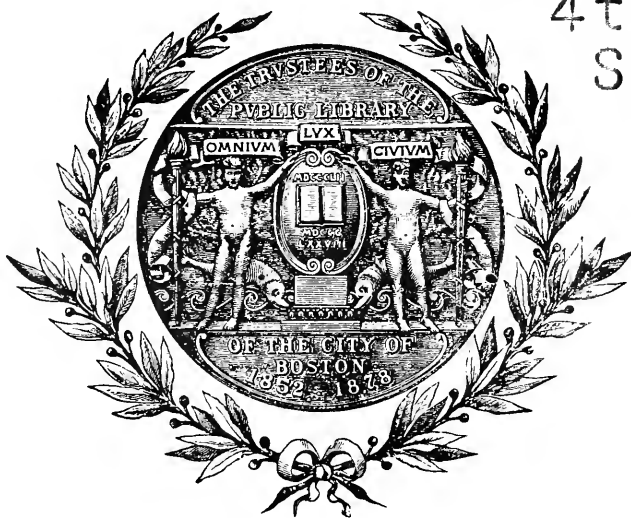


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THE HERITAGE  
OF  
LIBERAL CHRISTIANITY.

BY  
REV. LESLIE W. SPRAGUE.



AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION,  
BOSTON.

The object of the American Unitarian Association shall be to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity ; and all Unitarian Christians shall be invited to unite and co-operate with it for that purpose. — ARTICLE I. *of the By-Laws of the American Unitarian Association.*

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## THE HERITAGE OF LIBERAL CHRISTIANITY.

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The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are children of God; and if children of God, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified with him. — ROMANS viii. 16, 17.

MATERIAL inheritances may be mere matters of accident, but every spiritual inheritance must be proved. A child succeeds to his father's name and fortune without any effort or merit of his own. To be "a son of his father," however, he must live up to his father's life; must display the strength of character, of aim and effort, which marked the father from other men. Nor must he be a mere echo of the father; he must live a life of his own, which is yet worthy to be compared with the father's life. There are therefore two births: one into the material accidents of life; the other into life itself, into the purpose, aim, and effort which characterize personal existence.

The child is heir to the father's life when he also lives that life. So all men are heirs of God, joint heirs with Christ, if so be that they suffer with him. Inheritance from God is somewhat to be won; it knows neither chance nor gratuity, and acknowledges nothing but desert.

The inheritance of Liberal Christianity is mainly a spiritual inheritance. It does not consist, primarily, in organizations, in temples, creeds, or rites; it consists in

the things of the spirit. It is an inheritance which must be proved. Lowell says, —

“’T is heaven alone that is given away.

’T is only God may be had for the asking.”

Likewise Jesus says, “Ask, and it shall be given you,” and “Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.”

It would seem, then, that the greatest things are most easily to be had, are gratuitous bounties, showered by the free hand of Divine benevolence. Yet to ask for heaven, to supplicate for spiritual life, to hunger and thirst for righteousness are the accomplishment of most strenuous effort. No prayer needs to be so persistently offered as that of the disciples, — “Lord, teach us to pray.” To be able to ask for heaven is life’s greatest attainment.

The inheritance of Liberal Christianity is to be known only to those who have hungered and thirsted for spiritual things. It is not an inheritance to the idle or indifferent; it is not to those who delight to call themselves liberal from no other motive than to affirm that they are not orthodox, who know not the height and depth and glory of that faith which the ages have wrought for those willing to pay the price still due. There are those in every community where the Liberal Church is known who are heard to say that they have no religion, no need for any church, that they do not believe in God, or soul, or immortality, and yet presume to say that they are Unitarians or Universalists. The burden of their misrepresentation weighs heavily upon the forces of the Liberal Church. Such souls, most unhappily, do not know the height and depth and richness of the liberal faith. They have not paid the price of spiritual inheritance.

In order to grasp the significance of the spiritual in-

heritance, it must be perceived that there is also a material part to all inheritance, — a body to contain the soul.

A man joins a political party. He thereby shares a great heritage. That party, under various names and with differing emphasis, has continued through all the changes since government began. And because it is a party, not the whole, it has limitations. About it are arrayed prejudices; in it exist corruptions; the very machinery of its organization prescribes its action and results.

Likewise a church has its forms, its method of government, its articles of faith, the traditions which bind as law cannot; and, on the other hand, a splendid momentum, a time-honored prestige, an accumulation of experience, wisdom, and power.

Measuring his inheritance, the Liberal Christian finds little on the material side. In place of the prestige of an honored past, which other churchmen enjoy, he receives the prophet's part of stones, delivered now more politely, but no less stingingly, than of yore, since they are rendered in the form of mistrust and ostracism. He inherits an organization far from perfect, — formed largely upon lines of churches earlier in existence, and adapted to other work, not to that of the Liberal faith.

But on the material side he receives more than this; for he receives as an inheritance from the past religious consciousness a sacred literature — the Bible. He inherits a Sabbath, — a day set apart long ages since for rest to the body and refreshment to the soul. He inherits the custom and the social sanction of public worship, without which his religious inspirations would languish and his spiritual fellowships grow cold, and wanting which he would find it hard, out of the complexity, diversity, and rush of this age, to create such an opportunity of the higher life. He inherits a body of

opinion, which, if it sometimes limits, far more often aids; for best thoughts have historic roots, and no generation and no set of men could proceed far into truth without the great accomplishment of all human study, summed up in the body of opinion which prevails throughout the world at any given time.

The Liberal Christian would not get far in his thought if he were obliged to think his way from the beginning on such vast problems as those suggested by the words, God, soul, Jesus, prayer, church, and immortality.

The Liberal Christian inherits also a moral sanction, without which inheritance his best life would be impossible. If it were necessary to begin and say of every act and thought and aim whether it were good or bad, how far could one hope to journey upon the moral way? Philosophers may still debate as to what ultimate sanction there can be for right, as to the nature of conscience, and the true end of conduct; but while they debate, the world will go on its way, guided by the conscience which, whatever its nature, has developed through the millions of years of human existence, and will do that which the experience of all time has proven good and right. The Liberal Christian inherits not only moral sanctions, not only the conscience, but the Christian conscience, — that is, the conscience mellowed and quickened by the thought of the love of God, awakened and exalted by the example of Jesus, the Christ.

These things, it is true, constitute the inheritance also of those who call themselves "orthodox" Christians. Neither the liberal nor the orthodox — no, nor all Christians even — can claim a monopoly upon these. These are our common human inheritance; our common Christian inheritance, if so be that we make the sacrifice of effort necessary to their full perception and attainment. The common inheritance is deeper than all the differences

of thought or method. The Christian world is slowly learning that there are more important issues than those of doctrines and forms. One believes that God is Trinity; another that He is Unity; but the great question is, do both know His presence in the heart and obey His will in daily life? One believes in an inerrant Scripture, the other that the Bible is the record of the thoughts and deeds of men; but the important matter is that both should know the inspirations which reverent reading of inspiring thoughts might give. One worships God by rites and sacraments; another in the closet when the door is shut. The question is not as between these two with their different ways, but rather between them, on the one hand, and, on the other, those who

“ . . . lift not hands in prayer.”

One believes God to have been incarnated only in the man of Galilee; another sees God incarnated still in all that lives. It matters not as between these two; the vital question is that somewhere man may behold the semblance of His face. The real issues of religion, we are coming to perceive, are, after all, with the unbelieving, that somehow they may explain life's riddles and perplexities, gain strength for the burden, ease for the pain, and light for the darkened day. One would have a church of rites and creeds and symbols; another the church of the free. Let there be peace between them, that the needy soul may find a place where he may learn of God, and gain the hope that is in the Father. May the issues of dogma, which seem to be silently giving place, continue to give place to the real issue, that of essential religion; that its challenge, its confidence, and its purifying power may be in the hearts of all God's children! Thus Christian Union approaches.

James Martineau says that while scholars seek the

basis in fact, and ecclesiastics in some treaty of peace, those who pass behind the doctrinal differences and linger near the springs of human piety and hope, are learning the way of the true unity of the Church. That their number is increasing is the present hope of a more united and more efficient Church.

The common Christian heritage is the true bond of fellowship. The Liberal Christian stands outside the older organizations because he cannot conscientiously stand within them. He is glad to have a company of his own, however small, because the soul is made for companionship, and even the closet prayer means the brotherly greeting and the affection of believers. Yet the Liberal Christian rejoices that his heritage is from all. He leaves the older churches because of their limitations, but he still rejoices in all the good they ever enjoyed and in all they still enjoy.

“All of good the past hath had  
Remains to make our own time glad.”

And it remains to gladden all who in our time seek its joy. I need not be a Catholic in order to read with profit the inspiring words of Thomas à Kempis, or to be chastened by the example of St. Francis. I need not be a Methodist and accept John Wesley's theology and church government in order to rejoice in his fervor, his spiritual power and humane impulse. One need not join the Episcopal church in order to be blessed by the broad and lofty message of Phillips Brooks; nor are the Congregationalists alone in the benefits of Beecher's ministry. There are no rights of patent on the spirit of God. What He gives he gives forever, and He gives to all.

But the Liberal Christian has not only the common heritage of Christianity and of the world. His also is the heritage of freedom; of the freedom which means



progress and improvement. There is for him a Bible — the same Bible which others enjoy. But his is also the freedom to read it in the light of all the latest thought and study. While other churchmen must make compromises with their professed beliefs, the Liberal is expected to make no compromise with reason or with conscience. This is a freedom purchased at a price. For this have modern martyrs suffered. It is a heritage which not many yet enjoy, but which many are now struggling to win. To view that struggle should make the Liberal grateful for his heritage.

The Liberal Christian has not only a Sabbath, but a Sabbath made for man, and to be used as the spirit shall direct. It is not his to spend it as his fathers spent, because they so decreed, but to spend it as his heart shall choose and his own mind direct, for the welfare of the life God gave him to save.

For the Liberal Christian there is the institution of worship, and there is the freedom to modify, adapt, remould it to fit the new needs of a new age. It is his to omit the outgrown phrase and thought, and to enrich by all the contributions of God's later inspiration. That the Liberal has not made his service of worship richer is due only to his occupation with other lines of religious work; but that his worship has grown rich through the freedom he enjoys is attested not only by the spiritual atmosphere of many a Liberal Church, but by the spirituality of so many beautiful lives which have been nurtured at the altar of the Liberal Church; more than all, by the reverent hymns the Liberal singers have contributed to all churches, and by the books of prayer which have found their way from the hearts of such as Martineau and Theodore Parker. Such fruits of the heritage of freedom are not to be bartered for any chance of dignity of service or unity of rite.

For the Liberal there is a body of opinion, but for him there is no bondage to it. His is the heritage of freedom of thought. He may accept what remains after the corrections of this critical age. He may vitalize this with the new truth this age of discovery has wrought. The Liberal Christian has the old heritage of the thought of God, which prophets, seers, sages, and saints slowly toiled toward. He inherits also the God revealed through the larger reaches of thought, imagination, and hope, in this increasing age. The thought of life itself, of the Christ, of the future world—these increase in meaning and in power with the ever widening vistas of human intelligence. The larger view is the Liberal's heritage.

Besides this heritage of a common Christianity, and this larger heritage of freedom to apply new truth, the Liberal Christian has also all the heritage of Christianity, not all of which has yet been appreciated, and a world of heritage since Christianity. Christianity came in the fulness of time. It profited by the ages of development which preceded it. Into it flowed currents from older world-streams. It appropriated much of the best of Judaism. It later took inspirations and colorings—not all of them dark—from Greece and Rome and the sterner North. The heritage of Christianity goes back more than eighteen hundred years; it reached back to the day—

“When the first man stood God conquered,  
With his face to heaven upturned.”

The Liberal Christian has this heritage as a Christian, but as a Liberal he has more. For Christianity has not been all the life of humanity for the past eighteen hundred years. God hath not left himself without witness in any time. Great parallel streams have been gathering strength and beauty while the Christian waters have

flowed within their banks. No one revelation exhausts the Infinite. Sturdy hearts and reaching, searching souls have consecrated the best in every people to the progress of faith. The Liberal, because free, has his heritage from all lands and countries. The Bibles of the nations are chapters in his Sacred Book; the litanies of nations enrich his rites; the songs of all peoples make glad his heart; the faith and hope and love of all help in his upbuilding. The word God hath spoken to Buddha and Socrates and Plato, to Zoroaster and Mohammed, to the poet and the scientist of to-day, all become vocal in the message from on high. The Liberal is glad to believe that —

“One accent of the Holy Ghost,  
The heedless world hath never lost.”

Glad is he to claim every accent as his heritage.

The challenge to the Liberal Christian is great. If he would know the greatness of his heritage he must prove it by his life. He may be actually, as he is potentially, joint heir with every blessed soul, even with the Christ; joint heir in all the richness of God's revelations, in the wondrous sense of His love and forgiveness and majestic power, in all the lofty aspirations and deep, enkindling zeals which have tuned the heart of man to the music of eternity, and taught the mortal soul to lay hold upon immortality. All this may truly be his inheritance, if so be that he shall prove his claim by the quality, the worth, the richness of his own spiritual life.

The responsibility of the Liberal Christian is not less than his challenge. “Freely ye have received, freely give,” is not only an injunction, but a fundamental principle of the higher life. Every man is in duty bound to live up to his best inheritance. If material riches bear with them responsibilities, how much more does the spiritual heritage come with duties none may shrink. Born

in a Christian land, no man is morally free to be a pagan. He may transcend the faith of his race, but he cannot fall below it and be a man. The Liberal Christian is not only responsible for the maintenance of the standard of thought, emotion, and conduct, which Christianity has established — for this he is responsible with other Christians; but he is also responsible for the maintenance of the freedom, the broader view, the richer inspiration which has come to him. The heritage which the fathers bequeathed the sons bears with it the unquestioned duty of fulfilment. The end is not yet. Christianity is not yet wholly Christian. Freedom is not yet fully won, and far is it from being fully used. All truth has not yet been surcharged with reverence, nor has reverence been taught to respect only truth. Because the Liberal Christian stands with back upon the past, the mighty force of which has pressed him into this day, therefore must he stand with face upon a future in which the promise and potency of the past and of this present shall be still more unfolded.

The Liberal Christian, because he is liberal, ought to be even more ardent than others of the name to help all men share his Christianity; because he is Christian, he should be more concerned that all should share the breadth and liberality, the inspiration and privilege of which so bless his life. Receiving most, he should be most zealous to share. With such a heritage, and with the receptive spirit which finds constantly increasing richness of thought and life, the Liberal is prepared, as is no other, to go forth to that ministry which the world in anxiety and pain so long awaits. If the Liberal Christian would be true to his blessed heritage, he must not prove false in any slightest degree to this beseeching opportunity.

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