

THE CANADA PRESBYTERIAN.

Vol. 23.

TORONTO, WEDNESDAY, JUNE 20th, 1894

No. 25

Pastor and People.

GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA, 1894.

The twentieth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada met in St. David's Church, St. John, New Brunswick, on Wednesday June 13th, at 7.30 p.m. Public worship was conducted by Rev. Thomas Sedgwick, D.D., the retiring Moderator. We give in full

THE MODERATOR'S SERMON Matt. vii. 20.

The words of the text taken in connection with the passage of which they form a part, set forth a profound and comprehensive truth. Our Lord refers to the natural law, according to which every tree brings forth fruit after its kind, and thus in due time discloses with an accuracy in which there can be no mistake, its true nature, whether good or evil. Even so, our Lord tells us, is it with false prophets. In the same manner may they be detected. They come in sheep's clothing, but being inwardly ravening wolves, their wolfish nature will sooner or later betray itself. They pretend to be good trees—trees of righteousness, but, says our Lord "ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit, but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit, wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them."

But while our Lord in the text refers particularly to false teachers it seems to me that the principle He here lays down admits of a far wider application, and may be applied to religious faiths as well. It suggests to us that religious systems, whether true or false, will unfold in the same outward and significant way, all their inward and essential peculiarities. The true will discover itself as good, and the false as evil, by inevitable developments.

Such, I think, is a fair and legitimate application of the text, and it is the application, which, in two or three particulars, I intend to make this evening.

1. The words of the text may be applied to all

NEW CHRISTIAN SYSTEMS OF RELIGION,

as compared with Christianity. Of both it may be said, "By their fruits ye shall know them." I need hardly tell you, brethren, we all know it, that Christianity claims for itself a position entirely different from that of all other religions, and it makes this claim on the ground of its being a Divine revelation, of its possessing a knowledge of God and of His relations to men, which has been communicated by God Himself to it, and to it alone. And equally I need hardly tell you, how from the beginning this claim has in one way or another been disputed and denied, and just as often—let me add—as it has been disputed and denied, has it been substantiated and made good.

Now at the present time, one of the chief points of attack against the supernatural and unique character of the religion of Christ, is based on the fact—the certain and indisputable fact—that it is but one of the many religions which have existed, or which now exist in the world. It is alleged that the presumption is thereby raised that Christianity is merely the natural product of the human mind, as all the rest admittedly are, and that this presumption is proved to be true, because when we examine and compare the different religions of mankind, not simply as they exist now, or at any given period, but historically, we are led to this conclusion. All religions—so we are told—when investigated in the historical spirit and method of the present day, must be held—such being the similarity between them—to be but varying expressions of the religious spirit in man. All contain, it may be, some, perhaps many, elements of truth, but none require to account for or to explain them the introduction of a supernatural cause. The Christian religion, therefore, while probably the highest and most perfect development of the religious spirit, and containing more elements of truth than any other, is simply a natural religion like all the rest.

It should be carefully observed, however, that the

HISTORICAL SPIRIT AND METHOD

in which these investigations are conducted and which we are told leads to the conclusion of which I have just spoken, is only as a rule another name for the principle of evolution. I do not think this will be seriously questioned, and hence I may be permitted a word or two as to this principle before passing on. It cannot be questioned that at the present day it is the dominating principle in the intellectual world, but there are signs and tokens not a few that it is coming—if it is not already come—to be so regarded in the moral and spiritual world as well.

The allegation now commencing to be made is that such a use of it as I have just referred to is altogether illegitimate, and that when rightly applied it will prove of the utmost service in the defence and the elucidation of the Christian Faith.

Is such a view correct? There are many, you all know, who hold that it is, and they seem to share in the assurance which you cannot but have observed is a leading characteristic of the disciples of this school, that evolution, as it is the solution or on the way to the solution of all difficulties in the things of earth, is in like manner the solution or the way to the solution of all difficulties in the things of heaven, and that by means of it we may come to the understanding of all mysteries and of all knowledge of whatever kind. This characteristic, indeed, which I have just mentioned, has often reminded me of the words of the woman of Samaria, about the Messiah, "When He is come He will tell us all things," and this is precisely what, in effect, we are told evolution is to do. Hence the principle is fearlessly applied to the Christian Faith as a whole, alike in its records, its evidence and its contents. It lies at the root, I cannot doubt, of much that goes by the name of Higher Criticism. The record for instance places an event, or a series of events, at a certain period, but the historical spirit—in other words the principle of evolution—forbids us to place them there, and if they happened at all, they must be transferred to a far later time,—or to give another instance—we see the Books of Scripture interpreted in the same spirit, and as confidently as if the interpreters though living, in this nineteenth century had, so to speak, been eye witnesses of what transpired two or three thousand years ago. The evidences too are treated after a similar method. Many of them are cheerfully cast overboard, but we are told that this will only lighten the ship and postpone at all events the shipwreck. And in a word we hear of the

"HISTORICAL CHRIST,"

which, however, is far better than the "larger Christ" of the Galilean Gospel, and in the like way the faith itself as a system of Divine truth is cast into the same crucible, and we are assured as the result of the process that it will come forth as gold tried in the fire and as silver thrice refined. Well what is the result of this process? So far as it has gone, I will only say that the achievement seems to me to fall far short of the promise. Things remain very much as they were before, perhaps somewhat darker, and how further are we to regard the principle on which the process proceeds? I can only remind you, this is all that time will allow, of the use which as we have already seen, is made of it, to overthrow the faith. Such, so it is insisted upon by those who thus apply it, is one of its legitimate applications, and may they not be right? They certainly stand in the true line of succession to its originators, and are therefore most likely to understand its true bearing and scope. It excludes, they tell us, and I am not sure that in so doing they are wrong, all that is now supernatural in the development of the evidence and of creed. But, if so, there may be room for creation, but it is hard to see where there is room for sin, and much more for redemption. I will not take upon me to say that such is the only true account of the principle. But those who are best entitled to speak in its behalf tell us that it is, and certainly there is not a little which leads us to conclude that their account of it is true. There does at first sight seem to be a thoroughly materialistic taint about it, and the more it is scrutinized, the stronger does this impression I think become. Doubtless all this may not be so, but it may, and just for this very reason should it not be seriously considered whether a principle so questionable is likely to fulfil a truly friendly office to the religion of Christ, or to avail much in defence and explanation of a Faith which if it be anything at all is ideal, is supernatural, is Divine.

But to come back to the point before us from which I have digressed too long; I have no doubt as to the ability of Christianity to repel this as it has repelled every other attack. It is not, and will not be difficult to show that comparing it, considered in itself with all other systems, the conclusion must follow that it differs from them in *kind* as well as in degree. It is not that they contain no truth. Why should they not? Man, though fallen, has not lost altogether the lineaments of the Divine image—reason and conscience still remain. He is placed too in a universe which witnesses for its Maker, and so constituted and placed the elements of religion are ready to his hand, of which he could not fail and has not failed to avail himself. Compared, however

WITH CHRISTIANITY,

how defective are their teachings in all the matters with which religion has to do, how fundamentally erroneous in most and therefore how plainly is its origin not earthly but Divine. But with equal and perhaps greater ease can we reach the same conclusion if we compare the religion we profess with all rival faiths in the light of the principle of the text, in regard to the influences they respectively exert and the results they produce. Regarded from this point of view Christianity may invite comparison with any form of heathenism whatever. What have these religions done, it may be confidently asked, in the past? What are they doing now—I do not say to interpret God to man and to reconcile man to God, though this in truth lies at the root of all the rest—but in any real and large sense to uplift and transform him? Where is there in them, as

there is in Christianity, a power for truth, for righteousness, for purity, for compassion, for progress, witnessing for itself that it is the power of God? How can there be, they being what they are? If, for example, as one teaches, all things are Divine, or if according to another existence itself is an evil and a misery, or if, according to yet another, the world is in the grasp of an inexorable fate, what impulse from them can there be toward anything that is really good? But effects so unlike cannot surely proceed from the same cause.

We are privileged at this Assembly to have with us honoured and beloved missionaries of the cross. They have gone forth with tears, bearing the precious seed, and have come again with rejoicing bringing their sheaves with them. They will not tell us I am sure, knowing as they do what the fruits of heathenism are, that the tree is good that produces them, or that heathen religion is kindred to the Gospel, or in any true sense of the word a preparation for it. We are often told that in those and such like matters the attitude of the hard working minister and missionary to the theorist and specialist should be that of Mary to our Lord, who sat, as we know, at His feet and heard His word. And I am far from wishing to depreciate the toil of the specialist, but as a rule his results are arrived at in the closet, his conclusions are drawn from documents and not from life. In the matter before us, looking at this religion or that as set forth in its sacred books, it may be so exhibited as to present a pleasing and not untruthful picture. But the question remains,—Is it the whole truth? How does the system work? And these are questions which the missionary can best answer, and to which he has given but one reply.—Yes, his Christianity proves itself to be Divine by its fruits as well as its teaching, and comparing it with all other religious systems, we may say in the words of the text,—By their fruits ye shall know them.

2. The words of the text may be applied to the different

FORMS OF CHRISTIANITY ITSELF.

Now into the nature of these differences, much less into causes from which, or the manner in which they have arisen, I cannot enter at any length. Nor will I stay to lament them on the one hand, or extenuate or justify them on the other. That they do exist within her pale is as plain and indisputable a fact as is the existence of either religious systems outside of it.

What I would point out, however, is, that in a large and important department of Christian truth there is little difference of opinion among those who profess and call themselves Christians. Regarding Christianity in its true light as a redemption scheme, there is, I think, substantial agreement among all Christians as to the great truths—the trinity, the incarnation, the atonement, for example, which bear upon what may be called the purchase, the imputation, the obtaining of Redemption. It is however, when we come to deal with the *application* of Redemption, with the answer to be given to the question,—How are we made partakers of the Redemption purchased by Christ, or what is really the same thing, with the doctrine of the church that fundamental differences disclose themselves.

Admitting then, as all do, that our Saviour has founded a church, that He has deposited in it His truth, that He has endowed it with ordinances and promises and made it the instrument of imparting to men the benefit of His redemption, the question arises,—What is its nature? Where are we to look for it? By what marks is it to be recognized? It is here that grave differences of opinion emerge. What are they? Without going into any minuteness of detail it may be said that these differences of view resolve themselves in the last resort into two doctrines, or theories as to the church, essentially opposed to each other. There is in the first place, what may be called the

PRIESTLY, THE HIERARCHICAL THEORY

which is held—as you all know—by the Roman and Greek churches, and by a large and increasing party in the Church of England,—no doubt with shades of difference, which, however, are not of a vital kind. According to this doctrine the church is to be regarded as an external corporation which Christ has made the only channel in which His grace is to flow. Having resolved—so it is held—to erect on earth a sacred society or church, He made choice of the twelve apostles as its foundation. To them and to their successors He gave the promises, the grace of which was to be ministered sacramentally by them alone. Bishops in the usual meaning of the word, are their successors, and so to them and to the priests whom they ordain and govern exclusive of all others, the treasury of Christ's gifts and grace for human salvation has been intrusted, to be by them opened and dispensed to men. The motto of this theory, then, is the old adage,—*Ubi Episcopus, ibi ecclesia*. Where the bishop is there is the Church, or which is only carrying it a step further to its legitimate and logical issue—*Ubi Petrus, ibi ecclesia*.—Where Peter is there is the Church, and thus according to it, Episcopacy or Episcopacy in subjection to the Pope, as Prince and head of the Church, in succession to Peter, by Christ's appointment Prince and head of the Apostles, is the true note or mark of the Church. Very different, on the other hand, is the

PROTESTANT AND EVANGELICAL DOCTRINE.

This difference is based on what is held to be the true view of the relation of the Church to the truth. Divine truth in this view is the cause of the Church. It is the instrument by which the Spirit works, apart from it, therefore, she could and would have had no existence. One chief reason, too, it is believed, why she has been set up in the world is to hold it forth and to hold fast, inasmuch as men being what they are, it is only by the knowledge and belief of it that they can be saved. It is in this relation, therefore, according to the Protestant view, the church is to be mainly regarded. Not—let me say before passing on—that the Church is not conceived of as a visible society with ministers and ordinances, or that it is regarded as a matter of unimportance, what the nature of its outward frame work may be, but all these things, it is held, derive their importance from the truth, which is the cause of her life and perfection. Hence the Church is held to be alike as a whole and in its particular parts, the society of those who profess the truth and inasmuch as whatever the truth is, Christ himself may be said to be the Protestant idea as summed up, and beautifully and fully expressed in the saying—*Ubi Christus, ubi ecclesia* where Christ is there is the Church. According to this theory then, truth, Divine and Saving Truth and not outward organization, is the great note and mark of the Church. Such, then, are the

CONFLICTING THEORIES.

How are we to decide between them? Two things I will say at the outset.—The first is that I have little sympathy with the manner in which the sacerdotal theory is so seldom dealt with. It is held by not a few that so little can be said in its behalf, that it is so unreasonable, nay so absurd, that argument is wasted upon it. I am far from believing anything of the kind. The theory is intelligible. It is consistent. It is reasonable, certain things being presupposed. Nay, I will go further and say that it possesses not a few elements of attraction, influence and power. It comes to us recommended by antiquity, reverence for the old paths being a great Christian duty,—by the many great names, eminent for learning, for intellect, for goodness, who have embraced and maintained it, by what Scripture says, and it says much about the church, which, however, it knows well how in its own interest to abuse, and perhaps beyond and above all, by the craving of the human mind and heart, after, it may be, a vain search elsewhere for certainty, for infallible guidance, for rest in the things of God and the soul, which it affirms it possesses, and which it offers to impart. Doubtless other and meaner reasons for its acceptance might be advanced, but I prefer to mention those only of a nobler kind. It is, therefore, to me at least no matter for wonder that it appeared so soon, that it has been embraced by so many, and has held its ground so long, for that matter it is perhaps as full of life and vigor at the present day as at any former time. I do not marvel that so many have felt and owned its charm.

The other remark I wish to make is this: It is altogether a mistake to confound the question now before us with the question as to which of the several

FORMS OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT

is most in accordance with the Scriptural pattern. The matter is often so presented, but such a presentation of it is very misleading. The question of truth and fact between these opposing theories of the church is often sought to be made out to be the question of the truth and excellence of the Episcopal form above all others. But this is not so. I have no desire in what I am saying to enter into controversy with those who defend the Episcopal model simply on the ground that it is most in accordance with the mind of Christ. There is no necessary connection, it seems to me, between Episcopacy thus maintained, and the priestly theory in question—though it may be true that the one tends to the other. Episcopacy may be held to be true, and yet they that so hold it may not hold that Christ's grace is so tied to it that apart from it there can be no assurance or indeed possibility of salvation. And in point of fact this is the very ground taken in its defence by the illustrious Hooker for example—to mention no others—it is necessary to the *wellbeing*, but by no means to the *being* of the church, and against such an Episcopacy let me not be understood as contending.

How then are we to decide between those opposing theories? There are many ways in which this may be done—which time will not permit me even to mention. But it seems to me that the principle of the text supplies a short and easy method—if not the shortest and easiest of dealing with this question—the method, namely, of bringing it to the test of facts. By their fruits ye shall know them.

You will observe the importance, the vital importance of this question. It being admitted that the ordinary ministrations of the grace of Christ proceed by means of and in connection with the church, if the priestly theory be true, if in other words the church consists of the Papal and Episcopal communions, and these alone, then it follows

(Concluded on page 394.)