

THE BRIGGS CONTROVERSY.

FROM A CATHOLIC STANDPOINT.

Judicious and thoughtful people cannot be averse to hear a member of the Roman Catholic Church explain from what standpoint and in what particular light his co-religionists view the Briggs controversy. Two points in particular strike them as most surprising. In the indictment proffered against Professor Briggs we are told that the errors charged are fundamental, and relate, first, to the question as to the supreme and only authority in matters of faith and practice, and second, to the question as to the inerrancy or truthfulness of the inspired word of God. The other three principal charges, or fundamental errors, as they are called, are subordinated to, or at least congenial with the second mentioned above.

Nothing could surprise a member of the Roman Catholic Church more than the statement that Presbyterianism having been in existence for such a period of time, the fundamental and vital question of authority should not have long since been definitely agreed upon and settled forever. And what we here say of Presbyterianism can be, we think, fitly applied to other reformed denominations. A church is necessarily a society, and what society, a Catholic asks, can we do not say grow and prosper, but even live or exist, without that chief and indispensable element, authority? What else is there that could give cohesion and unity to the several parts whereof a society is composed? What else can make a society that one solid compact which it essentially is? Authority is absolutely necessary to the very existence, let alone the growth and progress, of any society—as necessary to it as the head is to the body. This being so, a Roman Catholic, when he is told that the question as to the supreme and only authority in matters of faith and practice is still being mooted in a religious society of many years standing, becomes conscious that the following dilemma imposes itself: Either a so-called religious society of that nature is in reality, no society, since it lacks the most vital element of a society, namely, authority; or else, though it is possessed of such an element, it is indeed strange that the wisest, most learned and most influential members of that society should be in such a state of doubt and hesitancy in that regard that they hotly discuss the matter among themselves, and have impanelled a jury we should say summoned a council—unwilling to give a unanimous verdict. Supposing, according to the latter alternative authority does not exist in a society of that kind, would not the result practically prove as disastrous as in the former hypothesis?

As to the question of the inerrancy or truthfulness of the inspired word of God, are we not forcibly led to a similar conclusion, that is, the utter necessity of a supreme authority, competent to elucidate those very points of the inerrancy, truthfulness and inspiration of what is proposed to men as the word of God, and, by unappealable sanction, impose belief in, and adherence to the same? It is not enough that men be presented with the word of God, inerrant, truthful and inspired, they must moreover be possessed of an infallible means of reaching an inerrant, truthful and therefore an inspired interpretation of it. For we know that the language of the Bible is not in every case so clear and self-evident to the mind of men, that all are enabled to find out its meaning at once. We know, on the contrary, that many investigations in reference thereto are doomed to be baffled, unless they be accompanied with deep study, serious knowledge of archaeology, comparative philology, scientific lore, etc. How many among the busy sons of men can find time to

equip their minds with such an amount of erudition, and yet, Dr. Briggs' assumptions to the contrary notwithstanding, his co-religionists maintain that the way of salvation must be sought, and can only be found in and through the Bible. Numberless, indeed, must be the perplexed and afflicted souls crying aloud: "Who is worthy to open the book, and to lose the seals thereof . . . And I wept much because no man was found worthy to open the book."—*Apo. I., 2, 4.* And even with the best qualified expounders of the sacred text when a passage of abstruse meaning must be interpreted, does it not happen that senses differing widely, nay, anon, that violently clashing conclusions are eventually arrived at? Now, if the truth investigated be one which, under pain of eternal reprobation, I am bound to believe, and the knowledge of which imposes stringent moral obligations upon me, what am I to do? Which of the two opinions shall I adopt? Shall I weigh and compare their intrinsic value? But have neither the time nor the ability to do so. Does it not, therefore, follow that the all-wise and all-merciful Founder of Christianity, whom all denominations alike acknowledge and worship, must have given to them whom He came to redeem and save an easier and safer means of reaching the true meaning of his utterances? Yes, evidently, and that means can be none less than authority—that authority, we say, set up by Christ in His church, not only to govern it, but also to hand down the holy traditions pure and intact, and to give to the divine word its true interpretation. That authority it is, which Augustine, himself a most learned and profound expounder of holy writ, acknowledges and reverences, when he says: "*Roma locuta est, causa finita est.*"

Therefore, sifted and scanned by unprejudiced and upright persons, the system of private interpretation of the Holy Scripture is found wanting. For most men it is impracticable; on reaching its conclusions it does not definitely satisfy the mind so as to convince it that all further research after the truth is unnecessary, nor can it impart to the heart that peace, without which the latter never can be at rest. What remains then? What else than the acknowledgment of, and submission to, a supreme authority, empowered to interpret the word of God with infallible assurance. That this conclusion should not yet have been arrived at, that the absolute necessity of a supreme authority to decide on the inerrancy and truthfulness of the inspired word of God, and to interpret the same, should not yet have become manifest to all adherents of Presbyterianism, or that they should still be seeking where that authority is to be found, in whom it is vested—is we repeat, a cause of singular surprise to a Roman Catholic.

But let us, for the sake of argument, concede that the system of private interpretation is practicable, available, indeed, the only true, reasonable and authorized mode of interpreting the word of God, shall the position held by the General Assembly in the Briggs controversy appear more tenable? Far from it, and this is at the very first glance obvious. The right to private interpretation means that each private individual is entitled to give to any passage, text, or word the significance which his own judgment may dictate, and that he may safely adopt the conclusion which, by using that standard, he has eventually reached; else the words are void of meaning. We suppose Dr. Briggs is no more to be debarred from the full enjoyment of that right than any other minister of his own denomination. We admit that his inferences and teachings are of a somewhat startling character—maintaining, as he does, that Moses is not the author of the Pentateuch; that Isaiah did not write

more than half his book; that sanctification is not complete after death. But what of all this, and why should Dr. Briggs be singled out, summoned before his peers, convicted of heresy and eventually suspended for believing and teaching as he does, if in accordance with the doctrine and by the gift of his own church, he has a right to attach to scriptural writings whatever meaning his own private judgment may suggest? Whether he has made a more lavish use of that right than any other Presbyterians are wont to do, is merely a question of more or less; the question of principle and right remains the same. For, after all, the case is simply this: We have before us a minister of the Gospel belonging to a church which holds as one of its essential tenets that all its members, shepherd and flock, are vested with the unlimited right to interpret the Bible in the manner which to them seems good and proper. This same minister is conscious of the fact that by using this right to violate no law, no rule of his church; that, on the contrary, he is acting in conformity with its spirit and its views; and lo and behold! when on a certain day he sets forth his own interpretations of the divine word, he is pointed out as a dangerous man, made the victim of obloquy, dragged from one tribunal to another, eventually condemned and suspended as guilty of heresy. Thus rebuked and sentenced for doing that which he was taught and told it was his right to do. Dr. Briggs may well wonder at the course followed by his self-appointed judges, and exclaim: "Consistency, thou art a jewel." We are not surprised that Dr. Briggs should after hearing of the sentence pronounced against him, have appeared quite unconcerned and told his friends that he "would go right on." And we deem the course of the minority in the General Assembly quite natural, when "declaring their hearty belief in a love for the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and their entire loyalty to the principles of the Presbyterian Church, they desire respectfully to record their solemn protest against the verdict and judgment of suspension, and the proceedings leading to the verdict, in the case against the Rev. Charles A. Briggs, D.D., in the General Assembly of 1888." Yes, if the right to private interpretation exists in the Presbyterian Church, and if words bear with them the meaning which they are intended to convey, the Briggs trial was a farce and the sentence passed upon the man a piece of iniquity.

These remarks concerning the free interpretation of the Bible and the case of Dr. Briggs have been made merely for the sake of argument; for a Roman Catholic believes and maintains that the system of individual interpretation of the divine word, with all its intrinsic absurdities, practical difficulties and baleful consequences, cannot be adopted or advocated by any man of upright judgment, and that it can, consequently, never have been handed down or sanctioned by the Founder of Christianity. Just as the safe keeping of the Holy Scriptures has been intrusted by Christ to His church, so must there be in that same church of His an infallible means to unravel all intricacies and to illustrate all sayings of recondite significance contained in those sacred books. That means is the teaching as well as governing authority set up in the church by its Founder. The very conclusions whereto we should be forcibly led by the contrary doctrine is sufficient proof that the Catholic belief in this regard is the only one deserving of respect and support. For who shall give to every man the time, the acumen, the knowledge required to arrive at the true meaning of certain difficult passages of the Holy Scriptures? Who shall tell a man that his interpretation of this or

that text is the true? And if, as in the case of Dr. Briggs, a conflict arise between two or more persons attributing different senses to some biblical expression, who shall decide the question? The local Presbytery or the General Assembly? But how could they thus tamper with the right to private interpretation vested in each of the wrangling parties? It is evident, therefore, that an absolute, supreme teaching authority must have been deputed by Christ to His church, that to this authority must be referred all difficulties met with in the interpretation of the sacred text, and that all the members of the church must consider the decision arrived at by that same authority as final and binding. Such is the Catholic belief, and we leave it for any sensible reader to say whether or not it is the only reasonable one. Authority in these matters of such serious import is so obviously necessary that all in practice recognize it and follow its dictates. The child, whether reared in the Catholic faith or not, receives the interpretation given him by his parents, and, later on, the man follows the teachings of his pastor. Why? Because this is for all the readiest, most natural and, generally speaking, the only practicable way of learning and understanding the Holy Scriptures.

L. A. NOLAN, O.M.I., LL.D.

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