

MEMORIAL OF JAMES HENLEY THORNWELL, D. D., LL. D.

BY REV. JOHN B. ADGER, D. D.

IT was at noonday on the 1st of August, 1862, at Charlotte, N. C., that James Henley Thornwell departed this life. His wife, one daughter, one son, and his friend, the late Rev. John Douglas, were present, with myself. I stood at his dying bedside for some six hours before he breathed his last, but I had no thought that his end was near. There were brief intervals of wakefulness when he would rouse up and speak with us for just a moment, but for the most part he lay with closed eyes and seemed to be dreaming that he was in his class-room at the Seminary. Once he uttered a statement as to the divine attributes. Once he said, "Well, you have stated your position, now prove it." Several times he was addressed concerning his views and feelings, and always answered in the tones of calm confidence and trustful hope. His lips moved frequently as if he were in prayer. For a long time he lay in quiet slumber, his countenance continually lit up with passing smiles, just as on a summer's evening in our Southern skies the heavy massive cloud illuminates itself almost every minute with beautiful flashes of lightning. Towards the close he exclaimed, "Wonderful, wonderful, nothing but space—expanse, expanse, expanse!" At the last, whilst we silently watched him, without any sign of suffering, he suddenly threw back his head upon the pillow which supported it, gasped once, or possibly twice, and was gone.

It is therefore nearly twenty years since this brilliant star went down to rise no more in our firmament. Yet is he far from being forgotten amongst us. How often his name (*clarum ac venerabile*) is named in our Church courts and Church papers. What Thornwell held, what Thornwell said, is always felt to be a most potent argument for or against any debatable position. As long as our Church lives, James Henley Thornwell will live in our hearts and his name dwell on our lips. And in that conviction,

simply his name was the only epitaph we inscribed on his tombstone.

Our distinguished Professor, therefore, has impressed himself in the strongest possible manner upon the Southern Presbyterian Church, and through her he will yet impress himself on catholic Presbyterianism the world over. What is the significance and the secret of this impression now so deep, and destined hereafter to be so wide? In my humble judgment, it was not the nobleness and sweetness of his character, not the depth of his piety, not the extent of his learning, and not the force of his intellect; although in every one of these particulars he was without his peer amongst us; but it was the truth and the worth of the principles to which he adhered, and to which he gave throughout his whole course the most earnest and consistent advocacy.

And I venture with great diffidence in this presence, but firmly, to assert that it was not as a theologian that James Henley Thornwell achieved his highest distinction, or accomplished the most useful work of his life. True, he left behind him a large number of incomparably grand theological lectures and treatises, both didactic and polemic. Many and important are the points of divine doctrine elucidated by him. And I may surely affirm that had Dr. Thornwell lived to be eighty years of age, and spent them all in the study of theology with a wealth of books at his command, he might have been perhaps less original in his thinking, but no doubt, with the blessing of God, he had produced such a system of theology as this country has never seen, nor these last ages anywhere known. And yet our Church does not talk of Thornwell's theology, but of his investigations in another department.

Nor was it Moral Philosophy where our distinguished Professor wrought out his chief performances. And yet he was a most successful and renowned teacher of Moral Philosophy; had deeply studied all the questions of this science and was at one time prepared to publish a volume respecting them.

Nor yet did Dr. Thornwell accomplish his chief work in the field of Metaphysics, although he was complimented more than once by Sir William Hamilton and other great masters as being

such a thorough student of Aristotle and of all philosophy. But it is neither Thornwell's moral nor mental science which we hear continually referred to and quoted.

Neither is our eminent brother best known, nor will he be longest remembered, as a preacher, although many of you, I feel quite sure, will put him, as I do, at the very head of all the preachers of the gospel in our day. At the same time I may say that if he was a very great preacher himself, he certainly made his mark visibly on more than one of the greatest preachers in our Southern Church. These survive him as his sons, and perpetuate his masterful power as a pulpit orator. Yes, I may also go farther and say that in so far as the Southern Presbyterian ministry is distinguished for soundness of doctrine and for evangelical preaching—for holding up to the popular gaze only Christ and Christ crucified, it is doing injustice to no man living or dead to say that in very large measure this is the result of the influence exerted in many various ways by our James Henley Thornwell.

Thornwell was cut off as Calvin was in the very noon of life, and resembling the immortal Genevese in several other respects he was like him certainly in this, that his chief work was in the field of Ecclesiastics.

The eminent Dr. William Cunningham, late of Edinburgh, said of Calvin: "The systematising of divine truth in his 'Institutio,' the most important work in the history of theological science, and the full organisation of the Christian Church according to the word, are the great peculiar achievements of Calvin." But he adds: "His own contributions to the establishment of principle and the development of truth, were greater in regard to Church organisation than in regard to any other department of discussion—of such magnitude and importance indeed in their bearing upon the whole subject of the Church as naturally to suggest a comparison with the achievements of Sir Isaac Newton in unfolding the true principles of the solar system. . . . We believe (continues Cunningham) that the leading principles which Calvin inculcated in regard to the organisation of the Church, never have been and never can be successfully assailed; while

there is certainly no possibility of any one being able again to bring out from Scripture a contribution of anything like equal value."

And then Calvin's main ecclesiastical principles, Cunningham states thus:

1. "The unlawfulness of introducing anything into the worship and government of the Church without positive sanction from Scripture."

2. "That the Church must be organised as to office-bearers, ordinances, worship, and general administration, and arrangements according to what is prescribed in the New Testament."

3. "That no one-man power of rule is to be allowed in the Church—which was the origin and root of the Papacy."

4. "That the Church is to be governed by presbyters, one class of whom are ministers of the word, and the others ruling elders, who though ordained presbyters are yet engaged usually in the ordinary occupations of society."

5. "That all these principles are bound on the conscience of the Church *jure divino*."—(Essays on the Leaders of the Church, p. 27, and on John Calvin, pp. 342 and 343.)

Now, perhaps, it is not for us to say that our distinguished Professor actually did what Dr. Cunningham says there was certainly no possibility of any man after Calvin ever being able again to do. And yet I am by no means sure that, all things considered, Thornwell did not make a contribution to ecclesiastical reformation in itself of as much value as Calvin's. The times were different in which the two great men lived. To Calvin belongs the honor of exhuming principles buried under the rubbish of ages; to Thornwell the honor of fully elucidating what the Genevese only hinted at, because what Calvin said on Ecclesiastics may usually be comprised in a very few lines. Each fought a good fight—Calvin against an apostasy from the word fully developed and also thoroughly armed and equipped to exterminate the truth; Thornwell against principles inevitably leading (though perhaps circuitously) to the same apostasy which threatened a return into the bosom of the Reformed Churches on this continent to be their plague and final destruction.

Very briefly I will justify these positions by essaying to state the ecclesiastical principles, which in an age of slack and relaxed Presbyterianism our friend and brother, with his great Kentucky compeer, was honored not only to defend but to set up again and reëstablish in the convictions of our Church, as unquestionably revealed in the word. They were as follows:

1. That the Scriptures are the only and the sufficient rule of faith and practice; the Church, God's servant and not his confidential agent with large discretionary powers; that a "Thus saith the Lord," must be produced for every Church appointment; and that in religion whatever is not commanded is forbidden.

2. That Presbyterian Church government in its main features and in a certain sense in all its details also is of divine right.

3. That *presbyter* is not synonymous with *preacher*; that the aboriginal presbyterate is ruling; that preaching is a function superadded to the office of one class of the rulers or presbyters; and that we are to assert the parity of all presbyters and not merely that of all ministers.

4. That the deacon is not to be connected with the lowest church court merely, but may be employed by the upper courts to keep the charge of all their pecuniary and other secular affairs.

5. That the Church in all her operations, both at home and abroad, must act not *indirectly* through great Boards which can never meet, and which constitute only a barrier between her and her work, but *directly* through Executive Committees small enough to meet often and actually to do what is committed to them.

6. That the Church is to have no connexion with political or moral voluntary societies.

7. That giving of our substance is an act of worship to Almighty God.

8. In respect to Church discipline, that an *offence*, the proper object of that discipline, is nothing but what the word of God condemns as sinful; that in appellate jurisdiction our courts must not be treated as parties; and that baptized non-communicating members of the Church are not to be subject to technical discipline.

9. I may add, that Dr. Thornwell held distinctly to Calvin's peculiar doctrines of the Lord's Supper and of Baptism, and that

he showed indisputably that the Church of Rome has corrupted the one as well as the other sacrament.

I have not time on this occasion to run out a comparison between these respective contributions of Calvin and Thornwell to our system of divinely revealed principles, and must leave that comparison to be made by each of you individually. Yet suffer me to call your attention to the striking similarity in gifts between these two great men who joined to so much intellect and learning so great practical wisdom. The Fourth Book of Calvin's Institutes treats of the Church, the communion of saints, and the external means or helps to fellowship with Christ; and it displays the strong common sense of Calvin while it sets forth the mind of the Master with respect to the government and discipline of his people. And so the Fourth Book of Thornwell's Collected Writings (much of it perhaps in advance of his time as a Presbyterian) will nevertheless probably prove to be the most practically effective and useful of the whole, constituting a monument to his knowledge of human nature and of human affairs, as well as of the divine polity set up on earth by Jesus Christ and his inspired apostles.

So much of the men and their respective works. A few closing words now of the impression of their teaching. For Calvin's theological instructions many students gathered at the little city of Geneva from all parts of Europe, and through them his doctrines permeated all the Reformed Churches of his day. France and Holland and Scotland all received and accepted his Church Government and Discipline. For one hundred years the Church of France maintained them in vigor and in purity, but St. Bartholomew and many other terrible fiery persecutions well nigh rooted them out of that beautiful country. Holland handed down Calvin's testimony through her Voetius and other Presbyterian divines; Knox carried it to Scotland, and Andrew Melville, Th. Henderson, Samuel Rutherford, and George Gillespie passed it down after his day. But the history of Presbyterianism in the Kirk of Scotland has been that of one long struggle, constantly renewed and vigorously maintained to bring back Prelacy, which in fact often did return and was reëstablished measurably

amongst our Scottish forefathers. Moderatism frequently and for long periods threatened to obliterate entirely what Knox carried to them from Geneva. And so in this country, to which this system was brought over from Scotland and Ireland, from France and Holland, much have these heaven-descended principles of polity been diluted with the Congregational or Prelatic ideas, which human wisdom would substitute for what the Lord has given to his Church. It has been for Thornwell and his coadjutor, Breckinridge, to take up the testimony of Gillespie and renew successfully in this country the struggle for the *jus divinum presbyterii*. Our eminent Professor had no Genevan crowd of students, but in this little Theological Seminary he taught the truth long enough and to men enough to perpetuate it in new life and vigor, and spread it all through this Southland. Our little Church has formally adopted his views in great fulness. In all humility we may add that she seems to be in advance of her Presbyterian sisters the world over as to the full and complete reception of these principles. Reverently and modestly we declare that we esteem it her glorious mission to maintain them undiluted, uncorrupted, and to exhibit them to other bodies of like order and to all the world in their simplicity, purity, and power. God grant that this school, where once our Thornwell taught his Master's revealed will touching the Church, may never decline from the distinctness, simplicity, and vigor of his testimony here.