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I. LITERARY.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE "NEW INSPIRATION."

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There are some among us who first turned the pages of the Bible to see the color and pictured form of men and things whose story was already familiar from parental lips. From picture to print we passed and found the narrative there recorded in exact agreement with the stories told us in childhood. Again and again we sought the printed pages only to find all these stories linked together in one great history. The "Father in Heaven" of our daily prayer was found to be the speaker, in his own Divine Person, on many pages of the sacred book. Character by character the nature of His Personality was unfolded to us. The Creator of the opening chapter was declared to be the Moral Governor in the chapters immediately following; then, by degrees, he was set forth as the Father, the Redeemer and the Comforter of those people whom He had before selected. Yet in all these varying manifestations of His character, He was declared to be 'the same, yesterday, today and forever.'

Closely interwoven with the web of these statements concerning the character of God, we found also a history of human character. Nations and individuals were described with reference to the relationship existing between them and the Invisible God. The character of men was always measured by our infallible standard—the character of God. Hence,

SKETCH OF A SERMON PREACHED BEFORE THE PRESBYTERY OF ARKANSAS.

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Jer. 6:16; "Thus saith the Lord, stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls."

A very much perverted text. It is about twenty-five hundred years old; the old paths then to which it refers must be very old indeed. And yet every man interprets it as applying to what he thinks is the "good old way," and piously quotes it in exhortation to the rising generation to return to the ways in which he used to walk when he was a boy. One good old brother thinks it means the way they used to do in North Mississippi Presbytery. Some apply it to the good old times of the Westminster Assembly, of John Knox, of Calvin and the Reformers. A devout Episcopalian might with equal propriety apply it to the good old times of Archbishop Laud, or a Romanist to the good old times before the Reformation. But in looking for the old paths of the text we must look for something older than the ways of the childhood of the oldest man among us. This text was written before the days of Confucius or Herodotus, and three centuries before the time of Alexander the Great. Books that to us are venerable with antiquity were written many centuries afterward. Not the paths of our Puritan or Scotch ancestors then, not the paths of the reformers, not the paths of the primitive church, not the paths of Jeremiah, but something older, older still than any of these. It seems strange, does it not, that ways which to us are old,—so old that the imagination fails to grasp the lapse of time, should be denounced as new? It seems that away back even in that ancient time the distinction had been made between "new-fangled" and "old fogy." It has always been the custom to distinguish between orthodoxy and heresy by the terms "old" and "new." There have always been in the world two classes of minds; those who cling to tradition and those who despise it. The one love and reverence the old, because it is old, the other thirst for the new because it is new. With the one class it is sufficient to condemn any doctrine or practice,

that it is new. I preached one cold day in January in an old Presbyterian church in South Carolina which had no stove, and the only reason given was that the old members resisted the introduction of one as an "innovation." The other class have no patience with anything that is old. If a man dares to try to reform old errors or abuses, or to favor progress of any kind, he is condemned by the first class with one word; "He is an innovator." If on the other hand he defends old truths against the radical spirit of the times, the second class express their contempt for him in one word, "He is an old-fogy." Now in the matter of religious doctrine or practice this question is a very serious one: Are we to make no progress? On the other hand, are we to cast away all that is old, all that we have revered and held dear from our childhood? Both parties are to-day urging us to join them. The thoughtless generally make their choice through the influences of their environment, or the prejudices of education, without examining the fundamental principles which underlie these two habits of thought. The question is then very important, What is true progressiveness, and what is true conservatism? Are they opposed to each other? Must one be an extremist in one direction or the other? Is there no mean? Must one be always the same, either always conservative or always progressive? If not, when should one be conservative and when progressive in matters of religion? Is there any rule? There is such a rule, and it is found in the words of the text. "Ask for the old paths." What then is meant by the old paths? We have already seen that it cannot refer to what may be deemed old or new in any particular age. The terms old and new as ordinarily used are merely relative. What is new to one age will be old to another. The heresy of one century may be the orthodoxy of the next. By the orthodox standard of his times Christ was a heretic, an innovator,—yet he was but republishing old truths, clearing away the rubbish of centuries of error. Luther was a heretic, a teacher of new things, yet his doctrines were older than the dogmas of his persecutors. Error is not new. It is often said truly that there is no such thing as a new heresy. New phases of the same error there may be, but the student of history can recognize it under all its disguises as the same old thing. And while error is not new, truth is never old in the sense that it is obsolete.

We cannot therefore make it a rule either to accept or reject anything because it is old or new in the relative sense. We may thus embrace some error that is hoary with antiquity, or reject some newly discovered gem from the mine of truth. Or we might cast away as a glass bauble some diamond of truth cut and polished centuries ago, while we seized some worthless pebble mistaking it for a diamond in the rough. Every seeker after truth should pray to be delivered both from blind reverence for tradition, and from an equally blind craze for novelty.

Why then are we exhorted to ask for the *old* paths? If age or novelty in the relative sense is no test of truth or error, why then does the prophet distinguish the *good* way, the way in which we shall find rest for our souls, as the *old* paths? Let us see.

The natural tendency of man's religious progress is downward, away from truth. In other words, religion, considered merely as natural, is subject to the law of degeneration. Unless there be some absolute standard by which all religion is to be judged, and some force from above and without to bring it back to that standard, it will inevitably degenerate. This statement is in the teeth of the theory of the natural development of religion, and a full discussion of it would require a treatise on comparative mythology. But the facts will support the assertion. Confucianism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Mohammedanism, Greek and Roman mythology, are all examples of the inevitable tendencies to decay of human religions. The only apparent exception to the rule in the religious history of the world is the Jewish religion, culminating in Christianity. Viewed as a whole, here we see progress, from the religion of the patriarchs, through the Laws of Moses, through the prophecies to the teaching of Christ. The only way to account for the apparent exception is the admission that this progress is due, not to anything inherent in Judaism considered merely as a natural religion, but to the fact that there was a supernatural power developing it by a preordained plan into the Christian religion. But the law of degeneration is proved by a study even of the Jewish-Christian religion. Even where an absolute standard had been given, even where truth had been supernaturally revealed, the history of its progress was one of alternate backslidings and revivals. This series of alternations may be traced all through Biblical and Ecclesiastical

tical history. This alternation cannot be accounted for on the supposition of a natural development. The only solution is the supposition that during the periods of backsliding the Spirit of God was grieved away from the great body of the church, and they were thus left to the operation of the natural law of decay ; and that the periods of reformation and revivals were brought about by the direct interposition of the Author of revealed religion. Although a comparatively excellent, and even perfect religion be given as a starting point, yet man's progress, if left to the working of the laws of his own sinful nature, will be downward. Monotheism will degenerate into polytheism and superstition, righteousness into pharisaical casuistry, and worship into formality.

It follows therefore that there is need of some absolute standard in religion which abides the same through all the changes of human thought, which is above the law of degeneration, by which all ways new and old may be tried, and man led back from error to truth. Such a standard then would be old in the highest sense. Since it abides the same through all ages, seeing the birth, growth and decay of all human systems of religion, it must be always old in comparison with the ways of departure from truth ; though it will always seem new to a generation which has forgotten it. This then is the old way to which the Prophet referred ; not to the ways of his childhood, not to the time of Moses or the patriarchs, but the old paths of God's revealed word. The original is *נתיבות עולם* "THE PATHS OF ETERNITY." They are old then, not in any relative sense, but in the same sense in which God is old, in the absolute sense.

Now we are in position to define true conservatism and true liberality. True conservatism consists in such firm adherence to the revealed standard as will resist any departure from it ; and true progressiveness consists in such independence of all human tradition as will enable us to develop in conformity to that standard. False conservatism is blind adherence to tradition, while false progressiveness or liberalism is equally blind hatred of tradition. Such false conservatism will impede reformation and progress in conformity to God's Word ; while such liberalism will break the anchor of faith, and drive man out into the ocean of unbelief. Either is wrong. The seeker after truth should avoid both.

Since the history of religious doctrine shows that there are

these alternating periods of decadence and reformation, the question whether the conservative or the progressive spirit should preponderate will depend upon the times in which a man may live, or upon his individual environment. Of course there should always be true progress, but there are times when progress should be slow and cautious. When a train is going down grade the brakes should be put on, but it should not be stopped. The lover of sound doctrine must be prepared under some circumstances to be called a heretic and an innovator by bigoted traditionalists, and under other circumstances to be called a bigot by the radical liberalists. The few leaders of religious thought who have followed the straight path of God's revealed Word have found themselves first on one side and then on the other of the wavering line of public opinion.

I present this subject through this magazine because it is a matter requiring profound thought and earnest prayer on the part of our young students of theology as to whether the times and circumstances in which they live call for thinkers of predominantly conservative or progressive spirit. While one should not be either exclusively, yet one or the other is almost certain to preponderate, and the outset of his ministerial career is the time that determines which. It is generally admitted that this is a progressive age. The spirit of radicalism and liberalism is rife. The prevalence of infidelity without, and rationalism within the church seems to show that the times call for conservative thinkers. That even the Presbyterian church, in America, Great Britain and elsewhere, is agitated by controversies on the subject of the inspiration of the Bible, is an alarming symptom. The fact that the conservators of sound doctrine are caricatured in the cartoon papers, that they are described in the editorials of leading secular papers as bigoted persecutors, while the applause of the galleries is with the preacher who has broken his ordination vows, shows on which side martyrdom for the truth is to be found. For a young minister to take his stand deliberately on the side of conservatism will require a high order of moral courage. He must expect to have the words "bigot," "heresy-hunter," "persecutor," and all the other terms of reproach in which the vocabulary of liberalism is rich, hurled at him. But it is my own profound conviction that the young man who dares to do this now, will, before another generation pass away, find him-

self in the van of religious thought, a leader among the progressives.

On the other hand, while the spirit of the age is progressive to an extreme, the predominating spirit of the Southern Presbyterian church is intensely conservative. Well that it is so. Many profound thinkers in other churches congratulate us that God in His Providence has given us this fortress to hold while the battle is raging around us. But here lies a danger. We are doubtless the more intense in our conservatism because the spirit of the age is too liberal. We may err on the other extreme. It cannot be maintained we are perfect in our conformity to the Word of God either in matters of doctrine or polity, and that we have no progress to make. And yet every effort to depart from the "good old ways" of seventy-five or a hundred years ago to a closer conformity to the "old paths" of God's word meets with strenuous resistance. A man who, in another church, might be considered intensely conservative, is in danger of being branded as a radical in our church. It is not impossible that our church may lose her influence and power as a conservative force in the church at large by too intense conservatism. Let us take care that we do not deserve to be called bigoted and narrow minded.

To be at once orthodox and liberal in the true sense, to be at once conservative and progressive just in the right proportion, to be sound in the faith, and at the same time charitable to those whom we believe to be in error, is a subject for the prayers of a life-time.

It will require more than human steadfastness and courage, more than human wisdom, more than human love. Only he who has the Spirit of his Master can attain to it.

