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PROBLEMS OF THE TWENTIETH
CENTURY

BY THE
REV. GEORGE TYBOUT PURVES, D. D., LL. D.

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By "the problems of the twentieth century" I understand those which present themselves to the Church at the beginning of the new age. I shall not confine myself however to those which are peculiar to Presbyterianism, but rather attempt a survey of those which we face in common with other evangelical branches of the Church of Christ. I assume that we desire to grapple with the largest questions; that we are most interested in the problems which address themselves to Christian men everywhere; that we believe that we shall best meet the problems of our own Church's life by doing our share in the solution of those which confront Christianity itself.

The Christian Church has entered the new century with her banners flying and her regimental hosts in marching order. The past century has indeed been one of struggle against foes without and within. But God has wonderfully upheld his truth and blessed it to mankind. Never was Christianity so strong a force in the world as she is to-day.

Never has she had so many reasons for hope of the promised and approaching victory. Yet the problems immediately before her are many and serious. We are not prophets. We cannot see far into the century. We do not know what change in the horizon even a decade may witness. It is enough if we look at the immediate future and scan the situation as it lies directly before us. There are four problems or classes of problems to which, as the most conspicuous, I invite your attention.

First, the intellectual problem as it presents itself to Christian faith, the problem of pure theology. This of course must be the fundamental one, and it will appear so especially to Presbyterians since our type of Christianity has been prevailingly intellectual. We have been accustomed to regard Christianity as a real interpretation of life and of the universe. As such it addresses itself to the intelligence. We have never considered it as merely the expression of religious sentiment nor as simple ethics. We have always believed that sentiment and morality must have their foundation in a view of the relation of God and the world which the intelligence apprehends as true, and that in consequence an attack upon the intellectual ideas which Christianity assumes or inculcates is the most dangerous, because the most fundamental, of all. The intellectual problems which confront the faith are therefore those which demand the closest scrutiny.

Yet at the very outset we find ourselves forced to meet the query, raised by modern cultivated thought, whether there is, properly speaking, an intellectual side to religion; whether the intellectual ideas upon which we have been accustomed to base Christian sentiment and duty have real and permanent validity. This is indeed the first phase of the religious problem of the day. Can we justify at the bar of culture the affirmations of our religion concerning God and his relation to the world? Can we justify the right of any religious authority, be it Christ or apostle, council or consciousness of the Church, to make such affirmations? Religion, we are told, is a matter of the heart and of conduct. As for Christianity, it is the moral influence upon men of the impressive personality of Jesus. The intellectual ideas through the medium of which his influence has acted and in which it has clothed itself are but temporary forms of thought, natural to the several epochs in which they have originated but not fitted to continue. In fact they have never been an essential part of the gospel. They have no right to claim permanent authority. For the human mind cannot know God adequately. It is shut up within the limits of the finite. It can only form for itself more or less imperfect images of divine things. These have for their age religious value as instruments to be used for a while by the pious heart in the expression of its sentiment and as a guide to conduct. But religion does not in

reality or rightfully have an intellectual side ; and all doctrine can be regarded only as of historical interest and relative importance.

It should be remembered also that this contention is made in the supposed interest of religion itself. Herein lies the peculiarity of the problem as now presented. The necessity of religion is universally admitted, and it is hoped to save it from the assaults of philosophy and science by separating their spheres. Philosophy, science, and historical criticism, may pursue their way, it is said, without hindrance from religion. The first may be agnostic or even pantheistic ; the second may be purely naturalistic ; the third may resolve the Bible and dogma into human constructions. But, we are told, they cannot injure religion, which has nothing to do with these intellectual processes. It will still retain its original power, provided it confess its limitations and content itself with the sphere of pious sentiment toward its thought of God and of love toward man.

Herein I say lies the first phase of the intellectual problem with which culture confronts Christianity. It evidently strikes at the roots of the question of what religion is. Can we admit the proposed solution? The theology of the twentieth century will turn upon the answer. Now I maintain that we cannot admit it, and, in brief, for two reasons. The one is because it is impossible to eliminate the intellectual element from the teaching of Christ

and his apostles without reducing them to the limitations of fallible men. They have given us doctrines about God and his relation to the world, about guilt and sin, atonement and the future, which enter into the very fabric of their instruction. These cannot be denied as either untrue or unessential without denying the infallibility of the founders of our religion; and, be it noted, the difficulty applies and the principle is in fact to-day applied, just as vigorously and just as logically to Jesus as to his apostles. The other reason is that the attempt to separate the religious and the intellectual sides of the human mind is, if it be possible, suicidal. The mind cannot build its sentiment on ideas which it knows to be untrue, or govern conduct by beliefs which it disbelieves. It cannot be permanently determined by what it affirms to be irrational. If divine things be unknowable, it cannot continue to reverence them as if they were known. It cannot give religious value to ideas which the reason declares to be of no value. Religion is either rational or it is an error. It cannot continue to sit on the limb of a tree which it has sawed off from the trunk. No! The intellectual side of religion is real. It has a right and a duty to furnish an interpretation of life and the universe to the intelligence of man. Dogma has a place in its consciousness. It must meet the culture of the new age not by shrinking back into a shell while the battle between truth and error is fought by

other weapons, but rather, as in the centuries past, by entering courageously into the fray and maintaining the truth of the great intellectual ideas for which it has stood; by making them clearer in statement and more convincing in argument; by asserting the rationality and the truth of its affirmations concerning God, and man, the nature of the former and the salvation of the latter; and thus interpreting to man's intelligence the basis of piety and of duty.

But, if there be an intellectual problem before religion, what is the particular form which it has taken; what is really the fundamental question which lies before Christian faith at the opening of the new century? The nineteenth century has witnessed a steady convergence of discussion toward the basal questions which lie at the very root of religion. The older debates were occupied with the inquiry whether the doctrines of historical Christianity are supported by Scripture; and, in the judgment of most, it appeared that they are. Then the debate changed into an inquiry concerning the authority of Scripture, and from that, still more deeply, into the question of the seat of authority in religion. Meanwhile a new emphasis has been placed upon the ethical element in religion, leading not only to a disparagement of dogma but to a reinterpretation by many thinkers of the older doctrines in the interest of their ethical content. Then the century has witnessed the rise and prevalence of

the philosophy of evolution, applied first to the world of nature and then to the history of man. We should not doubt that in these movements of thought valuable and permanent ideas have been discovered. It *has* been a century of great progress in religious thought. Historical criticism *has* illuminated the progress of revelation in Scripture. The ethical interpretation of dogma *has* delivered us from a barren scholasticism. The truth in evolution *has* opened to us the historic movement of the race. The conflict with error has brought old truth to new emphasis and new truth to expression. I am simply pointing out that the result has been to bring us face to face with fundamental problems and that the one now most pressing, as Christianity confronts modern culture, is that of the definition and the demonstration of "the supernatural" in history. Can we maintain it? How shall we define it? Is God transcendent over the world and superior to finite forces; or is he only immanent in them? Is "the supernatural" merely another name for "providence" or does it mean that, besides God's providential guidance of the world he has interfered to manifest himself immediately to men? This question underlies all religion and theology and criticism. Has God given an immediate revelation of his mind and will? Was the advent of Jesus a real incarnation of the divine Son? Is the human soul really born again by an immediate exercise of divine power?

Or is the Bible the providentially guided driftwood of Hebrew literature; and the person of Christ either an insoluble enigma or purely human; and is Christian experience simply the result of the moral influence of the Rabbi of Nazareth? This is beyond doubt the intellectual problem to which the Christianity of the twentieth century must give its answer; and because it underlies all questions of criticism and theology, it behooves us to face it calmly and honestly, and to weigh the importance of minor questions in view of their relation to it. I am here to state, rather than to argue, the problems of the new century. But I may be permitted to point out that the contribution which Reformed theology has to make in the solution of this problem lies in the fearless maintenance of its doctrine of God. That doctrine is the center of the Reformed system. It is, we believe, the completest statement of the biblical revelation. The Bible is emphatically the revelation of God as well as a revelation from God. It is the unveiling of the mighty Jehovah culminating in the person and teaching of Jesus. "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him." Calvinism has taken that point of view. God is the ultimate fact, and a complete system of religious teaching must proceed from him as the fundamental truth. So Calvinism has organized its system around the revealed doctrine of God. It has rec-

ognized in him not only the absolute Author of the world but its sovereign Ruler, in accordance with the purposes and government of whom all things proceed. It has not failed to recognize his moral attributes but it has first recognized his sovereignty, self-sufficiency, independence, and authority. It has found in his will the only safe resting place in the effort to explain the reason of things. It does not fail to perceive his immanence in nature and life; but it posits first his transcendence. It may be that it has not sufficiently emphasized his love toward the human race, though in its declaration of his infinite grace, it has embodied most profoundly the reality of that love. But it has completely expressed the truth of his relation to the world,—in accordance with his self-revelation in Christ,—so that with this conception of God fully maintained the supernatural in history is made to rest on an indestructible basis. So long as we hold to this idea of God in its integrity, the citadel of supernatural religion is safe. To defend this basal truth would seem to be our particular glory in the intellectual battle concerning religion which is closing in upon us. We shall not help to solve this problem of the twentieth century if in any degree we abate our testimony to the reality of that living God, who “hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness in and of himself, is alone in and unto himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which he hath made, . . . but only

manifesting his own glory in, by, unto and upon them; is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom and to whom are all things, and hath most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them and upon them, whatsoever himself pleaseth." This doctrine is the permanent safeguard of supernatural Christianity. It is the only breakwater within which supernaturalism can live in security. It answers all objections to revelation, miracles, the Incarnation and regeneration. It is, I affirm, our special task to meet on this basis the intellectual doubt of the coming century.

2. Turning to another direction, the Christian Church is face to face with a *social problem*. We are compelled to ask anew what is the relation of Christianity to the social progress of mankind? How can it best make its contribution in this sphere to the life of the world; and especially how can organized Christianity, or the Church, fulfill its mission in the Spirit of Jesus to society?

It is true that this problem has always been present, but it is now felt as never before; and the challenge has been given in no uncertain tones for the Church to prove itself the Saviour of society. This social problem has in fact become the most pressing one of the modern world. Humanity as a whole has become conscious of its rights and of its wrongs. The individualism which characterized the rising democracy of a century ago has in great measure been replaced by the social consciousness;

that is to say, by the idea that every factor, be it the individual or be it an institution, is under obligation to contribute to the well-being of the social organism, so that all may share in the benefit. Reconstruction of these relations in the political, economic and industrial spheres is certainly going on with great rapidity. The movement is changing the face of society and, with many blunders, yet on the whole with steady progress, is lifting it to a higher plane and to a fairer recognition of the rights and duties of man to man. In this condition of affairs, the Church cannot but have the liveliest interest. She cannot help inquiring what phase of duty and opportunity the situation brings before her.

There are also certain concrete facts which call for the most serious consideration of Christian men. It is sad to note the alienation of many from the Church, on the ground that she is not in hearty sympathy with humanity in its struggle for social betterment. We are told that she would better give heed to the present needs of men than confine her attention to their future life; that she is too often on the side of the rich and strong instead of the poor and oppressed; that she is out of touch with the life of the common people. The social restlessness of the age has also produced an antipathy to all authority, and hence to the authority of religion and to the grounds on which it claims to rest. There is further a widespread tendency to

substitute social improvement on earth for the salvation of the souls of men, sociology for theology; the culture of the physical and intellectual life for the spiritual. These facts constitute a problem with which we have to deal. At the same time never has Christ been so loudly praised; never has the necessity of some religion been so widely acknowledged. What shall we do in view of these serious questions which we cannot escape?

So far as Christianity itself is concerned, there ought to be no question from her history that she is a mighty force for social progress. In every age and land she has wrought for freedom and righteousness, for the physical and intellectual, the political and industrial improvement of life, as well as for the salvation of souls. She has entered into the social organism like the leaven into the meal. The process has been slow and long, with much to overcome, both in her adherents and in her foes. But she changed the civilization of the ancient world and made the new. She has ever acted however by the silent creation of public sentiment; by the awakening of leaders of progress to the needs of men and giving them courage to proclaim their ideas; by the quiet pervasion of the organism with more of her spirit. She will continue to do the same. In the words of Dr. Bruce, "Christianity has merely begun its workings in the world." Yet if the operations of this mighty leaven have been already so vast as history proves them to have

been, we may be sure that she will yet more effectually make her beneficent influence felt in the solving of the social problems of the new age.

The serious question however is, what should the organized Protestant Churches do in the situation which immediately confronts them? I venture to state a few guiding principles.

They must not abandon the effort to reach society through the individual. They must not aim to operate through legislation so much as through the creation of opinion. They must not forget that the transformation of individual character through the power of the gospel has been and alone can be the abiding secret of the transformation of the whole physical and social life of man. No dream of social organization must lead them away from the fundamental work of saving the body by first saving the soul, of saving society by first saving the individual.

But on the other hand they must cultivate more sympathy with the present needs of men. They must take pains to see that the charge of selfishness and exclusiveness is not true. They must correct not a few abuses which have crept into their practical operations.

To this end they must multiply agencies of every kind in order to minister to men. They must express in practical forms the adaptation of their message to every class and to every need. They are doing this, but they must do it more intensely

and abundantly. And then their preaching must be a faithful application of duty to every man, whether rich or poor, in straight, plain language; in the tongue of the unlearned; the pressing not only the salvation which is in Christ on the acceptance of all, but the duties in Christ toward God and men on the consciences of all. This, too, the Church is doing, thank God, as never before. I am not disposed to look on the social problem as wholly dark. It is being, I am persuaded, slowly and surely solved. It presents itself in its most acute form in our large cities. We only need to feel it. We must believe that the gospel of Christ contains its solution,—that it has in it the promise and power of every form of life. We must carry it, with all its attendant benefits to soul and body, to every class; and by the persistent love of men which we have learned of Jesus set the leaven free to work in the world which unquestionably feels the need of it.

3. Still again; within the circle of organized Christianity, there is the urgent problem of *coöperation*, if not of union, among the several branches of the Evangelical Church.

The longing for some measure at least of the reunion of Christendom is very strong and widespread. It has become one of the movements of the age. Many of the causes of division among the Churches belong to the past and are felt to be no longer in force. Others are now seen to have

been from the beginning insufficient and born of narrow views of truth and duty. There is evident a needless waste of power in the work of taking the gospel to the world. Often there exists unhappy rivalry. The multitudes in even our own land who need the ministration of the Church are so many that distribution of service is loudly called for; while in the vaster multitudes of the heathen world there is still larger room for division of function and union of effort. The inquiry comes from many lips, Shall not the new century witness some steps at least toward the outward expression of that unity of the Spirit in Christ which has been making itself more and more deeply felt in the breasts of millions of his followers?

There is certainly much to be said in the consideration of this problem and on both sides of it.

There would certainly seem to be every reason for the gradual reunion of the various branches of the leading types of Protestant Christianity. The subdivisions at least may be merged into the divisions in their respective countries. Why should not all Presbyterians in this land come into actual union; and all Methodists; and all Lutherans? May we not with reason hope that this century will witness such a measure of reunion?

And there is certainly a call for a fairer and broader application of the principle of coöperation in Christian work at home and abroad, even where

there may not be organic union. Why should we not have "spheres of influence" in Church activity; and this not in the interest of selfish advancement, but for the glory of the common Lord?

And of course there must be the full recognition of the Christian character of all other Churches who worship the divine Christ and proclaim him as the Saviour of mankind.

Yet there exist certain obvious limitations to the application of these aims and hopes. Union may never be consummated at the expense of essential truth. The problem is how much truth is essential; and that is just the question which the century will work out. But union will be worth nothing, if it be not the genuine expression of substantial accord in belief and life. Therefore we must move slowly. The practical question will be how and when to act. Every honest controversy will help to settle the question. Every performance also of our duty to the world will aid in a like way. As we all grow nearer to Christ, we shall grow nearer to one another. We may look to the future with the expectation that the common consciousness of Christendom will become more filled with his truth and spirit, and will therefore more freely and fully combine into oneness of form. We hail the prospect! It will fulfill the apostle's prediction and the Saviour's prayer. We may cherish the hope that the new century will see some advance toward the ideal when we

shall be outwardly as well as inwardly one in Christ Jesus.

4. In the last place, yet on the practical side perhaps most pressing of all, there confronts the Church the problem of missions,—of the world's evangelization. I will do no more than mention it, because you are to be addressed on this subject by one who has made it his specialty. It is enough for me to say that the problem is not whether we shall be a missionary Church, nor how missions should be conducted; but how can the Church be aroused to a realization of the opportunity, the immensity, and the solemn duty, of the cause. The success already won by the blessing of God, has only made the task appear the more complicated. Its immensity appears appalling. The revivals of heathenism make it more difficult. The evils of civilization, which often accompany Christianity, hinder the advance of the latter. Political complications are inevitable and full of peril. But there can be no doubt that the Spirit of Jesus is leading his militant hosts, and that the kingdoms of the world will become his. The chief problem, I say, is to arouse the Churches to the conviction of duty and to an adequate expenditure of men and money. We have not yet taken the work up with the zeal and devotion for which it calls. Enthusiasm must give way to permanent conviction; spasmodic efforts to systematic consecration. The whole Church and every individual must take part

in the task. What may we not expect in the next century, if the ratio of advance attained in the past one be continued? God help us to solve the problem; to keep the great commission in the front;—and to hasten the conquest of the world by the only true religion in the name of the only Saviour of mankind.

Such appear to be the chief classes of problems with which we are confronted at the opening of the new century,—the intellectual, the social, the ecclesiastical and the missionary. Let us meet them with calm faith and confident hope. They are not more serious than those which the past has faced. They will be solved just in proportion as the Church imbibes the Spirit of Jesus and fills herself with the Master's mind. They will be met successfully less by human wisdom than by the wisdom of God working through us; and this will follow if the Church brings every thought into captivity unto the obedience of Christ. For he is the solvent of all problems. He is the wisdom and the power of God. The brightest and most inspiring of all facts in the present situation is that Christ is being more glorified, more studied, better understood, than ever before. Nearer to him are all the Churches advancing; and as he fills our minds and lives, the day will be hastened when at his feet every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that he is Lord. When his reign is perfected in us, the problems of all the centuries will be solved. The intel-

lect and the social life of man will embody his truth and law; the Church and the world alike will own his sway. Believing in him we may face the future without a doubt; for as surely as God is true will the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ.