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The Perils of Opportunism.¹

BY THE RIGHT REV. THE LORD BISHOP OF NEWCASTLE.

“We cannot tell.”—MATT. xxi. 27.

I

LET me call your attention in opening to the circumstances under which this answer was given by the Chief Priests and elders of the Jewish Church to a plain question addressed to them by our Lord. His inquiry had concerned a matter of supreme ecclesiastical importance at that time, and I think it may help us not a little, as we seek to examine the situation which confronts us in our own Church to-day, if we try to trace the course of things which led up to this answer, to understand the frame of mind which finds expression in it, and the danger it portended and rendered inevitable.

We know, then, that, in its early history, Israel again and again displayed a fatal tendency to lapse into idolatry and superstition. Though the Lord had delivered their fathers from Egypt and its false gods, though by a mighty hand and outstretched arm He had brought them into the land of promise and established them there, they had perpetually been overcome by a hankering to assimilate their worship to that of the idolatrous nations around them under specious and familiar pretexts of breadth and unity. In the wilderness before their establishment, and in their own land after it, they were constantly found yielding to this tendency, notwithstanding God's solemn warnings as to the consequences of such a course. King after king misled them into it. Prophet after prophet prophesied falsely about it. Priests bore rule through their means, and for centuries this state of things continued, till, as a foretold result, the ten tribes of Israel were led captive by the Assyrian King. It was the same, too, in the case of treacherous Judah, for, as observation proves, history repeats itself. More than a century before the deportation of Israel we read: “They left the house of the Lord God of their fathers, and wrath came upon Judah

¹ A sermon preached on behalf of the National Church League at Christ Church, Mayfair, W., July, 1, 1910.

and Jerusalem for their trespass ; yet He sent prophets to them to bring them again to the Lord, and they testified against them ; but they would not give ear." I cannot refrain from giving you the last words of this quotation as they occur in the Vulgate, and I commend them to your careful notice. "Quos protestantes illi audire nolebant" — that is, "Whom, as they protested, these people were unwilling to hear." There are those who now tell us that you cannot find the word "Protestant" in the Bible. They might as well add that you cannot find the word "Trinity"; but what we do find most clearly are the truths which both these words express, while, as regards the former word, the criticism is the more unwarrantable, inasmuch as in Jer. xi., written on the eve of the Babylonish captivity, we find Almighty God declaring, "I earnestly protested unto your fathers in the day that I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, even unto this day, rising early and protesting, saying, Obey My voice."

Well, the end of Judah's failure to obey this protesting voice was the captivity, to which I have just referred, the seventy years of which appear to have finally destroyed all tendency to lapse into gross idolatry ; but what we have chiefly to consider to-day are the evils which took its place. What were they ? What was the condition of the Jewish Church at the time of the first Advent ? Open idolatry, as I have said, had ceased ; but what about opportunism, formalism, externalism, ecclesiasticism, and the substitution of petty rules and ceremonies for the weightier matters of the law and heart religion ? No doubt the men who gave the answer to our Lord, which I invite you to consider, were great authorities as to the exact length and breadth of a phylactery, or the precise distance permissible for a Sabbath-day's journey. They were great, too, in tithing the mint, the anise, and the cummin ; but they had so lost sight of great principles that our Lord had constantly to rebuke them, while, on more than one occasion, as they found fault with some act of mercy wrought by Him, He had indignantly recalled to them the teaching of one of their own prophets, "I will have mercy, and not sacrifice." Such a state

of mind as this led naturally to that frame of time-serving and opportunism which, in the long-run, always manifests itself in those who, having forsaken great principles for close observance of the petty rules of ecclesiasticism, put the latter in the place of the former, and grow blind to matters of really first importance and their own relation to them. Much had they to say about minutiae. But when it came to a question about our Lord's great forerunner, who had recently stirred the nation to its heart's core, all they could display or assume was ignorance. John the Baptist had been preaching repentance, baptizing, and pointing the multitudes who flocked to him to Jesus of Nazareth as the long-promised Messiah. What, then, had these accredited leaders of the Jewish Church to say about him? What were their relations to him, and therefore to our Lord Himself, to whom he had borne witness? It was at once plain that their lips were sealed by opportunism. The attitude of Jesus towards their pettiness and their misrepresentations of true religion was a thing unendurable to them. Their firm determination had long been, "We will not have this man to reign over us," and, knowing that He was now teaching in the Temple courts, they devised a cunning question, which they fondly hoped would discredit Him in the eyes of the people: "By what authority [they ask] doest Thou these things? and who gave Thee this authority?" Then in turn the Saviour put a question to them in regard to their relation to the matter to which I have just referred: "I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell Me, I in likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, whence was it? from Heaven, or from men?" Now mark to what straits they were reduced: "They reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From Heaven; He will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him? but if we shall say, Of men, we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet." So they answered, and said unto Jesus, "We cannot tell."

Now pause and consider what was portended by this self-admitted inability (or shall I say unwillingness?) to define their

own relation to a matter of supreme importance which was then exercising the public mind. Who can fail to perceive, as he reads the history of the next forty years, that the time-serving spirit which dictated this miserable answer affords clear evidence of that growing internal rottenness concerning which an inspired writer tells us, "Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away"? Notwithstanding all that the Jewish system had prefigured, and all that they should have known, from their own sacred writings, of Him to whom the Baptist pointed, they refused to recognize as such either our Lord or His forerunner. They dared not to take their stand on what they must have known to be true, and as a consequence the end was sure, no matter by what means it would be brought about. And yet that end was for a time delayed. It is a remarkable circumstance that whereas their ecclesiastical system, which (in God's providence) was only provisional and destined to give place to another, may be said to have had its infancy for forty years in the wilderness, its period of dissolution extended over a like time. Those years were marked by fierce opposition on their part to the extension of Christ's kingdom, and culminated in a complete severance between His followers and the Jewish Church. Judaism and Christianity, however, could never have remained at one, for no man can put a new patch on an old garment. Finally, even the Temple itself, in the courts of which the reply we have considered had been given to our Lord, was demolished, as He had Himself predicted, by a foreign power; insomuch that the ruin which threatened them from within was completed from without, because they had failed to recognize the day of their visitation.

II

I call your attention, secondly, to an inquiry which, however sad and serious, seems imperative in view of the circumstances which surround us. I do not for a moment invite you to ignore the practical work which is being done by our Church at large at the present time. I do not ask you to think of petty diver-

gences in matters of detail which involve no principle. In a great national Church (and especially in one with such a history as ours) we must be tolerant on minor points. I do not shut my eyes to the fact that even fundamental truths may be looked upon from different points of view. One man will ever lay the chief stress on the relation of the individual soul to God, another on the corporate relation of such souls, a third on the relation of the whole body to those outside, and likewise on social questions. Probably he who lays stress on all these views is the best Churchman all round. But when we come to foundation questions—questions which in the past have split up Christendom into bitterly antagonistic camps—questions to which we can hardly doubt that the recent Royal Commission referred when, alluding to “breaches of the law having significance,” they said that “these should be promptly made to cease by the exercise of the authority belonging to the Bishop,” is it not imperative to inquire whether our Church still adheres to the views as to these matters expressed in her own deliberately drawn Articles and Formularies, or whether she is now hopelessly drifting and indeterminate? If the answer to the latter alternative be in the affirmative, and if, in a spirit of opportunism, such as prevailed in the Jewish Church, this state of things is tolerated and not checked, the questions naturally arise: Whither are we drifting? What prospect lies before us? Can we remain homogeneous? and how long can we escape the operation of the law thus stated by our Lord, “If a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand,” or the result implied in the inquiry, “If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle”?

I must leave it to you to judge how far the condition of things which now surrounds us in respect of fundamental principles, and the opportunism which ignores them, is analogous to what we have traced as portending the dissolution of the Jewish Church. For my own part, I shall merely submit a few inquiries which seem to me to bear closely on the whole subject. Suppose, for example, we inquire of professed Church-

men at large, Is the Bible a Divinely inspired and authentic record of facts, or are considerable portions of it to be regarded as merely belonging to "Asiatic folklore"? am I right or am I wrong in fearing that the general result of such a referendum would thus be fairly expressed, "We cannot tell"? Again, if we asked, Was the Reformation, which stirred this nation no less deeply than the ministry of John stirred the Jews, a Divinely ordered cleansing of Christ's Church, or an event to be repented of with tears and in ashes?—would the general answer be less indeterminate? Or suppose we inquired, Is our Lord Himself the only Divinely appointed means of access to the Father, through whom a sin-burdened soul may freely approach Him, or should our people be taught to rely upon other mediators, living or dead, in seeking pardon and grace?—do you think that even here we could obtain a more definite reply? Still further, if we questioned, Is the Christian ministry a Divinely appointed agency for the edifying and pastoral care of Christ's Church, or a sacerdotal order of men, ordained to offer sacrifices for the living and the dead, and therefore properly to be vested in the garments which in the Middle Ages symbolized this view of things?—could we get a united answer to this inquiry to-day? Once more, if we asked, Is the Holy Communion a Divinely appointed ordinance for the continual remembrance of the sacrifice of the death of Christ and a means whereby the souls of faithful recipients are strengthened and refreshed by a renewed communication of His nature and His life, symbolized by the bread and wine, or is it in any sense a repetition of His great sacrifice once offered by Himself, in which the nature of the elements is changed?—would the replies, again, mean more than this: "We cannot tell"?

So much, then, for inquiries bearing on doctrinal matters—matters on which our Articles and Formularies have already definitely pronounced. But I have two other questions to propound of a different kind, and on the answer to one of these our very existence as an establishment seems to depend. First, what is the reasonable and necessary relation of a Church,

such as ours, established by law, to the decisions of the Sovereign of the State in which it works, and to which it is united, in cases where doubt arises as to the interpretation of its own Rubrics and Formularies? Bear in mind that not only has our Church in her Thirty-seventh Article deliberately assigned to the Sovereign of these realms the chief government in all causes ecclesiastical as well as civil therein, but something more: she has also taught her members, in her own Communion Office, to pray that they, duly considering whose authority the Sovereign hath, may faithfully serve, honour, and humbly obey him. Well, can you think that if this question were now submitted to the Church at large you could get any answer which would better be expressed than in the words of the text? Lastly, if we come back nearer to the form of our Lord's question to the Chief Priests and elders, and inquire, Is the work of other Protestant religious bodies—not in communion with our Episcopal Church—work carried on either at home or in the mission-field, recognized of Heaven, or is it merely of men?—would you expect a unanimous answer? or, on grounds not dissimilar to those which influenced the Jewish authorities, the old evasive reply "We cannot tell"?

May I not, then, well invite you to consider seriously the outlook of our present indeterminate position in the light which the probable answers to these inquiries throw upon it? Contrast it with the almost unanimous feeling which we are told prevailed on most of these points in the English Church in the early part of the last century. Consider it, too, in view of what a Roman Catholic Archbishop in England declared, only a few years ago—namely, that the doctrines of his Church were being preached from a thousand English pulpits. And to this assertion I may add another. I have lately read an utterance of a clergyman who has recently joined the Church of Rome. He was formerly a member of a community which is not only now regarded with favour in high quarters, but is also engaged in training candidates for the ministry of our own Church, and this is what he says about its teaching: "On

practically every point, except the supremacy of the Pope, we believed the teaching of the Catholic Church and taught most of her doctrines, as thousands of Anglican clergy are doing to-day." And if, after careful consideration, you come to the conclusion that this testimony is true, then I ask, Can you entertain much doubt as to what such a condition of affairs portends? Are the contradictions implied in these opposing opinions compatible either with permanence or unity? Optimism may hope to reconcile them. Opportunism may see fit to ignore them. Indifference may very likely smile at them. But, even suppose that no storm from without should burst upon our Church, can you hope to avoid the natural result of such a continued process of internal disintegration—at least, in destroying all *esprit de corps*? Has not the time come when, to quote a memorable sentence, "Tolerance has reached and even passed its limits, the sands have run out, and stern and drastic action is quite essential"? Should there not be some authoritative reassertion of what is, and what is not, English Churchmanship, and some assurance that our Church adheres to its own foundation principles? The twentieth century is demanding the *raison d'être* for every institution, and likewise the purport of its existence. But, if the growing dissatisfaction in England, combined with the internal condition we have considered, continues, is it not clear that we are threatened both from within and from without? As I hinted a moment ago, if the choicest fruit decays internally no external force is needed to bring it in time to the ground; but if external and internal forces combine to act upon it, then the end will come more quickly. I quite understand that the opportunist of to-day may shrink, as of old, from dealing with the difficulty, feeling that if he does so it will cause offence to those he fears; but recollect that, though for a moment we may evade the solution of a difficult problem, and thus secure apparent quiet for a brief season, the problem is sure to present itself again, and, when it does so, it will be in a harder and a harsher shape.

It now only remains for me to say that, with these thoughts

in my mind, I heartily congratulate you on the existence and marked progress of the National Church League, to which, I take it, at least the great majority of this congregation belongs. The main object of the League is very simple, and cannot but commend itself to you as of increasing importance every year. It is thus tersely expressed: "The defence and promotion of the Reformed Faith in the Church of England." I have endeavoured to show you the dangers which cannot for long be evaded if, through opportunism or for any other reason, our beloved Church is allowed to drift into an indeterminate position as regards the pressing questions of the day, and the great principles to which it has declared its adherence, to maintain which many of the compilers of our Liturgy laid down their lives. Our object may, of course, be misrepresented, and no doubt it is. It may be said that our League is a mere party organization; but we know that, as a matter of fact, it is nothing of the kind. Its first object is stated thus: "To unite in one association all members of the Church of England who feel the necessity of supporting the principles of the Church as based on Holy Scripture and set forth in the Prayer-Book and Thirty-Nine Articles." I have yet to learn that this object can fairly be described as a party one. If it be so, the position into which we have already drifted is more dangerous than I have allowed myself to suppose. What we desire is, that the Church of England should be kept true to herself, that the views which she has adopted as regards the Sacred Volume, the completeness of the sacrifice offered once for all by our Lord, His sole mediatorship with His Father, the character of the Christian ministry, the nature of the Holy Communion, and her own relation to the State, should be maintained, and that nothing should be tolerated that would symbolize the errors which before the Reformation obscured these views. We must be prepared for misrepresentations; but those who are clear in their own minds as to the supreme importance of these matters will surely not be greatly disturbed by any travesty of their position on the part of those who are opposed to them. Finally,

what we have to do is to ask God's guidance in our efforts to cleanse and defend our Church, to cling manfully and with renewed vigour to the light which, since the Reformation, has made our Church and country so great, so glorious, and so free. For, as we look around us we can hardly fail to see that the dangers which threaten us are real and alarming ; and that the heartiest and most widespread support is due from Churchmen to a League which seeks to promote the definite objects I have described, especially at a time when, alas ! if we ask, What is the attitude of our Church as regards the great principles on which it is founded ? I fear the general answer must be summarized in the words to which I have called your attention this morning : " We cannot tell."



Spirituality and Social Reform.¹

BY THE REV. CANON H. HENSLEY HENSON, D.D.

IT gives me great pleasure to be here at the courteous invitation of your President. I am not aware of any reason, whether of law or fitness, why I should not express the desire for closer religious fellowship with the non-episcopal Churches which I must needs feel when I observe their zealous and fruitful labours for the cause of Christ. The Baptist Churches have long outlived the heavy suspicions with which they started, and taken a recognized and prominent place among the agencies by which the world is being slowly but surely evangelized. If I am not misinformed, there are now in Great Britain and America some six or seven million Baptists, fully organized for pastoral work at home and for evangelistic work abroad. I observe that in point of numbers the Baptists stand third in the list of Churches in the recent census of the United States, being exceeded only by the Roman Catholics and the Methodists.

¹ An address delivered at a meeting of Baptist ministers in the Baptist Mission House, Fumival Street, London.