

CONGREGATION ALISM

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649225699

Congregationalism by Charles E. Jefferson

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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CHARLES E. JEFFERSON

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"Look unto the rock whence ye were hewn and
to the hole of the pit whence ye were digged."

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THE PILGRIM PRESS
BOSTON NEW YORK CHICAGO

BX
7232
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CONGREGATIONALISM

I

USES OF HISTORY

A HEBREW preacher was never so much at home as when he was dealing with the past. It was his delight to carry his countrymen back over the road along which they had traveled and to revive the memories of the experiences through which the nation had come. He loved the past, not because he was the victim of that morbid sentimentalism which loves to brood over scenes which have vanished, but because he was so intensely interested in the future. The Hebrew preacher felt himself called of God to make the future glorious, and in order to do this he was obliged to use the past. He dealt with a people who were easily discouraged and in order to brace their drooping spirits he held up before them the glowing record of God's dealings with their fathers. By unrolling history he showed them how through all the centuries every night had dawned into a broader day, and every crown of thorns had been transfigured into a crown of glory. When his hearers grew faint-hearted and approached great duties with fear and doubtings, he heartened them and drove them forward by urging them to take one good, long look backward. The vision of what had been made it easier to believe in the things which were to be. When men saw bygone centuries stand behind

them, each one jeweled with the mercy of the Lord, they faced the future with untroubled faces, assured that he who had begun a good work in them would perform it until the final day. The vanished generations were collaborators with the preacher, driving into the hearts of living men strong reasons for expecting new revelations of God's grace. And so it was well-nigh impossible for a Hebrew preacher to preach without bringing into a sermon a bit of Hebrew history. He never wearied of recalling Abraham and Isaac and Jacob; he was never more eloquent than when relating the wonders of deliverance wrought by God through Moses. It was difficult for a Hebrew poet to write a poem without weaving into it some reference to the goodness with which God had crowned the years. The Hebrew leaders were always saying, "Look unto the rock whence ye were hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye were digged." But there was a still deeper reason why the Hebrew preacher made such constant use of history. The Hebrews were dominated always by the conviction that they were a peculiar people, entrusted with a unique mission and appointed to a glorious destiny. From the very earliest times it had been borne in upon them that to them was given what was given to no other people, and that through them all the nations of the earth were ultimately to be blessed. To men possessed with such a belief all experience must become sacred. Everything that happened to the Hebrews was supposed by them to have a divine significance. Every event was a guide-post pointing the direction in which the people ought to move, every experience a window opening out

upon the Eternal. Their history was their Bible. It was the food upon which they reared their children. It was the literature which was read in the synagogues, it was history which the Levites sang in the temple service. Indeed, our Bible is little more than a book of history. The majority of its books are historical and the others are adorned and illumined by quotations from the historians. If we have "ears to hear," we can hear the old Book saying to us, "Look unto the rock whence ye were hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye were digged. Look unto Abraham, your father, and unto Sarah that bare you!"

Indeed, the history of every nation is to that nation a Bible, a book which ought to be studied with unflinching enthusiasm and religious care. In the experience of a people, God's character is revealed and his will concerning that people is made increasingly clear. Every nation will be strong in proportion to its willingness to gather up the lessons which preceding generations have worked out, and to drink in the spirit of the mighty men who have made the nation what it is. I wonder if we Americans are studying our history as we ought to study it. Do we earnestly teach it to our children in our homes, does it hold the place in our schools which it ought to hold, is it used in the Christian pulpit as frequently and effectively as it ought to be used by the men who are the ordained leaders of a people who, like the Hebrews, are also a peculiar people and to whom God has entrusted a mission to mankind?

If some boy should ask why not preach every Sunday from a sentence taken from a United States history, the answer is that while the history

of every nation is in the deepest sense a Bible, there is a value to the Hebrew history which no other can match. The Hebrews had a capacity for religion quite exceptional in the history of the world. They had an insight into spiritual laws and processes and a genius for interpreting spiritual phenomena given to no other people. Because of their moral sensitiveness and their responsiveness to the movements of the Eternal Spirit, God was able to work out through them wonders which he could do through no one else. Out of that race he could bring a man in whom it was possible for the Godhead to dwell, and who could reveal to all the world both the disposition of God and the possibilities of man. For this reason the Bible, though largely a book of history, is exalted above all other books. To it is given a name which is above all other names, and to it belongs a power which no other book can claim.

In the reading of American history, therefore, the Bible is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. We will count our history sacred, but we will hold it up in the light which streams upon it from the Book of Books, that in this light we may read in our own national experiences the wondrous messages of God.

II

PURITANISM

In order to grasp the significance of Congregationalism we must first master the meaning of Puritanism. What is Puritanism? Whence did it come, what did it do, when did it vanish? These are questions which ought to have answers in the mind of every intelligent American. Puri-