

THE PRESBYTERIAN AND REFORMED REVIEW

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I.

PHILIP MELANCHTHON.

FEBRUARY 16, 1897, will be the four-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Philip Melancthon. The Protestant world will remember to celebrate the day as one of gracious influences. For the name of the most irenic spirit among the noble group of the great reformers is one that all the churches delight to honor. Lacking the vigor and originality of his great chief, falling short of the constructive force of the resourceful Calvin, and representing in himself no national movement as did Zwingli and Knox, yet as the tried and trusted lieutenant of the mighty leader of the German Reformation, the calm and scholarly theologian, the judicious and temperate advocate, he holds a place of deserved prominence and even more deserved affection. Luther in one of his fine bursts of enthusiasm wrote of him: *Res et verba Philippus; verba sine re Erasmus; res sine verbis Lutherus; nec res nec verba Carolostadius.* Such an estimate was more than kind to Melancthon in so far at least as the comparison with Luther himself was concerned. It was to Luther in no small measure that Melancthon owed his capacity for deeds; without Luther to wield the weapons which he forged in his intellectual armory it is to be feared that the fires in the forge would often have gone out. He shares from their close comradeship a large part of Luther's fame as the herald of intellectual and religious freedom, yet, by the temperate spirit which animated his words and acts, escapes the hostility so often stirred by his rash and rough-spoken leader. If at times he yields too much in the effort to reconcile

VII.

HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL NOTES.

LUTHER AND RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION.

It is certainly with no feeling of satisfaction that we affirm that Luther taught the lawfulness of putting men to death on account of their religion. In taking this ground, we are aware that we run counter to the prevalent belief among Protestants of all denominations. But the evidence we can give of our position is only too clear and complete. Perhaps it might be truthfully affirmed that none of the Reformers of the sixteenth century protested so vehemently against religious intolerance as Luther did. But we think it might also with equal truth be maintained that none of them has expressed himself so strongly in its favor. No one could suspect the late Dr. Schaff of wishing to make Luther shine in unmerited glory to the disparagement of the Reformers of his native country, Switzerland. Yet in the sixth volume of his *Church History*, in the interesting preliminary chapter on "Protestantism and Religious Liberty," he declares that "Luther was the most advanced among the Reformers in the ideas of toleration and liberty," and quotes several noble utterances of his against the use of force in religion. The last, written in 1528, is in these words: "I can in no way admit that false teachers should be put to death; it is enough that they should be banished." From this declaration Dr. Schaff maintains that Luther approved of the punishment of false teachers or heretics only to the extent of banishment, but no further (p. 60). This, too, is the view of K stlin.*

Unfortunately the Luther of 1543 was not the Luther of 1528, who would "in no way admit that false teachers should be put to death." At the later period of his life the violence could hardly be exceeded with which he urged that the sword of persecution should be employed against false teachers and blasphemers among the Jews. And we may be sure that Luther, if he had lived long enough to learn the blasphemy of Servetus, would have counseled the exercise of like severity towards the man who could call the Trinity adored by ordinary Christians "a three-headed Cerberus."

It was in the year 1543 that Luther published the treatise entitled "*Von den Juden und ihren L gen*" (*On the Jews and Their Lies*). Good would it have been for his reputation if this work had never appeared. There is a lamentable difference between the sentiments

* See a letter from K stlin in Schaff's *Church History*, Vol. vii, p. 705.

expressed in it and those we find in Luther's earlier writings, respecting the way in which the Jews should be treated. From this melancholy production of his pen, as contained in volume xx of Walch's edition of Luther's *Sämmtliche Schriften*, our quotations are taken. In column 2476, Luther, speaking of the Jews, says that it is our guilt that we do not avenge the innocent blood which they have shed and put them to death : " So ist auch unser Schuld, dass wir das grosse unschuldige Blut so sie vergossen nicht rächen, sie nicht todtschlagen." The innocent blood that we are to avenge with death is that of our Lord (for the crime of whose crucifixion Luther would punish the Jews of his own time), and that of Christians shed by Jews for three centuries after the destruction of Jerusalem, and that of children which Luther believed Jews were still in the habit of shedding. Luther's wrath against the Jews was so dreadful that he would not allow them to live in comfortable houses. He would have their houses destroyed, and have them reduced to the condition of such miserable vagrants as the Gypsies. He would allow them only to have the shelter of a roof over their heads, or to put up in stables instead of houses, that they might by bitter experience know that they were in the misery and bondage of which they were accustomed to complain incessantly before God (col. 2479). In the same column he counsels that their Rabbis should be forbidden to teach *on the pain of death* : " dass man ihren Rabbinen bei Leib und Leben verbiete, hinfort zu lehren." He would have the Jews deprived of all their money and jewels, part of which he would have applied to the support of worthy converts (col. 2480). He would have the Germans deal with the Jews as they were dealt with in France, Spain, Bohemia and other countries (col. 2483). How cruelly they were treated in these lands does not need to be told. Nothing stirred our spirit within us more than to read the profane mockery and filthiness which Luther indulges in towards the man who would treat Jews with courtesy and benevolence. Here his language is too indecent to be repeated. We dare give only the concluding part of his ridicule of such a man : " He is a perfect Christian, full of works of mercy for which Christ will reward him at the last day with the Jews in the eternal fire of hell " (col. 2491)! He says again that " we are damned eternally with them " if we endure their blasphemy against Christ (col. 2499). He would have taken away from the Jews all their books, prayer books, Thalmuds, and even the whole Bible; he would not let them keep a leaf of it (col. 2500). Nor would he restrict the penalty of death to their Rabbis. He teaches of the Jews in general, that " in our country they should be forbidden publicly to praise God, to give thanks, to pray, to teach, *on pain of losing their lives*" (bey Verlust Leibes und Lebens) (col. 2501). Luther charges rulers " to burn the synagogues of the Jews, to forbid everything that he had mentioned, to compel them to work, to treat them with all unmercifulness (nach aller Unbarmherzigkeit), as Moses did in the wilderness and slew three thousand that the whole mass might

not perish" (col. 2509). Luther concludes his counsels as to the way in which the Jews should be treated by saying that if the sharp measures which he had recommended should prove futile, "we must hunt them away like mad dogs in order that we may not be partakers of their abominable blasphemy and of all vices, and deserve with them the wrath of God and be damned." Then, like a man well pleased with himself for the excellent Christian counsels he had given, he adds, "I have done my duty; let every one see how he does his" (col. 2509).

In the face of such utterances of Luther it is extraordinary that any scholarly and candid biographer of the reformer should deny that he taught the lawfulness of putting men to death for the sake of religion. On flagrant blasphemers, such as he held the Jews to be, he would assuredly have not been satisfied with the infliction of a less severe retribution. His language is only too plain and unequivocal. It proves, too, how unjust it is to the other reformers to represent them as of a more sanguinary and persecuting disposition than Luther. It is not merely Lutherans who thus extol him at the expense of men who were certainly possessed of as mild and tolerant a spirit as he. We boldly affirm that neither Melancthon, nor Zwingli, nor Calvin could have wielded a pen dipped in such bitter gall and uncharitableness as Luther employed when he composed the treatise from which we have made our quotations. And we could have taken from it other passages quite as shocking as those which we have ventured to bring forward. Luther could be at one time the champion of religious liberty in the widest sense. And so could Jeremy Taylor. But they could both discard the principles which they once maintained so conspicuously.

Walch, the honest biographer of the reformer, in apologizing for the faults of Luther, bids us remember that he was a man. Both sacred and profane history surprises us by exhibiting great men pitifully failing at times to exemplify the very excellency for which they had received the just commendation of God and man. We must not suffer the transcendent services of Luther as a reformer to blind us to the serious blemishes which he displayed, especially in his later years. We are to render to him impartial justice. With all his faults we must love and honor him. But neither he, nor any other of the reformers, was able to cast off every prejudice inherited from the middle ages. If Protestantism depended on the infallibility of Luther or Calvin, its doom had been long since sealed. But we Protestants can afford to acknowledge and condemn their errors, while we hold fast the grand evangelical doctrines which they set forth. The Word of the Lord, on which alone we build, endureth forever. But when Roman Catholic prelates in America openly appear as advocates of entire religious freedom for all denominations, they virtually renounce the proud boast that their Church is unchangeable. That the pronouncements of popes and the acts of councils have been opposed to the toleration of heretics is matter of notoriety. The theology which those studying for the Roman Catholic priesthood are still

taught inculcates the punishment of heretics. Thomas Aquinas, in a passage cited by Dr. Schaff (*Ch. Hist.*, vi, p. 55), has laid down the doctrine that "heretics can not only be excommunicated, but justly slain." Now the Angelic Doctor, as Thomas is called, is the theologian whose writings the present Pope Leo XIII has most strongly commended. But we do not expect to find the pope acknowledge that his predecessors and Thomas Aquinas, and Roman Catholic theologians as a body, were men, and as such erred in the views which they expressed on religious toleration.

PITTSBURGH, PA.

DUNLOP MOORE.

THE POWERS OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY.

THE question of the constitutional powers of the General Assembly, and of the relation as to authority in which that judicatory stands to the other judicatories of the Church, is one which is constantly raised. It came to the front in the clash between New York Presbytery and the Assembly; and the principle of it is involved in the position which was taken in the Vrooman case, in the Synod of Illinois, by the counsel for the Chicago Presbytery, that the Presbytery is the exclusive judge of the qualifications of its members.

In a discussion in New York Presbytery, a member was reported as having "declared that the Presbytery was the unit and the creator of the General Assembly. The General Assembly had, it was true, certain powers, but these powers were given by consent of the lower body." Nothing could be more at variance with our constitutional history. Those who were at the Saratoga Assembly of 1890 will remember that the whole question was discussed on the first report of the Committee on Methods of Effecting Changes in the Constitution of the Church, by President Patton, George Junkin, Esq., Dr. H. J. Van Dyke, Gen. J. A. Beaver, Dr. T. A. Hoyt, and the writer. Dr. Van Dyke took the position just alluded to, going so far as to deny to the Assembly any and all legislative power. It fell to my lot to answer him. He did me the rare honor to say that my speech convinced him of his error, adding that I was the only man who had ever shown him in controversy that he was wrong. And he went into the enlarged committee, on which he and I were placed, and voted with me, against his speech. Such a course was most honorable in one who was as able and straightforward and persistent in his conscientious views as Dr. Van Dyke was.

A plain statement of facts is sometimes the strongest argument. The speech which so completely changed Dr. Van Dyke's position was largely of that kind; and the facts at the basis of it are the following:

"The Presbytery" (so it called itself; not "the Presbytery of Philadelphia," or any other place, though the heading of the printed volume of Minutes does so entitle it) which was formed in 1706 and represented