

THE BAPTISTS IN THE BUILDING OF THE NATION

I

A General Background

Of the nature of the novel government set up by Christ there can be but one conclusion. Great conquerors had preceded him, and by feat of arms had wrought prodigies in the subjugation of nations to their individual sway, and by awe and terror, the nations thus subdued, were held in submission to the wills of the conquerors. Force was the dominant element in the world, and fear the condition produced by means of which conquerors domineered, and sovereigns reigned. No other method had before been known, no other conceived or thought of. These conquerors had hailed from the ruling class, from royal palaces and from thrones of dominion. For centuries this rule had prevailed till it was recognized as the natural order. The common people were thought of as nothing more than as machines, through the toil of whom thrones were upheld, palaces maintained, and the aristocratic class was enabled to luxuriate. The state was supreme, the people were only herds employed for its sustenance. Ripening through ages, this had come to be thought of as the normality of existence.

At the acme of this condition, a young man appeared on the scene, not from the circles of royalty, but from the ranks of the laboring peasantry. His birth-place

was the stall of an ox, his mother was a maiden from the base of the pyramid of society, his rearing was in the atmosphere of the shop of a carpenter, his social surroundings the humblest, his home in the Galilean hills, his associations the lowliest in the scale of society.

In the flush of young manhood, he began a propaganda which, in comparison with prevailing conditions, seemed not only fanciful but to the highest degree fanatical. At first, he excited but slight notice, save among the unlettered masses, where emotion and passion are most easily roused, and where stable thought is least expected. The effervescent crowd, like the cloud, is liable to every sort of shape and expression, an hour later the opposite of that which it was the hour before.

While this young Nazarene was artlessly and unostentatiously instilling his supposed visionary views into the minds of the common mass, Caesar was serene in his palace, for the time undisturbed, and really unaffected by that which was taking place. His armies were quartered in different parts of the world, and his word was law. This represented the physical prowess of the world, as the proclamations of the Roman throne were sustained by a veteran soldiery.

The main seat of the world's thought was at Athens where Sophists were still raising questions of abstraction which the world ever since has been seeking to answer. To discover something new in thought, and to stir mental activity by some novel proposition or problem, was the serious concern of the Athenian school of philosophy.

This newness of thought was already issuing from an un conjectured source, and it was of a nature so simple, that it could not have stirred a ripple on the surface of Athenian thought, nor have excited philosophic serenity, while its initial demonstration as concerned forcefulness, would not have elicited so much as a concessive sneer either at Rome or Athens.

Had it been possible, at the time, to telegraph or telephone to Athens and Rome on the occasion of the delivery of the Sermon on the Mount, that which the young reformer from the hills was proclaiming, it might have elicited nothing more than disdainful pity for a poor, deluded young Jew, who deserved nothing more than a transient contempt. Yet there were embodied in that simple discourse elements dynamic of dynasties and at the same time conducive to a fresh type of manhood for the world.

Here was beginning a process more than merely revolutionary, it was reversive. Here was commencing a campaign of the ages, the object of which was nothing less than that of turning the world upside down. There was being placed in the current of the world's thought, a rock, not only in arrest of its flow, but one which would turn the current upstream. It was literally the signal of an era when old things were to pass away, and all things were to become new.

The passive virtues long buried, and no longer thought of among men, were raised to new life, and were to supplant in dominance those bristling with force and controlled by fear. Classism was to be swept aside and thrown on the junk pile of the obsolete. The high state was to be overset, and the low individual

raised on high. Force in the control of men physically and in soul-life was to be subverted from its lordly function, and simple suasion substituted instead. Fear by means of which provinces and dominions were held in subject, was to be displaced by love. It was an era of opposites. Antipodal conditions were to be everywhere introduced, fathoming humanity to the lowest point, and about-facing all things. The world all-wrong, was to be made the world all-right.

Nothing less serious than this was the undertaking of this young man from Nazareth. His social position and prestige suggested the reversal—a man of the common people encountering the crowned heads and armed forces of the world. Individuality as a crowning feature of the new movement, was emphasized and symbolized by the fact that, single-handed, he assumed the tremendous venture.

But most astounding of all was the announcement of this unschooled young man from notorious Nazareth, that he would establish an empire that would be inclusive of all nations and races, kindreds and tribes, without special regard to one more than to another, and while in the world, this empire was not to be of the world. Stranger still, it was to be an empire of heart and of character rather than of geographical provinces, divided into heptarchies, oligarchies, satrapies, and hierarchies. It was to be an invisible kingdom, upheld not by lust of power, but by loyalty of love.

That of which Rome had dreamed in the successful carriage of her eagles through the ancient Gallic provinces and into the British isles far westward, com-

ing into the control of the world, then known, was to disintegrate under the mystic power of an empire without arms. That for which philosophic Greece yearned in a quest for "some new thing," was already present in the world. With the quietness of the morning, a new province of thought had been opened. Just as noiselessly, a new sphere of activity had been disclosed. A new impulse to achieve had been introduced. A new estimate of humanity had been established. All things had become new.

But to all this was added an element of support, quite as novel, if not more so, as any already named. To project the enterprise of a world-empire would have been the absurdest of dreams, if it had been left to a mere declaration. Government must have support. In an undertaking so bold as that projected by Jesus, there must be means of sustenance. By exacting taxation, wrung from the people in their poverty, governments had often prosecuted wars. Like other Governments, this must rely on efficient and loyal supporters, without which any government would be meaningless. Just as novel as all else, in this new movement, was the reliance of Jesus on individual voluntariness. He drafted no one, used not the least compulsion, but counted on men and women who were willing to give their lives for him. Subjection? Yes, but a subjection in which were involved individuality, voluntariness, personal choice, and personal faith. In this way, subjection to Christ became freedom.

But in view of the overwhelming physical forces at the command of conquerors and monarchs, might not this loyalty be intercepted and coerced into compliance

to the great powers? Not when men and women were armed with an inner force that was at once invincible and indestructible. This new force was also divinely vitalized. Once implanted, it could no more be blotted out or eradicated than one can snuff out the sun. It lay altogether beyond the reach of physical implements of torture and death.

What was this wonderful quality? Faith. But had not faith before existed? Yes, it is a quality that is inherent in every one, but now it is magnified in strength such as it never before had. So augmented was this inner force that it became practically a new creation. Charged with this new gift, disaster was met undismayed. Under its sway no labor was counted too great to be attempted, no sacrifice was esteemed too great to be made. Faith by the prodigy of its nature and by the possibility of its achievement, became a new word in the world's vocabulary. No word corresponding with the idea, as it was expressed in the deed of that time, was in either the Greek or Roman language. The original term was touched by the gospel into a new significance and a new potency never before known to men. Nor again did faith stand alone either in proportion or in efficacy of achievement. Behind it, and in inseparable connection with it was love, endowed with the same inextinguishable life. Neither was of course visible as a target for the aim of the oppressor or the persecutor. Displayed as these forces were, they won sympathy, when persecution fell on their possessors, roused interest, and served to awaken it in others. Thus incarnated and multiplied as these soul-forces were, there came another reversal

of the general order of things—defeat was turned into victory. Persecution is its own vanquisher. A worthy cause prospers in proportion to its persecution. There is that within men which responds to that to which the meritorious are subjected. Not a few causes are indebted to that which they have endured. When once on the high tableland of success, won through stress of storm and struggle, fagot, and sword, a cause becomes doubly valiant, and is correspondingly prized.

Faith and love with their sister, hope, sank themselves in everlasting rootage in the natures of men and women, in the early days of Christianity, for the perpetual welfare of the race. In their transcendent stoutness, they were never to pass from the earth. Not even the gates of hell should prevail against them. To the end of time, they were to flourish among men, both benignantly and aggressively. Meek in spirit, yet courageous in virtue, this triad of divine graces was to march down the centuries with conquering tread, overcoming even in disaster, resplendent in deepest darkness, rejoicing in tribulation.

There was no flaw in the government fashioned by the divine Founder. He said "My kingdom is not of this world," hence it formed no alliances, entered on no treaties, created no pacts, exacted no indemnities, imposed no tributes, formed no compromises. No naturalization document was needed to become a citizen of this spiritual commonwealth. The sole condition was embodied in just two words—"Only believe." An invisible kingdom, the condition was also an invisible factor. Invisible as the kingdom was, Rome, long a

blusterer, and grown arrogant by its prowess of arms, dissolved under its hidden power and sank in a common crash of ruin.

In the adventurer, Constantine, we find the world's first great demagogue which is only another way of saying that he was a prodigious hypocrite. Of the craftiness of this man but little needs to be said, but in his shrewdness he paid tribute to Christianity, not because of love or loyalty, but because he saw how powerful a party the Christians had become, and so beguiling them by a fake profession of faith, he lured them to trouble. While Constantine's motive was one purely selfish, yet on the obverse side of the transaction is seen the power to which Christianity had attained in the Roman world, and the footing which an astute politician was willing to accord it.

Here came an adverse turn in the tide of affairs. Church and state were merged in the introduction of an issue that was to extend with attendant blood and horror, far into the future ages. It is obviously out of the question to follow this struggle in any other than in the most general way. It is sufficient alone to say that there was an issue raised in the repeated assertion of the divine right, not of kings, but of the kingdom of heaven.

Had it been possible to quench in death the life of the church of Jesus Christ, it would have been done during the Middle Ages. Turning the same question about, it may be said that since the essence of Christianity could not be smothered by the flummery of the Dark Ages, when every enginery known to the machinations of men was enlisted in its extinction, it is safe,

BAPTISTS IN THE BUILDING OF THE NATION

not only, but its perpetuity is established by reason of its indestructibility. Like the peaks of mountains rising from a world of fog, the facts of the aggressive movements against "The Church," lift themselves along the centuries of the Dark Ages.

Sporadic movements against an impious institution called "The Church," rose and went, and though these movements were inoculated with the poison of the mother system, from which they came, they yet retained a modicum of the original virility once imparted, and sufficiently to give evidence of the fact that spiritual liberty was not extinct. Whatever may be said of these divers movements, called by different names in church history, though sometimes expressing themselves fanatically and even frantically, there is discerned within them the spirit of religious freedom. They were protests in behalf of individual liberty, responsibility to God rather than to men, direct personal approach and appeal to the one Mediator, disunion of church and state, elbow room and breathing-space for conscience and soul.

Neither should the fact be overlooked that, though temporarily suppressed, the spirit embodying the elements already named, rose again and yet again, with ever increasing strength and boldness, and with clearer perception each time of that first taught by the Son of God. This augmented force bore against the hierarchical obstructions raised to stay its progress, till they were finally compelled to give way.

Then came the era of the Reformation. Nor must the fact be overlooked that the Reformation was far from being the work of one man. Around the name

of Martin Luther the fame of the Reformation is grouped, but he could never have successfully moved an inch but for the undertow of popular sentiment running in a strong current in the same direction and with the same objective that he had. Luther was a hero, a virile but defective leader, but the monk of Erfurt would have been powerless but for the support of the common people, who had endured and struggled generations before Luther was born.

When in surprise and joy Luther fell on the old copy of the New Testament in the musty archives at Erfurt, and found on reading it the wide difference between its teachings and those of the hierarchy of which he was a priest, and when beginning to change his manner and method of preaching, by conforming to the model of the New Testament, then came the clash with the Pope, which resulted in the storm-burst of the Reformation. This was the signal for the demonstration of the spirit and strength of the common people. Not only were they ready, but prompt to act. On his way to answer the summons of Charles V., before whom he was to give account of his "new doctrine," he was heartened along the route by the plaudits of the crowds.

It is true that Luther failed the masses at a critical juncture, and espoused the cause of the German princes against them, but the people never flinched in the loyalty of devotion to the cause of which Luther was the leader. Hero and leader as he was, it is not to the credit of Luther that he turned from being the friend of the people to being that of the princes.

Issuing from the stormy contest occasioned by the

Reformation were two distinct classes of religionists. One of these, discolored traditionally by the long-continued sway of Romanism, retained not a little of the stain which has been permanently held in one form or another to this day. The other, a distinct group, standing apart from the party just named insisted on a return of conformity to the mold of New Testament doctrine. Belonging to the first class named, were the great leaders of the Reformation—Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and Melancthon, while not a great outstanding figure connected with the movement was found on the other side, favoring a return to the model of the New Testament—so imbued were these great men by the errors long inculcated by Rome. Certain grave errors had become invested with sacredness, and these had become so deeply engrafted that they were not extracted at a juncture which meant so much to the future of the world. Among others that might be named, were the two grave errors of infant baptism and the union of state and church.

The opportunity afforded by the Reformation was that of a prompt restoration in ascendancy of the principles taught by Christ. That opportunity was, in large measure lost, at the time, and with it was lost the logical meaning of the Reformation. Partial adoption was only partial victory, while the errors insistently retained, lent encouragement and stimulation to the impious system against which the reformers had in common battled. The retainment of Romish errors logically led to the retention of the means and measures of Rome of their coerced enforcement. If the false doctrines had been brought over from Rome, so

was the infamous practice of persecution. Hence the force of persecution was invoked on the hither side as it had been on the thither—all of which was at direct variance with the teaching of the New Testament.

Thus as it turned out, the battle had been but half won, and the conflict for soul freedom had to be renewed on this side of the Reformation, now among those who had been common sharers in breaking off the Romish yoke. With this mere incident of the formidable movement, that of throwing off the yoke of the papacy, the chief leaders were mainly content, while the intent of the group representing the notion of full religious freedom, was that of a thorough restoration of original doctrine and practice, as promulgated by Christ.

Here sprang up a new contest for religious liberty. Impelled by the same motive and spirit which had actuated them under Romish sway, these lovers of conscience-freedom were as ready to do, and die if need be, for that inestimable boon. With nothing short of that which Christ had prescribed for the full exercise of the free forces within men for the weal of humanity and the glory of God, would they be content. While that spirit had been displayed, in the transient outbreaks which now and then took place during the Dark Ages, it now assumed a distinct form under those who were stigmatized and persecuted as despised Anabaptists.

Now began in a fresh way, the conflict of the centuries which centered about soul-freedom. God still had his witnesses among men. They were of the common folk, but were not without great leadership, which

was developed by the new crisis. Balthaser Hubmaier and John Denck are names that must forever be unseparated from the annals of the battles of soul-freedom. Men like these stood as immovable as mountains against the half-way reforms of Luther and his compeers, and because of their conscientious protest and of that of their followers, they were hounded to the death, as had been the reformers before the Reformation. The history of this long and bloody struggle in Europe cannot be further pursued here. It is only enough to say that for centuries it was kept up in Europe, and came to involve much else, in consequence of the pernicious doctrines retained by the Reformation leaders after that they had passed beyond the jurisdiction of the Romish See. State and church became intermixed in a dreadful knot and complication, but God was still guarding the issue.