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Ecclesiastical History.

The Great Ejection of 1662.

A LECTURE,

BY J. M. CRAMP, D. D.

(CONCLUDED.)

And now, it may be asked, why is this horrible story raked up again? What purpose is to be served by bringing afresh to the light these atrocious deeds? Would it not be far better to allow them to remain in the oblivion to which they have been by common consent consigned for many years past? We reply, emphatically, No! They cannot—must not—ought not to be forgotten. They form part of England's history, and the omission would be fatal to the impartiality of the historian. They were the working out of a politico-religious experiment on the patience of the English people and their capability of enduring oppression, on the success or failure of which great interests depended. The result deserves to be chronicled in letters of fire. But it cannot be understood or appreciated unless the whole process be revealed. The revelation may be distasteful to some whose predecessors were engaged in the conspiracy against English freedom, but strict justice demands that the story shall be frequently told, so that our children and our children's children may be sufficiently informed on the subject, and well guarded against any attempt to introduce opinions or practices which may tend to revive the disorders and oppressions of the seventeenth century.

Nor let it be imagined that our object is to excite hostility to the Church of England. All Christendom is under obligation to that Church, or rather to the many great men whom it has produced, by whose labours the common faith has been triumphantly defended, and invaluable aid rendered to those who are engaged in the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. Likeminded men, we trust, will continue to be raised up in successive generations, prepared to do battle for truth and holiness, and to stand in the ranks with other combatants in the spiritual warfare, fighting side by side with christian soldiers of every name. But however we may honour and esteem individual members of that Church, and rejoice, too, in the evangelical spirit which now animates a large portion of her clergy, it is neither wise nor right to keep out of view certain facts in her history and certain peculiarities in her position, on which Christianity itself must pronounce its verdict. The inquiry therefore is, what was accomplished for the Church of England by the Act of Uniformity? The injury sustained by the Church, through the operation of the Act is not now under consideration. It would be a melancholy tale. For the loss of two thousand able, honest, conscientious ministers could not be easily repaired. Fit successors were not to be found; the places of the ejected were for a long time filled by men of a vastly inferior stamp, and in numerous instances sadly inefficient and unworthy. It was the rudest shock the church had ever sustained. Many, many years passed away before she recovered her strength. In fact, she staggered under the blow for more than a century. But passing this by, our present inquiry is, What was accomplished for the Church of England by the Act of Uniformity? Apparently, it stereotyped that Church for all time coming. No man can now obtain a benefice therein who does not declare his "unfeigned assent and consent to all and every thing" contained in the Common Prayer Book, besides his subscription to the Articles. The clergy of the Church of England are understood, as they are required, to believe that in baptism the infant is "made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven," being "regenerated by the Holy Spirit,"—that they have authority to say to a penitent sick person, "I absolve thee from all thy sins,"—and that every one at whose funeral they officiate is a "dear brother" or "sister," for whose deliverance from "the miseries of this sinful world" they give God hearty thanks. All this they must affirm, without variation or omission; and in celebrating divine service they must conform strictly to prescribed rules and modes, adding nothing, however appropriate the addition might be. The oaths of supremacy and of canonical obedience bind them to obey the behests of the Queen and of their respective bishops, in things spiritual, while, so far as legislation is concerned, they are compelled to accept the decrees of the Imperial Parliament.

It is well known that great numbers of the truest friends of the Church are dissatisfied with her present position. We sympathise with them in their difficulties and trials. They lament the want of uniformity that prevails among their own clergy, notwithstanding the requisitions of the celebrated Act. Some are high church; some, low church; some, broad church. Some believe in baptismal regeneration; others believe it not, or preach as if they do not believe it. Some encourage auricular confession; others abhor it, some (we trust a majority) hold firmly those truths to which the appellation "evangelical" is ordinarily prefixed; but many, it is to be feared, have "erred concerning the faith," giving heed to "vain babblings, and oppositions of science, falsely so called," or have substituted for the doctrines of the cross the "beggarly elements" of superstition, or a cold and heartless morality. These things cause pungent grief. And those who mourn over these evils are further distressed on account of the bondage to which they are doomed. Their Church, they say, is powerless. Her people cannot choose their own ministers,

but must receive those who are sent them by the patrons. Her clergy take no part in the choice of bishops, who are appointed by the prime minister of the day. Godly discipline, they add, is utterly in abeyance. The church can neither exclude error nor suppress vice, for the ultimate appeal is to Parliament or the Privy Council; and decisions are based on the thirty-nine Articles or the statutes of the realm—not on the word of God.

Other grievances might be mentioned—but we refrain. We say again that we heartily sympathise with our brethren of the Church of England whose souls are oppressed by these burdens. Would that they could be relieved! Would that they could recover their just liberties! Would that the incubus of state-connection could be removed, and the power of self-government, restored! That revolution (and it would be a revolution) would be most propitious to the interests of "pure and undefiled religion." All denominations would rejoice in the glorious emancipation, and the Church of England would rise up in the dignity of holiness, blessed herself and blessing others. The benevolence and activity of her members would be evoked to a degree which has not been yet imagined, and she would be prepared for a career of unexampled usefulness. "Awake, awake, put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for henceforth there shall no more come into thee the uncircumcised and the unclean." Isa. lli. 1.

There are other reasons why this bicentenary celebration should be solemnised. A fitting tribute is due to the noble-minded men whose non-compliance with the Act of Uniformity drew down upon them such terrific vengeance. Rather than submit to requirements which they felt to be inconsistent with the demands of truth they sacrificed their earthly prospects and exposed themselves to poverty, privation, and the penalties of vindictive law. They might have saved themselves by hushing conscience to sleep, or by mental reservation, as it is supposed many have done since their time—but their moral sensibility forbade it. They "feared their God, and knew no other fear." All honour to them! Infidels laughed them to scorn;—magistrates gladly signed warrants of commitment;—judges browbeat juries and terrified them into adverse verdicts;—the rabble hooted them in the streets;—the gentle and noble stood aloof from them or secretly encouraged their tormentors;—all ranks and orders combined for a time to trample them under foot, while they in patience possessed their souls and looked to God for support and vindication. He gave them both; the support of his grace under the endurance of their woes, and ample vindication by the judgment of posterity. Alleine, and Baxter, and Bunyan are reverently listened to by countless numbers all the world over, but Jeffries is remembered only to be execrated. "The memory of the just is blessed, but the name of the wicked shall rot." Pro. x. 7.

Let it be admitted that the heroes of the ejection were not so fully enlightened on some subjects as those who now occupy their places, and perpetuate the name and profession of the Nonconformist. Yet theirs was a noble protest against unchristian legislation. They maintained that the church has no authority, either with or without the aid of the magistrate, to impose on its members things in themselves indifferent; that in the assertion and exercise of such authority there is an interference with the government of the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Head of the church; and that those who object to any such impositions, whether on their own account or because of the principle involved, are justifiable in declining obedience and ought not to be compelled thereto. They pleaded for the rights of conscience, the freedom of the churches, and the honours of the divine lawgiver, and were resolved to make a firm stand against all encroachments. When they found that it was impossible to retain their positions without surrendering great principles and involving themselves in guilt, they peaceably withdrew,—forsook all and followed Christ.

There were many other servants of God in the kingdom who took much higher ground, denying altogether the power of the magistrate in matters of religion, and holding that not in doctrine only but also in constitution, government, worship and discipline, christian churches should be exclusively directed by the Word of God, repudiating all human tradition. They believed in the most extensive application of Chillingworth's celebrated saying—"The Bible, the Bible alone is the religion of Protestantism," and they acted in accordance with their belief. The storm of persecution fell on all parties alike. They adopted the same course, and were included in the same condemnation. Fellowship in suffering brought them often into friendly contact, placing them in circumstances favourable to interchange of thought and close investigation of truth. The outrages perpetrated under pretence of sustaining the form of religion by law established, and consented to by the ministers of that religion, would naturally lead the sufferers to enquire whether an institution so anti-christian in its outward working ought to be honoured as a christian church. Conviction followed inquiry. The adherents of non-conformity increased and multiplied, notwithstanding the violence of the persecution. "The bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed." It grew in the midst of the flames. At the close of the great struggle, when the glorious Revolution shed its blessings on the land, the nonconformist bodies presented an array of numbers that commanded respect and deference, and the spirit of freedom shone brighter and brighter. So it went on from year to year, gathering strength and influencing men in power, who, though they did not accept their religious opinions, admired and adopted the enlightened

views on the religious liberty question which Nonconformists held and professed. The "middle party," by which appellation a considerable number of the ejected might have been at first designated, gradually melted away. Some few of them—very few—retraced their steps, and conformed. The majority were absorbed in the various denominations of dissenters, whose liberal opinions they embraced, and to whose progress they contributed their varied learning and talents.

Then came a conflict of another kind, continuing for more than a century, with alternations of success and defeat, answering to the positions of political parties. When Toryism was in the ascendant, religious freedom lost ground; when the Whigs prevailed, she took heart again. At length the peculiar badge of degradation was removed, by the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, in 1828, when the doors of office were thrown open to all good subjects, and Protestant Dissenters were restored to their rights and privileges. Other disabilities and restraints, some of them very vexatious, have been also taken away. The civil equality of all sects is now nearly attained in Great Britain.

Public opinion also has undergone a remarkable change. Doctrines which were universally popular between the Restoration and the Revolution are heard of no more. No respectable British Protestant would now hazard his reputation by propounding the slavish notions which were rife in those times, were not unfrequently published by heat of "drum ecclesiastic," and were solemnly sanctioned by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. With regard to religious liberty we are almost "of one heart and one soul." We say "almost," for here and there a grumbler is still to be found, and obstructiveness lingers in high places, as of old.

These obstacles, however, will be overcome. The tattered remnants of intolerance will soon be blown to the winds. The days of the Conventicle Act—and the Five Mile Act—and the Test and Corporation Acts—and the Schism Act, are gone for ever. The Act of Uniformity itself could not now be carried through the Imperial Parliament. A misnamed conservatism rallies round the Church-rate, and succeeds, for the present, in warding off the abolition of that obnoxious impost. But "there is a good time coming." Freedom's triumphs may be delayed but cannot be hindered. Religion will yet shine forth in her own glory—purified from corruption—unshackled by human law—"redeemed, regenerated, and disenthralled."

If we are called on to rejoice in the progress of religious liberty in the mother country, much more should we congratulate one another on the advanced position attained in the provinces of British North America. Here, we are under no religious restraint or disability. Pecuniary exactions for the support of the worship of a favoured sect are unknown. Our lands have never been tithed. Church-rates are unheard-of. The legislature interferes with none—protects all. In the eye of the law we are all equal. And we claim equality among ourselves. The Episcopalian minister is as important a man as the Presbyterian, and the Presbyterian is as great as the Baptist, and the Baptist is equal to the Methodist. As ministers of Christ they are all equal to one another—brethren—fellow-servants of the same Master—fellow-labourers in the same cause. They can meet on common ground for the promotion of great objects, religious or philanthropic. Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians and Presbyterians unite in prayer for God's blessing on all, and even bishops preach in meeting houses. Here, then, Ephraim should not envy Judah, nor Judah vex Ephraim (Isa. xi. 13). Ambition, pride, contempt, contention should find no place; while all should be prepared to honour those, of whatever name or profession, whose superior attainments, holy lives, and self-denying activity entitle them to distinction—and should cultivate the brotherly kindness and charity for which, in the early days of the Church, christians were admired by the world. The Nova-scotian should gratefully say, "The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage." Psalm xvi. 6.

Two hundred years have passed away since the confessor of St. Bartholomew's day delivered their testimony. The world and the church have slowly grown wiser since that time. The folly and iniquity of persecution are all but universally confessed. Statesmen begin to see that religion lies not in the sphere of government, and that they ought to have nothing to do with the allocation of ministers, the regulation of church services, the imposition of creeds, or the enforcement of discipline.

"Let Caesar's dues be ever paid
To Caesar and his throne;
But consciences and souls were made
To be the Lord's alone."

—Watts.

Darkness, it is true, as yet hangs over Roman Catholic countries, the spirit of the Inquisition surviving where its form is seen no more, or is stripped of the old terrors of that hateful institution. Protestant Sweden and Denmark, and some of the petty principalities of Germany, continue to vex and annoy separatists from the established churches. But in Protestant States generally, the rights of conscience are acknowledged, and practical liberty is enjoyed. In all North America there is "freedom to worship God." Italy, too, in the old world, is rising into life and free action. Enlightened men of all nations give their adhesion to the glorious cause. Islamism itself, the fiercest of all systems, begins to abate of its ferocity, for Mahomedans in Turkey are now permitted to embrace the christian faith. Even China is giving up its exclusiveness, and toleration is proclaimed throughout that vast empire.