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ART. I.—THE SERVANT OF CHRIST.

No. VII.—DECISION.

WE might have thought that, in the days of the Apostles, if at any time at all, the advice to test the different opinions which presented themselves to the members of the primitive Church would have been unnecessary. While they had the priceless advantage of the living presence amongst them of the chosen companions of our Lord, and of the very founders of the kingdom of heaven on earth, we might have supposed that they would at once, with thankfulness, refer to them every question as it arose. It was not so. Never since the Church of Christ was first founded has it been all entirely of the same opinion. Never once has it had a perfect organization. If that happy state of things should arrive, we might at once expect the second advent. St. Paul was from the very beginning of his ministry troubled on the one hand with those who wished to confine the freedom of the Gospel by the old Jewish restrictions, and on the other by men of philosophical training who were always attempting to fit the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ into their own elaborate systems. Others there were who fancied they discovered differences in the principles of St. Paul, or of Apollos, or of St. Peter, or of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself from His representatives, and who attempted to found special parties in accordance with such fancied divergencies. Amongst others who showed dangerous heretical tendencies, St. Paul was obliged to denounce Hymenæus, Alexander, and Philetus. In the later days of St. John there were already many Antichrists: there were the Gnostics; there were the Nicolaitans. St. Paul and the other Apostles did not attempt to provide any machinery for extinguishing these perilous eccentricities; they trusted each to his own personal authority, to the loyalty

of their Churches, and to the intrinsic force of truth. Once a Council met at Jerusalem to discuss the relations of the Gentiles to the Law of Moses; but in general they were content with declaring the message of God, and appealing to personal responsibility. Of that personal responsibility, even in coming to seek Christ, a man could not divest himself. On the man's personal attitude towards truth depends his power of receiving it. "If any man is determined to do the will of God," said our Lord, "he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of Myself." And so St. Paul urged his friends in those early days at Thessalonica to prove all things. So St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that the discerning of spirits was one of the greatest of Divine gifts. So St. John wrote in later times: "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God, because many false prophets are gone out into the world." And he gave them a wide and infallible criterion: "Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God; and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God." Even in those early times we see that there were great and serious misrepresentations of truth; there were human admixtures of conceit, perverseness, of folly and stupidity. The duty of discernment lay with the individual under the inward light of the Spirit of God. That in all cases was of supreme necessity. None who approached the question of Divine revelation in an attitude of presumptuous criticism, rash independence, or patronizing self-sufficiency, would be a likely subject for enlightenment. A humble belief in the Divine Being is the first step, and then a trustful reliance on Divine illumination. "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things."

Such a time of proving there was in the second century, after the death of St. John, when the leaders and representatives of the different Churches scattered round the Mediterranean had, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to agree together which were the writings of the Apostles that should be collected in one, as the New Testament. For a long time the Western Churches hesitated to accept the Epistle to the Hebrews, because they were not sure who wrote it. For a long time the Eastern Churches shrank from acknowledging the Revelation of St. John, because it seemed to encourage strange opinions about the millennium. And some of the writings appeared too small, insignificant, and local for general preservation. And then, again, there were spurious writings to be dis-

carded. But the intrinsic inspired vitality of each document compelled their unity in the end; and at the close of the fourth century, in the time of St. Augustine of Hippo, the Council of Carthage finally ratified the list as it is now in our hands. But far better than any such mere formal decision by authority is the spontaneous agreement which we find in the writings of the Christian teachers in that early century which followed the age of the Apostles; first, in the principle that true Christian doctrine must be decided by an appeal to the Book; and, secondly, in the recognition already of the Divine authority of almost every one of the writings which form our New Testament.

Such a time of proving there was in England three and a half centuries ago, when the National Church woke up from the long centuries of darkness and slumber which she had passed under the bewitching enchantments of the Papacy. Once more our fathers returned to the simple Word of God, and restored Holy Scripture to its true position as the Rule of Faith. The usurping yoke of the Bishop of Rome was repudiated. In place of the perverted Sacrifice of the Mass was restored the primitive custom of the spiritual Communion of the Body and Blood of Christ. The worship of the Virgin, the worship of images, the intercession of saints were shown to be unwarrantable and idolatrous practices. Prayers for the dead were deliberately discontinued as having no precedent in the Bible. The doctrine of purgatory, with its attendant superstitions, was renounced. The tyrannical imposition of the necessity of auricular confession and absolution was changed into opportunities for spiritual counsel. The calamitous enforcement of compulsory celibacy on the clergy was abolished. All these things were carefully and earnestly proved; and the National Church, purified, enlightened, healed, and revived, held fast to the simple teaching of the primitive Gospel of Christ, to the simple principles of the orderly arrangements of His Apostles.

Such a time of proving comes to each individual soul when first he begins to realize the meaning of redemption in Christ. Is it true for the world? he asks; is it true for me? And God sends him an answer if he ask in faith. The time of proving may come gradually and imperceptibly with the dawn of our intelligence from our very entrance into the kingdom of heaven at our baptism. It may come to us at the serious crisis of our confirmation, when in the face of the Church we solemnly and deliberately renew our vows of faith and obedience. It may come when we first leave the shelter of our peaceful religious homes and begin to go out into the storms and scepticisms and sinfulness of the world. But,

thank God! we have the united testimony of all the millions of faithful believers who week by week worship Him in Christ, that no message can ever be sent to us more reasonable or more satisfying or more Divine than the revelation which the Bible gives us of God the Creator of the world, of His words and work for mankind in the incarnation of His Son, and of the beneficent and purifying operation of His omnipresent Spirit. Nothing can ever appeal to our consciences with the Divine force of the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ on sin and death, righteousness and life, pardon and peace, the future world, the future reward, the future punishment, on faith, on hope, and on love.

But after the duty of proving all things comes the duty of holding fast that which is good.

There probably never was an age so thoroughly steeped as the present in the spirit of criticism; never an age in which it was so completely the intellectual fashion to tolerate in an atmosphere of indiscriminate solubility any new opinion which may be the amusement of the hour, however antagonistic it must be to that on which we ought to have made up our minds. Flexibility, indifference, irresoluteness, instability, frivolity, are not these widely characteristic of our times? It would be very entertaining, if we chose, to illustrate this contemporary tendency from the practical field of public life, with all its degradations, which must be so intolerable to men of honour; to exhibit men of light and leading on both sides of our absurd and disastrous system of party warfare, not particularly in regard to any recent questions, but again and again in the course of history, ludicrously zealous and solemn in denouncing principles and courses of action which they afterwards adopt and enforce with a zeal no less ludicrously solemn; or it would be easy to exhibit the cynical paradoxes which are maintained in literature and thought by way of compliment to the fastidious spirit of culture. There are men who would persuade you that the judgment of history is wrong, and that, for example, the monster Henry VIII. was in reality an estimable statesman who was unfortunate in his relations with women; and that his daughter Mary, who justly earned her terrible sobriquet in the memory of the people, was in reality only an amiable zealot who had the misfortune to fall on times of religious change and commotion.

But we need rather to remind ourselves in our moral and religious life that though obstinacy is a fault, and though it is desirable not to be inelastic, yet flexibility when carried to an extreme is a still more perilous disease. If we are always making compromises with those who disagree from us in matters of principle, we shall soon have nothing left to

preserve. And that is the most prominent danger of an age of high and general culture. It is loosely thought to be opposed to the true spirit of liberalism if we have citadels in our minds which we decline to expose to attack. It is asserted by the men of culture that we must hold every question in solution, and consider every principle open to refutation. It is our business to remember that this habit as Christians we cannot loyally or conscientiously permit ourselves to adopt. There are certain great truths which we have found to be good, and come what may we intend to cling to them with an unflinching and imperturbable fidelity. Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.

"Irresolution and mutability," wrote Dr. Johnson, "are often the faults of men whose views are wide and whose imagination is vigorous and excursive, because they cannot confine their thoughts within their own boundaries of action, but are continually ranging over all the scenes of human existence, and, consequently, are often apt to conceive that they fall upon new regions of pleasure and start new possibilities of happiness. Thus they are busied with a perpetual succession of schemes, and pass their lives in alternate elation and sorrow, for want of that calm and immovable acquiescence in their condition by which men of slower understandings are fixed for ever to a certain point, or led on in the plain beaten track which their fathers and grandsires have trod before them." Some men will tell us that we cannot escape from the spirit of the age; but what we have to remember is that we are as free agents as anybody else, that the spirit of the age is merely made up by the contributions of units such as ourselves, and that we have the same right, the same opportunity, the same duty as others in helping to influence and modify that varying shifting chorus of parrot-cries which goes by the name of public opinion.

Be firm ! one constant element in luck
Is genuine, solid, old Teutonic pluck.
See yon tall shaft, it felt the earthquake's thrill,
Clung to its base, and greets the sunshine still.

"In matters of great concern," wrote Archbishop Tillotson, "and which must be done, there is no surer argument of a weak mind than irresolution; to be undetermined where the case is so plain and the necessity so urgent, to be always intending to live a new life, but never to find time to set about it, this is as if a man should put off eating and drinking and sleeping from one day and night to another, till he is starved and destroyed."

None sends his arrow to the mark in view
Whose hand is feeble, and his aim untrue.

For though, ere yet the shaft is on the wing,
 Or when it first forsakes the elastic string,
 It err but little from the intended line,
 It falls at last far wide of his design.
 So he who seeks a mansion in the sky
 Must watch his purpose with a steadfast eye ;
 That prize belongs to none but the sincere,
 The least obliquity is fatal here.

“Irresolution,” said another old writer of the seventeenth century, “is a worse vice than rashness. He that shoots best may sometimes miss the mark, but he that never shoots at all can never hit it. Irresolution loosens all the joints of a state; like an ague, it shakes not this limb or that limb, but all the body is at once in a fit. The irresolute man is lifted from one place to another, and hath none left to rest on. He flocks from one point to another; so hatching nothing, but addles all his actions.”¹

“Irresolute men are to be pitied, for they lead a life of perpetual anxiety and harassing doubt; and could they but resolve to pursue a purpose to the end, the obstacles they would meet with in its execution would sink into insignificance when compared with the barrier met at the start—that of resolving.”²

“Irresolution,” wrote Addison, “on the schemes of life which offer themselves to our choice, and inconstancy in pursuing them, are the greatest causes of all our unhappiness.”

“There is nothing more pitiable in the world,” said Goethe, “than an irresolute man.”

O what a thing is man ! how far from power,
 From settled peace and rest !
 He is some twenty several men at least
 Each several hour.

He builds a house which quickly down must go,
 As if a whirlwind blew
 And crushed the building ; and 'tis partly true
 His mind is so.

O what a sight is man, if his attires
 Did alter with his mind ;
 And like a dolphin's skin, his clothes combined
 With his desires !

There are many voices about us that would seduce us from the steadfastness of our allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ. There are the false, lying, hollow charms of a meretricious Romanism. What an example of instability it is when we remember that during the past half-century some three thousand persons of the educated and influential classes in this country, not to reckon those amongst the multitude,

¹ Owen Feltham, 1610-1678 A.D.

² W. T. Burke.

have left the English representative of Christ's invisible Church for the alien and unhappy Church of Italy! There is, again, the voice that insinuates to us how easy it is to find blemishes in our national profession of Christianity, and how free and healthy it would be to have a little sect of our own. What an example of levity in religious opinion, and of waste of power in religious action, it is when we remind ourselves that the denominations in this country, outside the old Church, number no less than 255! And then, do we not find numbers of persons allowing themselves to be taken up with Theosophy, or Buddhism, or Spiritualism, or Naturalism, or Æstheticism, or Agnosticism, or Materialism, or Secularism, to be enticed by any voice which speaks with the plausible interest of novelty, but which is not the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ?

It is well to remember how St. James warns us that he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea, driven with the wind and tossed. Let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord. A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways. Surely we have by this time tasted for ourselves that the Lord is gracious! Surely, having once walked in the green pastures and by the still waters of faith, we shall not willingly wander out into these grim deserts of doubt which are traversed only by the shrieking winds of despair! Surely we have found for ourselves what our fathers have told us, that the Word of God contains sufficiently all things necessary for the health and salvation of our souls! Surely nothing can ever be more lovely, or satisfying, or wholesome, than those simple truths which we learned by our father's side and at our mother's knee! Surely the Church which for so many centuries has held up the lamp of God's revelation to man, and which has made our country what it is in greatness and in usefulness and prosperity, is enough even for us! Surely our lives have been but empty and blundering if we have not yet found anything of truth and beauty and goodness worthy to be held fast! But, holding fast that which we have proved, we shall have in our hands the key of knowledge and the touchstone of truth; and all these other voices, and spirits, and tendencies, and cries which are about us will interest us only as matters which we should sift, and which may help to illustrate our central position, and we shall, as life draws on, only be more and more firmly persuaded that in Christ, and in Christ alone, are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. For He is the power of God and the wisdom of God; because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men; for God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise,

and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world and things which are despised hath God chosen; yea, and things which are not to bring to nought things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. And of Him are we in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption, that, according as it is written, He that glorieth let him glory in the Lord!

WILLIAM SINCLAIR.

ART. II.—THE CHURCH OF IRELAND.

THE work of Mr. Olden in the series on the National Churches,¹ edited by Mr. Ditchfield, is not, like so many manuals of Irish Church History, a mere compilation, but in every sense an original work. Mr. Olden is the rector of a remote parish in the county of Cork, but he is a scholar of wide learning, especially in Irish literature, and he is well versed in the Irish language. In this respect he has the advantage of Dr. Stokes, Professor of Ecclesiastical History in the University of Dublin, whose most able works on the Celtic and Anglo-Norman Churches we reviewed in the *CHURCHMAN*, in the years 1886 and 1890. Mr. Olden had previously made his mark by valuable contributions to the Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, by an interesting volume on "The Holy Scriptures in Ireland One Thousand Years Ago,"¹ and by important contributions to the "Dictionary of National Biography." He was invited to write the story of the fortunes of the Church of his native land, and the volume before us of 440 pp. is the result.

Mr. Olden has to traverse the ground so ably occupied within the last few years by Dr. Stokes, and he lies under a distinct disadvantage in being obliged to follow one endowed with such a talent for lucid presentation of obscure historical incidents. It is almost amusing to observe that Mr. Olden, although giving a list of forty-seven works on Irish history, never alludes to the works of Dr. Stokes, except once in order to point out that the latter gives a wrong date for the building of King Cormac's chapel at Cashel. We presume that he is resolved to keep well off Dr. Stokes' lines, and he has, in our opinion, done so. His book, therefore, is a fresh contribution to the history of the much-tried and much-calumniated Church of Ireland.

¹ *The National Churches: Ireland.* By Rev. THOMAS OLDEN, M.A., M.R.I.A. London: Wells, Gardner, Darton and Co. 1892.