

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE REFORMED
THEOLOGY TODAY

Mr, President, Gentlemen of the Board of Directors, Fathers and Brethren:

I have a very profound sense of unworthiness in taking up the duties of the Chair to which you have called me - a Chair made famous by the illustrious men who have preceded me, and whose labours have helped to give Princeton Seminary a fame throughout the world for sound learning and true piety. We think today of Archibald Alexander, that man of God, the first Professor in this Seminary; of Charles Hodge, whose Systematic Theology today remains as probably the greatest exposition of the Reformed Theology in the English language; of Archibald Alexander Hodge, a man of rare popular gifts and of unusual metaphysical ability; and last, but not least, excelling them all in erudition, of Dr. Warfield, whose recent death has left us bereft of our leader and of one of the greatest men who have ever taught in this Institution.

I would pause a moment to pay a tribute to his memory. He was my honoured teacher and friend. For twenty years I had the privilege of helping him in this department, and drew inspiration from his broad minded scholarship. At the time of his death he was, I think, without an equal as a theologian in the English speaking world. With Doctors Kuyper and Bavinck of Holland, he made up a great trio of outstanding exponents of the Reformed Faith. His loss is simply irreparable. But he has gone to his reward, to meet the Lord he loved and served, and we must seek to carry on the work he did so faithfully and well.

I am oppressed, I say, by a sense of unworthiness in following such men as these. But their example is an inspiration. Hal- lowed memories crowd upon us in this place. We are surrounded by the spirits of just men made perfect, who consecrated great powers and learning to the Master whom they loved. Relying on the help of God, I shall teach the same theology they taught, and give myself wholeheartedly to its exposition and defense. And so I wish to say a few words to you today about:

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE REFORMED THEOLOGY TODAY

We hear much nowadays about the difference between the old and new theology.

The old theology, as one of its leading opponents in this country admits, is characterized by definiteness, and gives us a great reinforcement of power from dependence on God. It has a profound view of the infinitude and transcendence of God as the Creator and Ruler of the universe. It therefore makes a clear distinction between the world and God, and between the spheres of nature and of grace. It views man as created in God's image, as fallen and ruined by sin, which is no mere incident in human evolution,

but a transgression of and want of conformity to God's law. God himself, therefore, must intervene in the world-process for man's salvation. This He does by giving man a supernatural revelation recorded in a supernaturally inspired Bible which consequently gives us truth concerning God and His plan of redemption. The old theology views Christ the Redeemer as very God in essence, become man for our salvation; not merely God in man, but God and man. With its profound sense of the justice of God and the guilt of sin, the old theology makes the Cross of Christ central, and proclaims expiation through His blood. With no less deep a sense of the power of sin, this theology cannot look for salvation to the natural perfectibility of man, or any change in his social environment, but asserts the regeneration of the sinner by the almighty power of God. And with this thorough going supernaturalism, this theology cannot see in Christianity a religion chiefly for the betterment of this world, but is profoundly eschatological in its outlook, and sees the final realization of God's eternal purpose and kingdom in a future consummation brought in by mighty acts of God. The distinctive mark of the old theology, then, is supernaturalism and the realization of the infinitude and transcendence of God, in opposition to paganism which finds God only in the world.

The new theology likewise is not a matter of date but of principles. It is not the result of the needs of the heart but of an intellectual revolution going back to English Deism, the French Revolution, and the German Illumination. It is claimed by its advocates that it is a theology determined by the modern scientific movement, but in reality it is the product of a philosophical dogma rooted in Kant and Darwin. It takes on a multitude of forms in Schleiermacher, Coleridge, Sabatier, and Roman Catholic Modernism. Thus, in contrast with the old theology, it is lacking in definiteness. It has no formal creed; no official representative. Indeed if one looks at the attacks of the Ritschlians on the Hegelians, of the Radicals on the Liberals, of Loisy on Harnack, one is tempted to believe that here are fundamental differences.

Yet this is not the fact. There are common principles underlying the various forms of the new theology. What are these common principles?

First, there is its idea of God. This theology has no adequate sense of the majesty and transcendence of God. He is not distinct and separate from the world, but only a name for the immanent law of the world; of an ever present Spirit in the world; or the divine in man. In this, the new theology is akin to paganism which, whether polytheistic or pantheistic, finds God only in the world. The advocates of the new theology like to call this a conception of the world as a unity, and assert that it does away with what they term the dualism of the old theology. But in seeking to escape from a false dualism, they have done away with any real distinction between God and the world, and the contrast between the natural and the supernatural, fundamental for the old theology, has vanished. "Nature," says a new theologian,

"expresses the law of development in process, the supernatural is only the end to which it tends."

In harmony with this low conception of God and his relation to the world, is also the exalted idea of this theology concerning the natural perfectibility of man, and its low view of sin. Man is naturally divine, or destined to become so. He is not in a natural state of sin, and redeemed by the supernatural grace and power of God. He is by nature both natural and supernatural, they tell us, i.e., at once the product of mere natural causes, yet destined for an ethical end. In consequence of this view of man and sin, there is the view of man's religious knowledge. Man has not a natural knowledge of God from reason, and a supernatural revelation from God. The terms natural and supernatural express only two aspects of knowledge. All of man's religious knowledge is natural and psychologically mediated in origin, and supernatural only in the religious purpose which it serves. Hence there is no real distinction between natural and supernatural revelation, and the Bible is not regarded as different from other religious books, but is subjected to a naturalistic reconstruction. It gives us no revealed truths; it simply nourishes the religious life from which doctrine is supposed to spring. Its uniqueness is found only in its spiritual content as the nourishment of religious life.

Furthermore, with its naturalistic idea of redemption, this theology needs no divine and supernatural Redeemer. Its low conception of God makes it easy to call Christ divine, for all men are divine in the same way. Christ is not God and man, but only God in man. He has, as this theology acknowledges, many brethren. And there being no conception of the guilt of sin, all idea of expiation vanishes, and the Cross and Calvary become only an illustration of the principle of all religious life. Instead of regeneration by the power of God, we have the false hope of the natural evolution of man, and his perfecting through adjustment to his environment and the improvement of the latter. Christianity is no longer a religion for the future with tremendous issues of life and destiny, but is chiefly a religion for this present world, looking toward its social betterment and the rule of ethical principles on earth.

Such, then, in general, is the new theology. To understand it and its underlying causes, we must go back and see how the logic of its principles has worked itself out relentlessly. Speaking broadly this theology has come to us from Germany. To understand the situation today, no less than formerly, it is necessary to go back to Schleiermacher. The rapid development of the historical and exegetical theological disciplines with their claim to exact scientific knowledge and their attitude of indifference or hostility to Dogmatics, led to a denial of the scientific character of the latter, and to a sharp separation between History and Dogmatics. The historical group of the theological disciplines was supposed to be scientific and to have no practical motive; whereas Dogmatics was supposed to be purely practical and nonscientific, and to serve the practical interests of the Church. Consequently Dogmatic Theology turned from the

statement of objectively valid doctrines to set forth the ideas implicated in Christian experience. It was this situation, as Troeltsch points out, which led to an attempt to justify theoretically this separation between the theological disciplines which had already taken place. The supposedly practical and non-scientific character of Dogmatics had to be justified. This was done by means of an agnostic theory of religious knowledge and a sharp distinction between religious and theoretic or scientific knowledge. This unfortunate point of view is quite generally recognized as a distinguishing mark of modern theology, as contrasted with the old evangelical theology and the old Rationalism. This religious agnosticism denotes the impossibility of adequate knowledge in the sphere of religious truth, and the practical, experiential character of religious knowledge. And more than this; it means the inadequate and symbolical form of all doctrinal statements which embody this religious knowledge. Thus Dogmatic Theology separated itself from the historical theological disciplines and assumed a purely practical character.

In order, however, to avoid falling into bare natural religion, Schleiermacher emphasized the fact that it was Christian experience, i.e., an experience connected with the influence of Christ, which was the source and norm of Christian truth. But his emphasis on the experience of the individual was so strong that he failed to do justice to the Christian revelation.

In order to avoid the danger of making Christian doctrine purely subjective and of reducing Christianity to the natural religious sentiment of man, it was necessary to give more emphasis to the objective revelation in the historical Christ; and in order to avoid the speculative construction of Christian truth of the mediating theology, it was thought to be necessary to reassert the practical character of religious knowledge and its distinction from scientific knowledge as well as from metaphysics. It was the significance of the Ritschlian school that it sought in these respects to carry out Schleiermacher's ideas more thoroughly than he had done. In doing this, Ritschl reacted from Schleiermacher so much that, though he rejected the old doctrine of the authority of Scripture, he nevertheless laid so much stress on the teaching of Jesus and the Apostolic conception of Christianity, that he was inconsistent. Herrmann, for example, regards Christian faith simply as trust in God's providence brought about by the impression which Jesus makes on the soul. All ideas about God and Christ, i.e., all Christian doctrines, are merely the way in which we think about Christ and God in view of our experience of God's presence in Christ. Dogmatic Theology which formulates these doctrines is purely an individual and subjective matter. It can lay no claim to universal validity. All that is permanent is the experience and life; doctrine is subjective and changing.

While, therefore, this theology sought to be conservative, its conservatism is only apparent. It sought to escape naturalism, but let it in by the back door in giving up as unessential to Christianity all that naturalism demanded. It would keep Christianity free from metaphysics, yet it depends on a philosophical

theory of knowledge. It asserted Independence of historical criticism, yet used it to separate a human Jesus from unhistorical surroundings. It was determined by a naturalistic philosophy, and yet would isolate Christianity as the final religion.

In opposition to the Ritschlians, the school of comparative religions arose, Troeltsch being its theologian. The isolation of Christianity from other religions, and of Christ from history, is abandoned as a remnant of dogmatism. A thorough application of historical method is demanded, which changes Christian doctrine into a chapter in the evolution of religious ideas. All is an unbroken evolution, naturalistically conceived. Troeltsch speaks of defending an "inclusive supernaturalism" in contrast with the old "exclusive supernaturalism"; but by this he means only that some contact with God is back of all religions. The religion of Israel is connected with old oriental religious traditions; late Judaism, from which Christianity is supposed to have sprung, is thought to be influenced by oriental and Greek thought, and New Testament Christianity is regarded as the product of a syncretistic religious evolution. Naturalism determines the whole procedure, and Troeltsch acknowledges that the application of these principles renders the uncertainty of the portrait of Christ in the Gospels "a heavy burden." How is the Christ of Apostolic tradition related to the actual Jesus? To what extent, in the Gospels, do we get the dogma of Christ's followers instead of history? How did this dogma arise? From such a point of view the Gospel narrative, is treated more and more skeptically, until it is doubted if Jesus claimed to be Messiah; the tradition in the so-called Logia is shattered; the difference between the Johannine and the Synoptic tradition is laid aside; and any certain historical knowledge of Jesus is questioned. The so-called historical Jesus has become a continually changing, even a vanishing quantity, so that any faith at all in Jesus is rendered difficult. We are left to choose between a divine Christ in a wholly mythical Gospel and a purely human Jesus in a Gospel which is supposed to be true only in so far as it is desupernaturalized.

And what has been said of Christ and Christianity, is true of the entire sum of Christian truth. All Christian doctrine is merged in the stream of evolution, the result being that all that is distinctive of supernatural Christianity, i.e., the Christianity of the New Testament, is explained away. For Christian truth is not the product of man's nature, and every attempt to explain Christianity as the culmination of the naturalistic evolution of religious thought, must end in the reduction of the doctrinal content of Christianity to that of bare natural religion.

In this situation more positive theologians judged rightly that the Christian Faith had been destroyed. But the attempt to mediate between the old theology and the modern consciousness has proved a failure and the so-called Modern Positive Theology - a new mediating theology - seems to have had little vitality and influence.

Since the war the Dogmatics which have appeared show either a return to the old mediating theology, though with differences, as

for example Lemme's Glaubenslehre. or to a line of thought which goes back to Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and Herrmann, as in the recent Dogmatics of Martin Schulze and Stephan.

When, now, we enquire what are the causes underlying this whole movement of modern theology, we should note that the chief cause alleged by modern theologians is not the real cause. It is usually claimed that, while the old theology is at variance with modern science, the new theology is the product of modern scientific thought. But such is not the case. There is nothing in the ascertained results of the modern natural sciences which need cause such a theological revolution. It is only when natural science fails to observe the limitations of its knowledge, and attempts to construct a naturalistic view of the world-in a word, when it becomes unscientific, speculative, and dogmatic-that it can be claimed as the cause of the new theology.

The real causes of this new theology are: first, agnosticism in religious knowledge, which reduces religion to mere feeling, making doctrine of no objective validity and purely symbolic. This is the result of the false anti-intellectualism which sprang from Kant's philosophy, and which is a widespread and potent error of modern thought. Under the false plea that religion is a matter of life and feeling only, the new theology brands the old theologians as "rationalists because they believe in the rational basis of religion.

This religious agnosticism can be met by showing that its alleged grounds lead to agnosticism in regard to all metaphysical questions, and that this kind of agnosticism leads in its turn to a complete skepticism which is self-contradictory. But this is not enough. It can be met in a constructive way only by a vindication of our natural knowledge of God from the point of view of Augustine and Calvin and the Reformed Theology which recognizes the innate religious sense in all men, or the semen religionis as it was called. This alone will give an adequate basis by which to meet the religious agnosticism which underlies the new theology.

A second cause and fundamental characteristic of the new theology is that it rejects all external authority in religious knowledge, and rests upon the Christian consciousness instead of on the Bible as the Word of God, as did the old theology. Again, under the specious plea that, because faith is trust which springs from the heart, and not a mere intellectual assent to truth, therefore it cannot have its doctrinal content given to it by revelation or accept it on authority, the new theology changes our whole conception of revelation and of the Bible. Revelation cannot give us truth objectively revealed, and the Bible does not contain such truth. Revelation consists in quickening our religious life, and the Bible is not intended to teach truth, but to nourish life.

It would not be difficult to point out the speciousness of the plea upon which this view of revelation and of faith rests. But we must hasten on to the real cause of this position. The

real cause of this fundamental difference between the old and new theology runs back to the differences between naturalism and supernaturalism. Here we strike the third, the fundamental, and the underlying difference between the old and new theology. It is not, then, the evangelical conception of faith which is at the basis of the rejection of the authority of the Bible by the new theology, as it claims, but a naturalistic philosophy which denies all supernatural revelation, which demands a revolutionary and absolutely naturalistic reconstruction of the Bible, which sees revelation only in man's thoughts about God or in the Christian's feelings, and which asserts man's ability and power of moral reformation over against a supernatural new birth from God. It is this naturalism which underlies the reconstruction of the Old Testament history and the Gospel criticism from Reimarus to Wrede, as well as all the doctrines of theology. By naturalism in this sense we do not mean simply the denial of teleology, and the assertion that the mechanical view of the world is final. We mean the denial of the power of God to make bare His arm and intrude in the world for man's salvation. This, chiefly, nay we may say, this almost alone, is the false root from which the whole movement of the new theology has sprung.

This all-engulfing speculative philosophy – for such it is – cannot be met by half way measure. We cannot withdraw into the citadel of our heart, and suppose that thereby we have saved the Christian religion. We cannot set up an apologetic minimum and hope to defend it and escape with the essence of Christianity from the flood of this naturalistic stream. Only by a bold assertion and adequate defense of the opposite principle, -- that of Christian supernaturalism – can we maintain our common Christian faith by the defense of a supernatural Bible as the Word of God, and a supernatural salvation which comes from the power of Almighty God.

This pure supernaturalism can be upheld only from the standpoint of a pure theism which interprets all events as the unfolding of the purpose of God, and which sets no limits to His power; of a pure religion which acknowledges our absolute dependence on God, and rejects the naturalistic or Pelagian principle of dependence on self; and of pure grace or our absolute dependence on God for salvation.

This pure theism and pure religion and pure grace are just the essence of the Reformed Faith which is really just Christian supernaturalism come to its full rights, and in which alone it comes to its full rights.

For what is the Reformed Theology? Goebel, Schneckenburger, Schweizer, and many others, have denied it chiefly from its points of distinction from Lutheranism. But Dr. Warfield, calling it Calvinism, has taught us to distinguish between its distinctive differences and its formative principle. Its formative principle is, as Dr. Warfield said, the vision of God in His Majesty, and, we may add, the realisation of our absolute dependence on God, and the immediacy of the relation of the soul to God. The Reformed Theology, therefore, is essentially just three things, as Dr. Warfield put it – pure theism, pure religion at the height of its conception, and pure grace or evangelicalism in its pure and only

stable expression."

It is, I repeat, pure theism. For theism is just the interpretation of the universe from the standpoint of God's purpose. And pure theism is just the construction of all that happens in the physical and mental spheres as the unfolding of the eternal purpose of God, and the refusal to limit God either by the world of nature or the human will. And this is precisely the view of the Reformed Theology. Withdraw the acts of free agents from the purpose of God, under the false notion that an event cannot be certain as to the fact of its futurity and free as to the mode of its occurrence, and you must also withdraw such acts from the foresight and providence of God which render them equally certain. The next step is to deny creation by this blind and helpless God, and to end in an ultimate dualism or else in the modern notion of a finite God. Your theism is gone, and the flood of naturalism sweeps away your Christianity. Go the opposite way and merge God in the world-process, and you end in pantheism, and then the flood of naturalism not only overwhelms yourself but God as well. To maintain theism you must keep it pure and regard God as the Almighty Creator, Preserver, and Governor of the universe, whose purpose and power are not limited. This is the Reformed Faith.

The Reformed Theology is secondly, I repeat, pure religion as absolute dependence on God, and not on the human will, using God only as a helper in our struggle against the world. Take this attitude of pure religion; let it have its way in all your thoughts, in all your feeling, and in all your life, and you have taken just the position of the Reformed Faith, and are in a position to defend yourself against naturalism in religion.

The Reformed Theology is thirdly, I repeat, the conception of pure grace or the absolute dependence of the sinner upon God for salvation. All the power in our salvation it ascribes to God; all the glory to Him alone; all to His wondrous grace. Only in this consistent form can evangelicalism be adequately defended against naturalism in soteriology. Subtract from this pure evangelicalism in any degree, and you fall into the idea and attitude of dependence in some degree on human merit and human power for salvation. You are in unstable equilibrium between the Reformed Theology and a bald naturalism and Pelagianism in which this relentless philosophy has now entered the center of your life and attacked the very ground of your hope for yourself and the world.

Only as the Christian Church defends her faith against this naturalism in all spheres, can she hope adequately to propagate it.

We must conclude, therefore, that, since the essence of the new theology is naturalism, it can be opposed adequately only from that viewpoint which gives us the opposite principle of supernaturalism in its purity and thoroughly grounded on an adequate basis, i.e., from the point of view of the Reformed Theology.

It is true that this theology emphasizes Christian supernaturalism especially in the sphere of soteriology. But you cannot deny it there, and hope to maintain it in regard to the origin of Christianity and the Christian revelation. Hence there follows the tremendous significance of the Reformed Theology for us today in giving us the only adequate support for supernaturalism against a naturalism which, when it has run its logical course and borne its bitter fruit, not only robs us of a supernatural salvation, but of supernatural Christianity and a supernatural Bible, and which indeed does not stay in its course till it has robbed us of Christ and even of God.

We are being told that the Reformed Faith or Calvinism is dead today or at least about to pass away. Doubtless it has not many representatives among the leaders of religious thought, nor does it court a place alongside of the wisdom of this world. But wherever humble souls catch the vision of God in His glory, and bow in adoration and humility before Him, trusting for salvation only in His grace and power, there you have the essence of the Reformed Faith. Once let this life blood of pure religion flow from the heart to nourish the anemic brain and work itself out in thought, and it will wash away many a cobweb spun by a dogmatic naturalism claiming to be modern, but in reality as old as Christianity itself.

And if amongst professed theologians we find not many who accept this faith, let us thank God that here in America and in our church, the influence of Charles Hodge, Robert Breckinridge, James Thornwell, Robert Dabney, Wm. G. T. Shedd, and Benjamin Warfield, still lives on.

What other hope have we than that which this Reformed Faith gives us? The forces of evil are powerful in the world today in the sphere of human life. In the realm of religious thought sinister shapes arise before us, threatening our most sacred possessions. And if we look within our own hearts, often we find there treachery from the lust of the flesh and the pride of life, when we would fain keep our eye single for the glory of God. With foes on every hand around us and within; with dark clouds of yet unknown potency for harm forming on the horizon; we dare not put our trust in human help or in the human will, but only in the grace and power of God. We must take the standpoint of the Reformed Faith, and say with the Psalmist: "My soul, wait thou only upon God; for my expectation is from Him. He only is my rock and my salvation; He is my defense; I shall not be moved. In God is my salvation and glory: the rock of my strength and my refuge is in God."

Princeton

Caspar Wistar Hodge