

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE IV.

MODERN LIGHTS ON THE REFORMATION.

BY THE REV. JAMES LINDSAY, M.A., B.D., B.SC.

THE modern lights cast upon the Reformation of the sixteenth century have shown a new way of estimating its power and value. The new view is that which comes of regarding it more as part of a wider, more general, movement than as something detached or isolated. The results of this new mode of view lie in the direction of sounder conceptions of its worth and success. These improved conceptions spring from its being set in juster relations to the advancing science and scholarship of its time, and in essential connection with the growth of toleration and liberty.

We may not forget that the age was one of literary discovery, enthusiasm, and progress, in which men like Luther and Ulrich von Hutten found it a glorious thing to live. Renaissance! this it was which acted like a charm on the men of that time, and brought them to feel as though 'twere bliss in that dawn to be alive. This was the joyous dawn of that life of the mind in which it goes forth into the cosmic life of Nature to find it gifted with an inexhaustible youth. It was the dawn of a new epoch in human history when the mind of man, freeing itself from the yoke of authority, turned to thoughts new, higher, and vaster, and essayed to reconcile the traditions of religion with the teachings of antiquity. Not least of the

evils from which mind freed itself was that of an overshadowing and oppressive supernaturalism. A new impulse wrought within science, and a new light rested upon art. The age was one of the new birth of the theoretic spirit or impulse, for that spirit or impulse sprang from the humanistic renewal in the guise of natural science. Philosophy began to proclaim the autonomy of mind, and put on a universal garb.

So far as the Renaissance is concerned, its entire philosophy lay along the lines of recovery of a disinterested study of nature. But the thought of to-day can very well see how closely connected with the past all the new quest of humanistic culture really was, how the world of Greek philosophy and ideas was brought to life again, and how dim and ill-defined was any longing for a worthy goal. What the age in its deepest, if least defined, desire craved, was not really Renaissance, not the reviving influences of learning or the transfiguring effects of art, but rather those moral and spiritual renewals which meant the Reformation. For the age rightly, if vaguely, divined that it was a greater—as it was a harder—thing to effect the rejuvenescence of the religious life than to renew the life of knowledge or æsthetic. It was still wise enough to perceive that these revivings of art and learning, complete renovations as men declared them to be, by no necessity meant the new births of the moral sphere. These were in origin and impulse human: no inward impulse prompted those, in whom the ancient culture and ideals had so revived, to call for a *sursum corda* and cry, "All our springs are in Thee"! No doubt, the humanness of the Renaissance in Germany was not without intellectual impulse, so that the Old and New Testaments of Reuchlin and Erasmus passed into the hands of the intellectual classes, and a spiritual tendency was alike evidenced and fostered. But it remained ineffective in respect of positive spiritual re-

sults and unfruitful in spiritual and creative issues. But a reviving of classic antiquity as the Renaissance might thus be, it was yet, as Professor Eucken (in his fine volume of "Lebensanschauungen") very properly regards it, first of all something which signified a development of modern life.

At the outset, it has to be said that there does not seem to be any lack of firmness in the hold which modern thought has of that aspect of the Reformation in which it appears as the resistless reaction of the European mind or a revolt against the imperial despotism of Rome, with the formal or mechanical unity it imposed. It is undeniable, as Goethe indeed said, that the human mind tried in the Reformation so to free itself, however partially it may have done so. Its attempt to break with authority was just the greatest gain of the movement. The thought of our time more clearly affirms Protestantism, in the palmy regions of poetry and art, to have been the precursor of Protestantism in the realm of reason, and also in that of religion. It yet apprehends that not from the mere feeling after liberty—for, as Hase has it, the struggle after freedom was regarded as a subordinate matter—and not from the scientific, but from the religious conscience in Luther did the Reformation proceed.

There can be little doubt that the cause of Luther's revolt was the preaching of Tetzel on indulgences, their shameless abuse, in fact, that which led to Luther's ultimate rejection of them. But it is a serious mistake to suppose that Luther's theses bore merely on the abuse of indulgences, for they really aimed to summon men to a new view of life and its relations to God and to church. Protestantism is to us, as to Kahnis, an essentially religious development, and, as such, to be measured by the law of its own territory of life. The form it took in Luther was due, as Köstlin declares, to his direct and mighty grasp, his in-

tuition, and his unifying view of truth. The *Bahnbrecher*, or path-breaking pioneer, was he, though there are, of course, the senses in which he was son of the ages that went immediately before. The mysteries of the heavenly kingdom woke in Luther a deep awe—the speechless awe that dares not move; and his perception of spiritual truths and realities was vivid in character. It was, moreover, joined to great natural shrewdness. His clearness of insight and creative genius made him the great religious power he was. Extraordinary strength of will and indomitable purpose are what always mark him: he is, in fact, apt so to luxuriate in his strength that he becomes to us a fine example of that *ἄβρις* or proud aggressive strength to which the Greeks so fittingly drew attention.

Deeply do the lines of his sturdy, cheerful, unconstrained Thuringian nature impress themselves upon our modern view. It was the greatness of Luther that, when the monastic world, in which he had believed and lived, fell in ruins around him, his faith in the new world, disclosed by saving and justifying faith, never for a moment wavered. It must be said, however, that his habits of self-scrutiny, or attempts to get behind and examine his feelings and inner experiences, do not impress us with the calm repose we expect to find attendant on true strength. Titanic strength is, as we have said, present in him, but he is by nature too restless and all unquiet. Impetuosity marks him, but not the rashness which is often mistakenly associated with Luther. This Achilles, with courage never to submit or yield, is marked, in fact, by great caution.

Harnack has not thought it too much to say that Luther's Christianity was the Reformation, and one of our own theologians remarks that Luther, as long as he lives, is the Saxon Reformation. Modern thought indeed retains Luther as the representative of Protestantism, of large ideas, and of individual freedom, in a word, of what Isaac Taylor

styled an un-compelled, undamaged service of the man to God. For it sees that to him we owe the moral ideals of the life of to-day, in which the ascetic ideals of medievalism have been replaced by ideals not merely humanistic but Christian. This is so because of the movement he headed, even although he was himself much less the champion of anything like liberty or toleration than might be wished. We do not altogether wonder that liberty was no perfect or immediate result of Luther's revolution, for we remember that, as Lord Acton has expressed it, "achieved liberty is the one ethical result that rests on the converging and combined conditions of advancing civilization." It is the unconscious greatness of Luther to pave the way for such advancing freedom and ethical achievement. There are senses in which Luther is clearly the precursor of Schiller and Kant, of Lessing and Goethe, even though he maintained an attitude on the servitude of the will very different from the ethical freedom of Kant and Schiller, and spurned that liberalism which Lessing and Goethe, as apostles of culture, suggest for us. Luther, in fact, builded better than he knew, when he sought to rectify the church by repairing and renewing the foundations whereon her life of faith doth rest.

For, as her faith is, so will the church's strength be. Therefore was it that Luther gradually—far more gradually than the Minerva-like process is generally supposed to have been—came to lay the stress he did on faith alone as that which justifies, and even that faith, as conceived by Luther, a very abstract thing indeed. Justification became to him a result of the imputed merits of Christ in a way that appeared quite independent of the moral and spiritual state of the subject. This was a consequence of the antithesis between sin and grace, or Law and Gospel, having attained a place that was central in his thought. It became, in fact, the so-called *Angelpunkte* or corner-stone

of his thought, so that he was thereby led at times almost, but not actually, into grave antinomian tendencies.

Less religious and mystical, more intellectual and humanistic, than Luther, was Zwingli, with, in fact, a marked distaste of that mysticism to which Luther's work owed so much. Zwingli was far more detached than Luther from the outer organization of the ancient church, and it is his glory to have brought into lasting prominence, in the power of the congregation, a general principle of church government whose after effects have been so lasting and great, for social and political, as for ecclesiastical, life, as to be beyond dispute.

Whatever our age may think of Calvin as thinker and theologian, it is ready to allow, what has been said by one who has no special proneness to Calvinism, that he was the pioneer of modern efforts to reconstruct, in more complete and scientific form, the contents of the Gospel narratives.

Less logical than Calvin, less courageous either mentally or morally than Luther, stands Melanchthon, the friend of both, scholar and diplomatist of the movement. Pre-eminently the theologian of the Lutheran Church was Melanchthon, for he performed the important function of systematizing the theology of the times, and his literary productiveness was of an astounding character. His range was, in fact, encyclopedic, the age of the specialists being not yet. His peace-loving spirit and his devotion to truth are held in honor to-day, for the world to-day—and every day—is less in need of the rushing reformer or the dainty humanist, than of the peaceable, pure, and devoted Christian. And such, we may allow, was Melanchthon, albeit he was not always so mild as is popularly supposed. He had, besides, a rather larger measure of that spirit of compromise which seems to be so much in favor in the institutions of our own country to-day. The merit was yet his

to have uncompromisingly opposed the superstitious tyranny of Rome; to have fostered learning in face of the Philistinism of the reforming party; to have left his impress as the "Teacher of Germany" on education in Protestant schools and universities; to have mitigated the rigor of theological theory; to have safeguarded public order, and preserved the sense of historic continuity; to have proved, in fact, the worthy lieutenant of the mighty-souled Luther; and to have earned the veneration and gratitude of after ages, in respect of the finely disciplined spirit he displayed, and the calm and peaceful services he rendered.

The peculiar niche filled by Melanchthon was just that of standing in the gateway of a new time, and trying to focus and peacefully unify, in and through his own single personality, all the influences at work amid the storm and stress of his age. Therein he was unique. In our day the restoration of the unity of Christendom in a purified churchly community is clearly seen to have been the ultimate and highest end of all Melanchthon's efforts. It has been properly claimed for him (for example, by Professor A. Dorner, of Königsberg) that he really opened up a new world to thought, in the way he passed beyond the former dualism of nature and grace to recognize the unity behind them, and clung to the possibility of nature-knowledge being harmoniously linked to knowledge ethical and religious. There seems to be more adequate recognition of his services to ethical thought of a philosophical character to-day than ever before. And it is clearly realized that his distinctive service lay in the way he was able to unite the speculative with the empirical, the naturally known with the historically revealed. It could not be otherwise with Melanchthon, for to him Nature also is offspring of God. Melanchthon's ethical feeling and his dislike of antinomian perversions are among the characteristics that mark him

off from Luther, whose friendship he retained despite every diversity. More than an Aristotelian philosopher the humanistic Melanchthon doubtless was, but he yet brought forth from Aristotle and antiquity the principles both by which his own thought was teleologically determined, and by which a fruitful discipline for the sciences was reached. From Melanchthon we must date a new epoch in dogmatic thought: it was his great merit to have redeemed it from scholastic character by his rich infusion of elements mystical and pietistic, experiential and rational, scriptural and personal.

Now, without saying more, we affirm that, while it may be perfectly true that disinclination to look in the face the spiritual greatness of the Reformers, and supine indifference to the necessity for the Reformation, may be only too characteristic of our time, modern thought is, in its sanest manifestations, by no means forgetful that the truths and principles they brought into view live and move and give being to the world of to-day. It recognizes the great defect of the Reformation to have been its leaving the real reign of dogma or speculative theology, untouched—its leaving, that is to say, opinions, definitions, and formulas of newer but hardly more fruitful type still reigning over faith. It sees the final triumph over scholasticism as yet to come. It admits that, in its speculative connections, the Reformation can be viewed only as a very mixed result, whose beneficial side is seen in the way it made men fundamentally think. It sees Christianity to have been left by the new scholasticism, too much as veritable dogma—all too little a thing of faith and love and character under the free impulse of a true idealism. It acknowledges how great need such scholasticism had of the admonition in "Faust"—

"Das Pergament, ist das der heil'ge Bronnen,
Woraus ein Trunk den Durst auf ewig stillt?
Erquickung hast du nicht gewonnen,
Wenn Sie dir nicht aus eignere Seele quillt."

“Parchment and books—are they the holy springs
 A drink from which thy thirst forever stills?
 To inspiration hast thou not attained,
 Except from thine own soul it freely wells.”

It sees, in fact, how the thought of faith, and of the justification which it brought, was allowed to obscure for men's minds the Christ of faith, even while it welcomes such faith as did then flourish as against the craving of the Middle Ages for the ineffable vision. It understands how dry and unfertile the Lutheran theory of justification by faith seems to the schematizing view of reason, but how real and true to the religious feeling was yet Luther's passionate proclamation of it. It perceives how the spiritual movement of the sixteenth century is a thing to be welcomed, because of the cleansing and renewing force it carried for the church universal, and in spite of the schism it involved. To be welcomed, even if any choose to say—

“Never came reformation in a flood
 With such a heady currance, scouring faults.”

For we shall soon see what ethical force it brought into play in the world of that time. But first let it be said that modern thought regards as a strange and arbitrary exclusion Harnack's treatment of Calvinism and Arminianism, when he makes the Reformation in reality an exit (*Wirklich ein Ausgang*) of the history of dogma. It recognizes the undue emphasis, the too exclusive stress, laid by the Reformation on the purely subjective aspect of its great principle, and the grievous disposition it showed to sever the inner from that which is outward, to set the spiritual over against the natural, as though grace had come to destroy rather than perfect nature. The pernicious effects of its excessive absorption with the subjective consciousness of salvation, to the neglect of the objective interests of Christianity, have been growingly apparent to modern thought, as itself but too conscious of wrestlings with the infinite subjectivity or self-occupation of this late time.

The secret of the superiority of the Reforming peoples we cannot but find in their inherited moral force *plus* the spirit of science.

Now it is seen how it was through the Reformation that the world, even the religious world, learned that the service which can be rendered by life and literature, by science and art, by politics and philosophy, is a service which must be one of perfect freedom—organic freedom of adjustment. It is further seen how all that is richest in subsequent culture is due to Protestantism having, despite the lack at times of the philosophy of what it was doing, never relinquished this principle of freedom of investigation. Yet it would be a lamentably inadequate thing merely to say, with Professor Paulsen, that the Reformation helped to bring release to the modern spirit from supernaturalism, and contributed to the bringing about of the secularization of modern times. As if the Reformation had not also been a leading men back from the secularization of a worldly church towards original purity of faith! As if it had not borne anything of more primary significance for religion, life, and ethics, than his admission implies! Of course, there were the freeing from medieval supernaturalism and the tendency towards secularization, but the theological thought of our time does not suffer itself to forget the sense of personal responsibility to God and of personal communion with Him, free, immediate, spiritual, won by the Reformation—with which, in fact, the Reformation began; nor the new hopes of higher life, to be realized here and now, which were then liberated, even though it admits a Christian community on earth to have been much less a Reformational ideal than it should have been; nor the theological interest that marked the era, with its teachings about the universal priesthood and private judgment or spiritual certitude on the basis of the Christian consciousness.

Just as little does it forget the way in which Catholicism, as a whole, or in its institutional aspect, denied to individual members the immediacy of relation to God which it yet claimed for itself, and entailed a woful abdication of that conscience which is man's crown. The revival of ethical interest which marks the Reformational era is not to be mistaken. It was, no doubt, unfortunate, in respect of such looseness of morals as then prevailed, that so much stress was laid on the intellectual aspect of faith. The evil effects of Luther's teaching were acknowledged by himself, for his rigid insistence on faith, and faith only, was of a kind that easily lent itself to moral perversion. No unsatisfactoriness or imperfection of the moral effects of the Reformation can make this quickening of ethical interest any less real. Men began to feel that all things were theirs, theirs to be used in the world that here and now is, and that in such using of them—without ascetic taint or bias—all the ends of moral life are satisfied. The inwardness of faith or spiritual redemption taught men another mode of triumph over the world than an outward sprinkling from it. The spring or motive-power of this quickened ethical interest was clearly religious, but it none the less really achieved, in its abjuration of the lordship of the universal church over conscience, an independent significance for the moral life in the view of the Christian religion.

Now the thought of to-day sees that the faith begotten of the Reformational spirit could not but, as Döllinger declared, purify the European atmosphere, impel the mind on to new courses, and promote a rich scientific and literary life. It perceives what a groundless notion is that of those who have in modern times taken the Protestantism, which is the outcome of that Reformation by which the faith was saved, to be anti-dogmatic in principle, as though the reserved right of perpetual investigation were a denial

that there is anything positive and ascertainable to investigate. Certainly Protestantism, as individualistic in thought, lies apart from dogma in its assertion of the independence of conscience; but what has just been said must be taken as true of Protestantism even before it passes into a method. Protestantism has not set the seal of its consecration on the principle of individuality without knowing that the liberty it has inaugurated is liberty to make for religious truth, order, and progress, in making for which true liberty alone can live. In this respect for the principle of individuality, it forms a striking antithesis to Catholicism, which has elected to plant itself at the antipodes of such liberty, and has really usurped the place of the revelation alike of history and of conscience.

But now, why should it be so hard to see that Reformation, in principle introduced in the sixteenth century, is not a thing done once for all, but something to be always and forever repeated in the renewing energies of Christianity? Why should our Protestant churches care so much for church domination, and not care more for truth? While the reconstructive powers of the movement were far less conspicuous than its restorative energies, we can at least be abidingly grateful for it as the underlying spring whence have flowed all subsequent efforts to realize a true, because spiritual, universality, in the higher unity of a system whose center of gravity moves not from the freedom of the Christian spirit. We are nowise troubled when it is said that the secret of the strength of Protestantism lies in its name. For no nobler stand could have been made by its founders than that which welcomed death sooner than believe a lie. Small indeed are the souls that cannot see the spiritual greatness involved in the dead set they made against papal indulgences and priestly pretensions of every sort. We can recognize that Protestantism, however it may be said to live in its protest, can be no

failure in that whereto it aspires. That, properly speaking, is the simple assertion of the principle of true individuality—the self-activity of the individual—or the *right* to fulfill the *duty* God has laid on individual man. Unlike Catholicism, it claims not (from our standpoint) to be a religion, but is content to cry, “*Prepare* ye the way of the Lord.” For all that, the positive theology of Protestantism was strong, noble, independent. The theology of the Reformation was creative, although legalism and traditionalism were besetting evils of the century that immediately followed.

This individuality of which we have been speaking is begotten in us by the power of faith, but faith itself in its turn comes to owe its very life to this principle of individuality. It would be strange if our thought to-day did not see the individualistic power of the Protestant faith foreshadowed in the very way in which it from the first created commanding personalities, whose impress has been left on succeeding generations, and whose force is felt to this hour. The thought of this time calmly but confidently maintains that the historic vindication of this daring Protestant principle of the unfettered freedom of individual power or genius, as the only condition of victoriously progressive scientific and æsthetic susceptibility, has, in spite of occasional iconoclasms, been ample. It has seen that principle persistently opposed, from the Jesuitical side, in the strained interests of authority, but also as firmly adhered to as the very crown of moral personality.

What it awaits is that justification of Protestantism in her children to which intellectual freedom and unity at length must lead, for vital individualism—when it shall be attained—is beginning rather than end. It has outgrown every view of Reformational principle which is satisfied with regarding it more as memorial of the past than as reserve of the future. The best thought of the time chills

before every effort to press modern thought into the Procrustean bed of the thought of the past, and ardently pants for the ideal which in Protestantism shines from the sky of the future. We may perhaps say that it takes religious Protestantism to be less an end than a means towards attaining freedom that shall be full, and rounded, and complete, and takes it to be, as means, of quite inestimable value. It takes what services Kant and Schleiermacher have rendered for the theology and religion of our own century to be nowise unrelated, as results, to the Reformation. Inestimable these services have been, albeit they reached not perfect or satisfying issues. But the self-revelation of God in Christ recovered for us by the Reformation has yet more glorious truth to give forth for us.

And when we speak of Schleiermacher, it cannot be forgotten what a new Reformation he has introduced—a Reformation which, beginning in a new sense of religion being brought to the cultured (*gebildeten*) among its despisers, awaits to-day the perfect result that will be reached when religion shall descend with renovating power to the uncultured (*ungebildeten*) among its despisers. For the reasons are not far to seek why the interests of these latter are to be considered not less than those of the former. And so it comes that, with its large outlook but too scanty leisure for seeing visions, the thought of to-day drops before every surmise that the Reformational position or principle may now lose its force, the venerated word, *E pur si muove*; for it sees that “the end is not yet.” It sees that there is an unexhausted vitality in the Protestantism of a Leibnitz, a Newton, a Milton, a Butler, a Goethe, a Schleiermacher, a Wordsworth, a Dorner, a Ranke, a Martineau, which proclaims new developments and advancing regeneration for humanity. It sees that the strength of Protestant ideas is augmented in all conflict with Catholicism, and that the sense of their worth is thereby deepened.

But this does not keep it from recognizing that there is an intellectualism—of the hard, all-in-all sort—in Protestantism that yet remains to be broken, ere the spiritual ideal can be fully attained.

If it should even own, with Edmond Schérer in a certain place, that the days of Protestantism, as a positive system or an institution, are, by reason of its logical inconsistency, numbered, it should yet, with him, hold fast to the principle of it as immortal. It certainly owns the need that Protestantism, grown more ideal to-day, should seek the courage and secure the consciousness of its own principles, and enter more fully into the largeness of reason. Then will be seen how little the thoughts of men have entered into the truth of religious individuality brought to the front by the Reformation, when they have been content to regard it as empty protest, on which might be inscribed, *Viduitas et sterilitas*, rather than something which “rests not now by day or night” till it shall see all crowns of power and intellect freely cast before the feet of Christ. Not in vain has an enlightened Protestantism meanwhile striven to realize that whereunto its greatest teachers have, in recent times, been seeking to bring it,—even that “equilibrium of the fixed and the alterable,” in which, through communion with a risen Lord, progress is rendered possible.