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Christian Messenger.

A REPOSITORY OF RELIGIOUS, POLITICAL AND GENERAL INTELLIGENCE.

"Not slothful in business: fervent in spirit."

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Ecclesiastical History.

The Great Ejection of 1662.

A LECTURE,

BY J. M. CRAMP, D. D.

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century was the protest of the peoples of Europe against soul-slavery. They demanded freedom of thought, profession, and worship. They burst asunder the chains of the papacy, and claimed the right to serve God according to his word. Glowing anticipations of the future were indulged, "Gird thy sword upon thy thigh," exulting believers exclaimed, "O most mighty, with thy glory and thy majesty; and in thy majesty ride prosperously because of truth and meekness and righteousness, and thy right hand shall teach thee terrible things. Thine arrows are sharp in the heart of the king's enemies, whereby the people fall under thee." But the "sword" and the "arrows" were understood to be spiritual weapons, and the wounds were the wounds of the soul. Rightly-instructed Christians, even in those days, would hurt no man's body nor spoil his estate, under pretext of defending religion. Their only desire was to see men broken in heart before God, and submissive to the laws of Immanuel. That submission they sought to secure by moral suasion and the power of prayer.

Unhappily, the management of the enterprise fell into the hands of men who had not shaken off old prejudices, and who allowed themselves to be controlled by the adherents of worldly policy. The Reformation was shorn of its glory when rulers and statesmen took the lead. What sympathy had they with a kingdom which is "not of this world," or with a sovereign whose subjects must not "fight" for him! It was their vocation to compel, not to persuade. They must have law, and penalty, and force. Instead of appealing to the heart and the conscience, they would point to the statute book, the prison, and the scaffold.

And they did so. Different polities were adopted:—the creeds of the Lutherans and the Reformed were discordant on various points, and neither would commune with the other. But there was a fearful agreement in the use of coercion and restraint. Both sought establishment from the civil power. Both demanded exclusive privileges. The Lutheran would not tolerate the Reformed nor the Reformed the Lutheran. Neither of them would allow the Anabaptist (as they called him) to dwell in their borders. They claimed the right to fine, imprison, banish, burn, hang or drown all who could not pronounce their Shibboleth.

When England received the Reformation, it was in this way. There was no proclamation of freedom to the people, nor was their consent to the change asked. They were bidden to be Protestants because the State had adopted Protestantism. They were commanded to serve God in a prescribed form or suffer the consequences. Henry VIII. was neither Protestant nor Papist, and so it would be unfair to cite his laws. But the introduction of Protestant worship under Edward VI. was signalled by the ordinary legal sanctions. The parish churches were the appointed places of religious assembly, and no other prayers were to be offered in them than those which were enjoined by authority, the use of them being enforced by fine and imprisonment. The restoration of the kingdom to the Pope's rule was distinguished by still sharper penalties, agreeably to the genius and spirit of the "mystery of iniquity." This excited no surprise because it was natural. But the re-establishment of the purer faith and service, on the accession of Elizabeth, revealed no progress. It was fine and imprisonment, still. The Romish interpretation of the Lord's words in the parable was adopted in practice, and "compel them to come in" became the motto of a Protestant government.

The first Reformers beheld men "as trees walking." Emerging from the thick darkness of Romanism their eyes were dazzled by the brightness into which they were brought, and their vision was imperfect. When they became accustomed to the light some of them saw things clearly, but unfortunately the plans of public procedure were formed, and whatever might have been their convictions they were unable to reduce them to practice. The governments of those parts of Europe which had embraced Protestantism assumed the management of religious affairs. Subjects were but little considered in those days; they were expected to believe as their princes believed, and to worship as they were commanded. Neglect or non-compliance incurred punishment. It was in vain that the rights of conscience were pleaded. It was the age of duties, not of rights; and was it not the duty of subjects to obey?

No one had a deeper impression on that point than Queen Elizabeth. She was a woman of imperious mind, impatient of contradiction, and intent on maintaining the dignity of the crown. It was a right royal thing to lord it over men, and to mark out the path for them to walk in. Elizabeth bowed down to the idol, uniformity, and could not brook the refusal of any to join in the general prostration. We may imagine, therefore, her disgust and fury when the exiled reformers who had taken refuge on the Continent during her sister Mary's burnings returned home half converted to Presbyterianism. They were ill affected to diocesan episcopacy; they demurred greatly to the proceedings of the bishops' courts; they protested against the sign of the cross in baptism, kneeling at the Lord's supper, and the use of the surplice and other ecclesiastical habits; and they demanded liberty of prayer, refusing to

be tied down to one set of forms, and to be denied the power of alteration. These were the first puritans, and many in England sympathized with them. They tried the experiment of mingling obedience to authority with freedom, hoping that the lady at the head of the church would accept a general adhesion without insisting on strict regard to the minutiae of of service. But they were mistaken. Elizabeth's fondness for pomp and power stood in their way. Her views and inclinations were rather Romish than Protestant, and it was a monstrous thing in her eyes that any man should presume to impeach her wisdom or deem even the least of her requirements superfluous. She was inflexible. The habits must be worn; knees must bow; not an iota must be omitted. Submission or expulsion was the order of the day, although it was apparent that some of the best men in the kingdom were on the puritan side, and that the rigid exaction of uniformity would rob numbers of parishes of the blessings of the gospel ministry. The evils apprehended were soon felt. Fifteen hundred clergymen were suspended or deprived during Elizabeth's reign. The church fell into distress and confusion. Good men indulged in the gloomiest forebodings, while the enemies of truth and godliness shouted for joy.

Then commenced the conflict which for an entire century embittered society throughout England and produced an incalculable amount of misery. The sovereign, as head of the church, required absolute submission on the part of the clergy, and refused to consent to any relaxation of the demand. Numbers of the clergy, on the other hand, asked for further reformation, or for a limited discretion in the use of ceremonies. When they failed to obtain the liberty prayed for, and still forbore to conform, the arm of the law fell upon them and they were driven from their posts. For a long time they abstained from instituting separate worship, fearing the guilt of schism, and hoping that a favourable consideration might yet be given to their requests. Necessity at length compelled them to take the final step. If the endowed church closed her doors upon them and steeled her heart against their remonstrances, might they not worship God elsewhere, and set up an altar according to the heavenly pattern? So they reasoned. But when they carried out their reasoning into practice the myrmidons of power pounced upon them. Obsequious legislatures were willing to gratify the wishes of the royal despot, and godly men found that assemblies for holiest purposes were treated as riotous and rebellious gatherings, subjecting those who took part in them to severe losses or degrading punishments. By the Act "to retain the Queen's subjects in their due obedience," every person who neglected to attend church forfeited twenty pounds per month, and schoolmasters similarly neglectful were to be fined ten pounds per month, be disabled from teaching school, and suffer a year's imprisonment. By the Act "for the punishment of persons obstinately refusing to come to church," all who should so refuse for one month, or who should "be present at any unlawful assembly, conventicle, or meeting, under colour or pretence of any exercise of religion," were adjudged to imprisonment till they should conform and submit; if they did not submit within three months, they were to "abjure the realm and go into perpetual banishment;" if they did not depart within the time limited, or if they returned without leave, they were to "suffer death without benefit of clergy." In order to give effect to these and other enactments the Courts of High Commission and Star Chamber were constituted, which by their cruel and illegal proceedings spread universal dismay and at last inflamed the indignation of the people to such a pitch that the throne itself was swept away in the uproar. Such a result can scarcely be wondered at, for "oppression maketh a wise man mad." The case of the dissenters was hard beyond example. While they were in the church they were punished for disobedience. When they went out of it they were punished for their separation. If they sought to defend themselves by means of the Press, the Press was placed under restraint;—if they evaded that restraint and succeeded in publishing their thoughts, they were punished for sedition or libel. If they remained in the country, a life of continual suffering was before them;—if they left it, it was at the risk of encountering distress in new and fearful forms;—and when numbers had exposed themselves to that risk, and others were prepared to follow their example, royal authority interposed to prevent them, that the objects of vengeance might be still retained within its grasp. They were "scattered and peeled," always and everywhere. With these facts before us, instead of affecting any surprise at the proceedings of the Long Parliament, or inquiring whether they were in every instance defensible, we may rather express our commendation of the prolonged forbearance of an outraged people. Their pent-up fury discharged itself fiercely enough on the heads of some of the delinquents, but the retaliation, as a whole, came far short of the insult and injury inflicted.

The time of the Commonwealth was eminently peculiar, not to be judged of by the tastes and views of the nineteenth century. The conduct of the men of that period was shaped by the extraordinary nature of the crisis, and must not be tried by our standard. We cannot fairly decide respecting the course they adopted unless we endeavour to place ourselves in their circumstances, and thus learn to sympathize with them in their painful experience. Nor must we allow the outcry against enthusiasm and fanaticism to deceive us. There were enthusiasts and fanatics in those days, no doubt—and hypocrites, too; as there always are in seasons of great excitement, religious or political. And it may be granted that there were grave errors in some of the public proceedings of the Commonwealth and Protectorate. The leaders were sincere men, and

terribly earnest in their sincerity. But they had endured the peltings of the storm during the tyrannies of the first James and the first Charles, and when they entered on public life, all battered and bruised by the tempest, they felt little charity for those who had invoked it. What wonder was it if, when power came into their own hands they used it with some sternness?—We censure them for their intolerance, and rightly; yet may not that intolerance, though not to be excused, be palliated by the consideration of the wrongs they had endured, as well as of the general dearth of christian feeling on the subject? With the exception of the Baptists, the Independents, and the Quakers, all Christendom was at that time imbued with the persecuting spirit. Every sect was prepared to give the magistrate power to put down every other sect, and each in its turn exclaimed against the cruelties of the rest and deplored its own melancholy lot. The Church of England persecuted and wasted the puritanic body; the puritans, in return, crushed the Church of England, which, when it recovered strength and pride of place laid its iron hand on all parties, and mauled them most unmercifully. They were all wrong—the Presbyterian no less than the Episcopalian—the Episcopalian no less than the Presbyterian; and their wrong-doing was the more criminal because of its Protestant aspect. The Romish church has burned and beheaded heretics on principle;—when Protestants tread in her steps they act in opposition to principle.

At the accession of Charles II. the state of religious affairs in England was truly anomalous. Episcopacy had been abolished and Presbyterianism put in its place; nominally, at least. That is the utmost that can be said, for in the majority of parishes the ministers did what was right, in their own eyes, only they were forbidden to use the Common Prayer Book. The Presbyterian framework, however, was set up in only a few counties. In the rest, though most of the ministers were of the Presbyterian order, they acted on their individual responsibility, there being no presbytery to which reports or appeals could be made. Some few of the ministers were Independents, and some, Baptists.* Here and there a man was to be found who retained his position amidst all changes, and was willing to sign any articles or enter into any engagement so that he might keep his parish. All these received the tithes and other ecclesiastical dues which constituted the "livings" of the church. That Church was still considered, in its temporal form, as a national institute. Its wealth was for the most part untouched, and the emoluments which the parochial funds supplied were enjoyed by those who were in actual possession. They had been in possession by the existing government when the old incumbents were cast out, which was either for bad behaviour, for insufficiency, or for refusal to promise allegiance and fidelity. At the restoration of Charles II., those incumbents who survived re-entered into possession of their livings and ousted the new occupants. But a large number of parishes were still held by Presbyterian ministers or by men who, though they were willing to remain under episcopal rule, in some modified form, were desirous of considerable changes in the worship and ceremonies of the church. Here, then, was a fine opportunity for conciliation. Such a conjuncture of affairs might not be expected to occur again. The controversy which had been raging ever since the time of Elizabeth might be settled on terms satisfactory to all reasonable persons. The demands made might be conceded without trenching in the least on the claims of conscience, since, however firm the attachment felt by some to certain formularies, it could not be maintained that they were bound by divine authority to the use of them. Besides this, the king had issued a Declaration from Breda a short time previous to his restoration, in which he expressly promised "liberty to tender consciences, and that no man should be disquieted or called in question for differences of opinion in matters of religion, which did not disturb the peace of the kingdom." Was there not, therefore, ground for hoping that a friendly and equitable adjustment might be accomplished, involving, possibly, some slight compromises on each side, yet securing the long-desired unity and fixing the church on a firmer foundation than ever?

There was the greater reason for this hope in that the requirements of the Presbyterians and the reforming portion of the clergy were exceedingly moderate. They were content, as has been mentioned, to submit to episcopal government, even though certain modifications which they desired were not conceded, if the validity of their own ordinations was granted. In regard to other things, they asked for liberty to baptize without using the sign of the cross—to administer the Lord's supper to communicants either kneeling, sitting, or standing—and to officiate without wearing the surplice. They wished also to be relieved from the obligation to "pronounce all baptized persons regenerated by the Holy Ghost, whether they were the children of christians or not"—to administer the Lord's supper to those who were unfit to receive it—and to give thanks indiscriminately for all whom they buried, as "brethren whom God had taken to himself." And they objected to subscribe a declaration that there was nothing in the Common Prayer Book, the Book of Ordinations, or the thirty-nine articles, contrary to the word of God. If they could be indulged in these particulars, and if some objectionable expressions in the liturgical services were revised and altered, they were willing to conform to the church as by law established. Now it must be confessed that in agreeing to exercise their ministry in the church on these terms they made large concessions. But on the other hand, concessions to very nearly the

*See Appendix, No. I.