

## ARTICLE IV.

## THE REFORMATION FROM A BAPTIST POINT OF VIEW.

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THE Reformation of the sixteenth century, like any other great historical movement, may be approached in three ways. We may go back into the remote past and trace minutely the course of events that has here and now found its culmination; we may show that the seed-sowing and the soil being as they were, the harvest is precisely what might have been expected. Or, we may take the movement as we find it, analyze it into its constituent elements, trace the motives and aims of leaders and led, trace the immediate and remote moral and spiritual effects, test every thing by the eternal principles of right and truth, as determined by conscience and the written Word. Or, again, we may view the movement as a link in the chain of the accomplishment of the divine purposes, knowing that the Almighty is able to make evil forces to co-operate with good thereunto. This last process we ought always to apply, so essential is it to the proper understanding of the ways of God to men. But we must beware of supposing that this process in any way precludes the first or the second process suggested. The knowledge that divine Providence has overruled a particular course of events for the accomplishment of beneficent ends by no means bars criticism of the actors; no more does it affect the fact that this series of events is itself the product of antecedent evil commingled with antecedent good.

And here we must remember that the cause of God on earth progresses not in straight lines like a railroad train across yonder prairie, but like yonder tossing ship on yon-

der surging ocean. It makes progress from age to age, but, owing to the perversity of men, not clear and constant progress. Sometimes it seems to lose ground; but, after all, the apparent loss is transmuted by divine alchemy into means of future gain.

Further, it is not enough that the actors in any great movement be shown to have been sincere. We are to judge according to the eternal principles of right and truth, not according to the conceptions of right and truth that may have been in the minds of such actors. My abhorrence of Moloch worship is not diminished, but rather increased, by my belief that parents often threw their children into the red-hot arms of the image *conscientiously*. The Inquisition is rendered none the less sickening by the certainty that many of its agents felt that in acting the part of incarnate devils they were doing God service.

And here, also, let me warn the reader against a tendency which Baptists share with others, but which in Baptists is more stultifying than in others, towards a blind hero-worship of certain religious teachers of the sixteenth century. Why, it is no uncommon thing to hear Baptist orators descant upon the virtues of these leaders in language which, *nominibus mutatis*, might properly be applied to the apostles! and that, too, when these very men would not have hesitated to urge our extermination by fire, sword, or water, if we had been their contemporaries, as they did urge the extermination of our brethren in Christ, and some of whose moral teachings were more Mormon than Christian. Let us test the titles of popular religious heroes to our adoration. In so far as they apprehended the Spirit of Christ and manifested this Spirit in their words and in their deeds, let us honor them. If, however, we find contemporaries who more perfectly apprehended Christ, and who more perfectly manifested his Spirit in word and in deed, let us not hesitate to make these our heroes, although they may not have drawn to the support of their cause the unregenerate mighty of this world, and although they may have been hunted down like

wild beasts by the men who, on the theory that might makes right, are generally regarded as the great champions of the truth. *Christ* did not convert men by nations, neither did *Paul*. *Mohammed* and *Charlemagne* did. *Hübmaier* did not make Protestants by nations. *Luther* did. *Christ* made individual, earnest Christians: *Charlemagne* made hypocrites and cringing slaves to external forms. *Hübmaier* made, with divine help, *self-sacrificing Christians*. *Luther* made *self-indulgent Protestants!*

We need not apply at length this third method of considering our subject. All the world recognizes the fact that the Protestant revolution of the sixteenth century forms a most important factor in the working out of our modern civilization and enlightenment, with its freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, with its spiritual religion as opposed to a religion of dead forms, with its apostolic missionary endeavor as opposed to mediæval religious conquest. This we never weary of rejoicing in and thanking God for. Nay, I maintain that the fundamental principle of the Protestant revolution was the emancipation of the human mind from human authority, far as this was from being consciously recognized by the Protestant leaders. This is my unwavering conviction. Just so I believe that the capture of Christian Constantinople by the Turks was a factor that can not be estimated too highly in the working out of the divine plan of Christian liberty and enlightenment. No thanks to the Turk. No thanks *a priori* to the leaders of the Protestant revolution. We are thus, I trust, in a position to put a fair estimate upon each individual, in accordance with historical facts; and we shall not be tempted to reverence an individual for the sole reason that he sustained an important relation to a movement which has, on the whole, resulted in good.

To understand the Reformation we must know wherein the need for reform lay. To appreciate this need we must have in mind, in broad outline at least, the course of events