

# THESE FIFTY YEARS:

A RETROSPECT.

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## THESE FIFTY YEARS.

At present one subject is engaging universal attention in the British empire ; most people are thinking in some way or other of the Jubilee of Her Majesty Queen Victoria. We hear much of celebrations and rejoicings, but not very much about the goodness of God, and the thanksgiving that is due to Him for His mercies to, and long-suffering over, this kingdom during her reign. Nor does there seem to be a disposition to review the past and make an acknowledgment of the national sins of this period. Every reader of these pages will, doubtless, gladly give thanks to God for His forbearance and His mercies, and for graciously preserving the Queen, thus enabling her to complete her fifty years' reign ; they will also pray that her life may still be lengthened, and her sovereignty upheld, and that she may finally enter the everlasting "mansions." Many, indeed, will not feel able to join in the worldliness inseparably connected with public celebrations, but they will rejoice to turn the occasion to profit by making it a time of special thanksgiving and supplication touching national matters, as well as concerning the matters of the kingdom of God. A few words here with reference to the past fifty years may help to this.

There are, of course, various ways of reviewing any period of time, and persons will come to different conclusions according to their individual standpoint. We can only consider the subject from one point of view, even that which affects men for eternity as well as for time, and therefore the following remarks will bear upon what in popular language would be called the religious condition of the nation.

Most of those who will read these lines have been taught, through God's grace, the great truth of the heavenly calling of His Church, and that the moment a sinner receives Christ as the Saviour of the lost, that sinner ceases to belong to the world; and as a child of God and a stranger and pilgrim here, he is simply waiting for the rightful but rejected King of the whole world, even the Lord Jesus Christ. This truth has not been learnt by all the children of God, or there would be more general separation from the world on the part of those who are Christ's. A large number of those who are really saved by faith in Christ do not see that His cross stands between them and that world which rejects Him, and they are found either in what is called the national Church, or in other bodies which mingle religion with politics. They are thus necessarily affected by the systems in which they are found, while to a certain extent they are responsible for the character of those systems, and it is a deeply humbling fact that so many of the anti-Christian movements of the day have the sanction of not a few who in their hearts own Christ alone as their Saviour.

It is not a little remarkable that many of the things now so powerful around us made their appearance, or had a new impetus given to them, just before the commencement of the last fifty years. If a twofold picture could be drawn of the state of things then and now, many would be startled at the rapid development of evil, and at the sad degeneration of one movement at least, which had for its aim the honour of the Lord in subjection to His Word. Our remarks, however, must be very brief, the object being to give a bird's-eye view of a large subject.

I. ROMANISM.—Let us first look at this system, which is above all others a combination of both religious and political pretensions. In England and Scotland, up

to the beginning of this century, Popery had never recovered from the blow it received at the time of the Reformation; then it again reared its head, and, beginning by obtaining grants from Parliament for educating its priests at Maynooth, it succeeded in 1845 in obtaining an endowment, and in 1884, more than half a million of the national funds were employed in supporting Romish training colleges and schools in Ireland.

Until 1829 Romanists were disabled from sitting in Parliament, not on account of their religion, but because the Romish theory of the temporal authority of the Pope prevented their taking the place of absolute allegiance to a Protestant sovereign. In that year the law was relaxed to such an extent as to throw open to them not Parliament only, but all offices in the realm, except five; afterwards came the obliteration of the word *Protestant* from the oath of allegiance to the sovereign, and as a consequence they have got into some of the highest offices of State.

Fifty years ago persons were not allowed to take titles similar to those given by law to the dignitaries of the Church of England, but in 1850 the Romanists began to assume them, and have gone on until now there are in England and Scotland no less than twenty-three who are called archbishops and bishops, in addition to over 2500 priests. And these titles are so far recognised by English statesmen that the priest who claims the highest position in the Romish church in England is given, in an official document, a place of precedence before the English nobility. During these fifty years Jesuits have been expelled even from Romish countries, but have been allowed to settle in England, and are said to be at the head of the great Catholic mission in this land. An agitation is also now on foot for establishing diplomatic relations between the Government of England and the

Pope of Rome. Thus is England nurturing that system that once held her in thralldom, that murdered her sons and her daughters for reading the Bible, that *boasts* itself to be ever the same, and *proves* itself to be so by enmity to Christ and the gospel, and all who cleave to Him and it. And she is doing so with an open declaration before her eyes, in words spoken in 1859 by one now a cardinal, and often quoted, that Rome will rest content with nothing less than supremacy. In addressing a council he said: "It is good for us to be here in England. It is yours, right reverend fathers, to subjugate and subdue, to bend and to break the will of an imperial race, the will which, as the will of Rome of old, rules over nations and peoples, invincible and inflexible. . . . It is the head of Protestantism; the centre of its movements, and the stronghold of its power. Weakened in England, it is paralysed everywhere. Conquered in England, it is conquered throughout the world."\*

II. RITUALISM. — We have hitherto spoken of that which bears its own name, but there is another movement more subtle, because carried on in many respects under false colours, that is, the Ritualistic movement in the established Church of England. We are told that between fifty and sixty years ago there was, amongst a certain number at Oxford, an earnest spirit aroused, and a desire for spiritual life and power, that could only be compared with the movement that preceded the great revival of the former century. But the results of the two movements were very different, and that difference may be accounted for by the fact that whereas in the earlier period men in

\* Many years ago I read a volume of sermons preached by this very priest as a clergyman of the Church of England, and I said, "Surely none but a Christian could have preached them." A solemn warning to us that truth in the head is one thing, but in the heart another.

their earnestness turned to the Word of God, in the latter they turned to the Church, starting with the postulate that the Scriptures were to be received on the authority of the Church, and by that authority alone could they be expounded. Hence, while "*Hear the Word of the Lord*," was the cry of the evangelists of the eighteenth century, "*Hear the Church*," was the watchword of the leaders of a new departure from that Word.

This is commonly called the *Tractarian* movement, because the leaders set forth their doctrines in a series of tracts, concluding with the celebrated "Tract XC.," in which, as one has said, the writer endeavoured to show "that the Protestant articles of the Church of England might, by a process of Jesuitical casuistry and non-natural interpretation, be explained away, and reconciled with the doctrines of the Romish Church." What led to the writing of this tract was the feeling on the part of some that, while the prayer-book generally was on their side, the articles were against them; there was in such a consequent exercise of conscience as to whether they ought to remain where they were. This tract agitated the whole of England, for at that time people were not prepared for such a defence as the author set forth. "But," says an able writer, "he had done his work, and had he waited a few years, till the seed which he had sown could grow, he would have seen the Church un-protestantizing itself more ardently than his most sanguine hope could have anticipated, the squire parsons of the establishment gone like a dream, an order of priests in their places, with an undress uniform in the world, and at their altars 'celebrating' masses in symbolic robes, with a directory to guide their inexperience. He would have seen them hearing confession, giving absolution, adoring 'Our Lady' and professing to receive visits from her, preaching tran-

substantiation and purgatory and penance, and everything his tract had claimed for them ; founding monasteries and religious orders, washing out of their naves and chancels the last traces of Puritan sacrilege ; doing all this in defiance of law and Parliaments and bishops, and forcing the authorities to admit that they cannot be interfered with." But the author of Tract XC. did not wait where he was, for he took the only consistent path and joined the Romish Church, of which he also is now a cardinal.

The above was the testimony six years ago of a churchman, whose brother was one of their early leaders, though he soon died ; the following is the testimony of a clergyman less than six months ago : " Prayers for the dead, invocation of angels, confession and absolution, seven sacraments, the mass, the real presence, the adoration of the host or wafer are all now openly taught." And he adds : " In regard to the ritual expression of these doctrines, we find it more or less pronounced in hundreds, if not thousands, of churches, from St. Paul's, London, down to the humblest village church in the land." The same writer makes another solemn statement : " Even our Nonconformist brethren seem bitten by the same rabies in their harvest decorations and elaborate musical services. The Church of England is racing after Rome, and some of our dissenting friends seem unwilling to be left too far behind."

This picture is, indeed, a sad one. Judges pronounce, as they have done fifty or sixty times, that certain things are illegal, yet the men who are under the law, and are eating the bread of the State, set the law at defiance and do as they choose. The bishops who have in the most solemn manner promised before God " to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrine contrary to God's Word," not only permit these things, which, indeed, they

seem powerless to prevent, but actually promote the men who practise them. But what is still more sad is the fact, that some who are truly children of God are helping on such things, while those who would oppose them render themselves powerless to testify against them, for while, every time they baptize an infant, they declare the awful lie of baptismal regeneration—which they themselves do not believe, but which is the foundation of the whole system—how can they withstand the immorality of the men who declare their unfeigned assent to the articles, and then teach doctrines and follow practices condemned in them?

III. INFIDELITY.—Side by side with the growth of superstition we have to record the terrible progress of avowed scepticism amongst those who profess the name of Christ. “Half a century ago,” says the churchman from whom we have quoted, “anyone who openly questioned the truth of Christianity was treated as a public offender and was excommunicated by society. . . . Orthodox dissent was permitted. Doubts about the essentials of the faith were not permitted.” Very soon, however, the flood of German rationalism reached this country, and one fruit of it was the notorious volume of *Essays and Reviews*, which set aside the authority of the Bible, questioned its fundamental truths, and struck at the very foundations of Christianity. Again many were startled; the matter was taken up, and efforts were made to obtain sentences against the writers (or some of them) for denying the doctrines of the Church of England, and after the charges had been considerably pruned down, the judge gave judgment against two of the offenders. This judgment was reversed by the highest court of the land in 1864, and thus the question was definitely settled that, as a leading journal expressed it, “the members of the Church are released from all legal obligation to maintain

a higher authority for the Scriptures than that claimed for them in *Essays and Reviews*," or, as another Review stated: "The clergy of the Church of England are required to believe that the Bible is, on the whole, a good book; but the Church of England does not affirm that it is, in any distinctive and authoritative sense, God's Book." The same Review adds, "Their lordships absolve ministers of the Church of England from obligation to believe in vicarious atonement and in the eternal punishment of the lost."

Such a judicial encouragement as the assertion from England's highest court, that the ministers of the State religion were at liberty to teach what they pleased, coupled with the promotion at no distant period of some of the writers and their defenders to places of dignity within its pale, could only be fruitful in the growth of irreverence in handling Scripture, and the subversion of its inspired teaching. The natural consequence is, that in the establishment Socinianism has spread to an amazing extent, and on every hand men are denying the vicarious character of the death of Christ, and openly caricaturing the solemn doctrine of the punishment of those who refuse to obey the gospel.

The effect of this teaching is felt outside the national establishment in a far greater degree than the effect of Ritualism. From hundreds of the Nonconformist pulpits of the land these evil doctrines are preached, and men seem seeking to outvie one another in popularizing sceptical teaching, while certain papers that are circulated by thousands, and find access to unsuspecting households, are sapping the faith and morality of the young.

Three facts may be given as sure evidences of the growth of laxity in bodies that once were reckoned to be sound upon fundamental doctrines.

1. In one large body the denial of the eternal punishment of the lost, and the holding of doctrines necessarily connected with this, form no barrier to the highest official position, while in that body the doctrine that men are by nature children of God, is commonly taught, and as a natural consequence the need of reconciliation by the death of Christ is denied.

2. In the recent union meeting of another body, from which better things might have been expected, a minister was appointed vice-president who has championed the cause of one who denied every essential of Christianity, and has himself given evidence of lack of reverence and soundness in expounding Scripture. This is not all. One minister was faithful enough to raise a protest on behalf of evangelical doctrine, and though he did so in a courteous and solemn manner, he was actually *hissed*, while in the assembly of hundreds of ministers only *eight* supported the protest by their votes!

In both the above bodies it was suggested for consideration at their large annual ministerial meetings, that the preaching of theology should be given up at their Sunday evening services, and that in order to attract the masses, such subjects as the works of creation, the human body, social and political duties, etc., should be taken up.

3. In a third denomination, the subject of some annual lectures is this year, "*The moral and religious aspects of the doctrine of evolution*"; and the one chosen to deliver these public lectures is known as "a decided evolutionist." Surely this points to nothing less than a loosing of the authority of Scripture, which condemns by anticipation *all* evolutionary theories, inasmuch as they deny *creation* and set aside the *Creator*.

Thus on every hand we see the word of God being made void, and human tradition, or human speculation, taking

its place, or influencing those who profess to be expositors of it; and even many who cannot be charged with actually teaching what is false are noted rather for what they *withhold*; and, it may be added, true servants of God, who know and love the Lord Jesus, and value His precious sacrifice, are, like Lot in Sodom, tormenting their righteous souls with the lawlessness around them, with which they are linked, and from which they seem to have no power to free themselves. We might refer to the agitation in northern churches against the Calvinistic principles of the Confession of Faith, and to the introduction of novel doctrines and practices among them; also to the strange lack of knowledge and consequent perils of those whose "salvation" zeal has of late so widely spread—but enough has been said concerning others, and we need to remember the apostolic injunction in 2 John 8.

"*Look to yourselves.*" This brief review is only given with the feeling that we ought not to be ignorant of the state of things in the midst of which our lot is cast, and in the hope that those who read will seek yet more earnestly to bow before God, in fellowship with our gracious Lord, and in deep humiliation and confession, with prayer for the deliverance of those who are His, and the rescue of those who are "led away with the error of the wicked." But even greater cause for abasement of soul is seen as we consider that which still more concerns us.

Again looking back to the period just preceding the last fifty years, at the very time of the Oxford movement to re-assert the authority of the Church, we behold a little company of children of God gathered around His Word, first in Dublin, and then in Plymouth, and seeking to give that Word its place of supremacy, and to test everything by it. The consequence was that they were taught much

by the Spirit of God, and sought at no little cost in many ways to carry out what they had learnt. They were led into the great truths of the heavenly calling and the oneness of the Church of God, the priesthood of all believers, the simplicity of the Lord's supper, the presence of the Lord with His people when gathered to His name, the guidance of the Spirit of God in the assembly, and the bright hope of the return of the Lord to receive His people unto Himself, raising the departed and changing those "which are alive and remain," and then fulfilling His word of promise to Israel and setting up His kingdom on the earth.

The results of the reception of such truths by believers were separation from the world and gathering together in a simple way to show forth the Lord's death, and to help one another's faith and joy. On the one hand, as the conviction grew that they could only find true fellowship with those who were really living members of Christ, so on the other, as one has said, "*the original principles of this happy communion tended to nothing less than the enjoyment of union and communion among all who possess the common life of the family of God.*" Those who thus assembled acknowledged that they were but a fragment of the Church of God, and they took such a position as enabled them to acknowledge all who were Christ's, while they raised no barriers to fellowship with any who had taken refuge under the blood of sprinkling, and were seeking to walk worthy of the gospel of Christ, however little they knew of the truth. Surely those who remember the position and course fifty years ago of these believers, and who consider the present condition of things, can but exclaim, "How is the gold become dim! how is the most fine gold changed!" while those of us who only hear with the hearing of the ear of

those happy days, are deeply bowed with a sense of the contrast.

Twenty-five years ago I heard a dear departed servant of Christ say, in the course of a lecture which has been published with much alteration since his death, " We have sadly lacked *grace* ; there we have lamentably failed. I believe the great mistake from the beginning has been, not in the act of separation, but in the ungracious way of exposing the mistakes of other brethren, and for this the Lord has solemnly judged us. The divisions of ' Brethren ' are the greatest scandal we see in the Church of God, and they are the result of the want of grace shown toward one another." What would he say if he were here now ? Above all, what does the Lord say ? Some who were once walking in the simplicity of the truth have been for years pursuing a path very contrary to their early course and drawing many after them, and thus building up a system the pretensions of which can only find their parallel in the Church of Rome. For about forty years they have unjustly charged with evil doctrine those from whom they separated, and have claimed to take a high stand for God ; but His blessing has been lacking, and strifes and divisions have only brought further dishonour on the name of Christ.

And even such as have in some measure sought to maintain the simplicity of those first principles of fellowship, are in great danger lest, instead of being truly humbled by the past, taking warning by the sorrowful condition of those we have just referred to, and seeking grace to deal wisely and patiently with all God's children, we should be misled into building up another system, surrounding ourselves with barriers of our own devising, and allowing the habit of judging other children of God to take the place of that intercession on their behalf which must spring from a walk in intelligent fellowship with

Christ. Have we not cause also to ask ourselves, Where is the evidence of the presence of the Lord in living power in our meetings, subduing what is not of Himself, and filling us with the spirit of worship, and with power for growth and edification? Where is the unworldliness of fifty years ago and the simple living to Christ, who "loved us and gave Himself for us?" Where is that zeal in the gospel which leads to self-denial in seeking to spread it around us, and to minister to those who carry it forth to other lands in such a measure as to give us the consciousness that we are fulfilling our Lord's last commission? And where is the brightness and purifying power of the blessed hope of His coming again to receive us to Himself and conform us to His image? Have we not allowed discussions and differences about prophetic truth to hinder our waiting for *Him*, and our keeping the eye on His judgment-seat?

These things cannot be enlarged on here, but surely they show us that a review of fifty or sixty years may well bring us on our faces before our God in humiliation and confession. Yet let us not be *discouraged*, and let us not be tempted to give up anything we have received; let us rather hear the Lord's word to the Church at Sardis: "Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and *hold fast*, and *repent*." Let the condition of things around us stir us to watchfulness and prayer for ourselves, and to the blessed work of intercession for others; and let us take to heart the fact that the Lord who has been pleased to cast our lot in these difficult days is able to make all grace abound unto us, so that we may as His witnesses magnify Him in all our ways, and gain His approval in "that day."

W. H. B.