MODERN THEOLOGY: AN EXPLANATION AND JUSTIFICATION.

BY THE EDITOR.

MODERN Theology has undoubtedly its weak points, and Mr. Hermon F. Bell brings them out in his article "A Criticism of Modern Theology," published in the present number. We are glad that while criticising the science he studied, he at the same time gratefully recognizes how much he owes to it. We do not deny the justice of his criticism but we wish to say that there is another side to the question, and there are many things which can be said—we will not say in palliation of its faults, but certainly in their extenuation, which to an impartial judge will amount to a justification.

First we must consider that modern theology is in a state of transition. Its many inconsistencies are simply due to the fact that a reform can not attend to every detail at once. We build up and tear down, and while a new interpretation is growing traces of the old are still lingering with us.

There is, however, an additional reason for the inconsistencies of modern theology. Many theological thinkers see them all too plainly, but they know very well that the time has not yet come to declare from the housetops what they are willing to whisper into the ears of serious inquirers. If they were too frank in their utterances, they would give more offence than would be good for many people who are on the fence, uncertain whether perhaps all religion should not be discarded as a superstition.

Religious questions must be treated with great reserve, and students of a groping mind should be dealt with gently and with great consideration. This has necessitated the modern theologian to acquire the habit of writing between the lines much that he has to say, and the thoughts which he thus merely hints at are frequently the most important ones. It means that there are problems in modern theology which the professor is neither willing nor called upon
to solve for his students, but he must leave it to them to work out their own salvation.

The truth is that, so far as I can see, the development of theology is too rapid, and it would be better if it were retarded, for it would not be good for our social and public life if our religious convictions changed so quickly as to give the churches no chance to adapt themselves to the new conditions. They would go to the wall and a great institution which ought to be an enormous power for good would be lost thereby.

Incidentally I will say here that upon the whole the brake on the wheel of progress in the several congregations is not the clergyman but the vestry. The clergy as a rule have been confronted with the various problems of theology. To a great extent they are acquainted with the difficulties that beset their intellectual horizon, and they are more liberal than they dare to own in the pulpit. This statement should not be interpreted to mean that they are cowards, but only that they have sufficient tact not to unnecessarily offend the weaker brethren who have not yet grown into the stature of the freedom of the children of God. St. Paul's advice is heeded, that they should be treated with consideration, and there are many who still require milk and should not be fed with meat. It so happens that the most active members of the congregations, those who are at the same time the most ready to contribute to the support of their church, are exactly those who vigorously insist on adhering to the old traditions. These men are valuable and it would be a pity if they were to change their minds too quickly.

There are exceptions of course, and I have known vestrymen who work for progress, possibly a conservative progress, but then as a rule they are mostly in sympathy with the work of their pastor and constitute his best support.

We must also consider that the new theology has by no means been worked out to such an extent as to have led to a practical agreement. This appears, for instance, in a point upon which I would take issue with Mr. Bell. He seems to think that modern theology should discard the Christ idea and concentrate its sympathies on Jesus. I grant that many theologians, especially those of the most liberal churches such as the Unitarians, show a great preference for emphasizing the noble humanity of Jesus in contrast to the philosophical idea of Christ the God-man, but I take the opposite view: I prefer the Christ ideal to the Jesus of the Gospels, and am glad to notice that, though a minority, yet some very prominent theologians would side with me. Professor Pfleiderer, for instance, in
one of his latest publications says very boldly and frankly that the "Jesus sentimentality must go."

There is no doubt but that the most important idea in traditional Christianity is the doctrine of an ideal man, a divine example, a God-man, a type of perfection. We ought to cling to the ideal, and not to the accidental personality which on account of a certain historical coincidence has become the nucleus around which the ideal has crystallized. A critical study of the Gospels will reveal to us that the best features of the Jesus picture are the traits that have been superadded to those data which may be regarded as historically best attested. Take, for instance, the words of Jesus on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." It is one of the noblest expressions of a dying martyr, and yet it is a late addition which appears only in Western manuscripts, and there is little doubt but it has been inserted to prevent Jesus from falling behind the merit of Socrates, who when drinking the hemlock, bore no grudge against his enemies who had condemned him to death. All the events of Jesus's life which are positively historical indicate that his horizon was limited by the superstitions of Galilee, and it appears that he made his living by exorcising devils who were then assumed to be the cause of all diseases. The historical Jesus is not the man on whom future theology will have to rely, and it seems to me that there is more value in the so-called metaphysical speculations of the Christians frequently denounced as obsolete and hyper-orthodox, than in the rationalizing liberalism of the praise allotted to "the gentle Jesus." Let us bear in mind that our religion is not called Jesuanity but Christianity, and that in the actual development of the Church the foundation has always been the Christ ideal, their interpretation of Jesus to the Christ ideal of their time—never vice versa. The narrative of the life of Jesus never played any significant part in the foundation of the Christ ideal.

I will add only one more remark. Mr. Bell accuses modern theology of being negative, and I will say that frequent attempts have been made to state the positive doctrines of the new conceptions of the Christianity which is now dawning on mankind; but it is natural that none of them has as yet found universal recognition, and these formulations of the positive aspect of the new Christianity must so far be considered as mere attempts, mere propositions, mere suggestions, the acceptability of which is still under consideration. It is neither desirable, nor can it be expected, that a positive statement should become the common property of all the progressive denominations within a short time. The churches are in a state of
fermentation and we must not be impatient. The period of growth, the period of clarification, must have its time and we must bear in mind that here philosophy will have to come to the aid of theology. The new Christianity will have to seek its foundation not in historical statements, not in special books, but in eternal truths. They may utilize historical material, but it will never provide them with the bottom rock on which they can build with safety.

If the Christ ideal remains a living force in the Church, we need not cling with such nervous anxiety to the figure of Jesus, nor be troubled whether it is historical or legendary.

Modern theology so far has made remarkable progress. The leaders in the movement have done wonderful work, and that their labors are not yet finished, that the solution of the problems has not yet been brought to a consummation is certainly not their fault, but is due to the difficulties that attend the situation.

Mr. Bell's very criticism of modern theology is an evidence that its seed is working most successfully in the hearts of the growing generation. He works on in the spirit in which he has been taught, and in his modest way he recognizes the fact. His article is instructive and I would even say true. I sympathize with his attitude and expect that our readers will do the same, but at the same time I feel that it would be unfair to let the accusation stand as if the shortcomings of modern theology should be laid at its own door. There is another side to the question and it is for this reason that I took up the pen to write a word of explanation of the apparent inconsistencies of modern theology.