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I. SOME POPULAR MISCONCEPTIONS OF PRESBYTERIANISM.

There is about the title of this article a faint and somewhat unpleasant suggestion of the old play upon the words orthodoxy and other-doxo, my doxy and your doxy. Bigoted though the paronomasia may sound, yet the gist of the jest is just; no one would willingly hold aught but the truth, or yet, aught less than the truth; any man's real creed, therefore, must necessarily be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, as he sees it; so, then, to a writer sincere in his purpose, and true to his conviction, every conception other than his conception is misconception. If, however, one readily recognizes and candidly confesses his limitations, repudiates all pretence to speak *ex cathedra*, disavowing any individual illumination to see, or any special authority to declare, the truth, perhaps there will be nothing presumptuous in an attempt to set forth, and to set right, what he believes to be certain very prevalent misconceptions of Presbyterianism in the popular mind.

Of course the writer recognizes the fact that Calvinism and Presbyterianism are not synonymous terms; yet as the Presbyterian Church is, more than any other, thoroughly and generally identified with this system of faith, and inasmuch, moreover, as the chief objections obtaining against Presbyterianism are directed against its Calvinistic doctrine, we may be pardoned in an article designed to be popular for using the terms somewhat interchangeably.

Abuse of Calvinism has long been the favorite resort of igno-

rant and shallow minds. It has been the fate of this truly great system of doctrine to suffer severely at the hands of its opponents. No other theology has been so bitterly assaulted, and what is far worse, so systematically misrepresented. We have found it sometimes very hard to stretch our charity sufficiently for even the scantest covering of a multitude of what seemed the malicious sins of writers too intelligent to be guilty of such gross caricature. To this inveterate custom of its critics may, in some measure, be attributed the fact that Presbyterianism is so greatly misunderstood by many people.

The first point that it occurs to us to make is, that it is a misconception of any system of faith to try it and judge it upon the merits of its distinctive principles alone. We do not say this because of any difficulty in receiving, or any disadvantage in defending, the distinctive doctrines of Presbyterianism; we believe it to be scriptural through and through, and strange to say, most distinctively scriptural in its most decidedly unpopular doctrines. This much in deference to any suspicious readers.

While distinctive principles are the *differentiæ* of any system, and as such are always important, and may, under some circumstances, become most important of all, yet they are after all but *differentiæ*, and on this very account must form a small part only of the faith in its entirety comprehended in any system. Surely the body of truth held by all evangelical churches in common must be much greater and of greater absolute importance than the few points which differentiate any one branch of the visible church from all others.

To illustrate: here is a professor in a certain faculty; his department is chemistry, in this he is pre-eminent, he is known throughout the intercollegiate world as, perhaps, its most renowned chemist, and his excellence in this branch of study differentiates him from all other men. It is perfectly possible, however, that he may be also an acute metaphysician, well and widely versed in literature, a fine mathematician, a profound classical scholar; he may be able to fill with credit any chair in the faculty. This being the case, and such instances are not unknown, it would be patent and gross injustice to the comprehensive scholarship of

this man to judge him solely by his knowledge of chemistry. One might reply, "well, but this knowledge is what differentiates him from his colleagues." Very true; but if he knows as much Latin as the professor of that language himself, he certainly must have credit therefor in any fair estimate of his attainments.

We believe that just this great and manifest injustice is done to Presbyterianism by the popular conception of it. If any comparison be instituted between the Methodist and Presbyterian Churches, the popular mind, having seized the fact that as between these two great churches the doctrine of election is distinctive of the Presbyterian, falls immediately to a consideration of the comparative merits of election and free agency, ignoring utterly the additional fact that the Presbyterian Church holds the doctrine of free agency not less decidedly than the Methodist. Now of course the reply will be made that she holds it inconsistently; a rejoinder to this would carry us too far out of our way, so that we can only answer that, however inconsistently it may appear to some, she does nevertheless hold the doctrine explicitly enounced in her standards, and that, too, in immediate connection with that of divine foreordination.¹ Such being indisputably the case, she deserves the full credit of holding it, and any comparison between her and the Methodist Church which ignores this fact, is manifestly unjust and unworthy of any intelligent, fair-minded critic. In all comparison or contrast with other churches, the Presbyterian deserves credit for all that she holds in common with them.

Perhaps some one may say, "I recognize in general the justice of what you say when considering the Presbyterian Church absolutely, but in comparison with another church, it seems to me perfectly just to try it on its distinctive doctrines alone, that which constitutes its *Presbyterianism*, so to speak."

Now this is just the kernel of our contention;—the distinctive doctrines do not constitute its Presbyterianism, "the distinctive doctrines alone" have no existence; there is no separation in fact, and there ought to be none in thought. The "Presbyterianism" of the Presbyterian church is not its distinctive doctrines, but

¹Conf. of Faith, Chap. iii. § i.

the whole body of faith as colored, influenced, determined by the *differentiæ* of its own peculiar views; the whole field of faith and practice, creed and conduct, as affected by its distinctive doctrines. This is Presbyterianism, and nothing less than this.

To return: When this great church is weighed she has clear right to have put into the balance with her distinctive doctrines all her other excellencies; her almost equally distinctive liberality, her granite conservatism, not only a bulwark to her, but often a blessing to others; her varied services to the common cause of civil and religious liberty; her prominence in education; her pre-eminence in the great foreign mission work; all her manifold activities; her generous support of undenominational religious enterprises; all the benefits of the trained minds and disciplined characters she has furnished to every honorable calling, and to every branch of the visible church; the eminent men in state and church other than her own who found their inspiration and gained their qualifications from her influence and her training.

Let it be borne always in mind that Presbyterianism stands for much more in the world than the five points of Calvinism.

In this immediate connection is suggested a similar misconception, affecting that great system of doctrine of which the Presbyterian Church is, perhaps, the most illustrious and consistent representative.

It seems generally supposed that the prime doctrine of Calvinism is the divine election, or, as more usually entitled, predestination. As soon as Calvinism is mentioned, the popular mind reverts immediately to the doctrine of the divine decrees as the foundation of all its theology. It would be far more philosophical, as well as far juster to Calvinism, to recognize the fact that, though a great and gracious doctrine, predestination is not the pivotal point of the system. The fundamental doctrine of Calvinism, that which gives it its specific character amid all other theologies, that from which predestination and other co-ordinate doctrines develop as logical consequences, is the Divine Sovereignty. This is the basis of the whole; this determines the Calvinistic conception of grace and its grounds, of the covenant and its parties, of the Scriptures and their character and authority,

of sin and its heinousness, guilt and penalty, of salvation and its nature and extent.

A thorough and consistent Calvinist approaches every doctrine from the point of God's sovereignty; the corner-stone of all his theology bears the inscription: *Soli Deo Gloria*. Every other principle, every other element of religious faith must be subordinate and tributary to this the paramount principle, the dominant element of all; the whole character of his theology is colored by this; in comparing any particular tenet of this system with one of any other, the specific difference will be found directly traceable to the influence of God's sovereignty. Not in the realm of doctrine alone, but in that also of worship, in the various practical policies of church work, in the character of preaching and particularly in the plans of presenting and applying the gospel to the unconverted; indeed in the whole realm of faith and practice this doctrine is determinative. To give to any other this position in the Calvinistic system is a misconception; it is illogical, unphilosophical and equally unscriptural.

A very prevalent impression of Presbyterianism finds expression in terms which describe it and its theology as harsh, hard, narrow,¹ arbitrary and tyrannical. References to this alleged spirit are very frequent; an eminent instance is furnished by W. T. Stead's interesting and generally just and appreciative critique of Spurgeon. In this paper Stead says of Spurgeon:

¹ There can be no question about the liberalness of our terms of communion. We are ready to welcome members from any evangelical church, according exactly the same credit to their certificate that we give to our own. A certificate from a Methodist church is received by a Presbyterian session on the same footing with a certificate from a church in our own connection. This fact is decisive. Moreover, there is a significant difference between the wording of a Presbyterian certificate dismissing a member to a Methodist church and the wording of a Methodist certificate dismissing one to the Presbyterian church. We have been forcibly struck with this difference. But more reliable than any custom, however inveterate, is the established creed of a church. Now, so far as our acquaintance extends, the Presbyterian Church is the only one that in its very creed expressly repudiates any claim to exclusive rights and privileges, and explicitly recognizes the true character and claims of other branches of the great Christian family. This fact may sound strange even to many of our own members; we invite their attention to our Book of Church Order, chap. i., sec. 7, and chap. ii., sec. 2, par. 2. Such is the claim we desire to make, and we invite investigation into the justice of it.

“He roundly assailed the tendency of the present time to take a broader view of the fate of man and the love of God than seemed orthodox to the Calvinists, who implanted upon the plastic mind of the Essex boy their cast-iron conception of God and his world. . . . The best men could no longer be cabined, cribbed, and confined within the pale of Calvinistic orthodoxy. . . . He almost excommunicated those of his brethren who could not share his conviction that no one could really believe in God the Father and Christ the Son who was not certain that the majority of the human race were created to pass a whole eternity in endless torment,” etc.

Surely when such a man will seriously write and deliberately publish such *stuff* as that, our topic is proven timely; yet the foregoing citation is simply a fair specimen of what continually offends the eyes of intelligent readers.

That the Calvinist is exceedingly jealous of the honor of the Lord God of Hosts goes without saying; it is the very genius of his whole system of faith; with him no other consideration is for a moment comparable to the glory of God. This may make him at times seem to be less considerate of man than some others who at the same time are less considerate of God. Between the two Calvinism never compromises, never trims, never hesitates. He believes with the Scriptures that it is “to the praise of the glory of his grace” that he hath “predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will”; he believes also that “the salvation of the righteous is of the Lord,” wholly, in its origin, development and issue. This likewise is Scripture, and it is Calvinism pure and simple; it puts the whole of salvation, matter, method, extent, in the hands of God, whom it believes to be all-merciful as well as all-wise. Now there are several obvious reflections:

1. If the theology of such a system is harsh, hard, narrow, arbitrary and tyrannical, it must be because such is the nature of God. It has always seemed to the writer of this paper that these bitter arraignments of Calvinism, however unintentionally, were none the less really arraignments of God.¹ So also indeed

¹ An objector would of course say, “No; an arraignment of the Calvinistic conception only of God.” Our reply would be, “Exactly; we recognize the difference

it seems to have appeared to the Apostle Paul when *identically the same objections* were preferred against his statement and exposition of the doctrines of grace and of the divine election; for his rejoinder, sharp and incisive, was, "Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God"?

2. How this scheme begets in the minds of some the notion that the saved are but few is passing strange. Yet we read the charge that such a theology consigns the majority of men to the doom of the damned; or, to put it in Mr. Stead's somewhat unduly vigorous style, "that the majority of the human race were created to pass a whole eternity in endless torment." The insertion of the word "endless" is surely painting darkness on the midnight air, but we suppose a "whole eternity" is too limited to contain Mr. Stead's indignation. It is not so surprising, however. We are somewhat indignant ourselves when this vigorous writer not only saddles such a doctrine on us, but actually out-herods Herod by charging us with making subscription to it a condition of salvation! This goes a bow-shot beyond anything in the line of theological criticism that has fallen under our eye for some years.

It would seem to an unprejudiced mind, believing in the God revealed in the Scriptures and incarnate in the Christ of the Gospels, that a scheme which leaves the whole matter of man's salvation in method and extent to the sovereign mercy of such a God will secure the salvation of a greater number of souls than any other conceivable plan. Though we are not, and with our reading of the word of God, could not be, aught but a thorough Calvinist, yet it is our confident trust that in the final consummation of the kingdom the lost will bear but an insignificant proportion to the saved. When the blessed Jesus "shall see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied," no devout Arminian, however tender-hearted, will have cause to complain.

3. Another mystery of misconception is that any one should

suggested; but then what is the difference after all but that which inheres in the sovereignty of God? Is not the objectionable feature in this Calvinistic conception precisely that which Paul so uncompromisingly defends against exactly the same criticism?" [Consult Rom. ix. 18-21.]

regard the decree of God as damning any soul. The decree so far as active at all, is saving in its influence; the only exercise of divine activity is a saving exercise. The election of grace is to life, not to death, and but for this election all without exception would be lost. The Calvinistic doctrine represents God as interposing to save some even at the infinite cost of his own life, and just this interposition is election. Of course this election implies and involves the passing over of those not elected; but their condition is not in any way or to any degree altered or affected by the decree; they are simply left to the natural, necessary, inevitable, just results of their own wrong doing. If we are asked why God should discriminate between sinners alike and equally deserving of wrath, our answer must be the same our Master gave when referring to the fact that enough divine energy had been apparently fruitless on the shores of Galilee to have saved the fated dwellers by the banks of the Mediterranean. God does not save all; but this objection obtains against all systems except that of the Universalist. Calvinist and Arminian both must confront this difficulty, and the answer above referred to is the resort of both alike, "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight."

4. The word "arbitrary," that in the mouths of objectors has become so wedded to the decree of God, is altogether out of place, and involves a grievous misconception. It conveys or insinuates the idea of something whimsical or unreasoning, a capricious exercise of sheer will; arbitrary, in the language of these critics, means practically groundless. Nothing that the God of the Calvinistic faith does can be arbitrary in this sense, because God is all wise. To say that we do not comprehend the reasons which influence the exercise of this infallible will is one thing; to say or to insinuate that there are no sufficient reasons is altogether another and a very different thing; the first we frankly admit, the second we shall always strenuously deny.

5. If the Calvinistic faith is tyrannical it is so only in the relation it teaches between God and man. There is no question as to the fact of its humbling man before God beyond any other system in the world. If this is what is meant by the charge, we yield the

point at once; only adding that this in our own estimate is the very essence of real religion, and, therefore, instead of denying the charge we accept it as the crown of Calvinism. But while Calvinism inculcates absolute unquestioning submission to God, it resolutely resists such submission to any other being in the universe. That Calvinists have habitually been the sturdiest foes to oppression is one of the most incontrovertible facts of history. Men who have spent their lives and made their reputation in the field of historical study have called attention uniformly to the prominence of Calvinists in every struggle for liberty the world over. In his history of the Netherlands, Motley says:

“The earliest and most eloquent preachers, the most impassioned converts, the sublimest martyrs, had lived, preached, fought, suffered and died, with the precepts of Calvin in their hearts. The fire which had consumed the last vestige of royal and sacerdotal despotism throughout the independent republic had been lighted by the hands of Calvinists.” Vol. III. 120.

To the Calvinists—“more than to any other class of men, the political liberties of Holland, England and America are due.” Vol. IV. 347.

Bancroft, in the first volume of his great history of the United States, page 266, says:

“A young French refugee (John Calvin) skilled in theology and civil law, in the duties of magistrates and in the dialectics of religious controversy, entering the republic of Geneva, and conforming its ecclesiastical discipline to the principles of republican simplicity, established a party of which Englishmen became members and New England the asylum.”

In his essay on Calvinism, Froude well says:

“Grapes do not grow on bramble-bushes. Illustrious natures do not form themselves on narrow and cruel theories. The practical effect of a belief is the real test of its soundness. Where we find an heroic life appearing as the uniform fruit of a particular mode of opinion, it is childish to argue in the face of fact that the result ought to have been different.”

How a system can be tyrannical that begets such a uniform and inextinguishable thirst for liberty, is a problem we leave to those whose charge gives it rise.

A fourth misconception that we sometimes meet with is the idea that Presbyterianism "does not believe in revivals."

If by revivals is meant the manifold machinery in vogue in some quarters, ingeniously devised and systematically directed towards every possible stimulus of emotional feeling, the various devices for arousing and intensifying excitement by all sorts of scenic effects and dramatic appeals to eye and ear, the slow music, darkened lights, legerdemain style so common under the leadership of certain popular peripatetic evangelists, so-called—if this is what is meant by revivals, we had as well "confess judgment," for the Presbyterian Church has generally, and very properly and consistently, discountenanced all such. But, if by revivals is meant an outpouring of the Holy Spirit in response to earnest prayer and godly living, the blessing of that Spirit upon the continued and repeated offer of the gospel appealing to the heart *through the intelligence and conscience*, with the expectation, under God's blessing, of immediate and permanent results in regenerated souls and consecrated lives—if this be revival, then Presbyterianism *does* believe in revivals, and has always believed in them. She could not believe otherwise and be consistent with her creed; a Calvinistic theology requires this at her hands. It is a thoroughly revival theology, instilling just such a doctrine of man's depravity and dependence as will place him at the throne of grace, and just in proportion as he cordially believes it, *will keep him there*. Even the Arminian prays Calvinism, whatever he may preach. Men may talk Arminianism to man, but no Christian ever talks anything but Calvinism to God. Besides inculcating such a doctrine of man's nature and needs as puts him in exactly the attitude to receive a revival, the Calvinistic theology proclaims just that plan of salvation which will lead the Christian to look directly and confidently for the baptism of the Spirit as his *sole* reliance for the salvation of sinners. As might be expected from such doctrine, the whole history of the Presbyterian family of churches is a history of revivals; a careful study of the subject will go far towards establishing the claim that nearly every great revival, general in character and permanent in influence, has been inaugurated under Calvinistic preaching; not even need we except the great Wesleyan movement, which is the

peculiar pride of the Arminian Church; for it is a matter of history that this great revival began under the preaching of the Calvinist Whitfield, and it was with no little difficulty that he induced Wesley to join in the movement. Most people consider the camp-meeting a peculiarly Methodist institution, and a Presbyterian camp-meeting is esteemed a sort of ecclesiastical hybrid—an innovation borrowed by the Presbyterians from the Methodists; whereas the camp-meeting originated with the Presbyterians and the Methodists borrowed it from them; wherever Presbyterians now employ it, they are simply returning to a custom of their forefathers.

Without referring in detail to the great Calvinistic revivals that marked the Reformation period throughout the various countries of Europe, we call attention to more recent history in our own land. The following widespread revivals are worthy of special notice: in 1734 under the preaching of Jonathan Edwards; in 1740 under the leadership of Dickinson and the Tennents; in 1789 under John Blair Smith, William Graham and others; in 1800 the famous revival beginning in Kentucky and extending as far north as New York; in 1820 under Finney, Nettleton and others; in 1830 chiefly associated with the venerable name of Daniel Baker. Indeed, the period extending from 1815 to 1834 was almost one continuous revival; during this time the Presbyterian Church increased more than five hundred *per cent.* It is a matter of history that the great, widespread, general revivals that have constituted epochs in religious history, have been distinctly Presbyterian.

The last misconception that shall receive our attention at this time is the idea that Presbyterianism is comparatively insignificant in numbers; that in this respect it is very far behind some other churches, particularly the Methodist and the Baptist. Many people suppose that these last two great churches dwarf the Presbyterian into utter numerical insignificance. There are not wanting Presbyterian people to accept this notion, some of whom lay the flattering unction to their souls that they make up in weight what they lack in bulk, that quality compensates the lack of quantity, saying sometimes in amiable satire, "We weigh, we don't count."

The writer of this paper has never been of the number of those who could take comfort in such reflection, and we are therefore the more glad to be relieved of the need of such consolation.

Presbyterianism suffers sometimes in comparison with some churches which report a much larger body of communicants in the United States, but when *ecumenical* statistics are taken into account, the Presbyterian church makes then her proper, proportionate showing; she is perhaps less local in character than any of her great competitors in faith and good words. Other great churches are almost distinctively American; the United States is practically their birth-place and to this day remains their great stronghold; whereas American Presbyterianism is simply an offshoot from the parent stem in Great Britain and the Continent. The American Presbyterian Church, which is the only one that many people ever think of, though numbering over a million communicants, is not half so large a body as that of Great Britain, or the Continent either. The United Kingdom reported to the Presbyterian Council of 1884, 2,999,038 communicants, and the European Continent, to the same Council, 2,352,421.

In that great gathering there were represented *sixty-five national churches*, reporting an actual membership of 6,750,460 communicants; with many omitted for lack of statistical reports. How many adherents these communicants represent it would be hard to say; certainly not less than twenty millions at the lowest estimate. No Presbyterian need blush for his church, even when numbers alone are under consideration.

In bringing this somewhat desultory and very unsatisfactory paper to its conclusion, we desire to disavow any apparent reflection upon any sister church in the great family of God; we wish to pay our hearty tribute to the truly glorious work they are privileged to do for our common blessed Master. If we know our own heart we would not rob them of one atom of the honor they so richly deserve; our only emulation should be one of good works and our only feeling one of devout thankfulness to God for his manifest blessing on their work of faith, their labor of love, and their patience of hope.

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