

Reformation Without Tarrying for Any

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No Date¹

This subject is taken from the title of a pamphlet published in 1582 by Robert Browne² in defense of the right of democratic organization of religious bodies. This treatise published in Holland was sent over to England for distribution. Its reception such that the queen issued a proclamation against it, and before the author himself reached his native soil two zealous men had hung for distributing it. Its great significance as an historical document arises from the fact that for the first time in the English language the principles of democratic self-government are set forth. In this modern time the idea of democracy, one of the first seeds of which was planted by this tract, has become so much the common thought of man that it has become the watchword of a great war.

I propose this morning, not to set forth the principles of democracy, but to use this historical incident, and one other incident of history as illustrations of, and a stimulation of loyalty to another principle that should be very close to your hearts.

This principle is set forth in the title of this sermon, "Reformation Without Tarrying for Any." Through the lofty and commonsense idealism that is exemplified in these two incidents of history to appeal to your enthusiasm, yea, your devotion, for

¹ This manuscript has no explicit date. However the reference at the end of the first paragraph to a "great war" suggests that this was written after the US entered WWI and before the conclusion of WWI, between April, 1917 and November, 1918. This is confirmed by the paper on which the manuscript is written, which is identical to paper used for manuscripts that can be dated to this period.

² Robert Browne (c. 1550- 1633) was one of the initial Puritan Congregational leaders. He authored *Reformation Without Tarrying of Any* in 1582.

an approach to the task that challenges us from all sides and at every turn of the rough road of these days.

What I wish to set forth is the thesis that in every great advance in human history, the trail has been blazed, the highway built, and the new station established by those great dreamers and idealists, who have been volunteers in the army of advance. They have been bound by no other ties than that of loyalty to some volunteer organization whose purpose have been the establishment of some new principle, some new dream, some new value in the life of man. Having set forth that thesis, I propose to apply it to the immediate needs of our own times, and still more definitely, to the immediate tasks before us. Time only will tell whether we have the faith and the ability to meet that demand. But the demand exists. It appeals to us from every burning bush of modern life, from the din of the factory, the sordidness of business, the lust for power, the smug phariseeism, and hypocrisy of the organized business. We may answer or we may not, as the strength of our spirit determines, but we are called.

In the year 31 B.C. in the battle of Actium the Roman Republic, long torn by factions and revolution, came to an end. Octavius, the leader of the victorious party set about the establishment of the great Roman Empire. With a sagacity and shrewdness almost without parallel in history he left all the old republican institutions, offices and machinery, but he took all the power exercised by the republican officials into his own hands, and they became puppets under his control. Thus began the history of that great Empire which ruled over practically the entire world of the time. It continued for five centuries until the year 476 when the last helpless remnants of the Roman Empire sent the vestments and insignia of the Empire, all that remained, to Constantinople, begging that a German Chief might be made ruler of Italy. It is a long interesting and illuminating history. The conquests of foreign lands, the extension of slavery, the increase of wealth and poverty, the slow decay of standards and virility under the influence of that very wealth and poverty, all these facts will cause one to pause and consider the operation of forces in history.

But what I wish to call your attention to is not the gradual decay of the great Roman Empire, but rather to the birth and growth into power of another organization, constructed along

other lines, and for other purposes. Under the social development of the Roman Empire, with the interplay of peoples, like the great melting pot of the modern world. Greek thought. Jewish idealism, the Jews spread all over the ancient Greek world. All this merging of racial ideas, accompanied by considerable interplay, was developing new insight, new ideas of life and its meaning. These obscure people, unnoticed by the Roman Empire, unheralded by any blast of trumpets, were laying the quiet foundations of a new social order, one which, in the fresh enthusiasm of its youth was called the rule of God. The genius and character of the result of this fusion expressed itself in the message of Jesus, and later in the volunteer groups that became the bearers of his message, and organized themselves into little democratic societies which were called "ecclesia" a name taken from the old Greek "Common Assembly." All over the Roman Empire these sprung up, among the Jews of the dispersion, and among the Gentiles. They were based upon some hope of a just kingdom of God, whose rule should be love, and whose ruler should be God and not Mammon. They all shared a great faith in the personality of their great leader, the first exponent of the new teaching, which came to be known among them as Jesus' Way.

It was a long and difficult journey that these builders of new world travelled. In prison, reviled, ridiculed, stoned, driven from place to place, tortured, made the victims of the circus games of the haughty Romans, they persisted in their task and at the end of 325 years they had so wormed their way into the structure and fabric of the Roman Empire, that Constantine, shrewd statesman that he was, saw that by appropriating Christianity, and making it the religion of the state, he could swing the balance of power, and "In this sign he could conquer."

How had this great conquest of the Roman Empire been accomplished? By following this method of "Reformation without Tarrying for Any." In their volunteer societies, their ecclesia, their churches, they ignored the social differences that existed about them.

They lived together as man-to-man. They had not yet attained the power to break the Roman Empire, and they rendered unto Caesar the things that were Caesar's, so long as it did no violence to their principles. To be sure, they would not worship the emperor, and for this defect many died. To be sure they

would not serve in the Roman Army, and for this unpatriotic attitude they suffered severely. But slowly, conforming to their principles within the sphere of their own life, they conquered Rome and became the dominating influence.

About them in the state existed the institution of slavery. But slave and patrician who had become Christian knew not the relationship of slave and master, but only the relationship of fellow-workers for the coming kingdom. About them was great luxury and wealth, but patricians of great wealth, as they became converts to Christianity, led austere and simple lives, and even sold all that they had in many cases and cast their wealth in to the common cause. Slowly, step-by-step, within the very midst of the Roman Empire with all its great institutions, its learning, its wealth, its culture, its conventional religion, all of which were slowly dying, with its institution of slavery based upon conquest in war, within the very midst of all this, Christianity was developing a new social order, a new state, and new code of living. They were doing this great work not by any supernatural means, but by the common ordinary means of adherence to their principles and [to] the institutions which stood for those principles.

It must not be supposed that this was a garden without weeds. The internal history of this same Christian movement that was conquering the Roman world was one of strain, variation, conflict. As they approached the period of their success and "Christian" became a word to be reckoned with rather than a word of derision, they met their greatest difficulties. People became Christian because it was good policy, because it was good business, and because it meant social standing. Then came the danger.

Men of ambition and men with the lust of power began to seek the high places in the church, and became Christians in name only, still living their lives in the spirit and practices of paganism, just as many today who cry loud and long the word, "Democracy" "Democracy" and practice the most gruesome autocratic principles. This was the situation in the middle of the fifth century. Rome was Christian. The old Roman Nobility, whose ancestors were the rulers of the world, were sliding down their hill of sensuality and luxury to their ignominious end. They were pagan, orthodox in their religion, devotees of literature, sports, hunting, country life, charity and the fine

arts. While the barbarian armies of the North were encircling their cities, there was not enough self-respect left for them to resist, and protect the Roman city whose history had them great. When the Barbarian Armies were before Rome, it was not the representative of the Great Roman Empire that met them at the gate, but the representative of the Christian Church, Leo the Great, Bishop of Rome, who met them.

This was symbolic of what was taking place, for these very barbarians who were conquering Rome were Christians. The Roman Empire was dead. Christianity, which was taking the great riches of human history that came to it through the Greek, the Jew and the East, was, during the next thousand years, to fuse these treasures with the raw, untutored, but virile stock of the barbarians of Europe, and pave the way for the modern world.

Here again, at this juncture when the whole Christian movement, once so pure and clean, but now in danger of becoming completely corrupted by its success and its power, once again, within the Christian Movement, appeared those volunteers, who throughout the dark ages, while the barbarians were absorbing and adjusting themselves to the history, the forms, the ideals of the Roman world that they had conquered, carried the torch of idealism, of learning, of integrity forward. Without tarrying for any, they raised the standard of their lives way above the standard of society, physically, intellectually and morally, and pushed forward not without stumbling, not without mistakes, not without grave offences, bearers of the torch of human progress.