

BROWNLOW NORTH:

THE STORY

OF

HIS LIFE AND WORK.

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MOFFAT.

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BROWNLOW NORTH'S THEOLOGY AND PREACHING CONTINUED.

IV. "BORN AGAIN."

THE NECESSITY FOR THE SPIRIT'S WORK ON THE INTELLECT, AFFECTIONS, AND WILL.

"He who receives
Light from above, from the fountain of light,
No other doctrine needs, though granted true.
But these are false, or little else but dreams,
Conjectures, fancies, built on nothing firm.
Alas, what can they teach, and not mislead,
Ignorant of themselves, of God much more,
And how the world began and how man fell,
Degraded by himself, on grace depending?
Much of the soul they talk, but all awry,
And in themselves seek virtue, and to themselves
All glory arrogate, to God give none."

MILTON.

THE doctrines already reviewed as forming the sum and substance of Brownlow North's preaching are doctrines of the Church Catholic. Those which follow, and which, equally with the preceding, were mottoes on his banner and watchwords on his lips, belong more distinctively to the system of theology that is named Calvinistic, or Augustinian, or Pauline. Although their roots ramify through the whole of Revelation, they were first taught in connected form by the inspired Apostle Paul, were recovered from the oblivion and neglect of generations by the mighty sanctified genius of Augustine, and were once more resuscitated from the tomb, in which for well-nigh a Millennium of murky years they had lain buried, by the divinely guided and commanding intellects of Martin Luther and John Calvin. In the publication of these doctrines these two great reformers were supported by all their illustrious coadjutors in the Reformation.

What makes the adhesion of Brownlow North to the leading doctrines of this system a most valuable testimony to their truth, is not simply the fact that he was a man of a singularly clear judgment, and of very strong reasoning faculties, but still more the fact that he derived his views, not from the Confession of any Church, or the works of any theologian of however great repute, but mainly from a study of Scripture for himself, a study to which he devoted himself from the day of his conversion with the most unwearied and prayerful diligence.

His theology as well as his experience impelled him to declare the freest offer of salvation to all, and to urge its instant acceptance upon every sinner to whom the offer came. The salvation he preached was as free as the sunlight, as authoritatively pressed on every gospel hearer as the august

command of God can press it, and as urgent as it can be made by the exactest meaning of the word NOW. Sufficient for all, suitable for all, offered in gift to all, pressed upon the immediate acceptance of all by the invitation, the entreaty, and the command of God, such was his gospel,—and can anything be more free, more full, and more unfettered? No doubt he also insisted on a natural aversion to it, inability to understand it, and incapacity to receive it. But over against this he held out an offer and gift of the Spirit as free as the offer and gift of the Saviour, thoroughly to overcome that aversion, to remove the blindness of the understanding and the alienation of the affections,—an omnipotent Spirit waiting to be bestowed on all who asked. Human language cannot express a salvation more overflowing full and more unconditionally free: God offering His Spirit to lost and helpless sinners as freely and unconditionally as He offers His Son.

Mr. North was accustomed with great emphasis, and in no passing way, to dwell upon the fact that man's nature since the fall is utterly depraved and hopelessly corrupt, and that no works wrought in his unrenewed state can have any merit or proper holiness. Many will remember the frequency and solemnity with which he used to quote the fourteenth Psalm, ver. 1-3, "They are corrupt, and have done abominable iniquity: there is none that doeth good." Another text which he used to employ as a proof of this doctrine was Heb. xi. 6, "Without faith it is impossible to please God." He showed that the unbeliever, being confessedly destitute of true faith, could not offer any truly acceptable worship or service to God, seeing the main-spring of a right relation to God was wanting.

But Mr. North went further into this subject, and used to press the truth that as man cannot be saved by any moral goodness that may be supposed to remain in him, so neither can he be saved by the exercise of his own reason, which the numerous section in most of our churches which has embraced rationalistic views seems to think has escaped the sad ravages of the Fall, which they acknowledge to have spread ruin over the rest of our nature.

That master theologian, John Bunyan, with his inimitable pictorial pen in his wonderful allegory of *The Holy War*, describes the very first ill deed of Diabolus, when he had gained entrance into Mansoul, as being the darkening of man's intellect. "My Lord Understanding," he tells us, "held the office of Lord Mayor of the town of Mansoul; but although he had complied with the rest of the town of Mansoul in admitting Diabolus into the town, yet he thought it not fit to let him abide in his former lustre and glory, because he was a seeing man. Wherefore he darkened him, not only by taking from him his office and power, but by building a high and strong tower just between the sun's reflection and the windows of my lord's pal-

ace; by which means his house, and all and the whole of his habitation, were made as dark as darkness itself. And thus being alienated from the light he became as one that was born blind.”

John Bunyan taught in the pregnant poetry of his dream precisely what Brownlow North taught in the pointed prose of his discourses, a truth which is diametrically opposed to the views and teaching of modern rationalists, who make reason man’s saviour,—setting it now in place of revelation as the Divine Light, or again in place of faith as that by which we apprehend the truth of revelation, ignoring such plain statements of inspiration as that of 1 Cor. ii. 14: “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

Mr. North was extremely jealous of that worship of human reason with which we are threatened in the present day to an extent never known before in our earth’s history, and which is in direct opposition to the worship of the Divine Wisdom incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth;—the object of rationalists’ worship being human reason in general, and that of modern papists the supposed sanctified reason of a single man, who has now usurped the throne of the Divine Word and the office of the Divine Spirit.

On this subject the margins of his Bibles are often black with annotations such as these: “No man can ever know anything of God or of the things of God, unless they are revealed to him by God’s Spirit. Pray for the Spirit. He is promised to all who ask.” “If Paul had not received the Spirit of God, he could have known nothing.” “Observe why Paul said that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge were hid in the Father and in Christ, lest any worldly-wise man should say there was knowledge anywhere else. There is no real wisdom or knowledge out of God and of Christ.” “In the wisest ages of the world man’s religion was the most absurd, yet even now are not the highly esteemed among men in too many instances as literally worshipping the work of their own hands as were the heathen?” “No man can know my secrets unless I am pleased to reveal them, so no man can know the things of God but by the teaching of the Holy Spirit.” Man’s reason has large and honourable functions, but while we render to reason the things that are reason’s, may such teaching as this long prevail which bids us render to God the things that are God’s!

Besides dwelling much on human helplessness and human ignorance, Mr. North always taught that the affections had been estranged and debased by the fall, and that therefore the heart required to be changed. He writes: “Even earthly wisdom might discover that unless a man was thoroughly changed, heaven could be no heaven to him. We must have a complete new set of affections and desires, a *new heart* in short, before we can enter into the kingdom of heaven.” “Every saved man and woman

on the earth is a new creature, he has experienced the new birth, he has been born again of the Spirit, he has a new heart and a new nature, which produce new affections and new obedience, springing from new motives” (“Ourselves,” p. 52).

But man’s fallen state consists also in the determined opposition of his will to the will of God, which can only be removed by the Holy Spirit, who influences it by such appeals, motives, and arguments as are fitted to bring about the desired result. Our will must be brought into conformity with the will of God. Salvation is never forced upon an unwilling recipient, but each gospel hearer is called on to exercise his will in an act of choice, and choose for himself the Lord to be his God. But the alteration in our will is wrought by the will of God, as it is said, “Thy people shall be willing in the day of Thy power” (Ps. cx. 3). Very powerfully did Mr. North press the duty of this willing choice upon his hearers. One of his most widely blessed discourses was a spiritualized exposition of Genesis xxiv. 28: “Wilt thou go with this man? and she said, I will go.” As may be seen even from this volume, soul after soul in different parts of the country was brought to the point of decision, and of closing with Christ, through that sermon, in which he throws the whole responsibility of the choice upon the hearer; yet he states unambiguously at the very outset, that “by the power of the Holy Ghost” his hearers or readers may answer as Rebecca did. On John vi. 37, he notes: “If we are really going to Jesus, this verse assures us of two most comfortable things: one, that Jesus will in no wise, for no reason whatever, cast us out; the other, that we must be among the number given Him, or we would not have gone to Him.” And again: “If Christ rejects a coming sinner, He must also reject a drawing Father.” Again, on John viii. 43, 44: “‘Ye cannot hear My words; for the lusts of your father ye will do;’ then explains *the ‘cannot.’* You cannot, because your will is in opposition.”

Such was his teaching on these most important points, of which he could say, along with the Apostle of the Gentiles, that “he neither received it of man, neither was taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ;” for he drew it fresh from the great fountain-head of truth contained in Holy Scripture.

After all, the true children of God, while they may differ in the war of words, and the din of definitions, give expression to the same confessions, desires, and hopes when approaching the throne of grace, in their prayers and their praises.

Strange to say, no words can better express Brownlow North’s Calvinism than Wesley’s hymn:—

“Stay, Thou insulted Spirit, stay,
Though I have done Thee such despite,

Nor cast the sinner quite away,
Nor take Thine everlasting flight!
Though I have steeled my stubborn heart,
And still shook off my guilty fears,
And vexed and urged Thee to depart
For many long rebellious years,
This only woe I deprecate,
This only plague I pray remove,
Nor leave me in my lost estate,
Nor curse me with this want of love.”

V. FAITH AND FEELING.

THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH.

“Oh how unlike the complex works of man,
Heaven’s easy, artless, unencumbered plan!

* * * * *

Inscribed above the portals from afar,
Conspicuous as the brightness of a star,
Legible only by the light they give,
Stand the soul-quickenings words, BELIEVE AND LIVE.”

COWPER.

JUSTIFICATION by faith was the great watchword of the Reformers. It was their battle-cry, with which they overturned that justification by works which filled the exchequer of the Church of Rome, and is precious still to all men of carnal reason. If the Word of God was the foundation-stone of the Reformers, the first doctrine which they built on that foundation was justification by faith. According to Luther’s famous aphorism, it is the article of a standing or a falling church.

Under the reign of Moderatism in Scotland, ministers and people had to a large extent returned to the exploded doctrine of a righteousness by works, in everything except the name: but with the reviving spiritual life of the present century, this unscriptural dogma had been dislodged once more from the churches, although it lingered in certain districts, and in many congregations, and in numberless hearts and minds over the land. To them the preaching that a sinner is justified by free grace through faith was news indeed, and Mr. North published it boldly and loudly in their hearing, even as Luther and Calvin and Knox had done.

But he found another tendency that had crept in almost unawares in many congregations where the preaching was evangelical, and which was causing much distress and hindrance to sin-burdened souls. It arose from a want of a clear scriptural knowledge that justification is an objective act, external to the man,—that God justifies the ungodly,—that this is the very entrance into the kingdom of grace, and that all evidences of grace in the heart are to be sought after this, and not before it. All over Scotland he found many, who had been trained and taught by godly ministers, examining their own hearts for tokens of grace, for pious frames and feelings of devotion, or of sadness, or of gladness, as grounds of acceptance, in place of looking simply to the Cross. They knew indeed that that Cross, with its great sin-atonings Sacrifice, is the only ground of reconciliation with the God they had offended, but they did not know that the sole instrument of justification is faith, and in no case feeling, or sensibility, or emotion.

We cannot but think that the absence of the emotional element in his teaching, probably caused in part by a lack of it in his own mental character, was a defect, and that his preaching would have been more attractive to many, and still more widely useful, had it allowed a larger and truer place to the religious affections. This element was prominent in the preaching and hymns of the Wesleys in England; and of the great Highland preachers in Scotland, not to speak of such men as Samuel Rutherford and McCheyne, whose deep stirrings of the affections in their writings have filled the Lord's house in Scotland with the odour of their precious ointment, for long years and generations after the alabaster vessel from which it was poured had been broken, and in the grave had mingled with its kindred dust.

Mr. North's preaching was addressed to the understanding, which he sought to enlighten, and to the will, which he sought to persuade, rather than to the tender chords of feeling and affection in the human heart. But while this is the case, there is no doubt that he did inestimable service to many in leading them away from most unhealthy and fruitless introspection to a simple looking to the crucified Saviour, and as great service to many others who were resting on their transient and ever-changing religious sensibility and feeling, in place of Jesus Christ the only Rock.

Repentance he rightly showed not to consist in tears, nor in outward reformation, but in the mental act of change of mind and turning to God producing reformation. But it must always, if true, be the result of a sense of sin's exceeding sinfulness, which is ever humbling and saddening to convinced sinners, although in very various degrees: and often it is only after the soul has repented and believed that the deepest fountains of heart sorrow and the sluices of the weeping eyes are opened. Yet assuredly Mr. North could not too strongly state that the mental emotions are neither the meritorious ground of justification, nor the essence of either repentance or faith, but their accompaniments.

Mr. North often said that every anxious inquirer he ever met with began to converse with him by talking about his own "feelings." His teaching on this subject is stated in a connected form in the tract published under the title "I feel," and also in one of his earliest tracts, "Trust God," but he enforced it in all his addresses and publications.

We quote the following from his annotated Bible: "Religion is not a thing of mere feeling, but a patient, plodding, perpetual, painstaking, persevering life of obedience to the will of God, springing out of a habitual faith that our labour is not in vain in the Lord." "If we would have God to hear us, we must be honest with Him, and confess our sins of thought, word, and deed honestly; and if we do this trusting to the atonement made by Jesus, we may say, 'Thou heardest me,' for God has promised to hear,

and we must believe He does, *whether we feel it or not.*” “God’s word is steadfast rock; rest on it, so in trial, sickness, and death, your soul shall be steadfast, founded on a rock. If you have only feeling, where are you when the feeling is gone?” “Judge yourselves, not by feeling, but by conduct. We know our love to men, not by feeling love, but by doing to them what we would have them do to us.” “The proof that any one has received the Holy Spirit is not a sensation, but power over the enemy.”

Another doctrine on which he laid great stress was that of the true and proper Divinity of Jesus Christ. In our recollection of his preaching, which is confined to the first ten years of his public ministry, we do not indeed recall this doctrine as being one specially claiming notice; but in his study Bible we have found every text bearing upon the divinity of the Saviour carefully marked and annotated in his own terse and striking manner, and the last work he printed was an exposition of John v. 16-30, written in defence of this great truth, and published under the title of “Christ the Saviour and Christ the Judge.” From this we draw the inference that he expected the next attack upon the faith of God’s children to be made upon this doctrine. His judgment was both shrewd and sound in such matters, while, from the very large number of persons who opened their mind to him in private upon their religious difficulties, his opportunities of becoming acquainted with the tendencies of thought in religion were extensive.

In the work referred to he says: “There is at this day, and in this generation, a large body of influential and well-educated people who, professing to believe the Bible, will yet tell you that the Lord Jesus Christ is not, and never professed to be, God. At the same time they will tell you He was the best man that ever lived upon earth, a pattern of every goodness, morality, and virtue, one who has left us an example that we shall do well to follow, but still a man, only a man, and nothing but a man. Verily may we not ask with St. Paul, ‘Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?’ A man, nothing but a man, and yet the very best man that ever lived upon earth! Away with such rubbish, such soul-destroying rubbish, away with it! Either the Lord Jesus Christ was the greatest impostor, the greatest liar and cheat ever born of woman, and has done more harm on earth than was ever done since the fall of Adam, or He was God. What! a good man, and yet only a man, and claim to do whatever God as God could do! What! a good man, and yet only a man, and claim to raise dead bodies, quicken dead souls, be the Saviour and Judge of the world, and receive as His right the honour that is due to God only! (John v. 9-22.)” Thus scathingly did he expose those who hold

“The wondrous birth at Bethlehem
A fiction of the wandering brain.”

In addition to these great leading doctrines, Brownlow North's preaching was distinguished by the vivid presentation which he gave of the existence, personality, and power over man of fallen spirits, and of Satan their great head. All who ever heard him must have been struck by this. At present it is fashionable in certain circles even of religious society to call these views into question, and to attribute any clear statements regarding the existence of fallen spirits to a superstitious or an overexcited imagination. The same views and statements have characterised some of the very foremost divines, such as Luther and Bunyan, Milton and Dante, as much as Brownlow North. But we are told the idea may be poetical, or may suit a popular preacher, but is not philosophical. Yet if sin does exist at all, if responsible creatures have fallen and rebelled against their Maker, there is no inherent improbability that this rebellion may have extended to other classes of intelligences as well as man. Sin and holiness are moral opposites independent of time and place.

Almost all the religions of the world have recognized the evil influence of fallen spirits; the purest and most philosophical of them all, Zoroastrianism, gives the greatest prominence to this belief, making the god of evil and darkness powerful almost as the God of holiness and light. Scripture itself clearly intimates to us the existence of sinful angels and their power over fallen men, and had this not been practically important for men to know, it had not been revealed. Nor was it merely a part of the pictorial teaching suited for the infancy of the Church: the revelation regarding it is much clearer in the later Old Testament books than in the earlier, and is most fully developed in the New Testament, in the teaching of Christ and His apostles. The glory, the extent, and the power of the Satanic dominion are developed in revelation in parallel columns with the development of the Messianic. Surely then Brownlow North did right in assigning to the god of this world, and the king of fallen spirits, that power and influence over the spirits of men which he is represented in the Divine Word as exercising, and in pressing upon men constantly that there are two kingdoms, two potentates, two gods, one worshipped and obeyed by the children of this world, the other by the children of light.

In a sermon on Proverbs viii., preached at Londonderry, he said that "the man who seeks the things of time and sense more than the things of God prays to the Devil. When man sinned, God left him, and the Devil took possession of him. Every man is inhabited either by the Devil alone, or by God and the Devil, the latter being kept under control. If any were able to be indifferent about eternity, they had received that power from the Devil, a power which he did not possess himself, for he trembled while he believed. Most men believe the Devil, and disbelieve God. The Devil wishes to produce indifference, and to keep people in forgetfulness of God,

so that each day they may be nearer hell. It is a want of simple belief in such passages as 1 Peter v. 8 that destroys men. They do not believe in a real Devil. He is a reality, and we are here taught how to resist him.”

From this *resumé* of Mr. North’s teaching it will be seen, as was once remarked of him, that the mission given to him was what Coleridge in his “Aids to Reflection” says is one of the most useful a man can be employed in, viz., that of “rescuing admitted truths from the neglect caused by the very circumstance of their universal admission.” And the present tendency of theology proves that such neglect ends in doubt and denial of the truths that were formerly unquestioned.