

THE INTERPRETATION OF PROVIDENCE IN HISTORY

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"And it came to pass, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said unto him, Art thou he that troubleth Israel? And he answered, I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the Lord, and thou hast followed Baalim." (1 Kings 18:17-18)

The occurrence of the word 'interpretation' in the title of this paper informs us at once that we are in the realm of applied, rather than theoretical or abstract theology. All sciences have their theoretical and their applied aspects. This is true of theology, which, in better days, was regarded as the 'queen of the sciences'. What follows, therefore, is not so much a statement as an argument, or a case. It is an attempt to develop an interpretation of God's providence in history which is true to the scriptures and practically relevant to the pastoral needs of God's people in the times through which we are passing.

The general theme of providence is that of God's sovereign and perfect control of all events. There is a natural division of the subject into two aspects: the providence of God in the lives of individuals, and God's providence over nations and over civilisation as a whole. Perhaps it would be convenient to give descriptive terms to these two distinct, though related, ways of studying God's providence. We could speak of micro-providence as that which concerns the individual, and macro-providence as that which relates to the larger units of mankind in history. It is with the latter that we are concerned here, and especially with the Christian church in the Anglo-Saxon world.

It needs to be said that the literature which deals with this subject is at one and the same time vast and yet sparse. Whilst all works of history and biography have some tangential connection with the theme, yet books which deal directly and specifically with this subject are, to our knowledge, few in number. That is not altogether surprising because the exercise of interpreting providence is essentially a religious and spiritual, rather than a purely historical, one. It is a task which we can only begin with any degree of realism, once we have accepted the great (and nowadays highly unpopular) postulate, that God is truly known only in the Christian scriptures and that history has ethical and spiritual meaning because it is the unfolding of a divine purpose.

Such a great spiritual classic as Flavel's treatise of *Providence*, therefore, will not help us greatly, because it deals with the more individual aspect of this theme. Indeed, most treatments of providence naturally tend to look at it from the point of view of the individual, especially that of the Christian believer. This is not true of a recent valuable study entitled *The Providence of God* by Benjamin Wirt Farley, a contemporary American scholar, who teaches at the Union Theological Seminary, Virginia. Professor Farley's book provides us with a very thorough historical survey of providence. That is to say, he works his way comprehensively, first through the views of providence held by the great thinkers of Greece and Rome, then by the early Church Fathers, and then by the Schoolmen, the Reformers and so on, up to the present day. It is a book to which one will turn again and again for information about the opinions of writer through the ages. But it does not set our

to address itself directly to the type of application of the theme which forms the title of this paper. Rather than beginning with the books, therefore, it will be better to take our point of departure from the Word of God itself.

In the chapter of the Bible which was read to us (Matthew 24), this evening, we have the great discourse of the Lord Jesus Christ on the subject of the Last Things. There our Lord is informing his people of the most notable and significant events which would occur in the course of human history right up to the very end. More particularly, Christ predicts the fall of Jerusalem, which occurred in A.D. 70, and also the destruction of the whole world at the Second Coming. From our standpoint today, one event is in the past and the other in the future. And with regard to both these momentous events, Christ says that we are to 'watch' (v.42). Clearly, the implication is that Christians are to be awake to major events in this world and they are to attempt to understand them, at least to some extent.

Failure to 'watch' and to be awake to what God is doing in the course of history is, according to Christ's warning, both foolish and dangerous. This is supremely true of the unbelieving world. But it is also true of God's own people. If we do not 'watch', then we are likely to become either complacent or, alternatively, discouraged. Events in the external world are integrally related to the words of holy scripture. To be ignorant of scripture is to be unprepared for what God is doing in history. To be unprepared at the end, when Christ returns, is to lose our soul eternally.

Furthermore, the view we take of events between our own day and the end of the world will inevitably have a considerable effect upon our whole state of mind as Christians. If we look for nothing in the future but gloom and declension, then we shall be pessimistic as to the degree of success which preaching and missionary endeavour will have on earth. But if we have an optimistic eschatology, we shall be correspondingly affected in our outlook and in our expectation of coming blessing. This is particularly true of the way in which we interpret the passage in Romans 11, respecting the 'mystery' of Israel. Admittedly, it may amount to no more than our state of mind as we set to work in the task of proclaiming the gospel and praying for its success. But our morale is very important. The overall view of providence which we adopt will have a close bearing on our morale and our degree of expectation in God's work.

SOME BIBLICAL INSIGHTS

The short passage of scripture from 1 Kings 18, which is provided at the head of this article, appears to be of considerable significance for the subject in hand. It consists of a snatch of conversation between the great prophet Elijah and the infamous King Ahab. There had been a serious state of drought in the kingdom for three and a half years. Each man, interestingly enough, blamed the other for the troubles, evidently for exactly reverse reasons.

Ahab's point of view was that Elijah had interrupted the peace and happiness of the land by praying down God's judgement. Elijah's opinion of the matter was that Ahab's idolatry had been the real cause of ruin to the land. It is an instructive exchange between a man of God and a man of the world. To the worldly man, it is the 'sour churchman' who spoils life. To the man of God, it is the reckless sinner who ruins the world by bringing God's curse upon a land. In Ahab's opinion, Israel was *his* kingdom and Elijah was a nuisance. In Elijah's judgement, Israel was *God's* theocratic kingdom and Ahab was a

thorn in its flesh. It is a notable case of two opposing interpretations of providence.

There is a point of major importance to be noticed in this exchange between Ahab and Elijah. *A man's theology always determines his view of providence.* It must be so and it cannot be otherwise. What we think of God must determine our interpretation of what we see all around us, both in the church and in the world. This principle is to be found everywhere in the Bible. If we apply the principle to our modern situation, especially in Britain, we shall see that the principle is both a true and a useful one. Who, it might be asked, are the 'troublers of Israel' in Britain today? Every man answers instinctively in terms of his own theology. The Ecumenical finds the 'troublers of Israel' in those who will not lay aside every doctrinal difference and 'heal the wounds in the body of Christ'. The Charismatic blames the church's trouble on those who decline to seek the 'gifts'. The theologically liberal trace the modern church's malady to the presence still on earth of an 'antediluvian confessionalism'. The Evangelical and the Calvinist diagnose the church's ills as the judgement of God upon the theological unfaithfulness and departure from scripture.

This principle holds good also in its reverse form. *The way a man interprets providence proves his real theology.* This is illustrated interestingly by a recently published book, entitled *Defending and Declaring the Faith*. From the title, one would expect to find that the orthodox creed of evangelical religion was being set forth and defended. The author looks at the life and thoughts of eight well known Scottish theologians and preachers between 1860 and 1920. It is valuable as a summary of the thought of such men as Kennedy of Dingwall, John Caird, A. B. Bruce and James Denney. But what is surprising to the evangelical reader is a comparison between the title of the book and the foreword, the author of which admires and praises John McLeod Campbell, Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, and Edward Irving. Yet all three of these men, far from defending the faith, were disciplined for unorthodoxy by the nineteenth century Scottish church to which they belonged. It is a remarkable instance of hiatus between the title of a book and its message. What today is being called the church's remedy was, in better days, treated as heresy.

This brings us to a further point in the church's duty in a time of judgement and declension-- to enquire after the *real* cause of the trouble. A generation which makes a false diagnosis of the church's ills may land the church in apostasy. 'Whom God will destroy he first makes mad'. There are repeated warnings in the prophets against the folly of either not heeding, or else misinterpreting, the omens of providence. (Cf. Isa. 22:12-14; Jer.23:16-17; Ezek. 22:28-30). This is what Ezekiel caustically terms 'daubing the wall with untempered mortar' (Ezek. 22:28), which he defines as 'seeing false burdens and causes of banishment' (Lam. 2:14). In the New Testament, Christ refers to this same sin as a culpable failure to 'discern the signs of the times' (Matt. 16:3).

Whatever be the true causes of the church's steep decline in Britain in our generation, there is no denying that the decline is there. There is a worm at the root of the tree which threatens not the leaf or the blossom only, but the very existence of the tree itself. Britain has no patent rights to the gospel of Christ. The church of Christ as such cannot be lost. But national churches can be lost. The Jewish church in Palestine was lost for hundreds of years after A.D.70. Much the same happened to North Africa and Turkey at later periods in history. We had better diagnose the cause of our modern ills correctly. Failure to do so might plunge our nation into darkness for centuries. If we see the cause, there is hope that we may repent in time. But who will repent of unrecognised sin? The

fearful possibility is that we may already be past hope, because God has given our church leaders over to a reprobate mind. God forbid that it should be so. But the situation is urgent. And it is made all the more urgent in that key concepts of God's providence are out of favour.

SOME 'LOST' CONCEPTS

In the modern church, there are a number of concepts relating to providence which are in danger of being lost for one reason or another. They are concepts which are to be found in the Word of God and which were cherished in better ages of the church. Their loss in the modern church has made us spiritually weaker and less able to wrestle with God for a return of his favour. We may look briefly at four such lost concepts.

1. *The concept of a 'model age'*. Not in an absolute sense, certainly, but in a limited sense, there are 'model ages' of the church. By that, we mean that, in some ages, God is powerfully and wonderfully at work on earth in sending revival, reformation and influential preachers of the gospel. At other ages there is a dryness and a deadness, even on good and orthodox men. It is true, of course, that the church in apostolic times is the only 'model' church in an absolute sense. There we have the inspired men and the blueprint of what the gospel and the church ought to be. But if we see all subsequent church history as nothing more than monotonous shades of grey, we have a false idea of church history. The fact is that some ages have been rich in spiritual greatness while others have been lifeless and dead. It is possibly the influence of Brethrenism which has led to a disparaging attitude towards such golden ages of the church as the Reformation, the Covenanting and Puritan era and the period of the Evangelical Awakening. Such ages do come. If we do not believe in them, how can we begin to pray for such an age to dawn on our country again?

2. *The idea that God must be glorified on earth*. That God is to be glorified is a belief common to all Christians. But that God is to be glorified on earth, by our obedience and faithfulness, is by no means the common creed of all believers as it should be. The point is well illustrated in an anecdote which has come down to us from Scottish Covenanting times. A conforming Christian put the question to a Covenanter as to why he should suffer such 'unnecessary' trials. 'Because', as he put it, 'I shall have heaven as a Christian and you will get no more'. To this the godly non-conformist replied, 'Yes, we shall have more. We shall have God glorified *on earth*'. There is both great theology and also great heroism in these words.

The practical outworking of the point is that carelessness in our walk, worship and witness not only forfeits God's blessing but robs him of his declarative glory on earth--an incalculable loss. Universal obedience to God's written Word becomes, in the light of this, more essential than life itself. It is an aspect of the truth which needs to be recovered.

3. It belongs to the biblical portrait of God's church on earth that *its history is like a wave, periodically rising and falling*. This is the view of providence implicit in such passages, for instance, as Psalms 44, 78, 106 and 126. Christ himself made it clear that this pattern would continue to the end of the world. There would be times in history 'when the bridegroom' would be 'taken away' from God's people, so that believers would 'fast in

those days' (Mark 2:20). Again, the Lord speaks of times in the history of the New Testament church when believers would desire to see 'one of the days of the Son of man, and should not see it' (Luke 17:22). Periods of revival and declension, to use modern terms, will alternate in the life of Christ's church till the very end.

It is of great importance to believers to be thoroughly convinced of this aspect of God's providence. It kindles afresh our flagging hopes to realise that, however low the cause of Christ may fall, God is able to revive it again, even in a very short time, in answer to believing prayer. The wave that falls to its trough is destined to rise up again to another peak. This concept is essential to us if we are not to sink into despair as such a day as this.

4. The fourth aspect of God's providence which is in danger of being lost is the distinctive concept of the church's history which emerged at the Protestant Reformation. According to this view, there are three clearly-defined periods of the church's history: the early period, the medieval period and the modern period.

This three-fold view of church history is a more important part of our Protestant heritage than might at first appear. It serves to remind us that for a thousand years the church in the West wandered into darkness and superstition. This is not to deny that there were good and great men in the Middle Ages. But it helps us to see the immense debt of gratitude we owe to God for the Reformers and their work. We must never allow this view of history to be blurred in our minds. The Reformers not only gave us a new principle of exegesis and a new systematic theology but also a new way of looking at church history. This view of history is to be found implicitly in the three Reformation treatises of Luther written in 1520. It is also found more explicitly in the Fourth Book of Calvin's *Institutes* and in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, as it is popularly called.

There are today powerful influences at work tending to obscure this attitude to church history, which was once the commonplace view of Protestants. The Oxford Movement of the 1830's seriously challenged this view of providence which we are referring to. But, more recently, it has been blurred in people's minds by the misguided statements of some Protestant leaders, who are suggesting that the Reformation was something of a tragedy or, at least, an unfortunate mistake.

If the Reformation comes to be looked on as a tragedy, then Protestants will have ceased to be the real spiritual heirs of the Reformers. To give ground on a point of history is, in effect, to concede to a new theology. There are many who do not appear to see that this is the case. But it must be so. To recover out of the present state of decline, therefore, means that Protestants must go back to the older view of history which looked at the Reformation as a return from darkness to light. *Post tenebras lux* is more than a slogan. It is an interpretation of providence. Indeed, it implies a vital creed.

PROVIDENCE AND HISTORY

From what we have said, it follows that the way we interpret providence will determine the way we evaluate history, especially church history. And that, in turn, will determine the way we look at the great figures of church history and those who write about them.

It needs briefly to be said that providence and history are the same thing looked at from two different points of view. Both terms refer to the contents of God's eternal purpose or decree as that unfolds in this world. 'History' is the term we use to refer to the events of

God's plan on earth when looked at from the standpoint of mankind. 'Providence' is the term we use when we are looking at the same thing from a theological point of view. Of course, many do not choose to accept that there is such a thing as providence. But that does not concern us here. Christians, at any rate, are committed to a belief in providence, which is just history, as God has ordained it and watches over it.

It is important to remember that a man cannot really understand history if he has no true concept of God's providence. It is true that he may be an expert in some details and therefore may be worthy of great respect for his erudition. But to be an authority in the details is not the same as to be competent to understand the overall significance of a period of history. An expert may, strange to say, 'miss the wood for the trees'.

One of the most remarkable examples of this is to be seen in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which is justly regarded as an historical masterpiece. But as an overall explanation of the subject with which it deals, it is unsatisfactory. Gibbon attributes the fall of Rome to its abandonment of paganism and its conversion to Christianity! He was simply reiterating an old pagan view, advanced by such ancient enemies of the gospel as Celsus. Augustine long ago answered their case conclusively in the twenty-two books of his polemical work, *The City of God*. The pagan view had virtually disappeared till Gibbon revived it in late eighteenth-century England. It is a classic case of a timeless work of history marred by a false view of providence. In that case, there was no very great damage done to Christian faith. But in other cases, great damage can be done to men's faith.

Religious and philosophical assumptions always lie at the heart of the way men write history. This point is brought out very clearly in a helpful book by Dr. David Bebbington of Stirling University, entitled *Patterns in History*. He shows that history has been viewed from various standpoints over the centuries. He mentions several of these views: the *cyclical* outlook of oriental writers; the traditional Christian view, which considers history to be a *straight line*; the idea of *progress*; the theory of *historicism*, and that of *Marxism*. Perhaps we today would need to include a further view, that of historical *relativism*. But the essential point which is made by Dr Bebbington's study is that there are not only the 'brute facts' of history. There is also the deeper question of how we understand and interpret those facts. If those who write about history do not have a biblical view of providence, they will scarcely be able to see the events they write about in their true light.

It is very interesting to evangelical Christians to note that historians who may not share their view of divine providence are nonetheless concerned about the interpretation of history. Sir Arnold Toynbee, for instance, in his monumental work *A Study of History*, speaks about 'metahistory'. He is evidently quoting from the historian, Christopher Dawson, who had earlier used the word, on an analogy with the familiar term 'metaphysics'. Toynbee explains the word in this way:

'Metahistory is concerned with the nature of history, the meaning of history and the cause and significance of historical change. It arises out of the study of history, and is akin to metaphysics and theology. The metahistorian seeks to integrate his study of reality in some higher dimension than that of human affairs as these present themselves to him phenomenally.'

At first sight it may not seem a very important matter how one interprets the events of the past or even of the present. But no one who takes the Christian faith seriously could

adopt such an attitude of indifference to the providence of God and its meaning. It is the duty of the church to explain history. The Lord Jesus Christ laid it as a sin upon the Jewish leaders that they had failed to discern the voice of providence in their day: 'O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?' (Matt. 16:3)

Events, especially events in which the hand of God is manifest, have a meaning which we ignore only to our loss or at our peril. Admittedly, there are vast areas of providence which we are not qualified to interpret. But that does not excuse men for their failure to interpret crucial periods of history, such as the life of Christ and the early church, correctly.

The question might well be asked, do we have a key in the Bible by which to interpret events in our day? We believe that we do. The great 'benchmark', so to speak, of modern church history is to be found in the Acts of the Apostles and its inspired account of what God did on and after the Day of Pentecost. In that narrative, along with the other apostolic writings of the New Testament, we have a golden key to the meaning of all subsequent events in the church--and, to some extent, even of the world. The New Testament writings show us what real Christianity is, what the church should be, and therefore what we may confidently expect God to bless and to favour on earth.

Consequently, where, in history, we find that some doctrine taught and those same church ordinances practised, there we may be certain that we see the approval of God in his providence. Conversely, where, in history, we see serious departure from New Testament doctrine and practice, there we know we see God's wrath and curse. It seems impossible to escape from this view of the matter, if we grant the premise that the scriptures are the inerrant Word of God.

The application of the principle here stated drives us towards the conviction that the religion of the Middle Ages was a grave departure from God and that the Reformation was a glorious returning to God. So much is surely clear, whatever else in providence may not be clear. But to be convinced of that is essential and it is enough. It is enough to glorify God by and enough to be saved by, if we are brought in this way to believe in the Christ of the New Testament and of the Reformation.

It is precisely this interpretation of history, however, which is under attack in the western world in the twentieth century. The classic Protestant historians, whose names were once a household word in Christian circles, are now sometimes referred to, even by evangelicals, as biased and untrustworthy writers. This is the new Protestant judgement upon historians such as Knox, Calderwood, Wodrow, and McCrie for Scotland, and Foxe, Burnet, D'Aubigne and Wylie, who chronicled the events of the Protestant Reformation in England and on the continent of Europe.

The argument is used that a writer like John Knox, in his book *The History of the Reformation in Scotland* (and the same argument would apply equally to writers like him, some of whom we have named above), is guilty of prejudice. He identifies his own cause with the cause of God. What favours his cause is praised by him as the work of God and what hinders his cause is reported as the work of God's enemies. That, according to modern writers, is not good history. It is said to be too subjective a view of God's cause and it is thought to vitiate the canons of objectivity required in a reliable writer of history.

The objection sounds plausible enough. But it seems to us to leave the most crucial factor of all out of the reckoning. It fails to do justice to the New Testament scriptures. If

that religion which the New Testament presents as the truth happens also to be the religion of Knox, then it is justifiable to identify it as the work of God, and its opponents as the enemies of God. The only way to invalidate this conclusion, surely, is to demonstrate that Knox's message and the message of the New Testament were not substantially the same. Knox believed that they were the same. Hence the explanation for his confidence.

The real reason why modern Protestants apologise for Knox's manner of writing history, we strongly suspect, is that they are no longer in sympathy with the theology which he held. It looks very much like being 'ashamed of the gospel' (Rom. 1:16), albeit in a sophisticated way.

There is a corollary to the claim made by early Protestants that the Reformation was a glorious work of God's providence. It is this, that God's blessing must be expected to rest on nations embracing the Reformation teachings and his displeasure to follow nations which turn from those teachings.

Whatever view one holds of the rights and wrongs of British Rule (and both were there) in the days when this country was in its prime, it cannot be denied that the collapse of our national power went hand in hand with the collapse of our Protestant religion. Sir Arnold Toynbee, to whom we have referred, lived to witness both the high water-mark of British power in 1897 and its decline by the year 1972, just seventy-five years later. The dates are significant in that they correspond closely with the decline of the British pulpit. This fact surely illustrates the proverb: 'Righteousness exalteth a nation; sin is a reproach to any people' (Prov. 14:24). The curse has not come without a cause. Do we need to look any further afield for our metahistory of the period?

OUR BACKSLIDDEN PROTESTANTISM

Generally speaking, it would appear to be true to say that the backsliding of Britain (and probably of America and some other Anglo-Saxon countries belonging to the Protestant family) has taken place in two stages. As a nation, we rejected the theology of the Reformation about the time of the First World War, and the morality of the Reformation at, or just after, the Second World War. The New Morality and the 'permissive society' appeared in the early 1960's at about the same time. Since then, there has been a marked shift downwards in this country. That is not to deny that there has been, more recently, a recovery of the Reformed faith. But the impact of this movement, intensely promising as it is, is as yet only very small. The point we make here is that society as a whole, and the church as a whole, has sunk steadily further from righteousness and from God. And, until God sends upon us the blessing of true revival, we can only continue to sink still further.

Of the many contributory causes to this state of national decline, we may here mention just three. We believe one to be the secularisation of our national school system after the passing of the Education Acts of 1870 (England and Wales) and 1872 (Scotland).

After the implementation of these Acts, our day schools, many of which had before been in the hands of the churches and had taught the catechisms as well as the Bible, steadily moved towards a position of religious 'neutrality'. After the two World Wars, the pace of secularisation became accelerated. This has meant, not simply that religious education in the traditional sense is now only haphazardly taught, but also that the content of the history syllabus has become chronically anaemic in its treatment of the great spiritual conflict which raged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

So far do some educators today resent the New History, as it is called, that a

society or movement has been started with the name 'The Campaign for Real Education'! No doubt they are dissatisfied with the modern approach to teaching other subjects too. But the new approach to teaching history is singled out in their first pamphlet as desperately in need of improvement and modification. 'The pursuit of truth has been replaced by what is called "the form of knowledge approach", which means in practice that pupils are encouraged to arrive at confident judgements...while being dismissive of "facts"... That, like so much else in the New History, is wilfully perverse'. So writes the author of this pamphlet on behalf of this new society, which has the support of MPs, members of the House of Lords and other academics.

A second more powerful and harmful influence upon our land has come from eminent literary men and women, especially in the period since the First World War. Today we have almost come to accept that eminent literary persons must be irreligious. There are, of course, notable exceptions, such as C. S. Lewis. But this appears to have been the main direction taken by men and women of letters in the past sixty years.

A notable assault on Christian standards of behaviour was made about the time of the First World War by the Bloomsbury Group. This was a brilliant set of young Cambridge graduates, including Lytton Sackey, Virginia Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, Duncan Grant and Bertrand Russell. They were later followed by D. H. Lawrence and others. These all had a profound influence on the country. The private morality of many of them was a shameless denial of earlier British standards of behaviour and morality. To read Michael Holroyd's biography of Strachey is to see how advanced practical ungodliness had become at that comparatively early date among some of our influential English intellectuals. It was a significant turning-point in the ethical history of this land in modern times. What we see today is not much more than the widespread adoption of their ideals and practices by persons of all sorts. But the lead was taken by these influential figures those many years ago.

The third factor which we may mention as a contributory cause of the present low ebb in our country is the rise of Roman Catholicism to a position of importance and influence unparalleled since the Reformation. This influence extends not only to many aspects of our national life but also to the life of churches and denominations. It is a sobering thought that many of the crucial discussions and heart-searchings we face as Protestant churches in this country at this hour have something or other to do with our attitude to the dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church. That is so whether one belongs to a church which is Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Baptist or of some other denomination. It is a subject which we could ponder for a long time. But the fact is there and it must surely strike us as significant.

Our subject required of us that we should attempt to interpret the providence of God in history. Is there any one great practical issue which such a survey draws particular attention to? We believe that there is. The most urgent question of all for the present-day churches, in our considered opinion, is this: Were the old Protestant historians and theologians right to regard the Roman Catholic Church as no true church and to identify the Papacy with the Antichrist? Let us remember that they were, for the most part, men of profound erudition and spirituality--men such as Calvin, Owen, Turretine, Edwards, Cunningham and Charles Hodge. Let us further bear in mind that they claimed that their view of Rome was drawn from Holy Scripture.

Our reason for singling out this one issue is easily stated. The pre-twentieth-century

Protestant church clung, by and large, to the anti-papal clauses in its creed. The present-day churches have, by and large, discarded them. This change in attitude appears to have begun somewhere around the First World War. The way Protestant churches view union with Rome is going to be momentarily important from now on.

If the Catholic Church is not the Antichrist of Scripture as the old Protestant writers affirmed it to be, then there is ultimately no reason in principle why our Protestant churches should not return and reunite--if not this century, at least at some time in the future. But if the Reformers were right, then union with Rome is apostasy.

Precisely how and why Protestantism in this century came to hold a more relaxed attitude to Catholicism is one of the most intriguing, not to say burning, questions raised by the subject we have looked at.

It would make a good theme for research. Indeed, it ought to compel the attention of every Protestant who takes seriously the events of this hour.