond all cavil. We would naturally suppose, too, that God, having made an infallible revelation of his will, would preserve it from all errors of copyists and others, but the facts lend no countenance to such an idea. Is it not safer to begin with the facts, and find out just what God has done, instead of settling *a priori* what he must do?

Herein lies one of the fundamental errors of that suggestive, but dangerous book, *In His Steps*. What Jesus would do in any given case is altogether a matter of conjecture, except so far as we can infer it from his conduct under similar circumstances; and it concerns us far more to inquire what he has commanded us to do. Was not our Lord's conduct a constant surprise alike to friend and foe? Blot out the record of the marriage in Cana, and then let one say what he would be likely to do under such circumstances. Would he go where wine was freely flowing, and would he use his almighty power in providing an additional and most bountiful supply when the guests had already partaken freely? Who would have predicted that he would accept an invitation to a dinner party in a Pharisee's house on the Sabbath? Is it not safer for us to gather together all the facts, and then from them formulate our conclusions?

(3) It serves in some degree at least to guard against the sin of *eisegesis*. When one studies a passage from the standpoint of doctrine to see whether or not it sustains his position, the temptation to find there just what he is looking for is too strong for ordinary mortals to withstand. Take as an illustration a work like Guthrie's *Gospel in Ezekiel*. When it first appeared a certain reviewer said that Dr. Guthrie seemed to have written the book "under the impression that Ezekiel had signed the Confession of Faith." The criticism was a just one, for after a perusal of the book one is led to wonder what need there was for the New Testament any way, since the whole gospel is set forth in this book so luminously. How different would have been the result if, instead of going gospel-hunting amid the obscurities of Ezekiel's prophecies, he had set out to ascertain what message God had sent through the great prophet of the Captivity.

(4) It tends to make one "mighty in the scriptures;" a biblical rather than a theological preacher. Every minister is bound to be a theologian, but it is not enough that his theology is sound and scriptural—he must himself trace it back to the Word of God. No matter by whom he has been taught it, and no matter how much confidence he may have in the ability and soundness of his instructors, it is God's message to him only, in so far as it comes to him from his Word. When he goes forth as Jehovah's messenger he must deliver his message as coming from God through his Word, and not from the masters in Israel. He is to expound to hungry souls, not Hodge and Dabney, but the Word of God. His message is not, "Thus saith the standards," but, "Thus saith the Lord."

Is it not a fact that many of our ministers are far better acquainted with Hodge and Dabney than with the Bible? Is not the church itself in part responsible for this? In order to licensure or ordination, it is essential that the candidate should have more or less acquaintance with theology and church history. He must be able to read a little Latin and Greek and Hebrew. He must also have a little smattering of philosophy; but his knowledge of the Word of God which he is to preach is never inquired into except incidentally. It would be entirely possible for one to stand a satisfactory examination and be licensed to preach without ever having opened his Bible, save for the purpose of giving an exegesis of the passages assigned, and for acquiring a knowledge of the Hebrew. Would it be too much to say that men are sometimes licensed to preach who have never in their lives read through the Bible a single time? Some years ago a careful investigation was made as to the amount of Bible study done by ministers. Out of one thousand ministers, taken from the five leading denominations, all of whom were graduates of a theological seminary, and all of whom had been in the active pastorate for periods ranging from five to twenty years, it was found that 288 had given no special time to the study of the Bible. Only 636 had read the Old Testament through in English during this period, and not one had read it through in Hebrew; 790 only had read the New Testament through in English, and only 204 in Greek. Here is the astounding fact that out of a thousand men who had been preaching from five to twenty years 364 had not read the Old Testament through in all that time! Think of

210 pastors preaching for such a length of time without so much as even glancing at a part of the message committed to them, and that too in the New Testament! In the light of such facts is it too much to say that there are men to be found, even in our Presbyterian pulpits, who have never read the Bible through in all their lives! May the time soon come when we will realize that after all the Bible ought to be the main topic of study, and everything else subsidiary to this!