

## The Principle of Christian Progress.

[THE DEAN OF DURHAM'S SERMON AT THE CITY TEMPLE ON SUNDAY MORNING, MARCH 25, 1917.]

"But we are not of them that shrink back unto perdition, but of them that have faith unto the saving of the soul."—*Heb.* x. 39.

### I.

THESE words carry back our minds to the first and greatest crisis of Christianity, for they were written (if we may assume the soundness of what appears to be the most probable opinion on the point) just before the outbreak of the Jewish war, in which the political framework of Judaism was to perish and Israel, as a nation, was to be blotted out from the world's reckoning. The Hebrew believers had clung to their ancestral connections. Neither the harshness of the Jewish authorities nor the eager reasonings of St. Paul had been able to loosen their hold on the religious habit which they had received from the past. They had persisted in assuming that the divinely-ordained system of Israel would ultimately prove itself to be elastic enough to include the new society of disciples, that (in spite of the Lord's warning) the "old wineskins" of Jewish legalism would be able to contain the "new wine" of evangelical liberty. This assumption determined their religious practice and governed their theological thinking. At the end of a whole generation from the Lord's departure they remained still to outward seeming devout Israelites, regular worshippers in the Temple on Zion, differing only from the rest by their belief in Jesus as the Messiah, and by the higher level of morality which that belief inspired. Sooner or later, they were persuaded, Israel would acknowledge its true King, and the noble prophecies of Scripture would receive their plenary fulfilment. Moreover, they confidently expected the Messiah's triumphant return to authenticate His claim and to reward their faith. These two assumptions, the conversion of Israel and the speedy coming of Christ, were the substructures of their personal religion, on which they built a fabric of patience and hope, strong enough to sustain the repeated shocks of disappointment and persecution. But inexorable time was testing these governing assumptions, and it was slowly but surely disproving them. The Jewish people, as a whole, was quite clearly

hardening its attitude into an irrevocable refusal to accept a crucified Messiah, and Jesus Himself did not return, as He had been understood to promise, and as the Hebrews had confidently believed that He would. A new situation was emerging for these conservative believers—nay, had already emerged—and for good or for ill, for the enlargement, or for the destruction, of their faith, they might no longer refuse to face it. In this juncture an inspired writer, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, brings the guidance that was needed. He “calls upon his readers to make their choice boldly. Judaism was becoming, if it had not already become, anti-Christian. It must be given up. It was ‘near vanishing away.’ The Christian Church must be one and independent.” Thus observes Bishop Westcott: “The epistle is a monument of the last crisis of conflict out of which the Catholic Church arose.” (Heb., p. lviii.)

## II.

With these facts in mind consider the text. “We Christians,” says the Apostle, “are not of them that shrink back into perdition; but of them that have faith unto the saving of the soul.” He sets before us two types of men, and indicates two conceptions of religion. An exacter rendering of the words makes the meaning yet clearer. “We are not of shrinking back, but of faith.” Our gaze is directed not backwards to a past which is ever remoter, but forwards to a future which is ever nearer. The principle of our religion is not retrogression to that which once was, and is no more, but progress to that which never yet has been, and yet shall be. We are not a garrison set to guard a beleaguered city, but the army of the Lord following Him to the conquest of the world. Nothing less is the dénouement of human history to which we look forward. Isaiah’s prophecy is destined to receive fulfilment: “The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun  
Doth his successive journeys run;  
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,  
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.

The catholicity of the Gospel is disclosed by the simple interpretation of its scope and the statement of its divinely guaranteed destiny.

The two words contrasted in the text, "shrinking back" (*ἰπποστολή*), and "faith" (*πίστις*), deserve our careful notice. The first has an interest of its own, as being here only used in the New Testament. It is not found in the Septuagint, or in any other Greek version of the older Scriptures, and it is (we are assured) unused by the classical Greek writers. The verb from which it is formed is, however, found in an interesting passage which throws light on the text. In the Epistle to the Galatians St. Paul is led to give some passages of his own life, and, among others, that memorable episode when he came into open collision with the chief of the Apostles at Antioch. The question at issue was the recognition of Gentile believers, whom the stricter Jews refused to acknowledge as in the full sense members of the Christian Church. St. Peter, to whom had been vouchsafed a Divine revelation which left him in no doubt on the question, had first acted with liberality, and then (when orthodox opposition was threatened) had changed his attitude. The more resolute spirit of St. Paul could not tolerate such vacillation. "But when Cephas came to Antioch I resisted him to the face, because he stood condemned, for before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he drew back and separated himself, fearing them that were of the circumcision." *ἰπέστελλον*, "he drew back," playing false through fear to his own convictions. Bishop Lightfoot's comment is useful:—"St. Peter's vision had taught him the worthlessness of these narrow traditions. He had no scruples about living *ἔθνικῶς*. And when, in this instance, he separated himself from the Gentiles, he practically dissembled his convictions." That, then, is what the Greek word suggests—the timidity of one stealthily retreating. Possibly the notion was suggested by the cautious procedure of a general retiring before superior forces, trying to elude observation in his retreat. We Christians are not, says our author, timid reactionaries, but men of courageous faith. "We are not of them that shrink back unto perdition, but of them that have faith unto the saving of the soul." In laconic phrase he offers as the watchword for times of trial "not men of shrinking, but men of faith." (v. Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 411.)

Now it is not a little remarkable that the apostle, in order to assist his brethren to gain the courage and patience which belong to their profession as Christians, deliberately directs their thoughts

to the past—to that past which they are to leave behind—and from which they are to take only the precedents of “faith.” “Call to remembrance the former days,” is his counsel, bidding them read the message of their own experience and renew, in the changed circumstances of the present, that willingness to venture and to suffer which had marked the beginning of their discipleship. From the relatively narrow sphere of individual experience he passes on to a larger appeal, and bids them perceive the same truth proclaimed throughout history in the records of faithful men, an infinitely various company, living in circumstances the most diverse, yet all bearing a common stamp, and visibly moving under a single impulse. “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them, and greeted them from afar, and having confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things make it manifest that they are seeking after a country of their own, and if, indeed, they had been mindful of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better country—that is a heavenly; wherefore God is not ashamed of them to be called their God; for He hath prepared for them a city.”

### III.

Turn from the first century to the twentieth, and consider whether the words of the text do not carry a message for us here and now. I do not, indeed, forget—I should be sorry to under-rate—the difference, deep, pervading, incalculable, which separates the thinking of the first century from that of the twentieth. The writer and the first readers of this epistle belonged to their own age, as we do to ours; and the fact in both cases implies much. Nevertheless, when the difference has been fully allowed for, I am persuaded that there is agreement enough between the two epochs of revolutionary transition to make such a consideration as that to which I invite you both reasonable and fruitful. The conditions of such critical eras are sufficiently similar to make the earlier trustworthy monitors for the later. I believe that if the inspired writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews had to address himself to the Christian Church in England at the present time, his appeal would still be essentially the same. He would still bid us “call to remembrance the former days,” still entreat us “not to cast

away our boldness which hath great recompense of reward," still warn us that we "have need of patience," still call us to act as men who "are not of them that draw back unto perdition, but of them that have faith unto the saving of the soul."

#### IV.

What is the real crisis which confronts the Church of Christ, and which the war has forced into a prominence that compels universal attention? There is, perhaps, some danger that that crisis shall be misapprehended, and for that reason mishandled; and therefore I beg your closest attention while I endeavour to state the facts as I am able to see them. The war has disclosed the political unimportance of the Churches within Christendom, and thereby has startled the multitude of ordinary Christians, who had accepted the conventions of society as evidences of far more than they were competent to prove. But the essence of the crisis is not to be found there. For if the organized Churches, though their direct influence on the course of secular politics were but slight, and though their formal membership were disappointingly small, did yet plainly command the loyalty of the morally highest factors of modern society, and (to adopt the striking metaphor of the Apostle) were "seen as lights in the world holding forth the word of life," then it would not greatly matter that they were weak in power and in numbers. For, in the frank and involuntary homage of the general conscience, they would possess the pledge and the potency of future victory. The case, however, is far otherwise. A rift has appeared between the best conscience and intelligence of the modern world, and the Churches which claim to represent on earth the religion of Him Who revealed Himself as "the way, the truth, and the life"; and that rift widens daily, so that there rises on the vision of a considering believer the awful possibility of a total dissidence, and the foreboding words of the Divine Founder come home to the mind with something of the interest which attaches to the formula which solves a problem. "Ye are the salt of the earth; but if the salt have lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out and trodden underfoot of men."

Can the rift be filled up? Can the Christian society regain the moral supremacy which is essential to its life, or is it indeed

destined to shrivel and pass, while the march of humanity proceeds independently alike of its pretensions to lead and its ability to follow? I have assumed that in the past the Christian Church has possessed that indispensable moral primacy, and a reference to history will justify the assumption. The apostolic epistles are themselves sufficient proof that this was the case in the first age, and a few competent students of antiquity will be disposed to dispute that the victory of Christianity in the early centuries was fairly won. In the cruel and debased society of the Roman Empire the little communities of Christian believers forced their way to recognition, and then to supremacy, by their ability to interpret, to adopt, and to illustrate in practice the moral aspirations of their contemporaries. In the Gospel the Church possessed a magnet of moral excellence which drew into its membership the soundest elements of ancient life. In a sense, it is true that Christianity appropriated rather than contributed its materials. The "light of the world" revealed the treasures which the reigning gloom had veiled; it did not create them.

We must be on our guard against exaggerated pretensions to originality when we would state the case of historic Christianity. The Spirit of God is working over the whole area of human action, not merely within the society of believers, though doubtless there with special intensity, and we must be quick to discern and reverence His work wherever it be disclosed. Moral supremacy must always be relative to the existing levels of morality. It may be most complete where the moral standard of society is lowest, but, so long as it is moral supremacy it will operate as an uplifting force within society, a "leaven" of God within the "lump" of human life, silently transforming it for good. The moral standard of Europe was almost incredibly low during the centuries of barbaric confusion which succeeded the breaking up of the Roman Empire, and during the feudal epoch which followed, yet, perhaps, the Christian Church was never more apparently and effectively the moral teacher of the nations. It stood in society as a mediaeval cathedral stands in a city, towering upwards in supreme beauty and strength. We must not, indeed, ignore the moral paradoxes of the time; still, when full allowance has been made for these, it would be broadly true to say that the mediaeval Church was the "light" and the "salt" of the world. But this was less and less the case as the modern

epoch approached, until, on the eve of the Reformation, a situation had come into existence suggestively similar to that in which we now stand. The Christian Church (which, to mediæval minds, meant the hierarchy) had lost that "moral supremacy which is indispensable to the fulfilment of its primary function in human society, and was visibly menaced with dissolution.

## V.

Just four centuries have passed since two events, unconnected at the time, but, seen in the retrospect to have an intimate and melancholy connection, occurred in Europe. In March, 1517, the Lateran Council was concluded, and on November 1 of the same year Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg. The language in which the late Bishop of London has described the attitude of contemporary Christendom might be applied almost without alteration to describe the attitude of our modern world towards ecclesiastical procedures:—

Europe as a whole paid little heed to the Council or its proceedings, and amongst the mass of State papers preserved in every country it is scarcely mentioned. Statesmen were not interested in ecclesiastical questions; the general tone of thought was national and practical. The new learning employed the minds of thoughtful men; the spread of commerce attracted the trading classes; schemes of national aggrandisement filled the minds of statesmen.—(v. Creighton, *History of the Papacy*, vol. iv., p. 227.)

Of the universal contempt into which it had fallen, the hierarchy, as represented by the Pope, seemed to be unconscious. Nothing could exceed the complacency with which the Council's achievements were described in the decree of dissolution:—

Schism had been destroyed; all necessary reforms had been accomplished; the faith had been declared and established; the Pope had good hope that the peace of Christendom would soon be secure, and that all Europe would unite in war against the Turk.—(v. *Ibid.*, p. 234.)

An obscure monk in semi-barbarous Germany was about to comment somewhat startlingly on these pleasant assurances. Bishop Creighton's comment is worth quoting:—

It is the most astonishing instance of the irony of events that the Lateran Council should have been dissolved with promises of peace on the very verge of the greatest outbreak which had ever threatened the organization of the Church. It may be pleasant to be free from demands of reform, but it is assuredly dangerous. The quiet of indifference wears the same aspect as the quiet of content; but it needs only a small impulse to convert indifference into antagonism.—(v. *Ibid.*, p. 235.)

I have led you deliberately to the great crisis of the Reformation, because, not only do I believe that the crisis which confronts us now can best be studied in the light of that tremendous event, but also because the message which I desire to deliver connects itself directly with it.

## VI

If we are agreed that the Christian Church is now confronted by a most formidable crisis, if we perforce interpret the gigantic conflict which now enfolds the civilized world in a mantle of anguish as a "day of the Lord," in which, as always before, "God is visiting His people," then we must needs ask ourselves most solemnly what our personal duty as Christians demands from us. Immediately at the forefront of our anxious self-interrogation, there rises this old, obstinate problem of "our unhappy divisions." A fissiparous Christianity, such as that in which we have grown up, and in which we are tempted guiltily to acquiesce, was never contemplated in the Gospel. It seems to stultify the language of the apostles. It goes far to empty of meaning even the "precious and exceeding great promises" of Christ. It would, indeed, be absurd, were it not even more pathetic, to hear the champions of some tiny fragment of the Christian family applying to their own petty denomination the sublime words of St. Paul, and claiming for its interests and ambitions the awful sanctions of the Divine Lord. Let us make no mistake about it. No fellowship smaller than that of "the whole company of Christian people dispersed throughout the world" can claim the promises of the Gospel or satisfy the descriptions of the apostles. This reflection will at least moderate the self-assertiveness of our denominationalism and predispose us to correct our separating dogmata by the larger truths in which the unity of discipleship finds expression. It is wonderful, when once the sincere believer sets himself to compare the two, how petty the first looks beside the last. On this point the judgment of the private Christian accords with the verdict of the trained historian: "No one," wrote the late Professor Bigg, "can travel down the long river of time with a scholar's eye, a scholar's reverence for fact, and a scholar's trained discernment, without coming to feel how trivial are the little differences that part him from his fellow-believers, in comparison with the great axioms in which all are agreed."—(v. Bigg,



*The Church's Task under the Roman Empire*, p. viii.) This is certainly true, but it is not the whole truth.

There is more in the witness of history than the proofs of Christian agreement in fundamentals. History certifies religious development, and suggests a gradual teaching through experience. The past, which mitigates our resentments and corrects our prejudices, also marks out our path and determines our direction. We cannot go back on our history. In spite of the scandals which marked its stormy course, the Reformation was essentially a process of spiritual advance, not of spiritual retrogression. This is not to deny that there was loss, as well as gain, in it. We, looking at the Reformation in the light of nearly four centuries, can see that it was a mingled movement, as all human movements must needs be. We lament the loss of that external unity, which (though, indeed, it had shrivelled to a powerless convention) did yet sustain in men's minds the sense of a Catholic fellowship. We admit the faults of the Reformers, their fierce and indiscriminating iconoclasm, their crude dogmatizing, too often their personal unscrupulousness, and strangely illogical intolerance. We regret and repudiate their errors and limitations, but we cannot go back on the main verdict which history affirms and which our experience validates. The Reformation was a mighty movement of the SPIRIT of GOD leading the Church to a fuller understanding of the Gospel, and bringing to all who sincerely received it the gift of a spiritual enfranchisement.

If we are agreed so far—and I am persuaded that the general body of Anglicans would join hands here with the whole multitude of Nonconformists—we must not shrink from drawing a practical inference. The Reformation implied a parting of the roads, and disclosed a new conception of the Christian Church. Every Reformed Church, be its polity what it may, must finally justify its existence by the principle of private judgment. The problem which we have to solve, if we are serious in our desire to restore or secure an effective external unity, is far more complex than negotiating a reversion to the old political union which was broken in the sixteenth century. The external unity of the Church must in the future be consistent with the principle of private judgment. It cannot rest on the authority of a hierarchy, however organized, which claims an exclusive divine right by title of Dominical appointment. We, the children of the Reformation, cannot now repudiate

its central truth, even in the interest of that outward unity for which we so earnestly long. It is very important to dwell on the obligation under which we stand, because the Great War is visibly stimulating retrogressive tendencies, which only a reasoned conviction will be strong enough to resist. At the end of my sermon I cannot point out in detail the signs of reviving superstition in our midst. They are, indeed, sufficiently apparent, and must stir the anxiety of every considering Christian. I only refer to them in order to emphasize my plea that we should hold fast to the truth which has been given us. Our efforts to unite the Churches are only legitimate, reasonable, and promising if we continue and develop the tradition of the Reformers. And that tradition is not properly to be sought in their doctrinal confessions, which had reference to issues many of which are no longer vital, and to circumstances which have passed away, still less in their ecclesiastical systems, which had necessarily a provisional and even a makeshift character, but in their example of courageous faith, and in their precedent of large innovation in the light of new knowledge. In their day they approved themselves to be "not of them that shrink back unto perdition, but of them that have faith unto the saving of the soul." If we also would be worthy of that description we must in our turn, exhibit the same temper. The true principle of the Reformation was disclosed in that memorable speech of John Robinson, known as the father of the Independents, in which he charged the Puritans before they sailed for America to cherish the spirit of candid receptiveness: "If God reveals anything to you, by any other instrument of His, be as ready to receive it as ever you were to receive any truth by my ministry, for I am verily persuaded the Lord has more truth yet to break forth out of His Holy Word. . . . I beseech you to remember, it is an article of your church-covenant that you be ready to receive whatever truth shall be made known to you from the written Word of God."

## VII.

This is no ordinary occasion, and this is no ordinary time. You will not doubt that the words which I have addressed to you this morning have been anxiously and prayerfully weighed. I have come here to this central church of English Nonconformity, at the courteous invitation of those who are the responsible authorities,

in order, as an English clergyman, to claim my liberty of religious fellowship with the members of those evangelical Churches, called in this country Nonconformist, which share with the parent Church of England the heritage of the Reformation. I have come here in order to renew the appeal which Archbishop Sancroft made in 1688—a critical year for England and for Europe—when he urged the Bishops, in their addresses to the clergy and people of their respective dioceses, “that they warmly and most affectionately exhort them to join with us in daily fervent prayer to the God of peace, for a universal blessed union of all reformed churches, both at home and abroad, against our common enemies; and that all they who do confess the holy name of our dear Lord, and do agree in the truth of His Holy Word, may also meet in one holy communion and live in perfect unity and godly love.”—(v. Wilkin's *Concilia*, vol. iv., p. 619.)

On the basis of [the Reformation everything is possible. We can come together for common worship without violating any “principle”; we can discuss together as fellow-disciples the common interests of Christ's Kingdom; we can revise our systems without humiliation in deference to the new needs which the war has disclosed; we can face, with the confidence of faith, and in the strength of united prayer, the moral and intellectual questions of our time, which challenge, or seem to challenge, our inherited standards of faith and conduct; we can pass under examination every part of the rich heritage of the past, not that of the first four centuries only, or of the last four, but that of all the centuries since the first, for in all the Holy Spirit was active as Teacher, Guide, and Comforter of Christ's people, and by the aid of the same Divine Spirit we, in our time, also can bring forth from our rich and manifold treasure “things new and old.”

Reject that basis of the Reformation, and—do not deceive yourself—nothing is possible. You may multiply conferences and indulge in the language of an almost exaggerated fraternity, but you will effect nothing. Antiquarian investigations into the probable origins of the Christian ministry may fitly amuse the leisure of the learned, but they have no relevance to any religious issue. Nothing that historians can agree upon with respect to such matters can alter the fact that the sanction of Christ, demonstrated by the “fruits of the spirit,” rests on the great “new departure” of the

Reformation. There can be no going back on that. "With freedom did Christ set us free; let us stand fast and not be entangled again in a yoke of bondage." That is the whole gist of my message to you who are Nonconformists and to my fellow-Anglicans alike. In circumstances of far greater peril to our religion and our country than those which suggested Sancroft's appeal, I plead for the recognition of the essential agreement of those who accept the Reformation. I do so in the interest, not merely of immediate efficiency for the tasks which are coming upon us, but also in the interest of a complete reconciliation presently—a reconciliation which shall embrace all the members of the Christian family.

To seek the fellowship of the unreformed Churches of East and West, while leaving our own kith and kin, who share our religious point of view, and are in daily contact with us, estranged and disowned, is to deceive ourselves and to court defeat. "Charity begins at home." Let us first solve the problem of effective union among ourselves, whom so many forces of the past and of the present are drawing together, and then it may be that the yet larger ideal will claim us. History—that is, the voice of the Spirit in Christian experience—is an ever-present, ever-active teacher.

In following the guidance which unfolds itself in history the Church moves forward to that supreme consummation which the prophetic vision of St. Paul beheld when he dwelt with reverent enthusiasm on the glory of Christ, the Reconciler and Redeemer of mankind. As Jew and Gentile in the past, so Catholic and Protestant in the future shall finally meet in a common devotion to Him. "For he is our peace, who made both one, and brake down the middle wall of partition, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; that he might create in Himself of the twain one new man, so making peace; and might reconcile them both in one body unto God through the Cross, having slain the enmity thereby; and He came and preached peace to you that were far off, and peace to them that were nigh; for through Him we both have our access in one spirit unto the Father."

