

II.

Dr. Thornwell as a Theologian

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The history of the world is largely the biography of its great men. Certain historic forces are to be discerned at work in any particular period, but these forces first become effective when they are incarnated in a human character and expounded in a human life. The most significant event which has occurred in Presbyterian circles in South Carolina during the last one hundred years was the appearance of James Henley Thornwell as a gift from God to His Church, with the divine mission of interpreting anew in the light of the best philosophy and science of his day the essential contents of the Holy Word. And his significance is well-nigh exhausted in his master work as a theologian; for, while he was a preacher, teacher, writer and ecclesiastic, he was always the theological preacher, teacher, author and ecclesiastic. He touched no subject in any sphere at any time without pressing through the accidental and circumstantial to the fundamental and essential in reason and in the Scriptures upon which a valid conclusion alone could rest.

Some of the marks which characterized Dr. Thornwell's theology were, first, that he was one of the most *philosophic* of theologians. He thought there was more laziness than piety, more stupidity than consecration in refusing to use the human reason up to the full limits of its power in every region of thought and of faith. Revelation, instead of denying the authority of reason, made its threefold appeal to this noblest faculty, whose function it was first, to weigh the evidences which proved the revelation true; second, to interpret the contents of the revelation, reducing them to logical and systematic form; and, above all, thirdly, to evince the harmony between the teachings of the revealed word and the deliverances of right reason, at least to the extent of showing that there is no contradiction between them. Some of his strongest contributions to theology are in this last field; and more than one scholar and student has expressed the opinion that he reached his highest level in his famous discussion of "Morell's Philosophy of Religion," notably the section entitled "Religion Psychologically Considered," which is the most purely speculative and metaphysical

of all his discussions. But, while strongly philosophic, Dr. Thornwell was also intensely *biblical* as a theologian. When Revelation was proven true by sufficient evidence, and its contents were discovered by a just interpretation, the only legitimate procedure was for the human reason to check up its processes by the deliverance of the divine reason in the Revealed Word. A magnificent illustration of this true theological method, which combines absolute loyalty to the teachings of the divine reason with the most intense use of human reason up to its utmost possible limits, may be found in that monumental tract on "Election and Reprobation," which comes as near as any human document can do to saying the last word on the subject from both the rational and biblical points of view. The conciliation of reason and faith, the harmony of philosophy and theology, the proved concurrence of the human and divine reason presented to him no impossible task, but prescribed for him the chief work of the theologian, and at this task he worked with adamant industry, with sanctified genius, with ample scholarship and with a liberal success, as shown by the four massive volumes of his "Collected Writings," and by his powerful influence upon hosts of admiring students.

Uniting these two traits of the genuine theologian, viz: that he was philosophic, yet biblical, he also combined two other marks which might seem inconsistent. He was a true and rational conservative, who knew the results of the philosophic and theological thinking of the past, and who knew that Plato had not philosophized and Augustine theologized in vain. The catholic conclusions of that straight line of philosophers who have expounded the contents of the human reason were not regarded by him as *brutum fulmen*, and the oecumenical attainments of the Church in the Nicene Trinitarianism, and the Chalcedonian Christology and the Anselmic and Reformed Soteriology was not regarded by him as a delusive mirage. He borrowed no wood, hay or stubble from the dead, dry-as-dust, by-gone systems to build into his theological structure; but he borrowed many solid and precious stones from the great master builders of the past. Too true a scholar to be a radical, he must be a conservative; he had taken the measure of Calvin and Anselm, of Hamilton and Kant, and he knew that none of these

mighty intellectual wrestlers had toiled for naught; he knew that they had been as successful as he could well hope to be, and he enriched his theology with the ripe results of their mental toil and travail in obedience to the great law that "other men labored and ye are entered into their labors." But he combined with this conservatism a striking originality, an almost daring theological initiative. If I will not be misunderstood, I may say Dr. Thornwell was a theological progressive; he did not believe that the goal of the full unfolding of the total contents of Revelation had yet been reached; there was rich ore in the Scriptures yet which had not been adequately mined, and through the *stadium* allotted to him he worked with a single eye and with consuming intensity at this very task of the fuller development in systematic and rational form of the Revelation found in God's Word.

Some striking instances of this originality now fall to be considered. First and foremost, I mention the large place and the novel treatment which he gave to Christian Ethics as a section of Systematic Theology. Ethics is divided into three parts: First, the Metaphysics of Ethics, or the Ontological predicates which underlie it; second, the Psychology of Ethics, or the Method in which moral distinctions are drawn; and third, Practical Ethics, or a description and a classification of the duties which every man ought to perform. Quite a number of Dr. Thornwell's lectures are devoted to the first two divisions, the Metaphysic and the Psychology of Ethics, notably his remarkable lectures, (the two ablest, I think, which ever came from his pen), the one on Moral Government and the other the State-and Nature of Sin; in fact, the last six of his sixteen theological lectures are predominantly ethical; and he published a little treatise on Truth, which he described as giving one-third of a system of practical ethics, benevolence and justice being the other two-thirds. This is a striking innovation in theological science. Compare the monumental system of Dr. Charles Hodge, who was his contemporary, and see how full it is of the dogmas of theology and how comparatively barren in the field of Christian ethics, and you get the right angle from which to view what I almost venture to call the striking theological invention of our Carolina expounder, viz: the marriage of theo-

logical dogma to Scriptural or Christian ethics, so that dogmas and duties are really fused into unity in this system, which we name the Thornwellian Theology. Others had seen the importance of union in a speculative system of creed and deed, but the distinction of the largest success in achieving this union belongs to Dr. Thornwell, and it is no small part of his title to lasting renown.

But in the field of theology purely considered, we find impressive illustrations of his individual initiative and theological progressiveness—for example, his definition and divisions of theology. Theology is the Science of Religion; or it is that system of truth in its logical connection and dependence which, when spiritually perceived, results in true religion. There are two modes of knowing the truth, first, the speculative; second, the spiritual, which is faith or religion. It is only objectively, therefore, that theology is the science of religion. The question arises, is religion speculative or practical; the answer being it is neither exclusively, but both. It is neither exclusively cognition, feeling, nor volition; but it involves all three. It is the result of a life which fuses into a higher unity elements drawn from every part of human nature. We are to avoid the mistake of supposing that these separable elements are added to one another so that the religious man first knows, then feels, then wills; but rather in the religious life marked by holiness, cognition, feeling, volition coexist in the holy activities of the religious man. We are to avoid the still more dangerous error that religion can be divorced from its object, Who must contain in Himself the truth which the intellect cognizes, the beauty which the emotions embrace, the good toward which the will energizes. There can be no religion apart from God, the object, any more than apart from man, the subject, and the relations between these two. The first division of theology, then, consists of the necessary relations between God and man expressed in moral government and regulated by the principle of distributive justice. Man is God's creature and servant, and as long as he obeys will be rewarded; but as soon as he disobeys will be condemned. In a system of unmodified moral government probation would be endless; or, if terminated at all, would be terminated only by failure. But, while God

cannot be less, He may be more than just—that is, He may be gracious. He may deign to alter the status of His creature and make him a son instead of a servant, and thus He limits the period of probation as to duration, promising to accept obedience for a limited period in place of obedience for all the endless future, thus introducing the idea of justification. Further, He limits the probation as to persons, making the natural head or progenitor of the race the representative of all other members of the race, promising to accept his obedience in the stead of the obedience of his descendants, thus introducing Federal Headship, with its features of Substitution and Imputation. Historically, this was the first form of religion in our world, and we may call it the Covenant of Works, or natural religion, and its theology the theology of natural religion, which is the second great division of theology. But the covenant broke down through the failure of its Federal Head, leaving the purpose of God to change the status of His creature from a servant to a son still unchanged, although His creature had now become His sinful creature. No new principle is applied in the modification of Moral Government, which has to be made to fit the status of a sinful creature. Federal Headship is still the master key; God has never dealt with our race on any other principle. Only two probations have ever been offered, the one in the first Adam, the other in the second Adam; so that the Adamic principle governs the religious history of our world. The justification of many through the obedience of one is still the plan—has always been God's plan. Some new features, however, appear for the first time. Election, or the choice of those to be represented; atonement for the removal of guilt: regeneration for the removal of corruption, are added. And we have supernatural religion, or the Covenant of Grace, and its theology, the theology of supernatural religion, or the third great division of Theology.

All this sounds simple to us now, but Dr. Thornwell has this distinction, that he is the first man in the whole history of theological thinking that put these things in this way and said them after his *fashion*.

In still further illustration, his teachings upon the fundamental question of Theology, the existence of God, combines the elements of completeness, simplicity and novelty. God's exist-

ence is not known by intuition, else there would be a God-consciousness, in which God as an object was immediately known, but "no man hath seen God at any time." Nor is God's existence established by a process of syllogistic reasoning, and the common theological arguments for His existence are of value only as fully unfolding the contents of the knowledge already possessed. But positively God's existence is reached by immediate inference necessarily drawn from the primitive beliefs or faith of the mind. There are many arguments, but only one proof, and that consists of the immediate and direct inference drawn from the soul's necessary beliefs as they are developed by experience. The so-called arguments for the being of God are valid only when we consider them as statements of some aspect of these immediate inferences. The cosmological argument is the inference drawn from a necessary faith in causation. The moral argument is an inference from faith in a moral law to a law-giver and judge. The ontological argument is an inference from belief in the two correlatives, the finite and infinite, to the existence of both. The union of scientific accuracy and amazing simplicity in this position render it a marvel that no theologian had anticipated him in this teaching, but it is the prerogative of genius, especially when illumined by divine wisdom, to unravel the most intricate phenomena by the discovery of some law whose combined universality and simplicity provokes wonder and which remains forever afterward a part of the spiritual riches of the race. Dr. Thornwell's thesis that God's existence is an immediate inference drawn in some new aspect from each one of the mind's primitive beliefs in turn and necessarily developed by experience, has left the theologian only the work of illustration and exposition in this field.

Again, his views upon the Freedom of the Human Will, show that he was the master instead of the slavish expounder of a system inherited from the past. Determinism, or the theory that the dispositions of the soul infallibly control the volitions of the will, might have applied to the case of Adam if he had maintained his original condition; and if the theory of Determinism had been universally true, then Adam would have remained holy until this day. But in the strategic case of our first parent, this theory of the will as a complete theory, was shattered into frag-

ments; for Adam's dispositions *exhypothesi* were all holy, but his volition was altogether sinful. So that, without reluctance or hesitation, he affirmed the self-determination of the will in the supreme case of the first sin of our first parent. This self-determination of the will, designed to fit for probation, was lost when the probation was ended by failure and the will became penally enslaved to the evil dispositions it had originated; but to unite Calvinism to the out-worn and exploded dogma of Determinism was a measure to which Dr. Thornwell would give "place by way of subjection, no, not for an hour." It is one of the unfortunate features of our doctrinal history that quite a number of exponents of our theology have allowed this speculative dogma of Determinism—of doubtful philosophic reputation—to become identified in many minds with our system of faith and doctrine. The splendid service of Jonathan Edwards must be largely discounted by the rigorous and universal determinism which he made central and controlling in his philosophy and theology, and with which he has poisoned much of the thinking of those who are in the line of development from him; and, in striking contrast, the transcendent service of Dr. Thornwell is greatly enhanced by his demonstration that our theology must expel this alien intruder by substituting for it a more comprehensive and truly philosophic and scriptural doctrine of Human Freedom.

But the most valuable work of our master Theologian was accomplished in the Theology of Redemption by the supreme and regulative place which he assigned *Adoption*. In fact, the organic and unifying principle in Thornwell's theology is found in his doctrine of Adoption. The question proposed, both in natural religion and in supernatural religion, was the same, viz: how may a servant, through adoption, become a son. In the Covenant of Works the question relates to a righteous servant; in the Covenant of Grace to an unholy and condemned servant; but the end proposed in each case is the same, the change from the status of a servant to that of a son through adoption. From this point of view, Election is election "into the adoption of sons"; Justification is a means devised by which the standing of the servant may be so assured that adoption to sonship shall certainly follow; Federal Headship again is a sublime means which the adoptive

decreed utilizes in order that the one who is represented shall receive this gracious benefit of the change from the status of a servant to that of a son; Regeneration is the effective way in which the spirit of sonship is made real in those who have secured the adoption of sons. No other system of theology has assigned so large a place to this ruling conception which occupies so supreme a position in the Scriptures and in religious experience; and in making Adoption central, Dr. Thornwell is at once the more scriptural and the more philosophic. This is his chief achievement as a Theologian, making a distinct advance upon the Reformed Soteriology and that of all subsequent thinkers, by giving Adoption the regal position assigned to it in revelation, and belonging to it in Christian experience, and which theology ought to recognize in its systematic construction of Scripture and experience by giving Adoption the same influential and regulative place in the doctrinal system.

But I cannot speak further; my time and your patience forbid. "If I have done well and as is fitting the story, it is that what I desired; but if slenderly and meanly, it is that which I could attain unto."

In closing, I remark that Dr. Thornwell was fortunate in at least one of his successors in the chair of theology in the Columbia Seminary; for Dr. John L. Girardeau, while not a slavish copyist, was a true disciple of his famous predecessor; and with equal gifts of mind and graces of heart carried to still further development the theologizing which he inherited with his chair. The theology of Thornwell and Girardeau is one, and seldom in the history of the Church have two minds so similarly endowed and equally gifted labored in such close conjunction and inner harmony in theological construction and work. Dr. Thornwell was fortunate, too, in having a great historic Church born just at the right moment to receive the impress of his genius and spirit; and in some just sense the Southern Presbyterian Church is his colossal monument; and John Knox is no more completely incarnate in the Church in Scotland than is "James Henley Thornwell embodied in the Presbyterian Church of the South." That great Church is fortunate beyond all speaking in having as its representative Theologian and Ecclesiastic a man of his type; ample in scholarship, profound in research, accurate in

reasoning, conservative in temper and yet progressive in spirit; above all, saintly in life, the expression in character and devotion and intensity of consecration of that mighty system of doctrine which not only mastered his intellect, but moulded all the deepest springs of his innermost personality. And thus the Theologian was the saint, who poured out through press and pulpit and professor's chair the combined stores of learning and genius and exalted saintliness. The Synod of South Carolina, therefore, one hundred years after his birth, with profound appreciation of his unrivalled influence and imperial services, gives devout thanks to Almighty God for the gracious gift of JAMES HENLEY THORNWELL, THE THEOLOGIAN.