

## A CRITICISM OF MODERN THEOLOGY.

BY HERMON F. BELL.

NOT in criticism of traditional Christianity, whether that of the Apostles' Creed, of the Roman Church, of Calvinism, or of American Protestant orthodoxy, is the present article written. It is assumed that however vigorous these are in outward appearance or however widely held,—it is assumed that these traditional orthodoxies belong to the past, not to the future. So thoroughly have their premises been undermined that these beliefs will fall of themselves as soon as the more progressive churches and schools spread the results of modern study. But does this current liberal theology offer something better? Does it meet deep human need, or give strength to the faint-hearted in life's struggle? Our debt to modern Christian theology, such, for example as taught in Union Seminary, Yale, and similar institutions, is large,—so much so that it seems ungracious almost for these of us who enter into its heritage to speak the word of criticism. Yet this word needs to be said; and after all, will we not better prove ourselves worthy disciples of true scholars and devout men when we transcend their positions than when we accept their conclusions? They it is who enable us to pass beyond them.

Modern Christian theology is essentially negative. It is on the defensive. It is also illogical, but this is the result of its defensive position. Compelled to take away from the old theology continually, its endeavor is to retain the old terms and the old symbols and to show that they have value. There is lacking the all-compelling power of a comprehensive gospel that must be preached. The illogical position of modern Christian theology may be seen by a study of its teaching as to the Bible and as to Christ.

1. *The Bible.* Liberal Christianity makes the Bible the great subject of study. True it believes in the composite origin of the Pentateuch; in the Psalms as representing a great number of authors;

in the prophetic books as composite; and some, as Daniel for example, as very late; one at least, Jonah, as allegorical. It holds even that much of the Old Testament is colored by the prejudices, the fables and even by the jealousies and hatreds of the Hebrew people. As for the New Testament, the miraculous element is explained by natural causes or at any rate regarded as the less valuable part of the book. It is said that the part of the supreme worth is that which tells us of Christ. Do we ask why the Bible, not being infallible, is taken as the great book of religion, the answer given is that it is by reason of its witness to Christ.

2. *Christ.* Christ is not only the standard by which the Scriptures are judged, but he is the center of the theological and religious thought. He is not represented as the metaphysical second person of the Trinity. He is not believed in as the Creator of all things. At least, such expressions as are found in the prologue of John are either interpreted in a figurative sense, or treated simply as a part of the philosophy of that ancient time, which thus bore witness in its own terms to the moral supremacy of Jesus. Some believe in the Virgin Birth; some do not. Many are undecided. Nearly all agree that it is a question of relatively small importance. A few believe in the bodily, the physical resurrection of Jesus. The great majority do not, but believe in what they call the spiritual resurrection. This teaching concerning Jesus is certainly far from orthodox. How is it that Christ is, if anything, made even more than before the center of theology? It is said that we find Jesus to be supreme in the realm of morals and religion.

Modern liberal theology is Christo-centric because of what it finds Christ to be. It is Scriptural because the Bible best teaches us of Christ. And so, despite all the differences between the old theology and the new, the resulting changes in the worship of the churches or in the statements of religious belief are very slight. The Apostles' Creed can be repeated,—with a moral and religious rather than a metaphysical interpretation. The Bible occupies its old time place on the pulpit. Christ is still the center of religious thought and devotion. And this theology is professedly based upon the experience of the church universal.

The theology of a universal religion must be based upon the experience of the church universal. Notwithstanding its claim it is upon this very point that modern Christian theology is especially open to criticism. It does not rest upon universal experience. For one thing, it confines itself to the Christian Church; but in the church of the living God, we must include all who in all ages, have been

led by the Spirit of God. And who have been thus led? Certainly all who have achieved anything of goodness or had any visions of new life which they have carried forward to realization; for without God no man can accomplish anything. The experience of Moses and Isaiah surely counts for something; so does the experience of Socrates and Plato, to say nothing of the multitudes of true men and women unknown to fame. How contradictory then to appeal to the experience of the church universal to show that all that this church knows of God it knows through Jesus, when great numbers of its members lived before Jesus, and many of those who have come after never even heard of his name! How contradictory—unless the claim is that even though these patriarchs and leaders and teachers of men, both great and small, did not knowingly receive strength from Christ, yet it was in reality from him that they had power to be and to become sons of God. But modern theology makes this claim impossible by taking metaphysics from theology and resting its case simply upon the moral supremacy of Jesus. With its denial of a metaphysical Trinity—such as our fathers believed in—the new theology can no longer speak of Jesus as the light of every man coming into the world. It thus at one sweep shuts him out from communion with those who lived before he did, and also really denies its own great affirmation that all that the world knows of God it knows from Jesus. But perhaps it is not affirmed so strongly as this that all knowledge of God is through Jesus. Earnest men want the largest and fullest revelation of God it is possible for them to have. If Christ is not all, why make him the Alpha and Omega of theology and religion?

In reply to all this, perhaps it will be said that the Christian Church by its very existence, testifies to the present power of Jesus, or that the individual Christian to-day does receive strength from him, or that all the best that has been accomplished in the last two thousand years has been done under the influence of Jesus. There is considerable force to such statements. As a great historic person, Jesus has entered into human history and has left an influence that will not cease. Men to-day are made better when brought under the influence of Jesus. But so are men made better when brought under the influence of Lincoln, to take a single illustration. And it proves nothing to say that Lincoln influences men for good because consciously or unconsciously, he learned from Jesus, for so also Jesus received from those who lived before his time. Much confusion as to the present power of Jesus in the world to-day results from lack of clearness on the subject of the resurrection. What is meant by

a spiritual resurrection? Is it simply that the apostles thought they saw Jesus? Or is it that his influence has remained on earth? But it is true of all men that the good they do lives after them. Or did Jesus really appear in spiritual form? But if he appeared was it not in bodily form, for who has seen a spirit, or what is a spiritual form? Then, too, the question of prayer to Jesus or in the name of Jesus is here suggested. Prayer to Jesus if justified at all must be on the ground that Jesus is very God. Men pray only to whom they believe to be a present power. Is Jesus so present? Does he to-day restrain men from evil? Does he help them to be what they ought to be? Yes, he does, but none otherwise than by his example and his influence, as St. Francis does in his own degree. Unless we believe in a metaphysical Christ, who, like God, or we might say as God, is present, an indwelling spirit, how can we pray to Jesus? Modern liberal theology says Christ is not such a spirit, and yet it makes him the All in All of theology.

Modern theology is at fault in that it does not follow the logic of its own teachings. Either the conservatives are right and the new theology is wrong in its teaching as to the Bible and Jesus; or, if the new theology is right in the results of its scholarship it is open to criticism for still giving the Bible and Jesus the place it does. Modern Christianity has brought the Bible back from its infallible position and given it a place with the world's literature, but it continues to hold it apart from other books. It has taken the distinctively infinite attributes from Jesus, it confesses his limitations, yet it worships him and makes him authoritative;—and why? Because of his alleged sinlessness. But this sinlessness cannot be proven. We can no more speak of the sinlessness of Jesus than of the artistic perfection of Michael Angelo or Raphael. And every one knows that however great Angelo was as an artist, he was not perfect. He lacked some qualities that Raphael had, and *vice versa*. So Jesus lacked some qualities that Paul had. To say that by sinlessness we mean that Jesus did no wrong,—this is at best a merely negative statement. To say that he did everything that was right and that ought to be done, to say that he combined in perfect degree all good qualities,—this no man is able to assert. If the assertion is made, it is no more valid than the old proof for the infallibility of the Bible, namely, that when we read it we know that it finds us and we are inwardly convinced of the truth of what we read, hence every word, every part of the Bible is without error. It is a similar proof that is offered for the sinlessness of Jesus,—because this or that or all these incidents reveal his greatness and his goodness, the

conclusion is drawn that he was always without fault of any kind. If, however, any one prefers to appeal, as is often done, to the supposition that Jesus claimed to be perfect by word or by implication, let such a one remember that a similar proof for the infallibility of the Bible has proven inadequate. Unless Jesus perfectly and completely reveals all of God that we know, why make him the one leader, the one teacher, the one example? No man, not even Jesus, is great enough or wise enough, or good enough to be the sole authority in morals and religion.

Modern theology fails to meet the universal need not simply by reason of what it teaches, but far more by reason of what it neglects to say. It is at fault in confining itself to the Bible not so much because the Bible is not helpful as because there are other messages from God. To take one illustration. God spoke to the ancient Greeks in a way that He did not speak to the Hebrews or to any one else; and the Christian Church by taking no account of this message is neglecting the Word of God. To be sure, the Christian Church does not forbid men to study or to read these words spoken to other peoples than the Hebrews, but it does not, as a religion ought to do, stop men in the busy rush of life and say,—hold, here is a word of God for you. It does not in church or church school tell of that real Word of God which comprises all the great truths which courageous souls have seized upon down through the entire stream of human life. And God has sent us prophets even in recent years. There are Victor Hugo, and Goethe, and Browning, and Tennyson, and Carlyle with his message that might is divine because the only power that can accomplish lasting results is power that is righetous; and there is Emerson to teach us that self-reliance which is trust in the spirit within and above us. And there is Abraham Lincoln. As many lessons are to be gained by study of his life as that of David, who was taken from tending his father's sheep and made ruler over Israel. It is not enough once a year to suspend, as it were, religious exercises and preach a patriotic sermon on Washington or Lincoln, or of an evening to discuss the poetry of Browning or Tennyson. There is need of clear and emphatic witness to the great fact that the all-comprehending God has given us the enduring literature of all nations as His Divine Word. And this word asks not toleration, but demands its rightful place as the Book of the Church.

And modern theology fails in confining itself so much to the historic Jesus, not because his teaching is not helpful or his life inspiring, but because the Eternal Father, the Ever-present Spirit is

the one for whom our souls hunger and thirst. And He has not confined the revelation of Himself to one age or to one man. The Father Almighty spoke to Moses. He gave strength to Cyrus, His anointed. He made Cæsar the instrument of His will. He taught Demosthenes oratory. He gave Paul zeal for the Gospel he had experienced. He was the Father of Jesus and the God of Aquinas. He came to Mohammed in Arabia. He inspired Gautama with pity. Yes, and God is in the world to-day, the all real, the all vital, the all conquering fact of life. No mother's love but is token of a fuller love of God; no father's care but is from Him.

Did we think of saying that the Bible and Jesus adequately and perfectly reveal God? Millenniums of years and countless lives have told us only a little of His greatness and His goodness. Modern Christianity fails because it points men backward rather than forward for the ideal. The best is yet to be. Universal religion demands a universal Bible and an ever present God. Unless modern Christianity succeeds in showing the Bible, as at present, constituted to be absolutely unique, there must be a revision of the canon. Those who chose the present one are not competent to bind us to-day, any more than Ezra was competent to select the Gospels or the other New Testament books. How could he be when he lived before they were written? Unless modern Christianity can show as it has not yet done that Jesus, the historic man of Nazareth, is to be identified in a unique way with the ever present Spirit of God, it must cease to center around him. And it is not enough to appeal to the experience of the great body of Christians; for it stands to reason that even as one who had never traveled beyond his native country nor even read of foreign lands, unless with the object of becoming more firmly convinced of his own country's pre-eminence,—even as such a one would believe all the good to be within his own fatherland, and base his claim perhaps upon his own experience, so those who confine their religious reading to the Bible or books about the Bible, and their thought of God to Jesus (as the great body of Christians has done) would regard this book as pre-eminently the Word of God and Jesus the one authority and,—to prove these things, quote from their own experience. Nor can the burden of proof be shifted. It does not rest with such as the writer, but with modern Christians, because they are the ones who have themselves denied the infallibility of the Bible and the deity of Jesus. It lies before them either to present some valid reason for not accepting the logic of their own results, or else accepting it, to pass from Christianity to universal religion.