The Debt Eternal

John H. Finley

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The eternal debt of maturity
to childhood and youth

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A "partial payment" of the debt under which I have been placed by the church of my fathers, by my Sunday-school teacher in the little church that I knew best, and above all by the prairie pioneer mother with whom I learned to read the Bible.

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THE CLASS OF WHICH THE AUTHOR WAS A MEMBER IN THE PRAIRIE CHURCH OF HIS BOYHOOD

"Every child in the neighborhood had instruction in the Bible. And I am thinking that what existed there in that primitive community should, for the integrity of our life, be made possible under the changed and heterogeneous social conditions which now obtain."

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During the Great War, in its very blackest period, I crossed the ocean on my way to Palestine. The battle of Kemmel Hill occurred when I was on shipboard. Marshal Haig, on the other side of the Channel, was saying to his men that they were standing with their backs to the wall. Conditions were desperate. And yet it was at that very time that the head of the Education Department in England was introducing a parliamentary measure which came to be known as the "Children's Charter," and that he was rising in the House of Commons in its behalf, crying even above the sound of the guns and of Marshal Haig's appeal, "Education is the eternal debt which maturity owes to children and youth."

So in the midst of discussions of reparations and debts which fill the papers and books with statistics of what peoples owe one another, and incidentally fill their heads with suspicion, distrust and hate, we have need to remember that the supreme debt under which we have been placed by our past, by our hope for the future of the race, by our faith in a Divine Being and by our belief in the Christ in whom He has been revealed to men, is to teach our children that which has been committed to us through centuries and to enable them, so far as that is humanly possible, to realize that which we have struggled toward in our best moments and in our highest aspirations and our most unselfish deeds.

So I have called this book "The Debt Eternal." It is to help us to feel that responsibility to those who come immediately and even remotely after us, and then to suggest ways in which that responsibility can be met through the home, the school, the church and other institutions and agencies of our Christian civilization.

And think how the responsibility crowds upon us. The world has been thousands of millions of years in the making and man has been upon it for tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of years. The mouths of the billions who have gone before are stopped with dust. It is only through us, the living, and such of their thoughts and memories of their deeds as are kept in books and in music and in pictures, that all that racial experience of these hundreds of thousands of years is transmitted, and it is only as we make child character and child intelligence and child bodies capable of carrying on toward the ideals set before mankind in the teachings of Christ, that we confidently hope for the "saving of America" and of the world.

First of all, let us think of what our heritage is, the heritage of faith which has come down to us through many centuries. We usually begin the record with the eleventh chapter of *Hebrews,* which is a recital of the phenomena of the faith of the patriarchs and prophets and warriors, among the first of whom was Abraham —whom I heard Dr. Gunsaulus once speak of as "the first American" because he "went out (westward) not knowing whither he went." That immortal list of men and women included the names and the particular evidences of the faith of Jacob and Moses and Joshua; the names of some of whose deeds time failed the writer of the

letter to speak; Gideon and Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel; and the evidences of the faith of unnumbered martyrs whose names are not given. It is a chapter of disappointments, for though they all obtained a "good report," they received not the promise, that is, they did not reach their ideal state. It was only through those coming after them that they were to be "made perfect."

That list was written nearly two thousand years ago. It was but suggestive even for that time. It did not include, for example, the names of the first disciples and the apostles. But the writer was conscious that he and they to whom he was writing were compassed about by a greater cloud of witnesses than those he mentioned. It is that company, multiplied by hundreds of thousands, that now look down upon us to see what we are going to do to realize the ideal set before us by one who is the "Author and Finisher of our faith." I once heard Dr. Fosdick say in a sermon that we had to count our direct ancestors back through but thirty generations to find that we had each a billion. They converge upon us, they reside within us, they remind us of the land for which they set out but never reached. What else is this urge within us but a Divinity impelling us toward a goal that is beyond our sight, a goal that science has not seen with its microscope or its telescope, a goal that we can see only by a faith and reach as a nation and as a race only by keeping that faith burning in the hearts of those who carry on when our living here is ended?

If I were adding new examples of faith and new names to the memorable list in the letter to the Hebrews, I should have to give up the whole of the book to our

heritage. But space fails me, as time failed the author of that ancient epistle of faith, to speak of those who have gone before us in later generations, confessed "strangers and pilgrims on the earth" who, though they also obtained a good report, received not the promise.

I cite my own personal experience and debt, which is, I am sure, suggestive and illustrative of the great generic debt under which those sojourners from one eternity to another across this earth here in America, to go no farther back, have placed us.

When I was emerging from the indistinctness of the past eternity into what I am accustomed to call my "life," (and it seems as if it were contemporaneous with the Homeric days of the race), I can see a Scotch-Irish Presbyterian, who was accustomed to start the hymns of a Sunday in the prairie-church, sitting at night, with closed eyes, in a small, lighted room, the only one in a square mile of darkness out on the prairie, and I can still hear him singing a quaint song, which has now disappeared, I think, from our hymnology:

> I'm a pilgrim, and I'm a stranger;
> I can tarry, I can tarry but a night.
> Do not detain me, for I am going
> To where the fountains are ever flowing.
> I'm a pilgrim, and I'm a stranger;
> I can tarry, I can tarry but a night.

He had come as a young man from a little church on the western slopes of the Alleghenies, a church established by his grandfather, who was my great-great grandfather, in a Presbytery reaching from the ridges of the "Laurel Hills to the setting sun"; and he went on, sing-

ing in the dawn, toward the west—one of the society of frontier Scotch-Irish migrants, who as President Roosevelt has said, were as the spray of the immigration that broke over the Alleghenies, precursors, pilgrims, whose companions in that wandering exile were the clouds, the migratory birds, the swarming bees, the frogs, the devouring grasshoppers, the seventeen-year locusts and those lean large-familied brothers of the pioneer, whose covered wagons like white-sailed schooners were ever moving across the level stretches of plain.

I can even now hear (accompanying the tune of that pioneer's confident faith in a celestial destination or predestination) the cry of the cranes in their honking migration northward, the lonesome croak of the frogs, (as Aristophanes heard them in the ponds of Greece), and the shrill cry of the bloodless grasshoppers, to whom Homer likened Old Priam's chiefs upon the walls of Troy. I can even hear the invisible choir of bees which one day came singing in the sky over my field and were persuaded down to temporary industry on the earth by the clods I, as a ploughboy, threw up into the air.

For the whole creation seemed to give accompaniment to the song of the faith of those who "confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth," and that they desired "a better country, that is, an heavenly."

There was a sense of the "illimitable destiny," of the 'challenge of eternity," even among those pioneer, God-fearing farmers and farmers' wives who lived austerely and busily, yet calmly, and as in the presence of immortal forces. Outwardly, the life seemed a hard life, a gray life, a narrow life. No one actually traveled far, except to go back to one's native place or to search for new

fields beyond. But there was a consciousness of the splashing fountains beyond time and space.

These migrants (for they were not vagrants, they were destinated travelers) built their houses of wood, from sheer necessity; but these ephemeral structures, even, seemed to express their sense of the transitoriness of their terrestrial life. And the acre of virgin land which they set apart for the church was as the threshing-floor of Ornan, the Jebusite, or the plot of Obed-Edom in whose house the ark rested on its journey,—as a Bethel, a very gate of heaven, on a stoneless, treeless plain.

I should think that I was imagining and imputing too much of other-worldliness to those whose seemingly cheerless lives sat often at such gates of heaven if I had not the testimony of others to add to my own experience. I read some time ago a notable article in *The Atlantic,* entitled "Whither?", which reveals in letters gathered from a generation or two ago (though in another part of the United States, as I assume) what I believe was true in my less cultured community,—reveals "a far deeper life, a profounder hope and faith, a recognition of wider horizons than most of the contemporary world knows" with all its greater geographical horizons.

And I found recently in a diary this entry concerning a sermon which belonged to that period, a sermon preached about the Atlantic cable:

"The two hemispheres are now successfully united by means of the electric wire, but what is it, after all, compared with the instantaneous communication between the Throne of Divine Grace and the heart of man? Offer up your silent petition. It is transmitted through realms

of unmeasured space more rapidly than the lightning's flash, and the answer reaches the soul ere the prayer has died away on the sinner's lips. Yet this telegraph, performing its saving functions ever since Christ died for men on Calvary, fills not the world with exultation and shouts of gladness, with illuminations and bonfires and the booming of cannon. The reason is, one is the telegraph of this world and may produce revolutions on earth [as it has] ; the other is the sweet communication between Christ and the Christian soul and will secure a glorious immortality in Heaven."

The poet Arthur O'Shaughnessy in his poem on St. John the Baptist says:

> I think he had not heard of the far towns,
> Nor of the deeds of men nor of Kings' crowns
> Before the thought of God took hold of him.

I have often wondered if in this age in which the telegraph now reaches around the globe, in which the telephone has made it possible for the President to speak to thousands in New York and San Francisco at the same moment, as he did on the day of the burial of the Unknown Soldier, in which a voice in speech or song may be heard by a million or more by radio, when the noises of the far towns and the deeds of men in remote parts of the earth are heard even in the midst of solitudes, whether we shall be able to keep the thought that took hold of John in the Wilderness or even give it a chance to take hold of us. Our victories over the afar will be of little value to mankind if they shut us away from this communication with the Infinite.

It was at that very time of this Homeric Presbyterian

singing out on the prairies by one whose kinsman had invented the telegraph that there was sung here in the Atlantic seaboard states that crude song, very like a topical melody of more recent days, which ran, as nearly as I can remember:

Far out upon the prairies
How many children dwell
Who never read the Bible
Nor hear the Sabbath bell!
And when the holy morning
Wakes us to sing and pray,
They spend the blessed moments
In idleness and play.

And we prairie children, using an Eastern book, I suppose, sang it, too, never realizing that we were of those whom the song-writer had pityingly in mind.

Fortunately, out on those prairies, though there were few Sabbath bells, the children who dwelt there *did* read the Bible and knew the chief end of man, and if there was aught of Sabbath "idleness or play," it was of a most pious and sober sort. At any rate it was so if I may generalize from the habits of the little community which had that country church which I knew best at its center.

A metropolitan reporter who had an interview with me a little time ago said that when President Wilson many years since made the famous threat of hanging certain people "higher than Haman," he and his fellow reporters had no notion as to who Haman was. But I venture to say that there were few if any of teachable mind and literate age in the pioneer Christian families who were not as familiar with the characters of the