

T H E C O L O N I A L C H U R C H M A N.

"BUILT UPON THE FOUNDATION OF THE APOSTLES AND PROPHETS, JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF BEING THE CHIEF CORNER STONE. Eph. 2 c. 20 v.

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For the Colonial Churchman.

ABUSE OF CHURCH PROPERTY AMONG THE JEWS.

Essay 3.

Every thing that is entrusted to the care and management of mortals, is in a greater or less degree subject to be abused,—in other words to be permitted through neglect or indiscretion to be diverted from its legitimate object. Consequently we cannot wonder that property, expressly set apart for divine purposes, might, through the carelessness or sinfulness of those concerned with its management, be applied to other objects than such as related to things spiritual and eternal.

A remarkable instance of this happened in the time of the Judges, shortly after the death of Samson. The Children of Dan, it appears, had departed from the worship of the true God, and had set up a graven image; at the same time dedicating to the service of their abomination the property, which of right belonged unto the Lord. 'And the Children of Dan set up the graven image: and Jonathan the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of Dan until the day of the captivity of the land. And they set them up Micah's graven image which he made, all the time that the house of God was in Shiloh.' Judges xviii. 30. 31.—The captivity here mentioned refers evidently to the carrying away of the ark from the camp of Israel by the Philistines, which happened at the end of Eli's sovereignty. For after this event the ark was never carried back to Shiloh; but remained in the house of Obed-Edom until it was removed by David into his own city.

Another instance of the same nature may be adduced from the conduct of Hophni and Phineas, the two sons of Eli. When the people brought their accustomed offerings to Shiloh; these 'sons of Belial,' interfered with the offerings, and the established mode of proceeding on such occasions. If the worshipper was unwilling to accede to their unusual and unjust demands, they scrupled not to employ force, to accomplish their unlawful designs. 'Wherefore the sin of the young men was very great before the Lord; for men abhorred the offering of the Lord,' I. Sam. ii. 17. The offering was through their wicked practices, brought into contempt and disrespect among the people. The exactions and misappropriations which caused this result constituted of course a great sin.

Likewise after the revolt of Jeroboam there are several instances of a like description to be met with in the annals of the Hebrews. Neither the subjects of the Princes of Judah, nor those who owed subjection to the kings of Israel, were free from transgression in this respect. At the time that Hezekiah ascended the throne of Judah, and attempted a reformation of the civil and ecclesiastical polity of the nation, idolatry was so prevalent, and the service of the temple so neglected, that there were not a sufficient number of priests to perform the sacrificial ordinances. 'But the priests were too few, so that they could not slay all the burnt-offerings: wherefore their brethren the Levites did help them, till the work was ended, and until the other priests had sanctified themselves.' II. Chron. xxix. 34. The temple itself had been so long neglected and polluted, that even the inner part of it required to be cleansed. 'And the priests went into the inner part of the house of the Lord, to cleanse it, and brought out all the uncleanness that they found in the temple of the Lord into the court of the house of the Lord. And the Levites took it to carry it abroad into the brook Kidron. II. Chron. xxx. 16.

During such relapses into idolatry it may be justly supposed that the tithes and offerings of the people were either not collected at all, or if so, not appropriated to their legitimate objects. For we find that Hezekiah was under the necessity of issuing certain decrees relative to this very subject, II. Chron. xxxi. 4. The people obeyed him, and the share of their temporal goods, which was appointed by law to be devoted to pious uses, was readily accounted for. The same indifference or misappropriation of holy things was still more apparent in the wicked reign of Manasseh. The service of God became every day more neglected through the example of this king and his no less blameable successor Amon. Holy places were desecrated with the presence of idols: the priesthood were sunk in apathy, or it may be, followed after the vain delusions of the multitude. At length when the cup of the Lord's fury was full, he poured forth his vengeance upon all the people, and suffered them to fall, for their wickedness, under the mighty hand of a foreign Conqueror, more powerful than themselves. Notwithstanding the efforts of the good king Josiah to restore the institutions of the land to their pristine state of purity, the arm of the Almighty was not staid. The Assyrian came with his hosts, besieged and took the holy city; plundered the Lord's sanctuary of its most valuable treasures, rased the temple and the city into a heap of ruins; and carried the inhabitants captive into Babylon. The misappropriation, or desecration of Church property, formed not a small item in the catalogue of crime and iniquity, which brought this melancholy catastrophe on the heads of the chosen people.

But a greater desecration followed. Nebuchadnezzar had 'brought to Babylon all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king and his princes.' II. Chron. xxxvi. 18. These vessels were used at Babylon in a way which did by no means accord with the sacred purpose for which they were set apart. Belshazzar, the next successor but one to the Conqueror of Jerusalem, made a feast for the chief men of his kingdom, and commanded his servants to bring 'the golden vessels that were taken out of the temple of the house of God which was at Jerusalem; and the king and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, drank in them.' Daniel v. 3. For this act of desecration he was severely punished. A mysterious writing appeared on the wall of the banqueting room, which when interpreted was found to foretell the overthrow of his kingdom and dynasty. The prophecy was soon accomplished. For 'in that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain. And Darius the Median took the kingdom, being about threescore and two years old.' Dan. v. 30. 31.

In the third chapter of the second book of the Maccabees there is an account given of an attempt made by one Heliodorus to commit an act of desecration in the temple, and of the punishment which was consequently inflicted upon him. 'For there appeared unto them an horse with a terrible rider upon him, and adorned with a very fair covering, and he ran fiercely and smote at Heliodorus with his forefeet, and it seemed that he that sat upon the horse had a complete harness of gold.' II. Macc. ii. 25. Other instances of the same nature are on record: but the most remarkable is that related concerning Antiochus Epiphanes' conduct in Jerusalem, and alluded to in II. Macc. v. 2. Diodorus Siculus, a Greek historian, gives a fuller account of this transaction, which is to the following effect.—

Antiochus, having been informed of some disturbances

at Jerusalem, supposed that the whole Jewish nation had revolted from him; and therefore marched with all haste out of Egypt into Judea, to quell this supposed insurrection. He was told that the people of Jerusalem greatly rejoiced at having heard a false rumour of his death,—a circumstance which caused him much provocation. Being much irritated on this account, he laid siege to Jerusalem, took it by force, slew, in the course of three days, forty thousand of the inhabitants; and, having taken as many more captives, sold them for slaves to the neighbouring nations. Not content with this, he impiously forced himself into the temple, and entered into the inner and most sacred recesses of it, polluting by his presence both the holy place, and also the holy of holies; the wicked traitor Menelans being his conductor and shewing him the way into both. And to offer the greater indignity to this sacred place, and to affront in the highest possible manner the religion of the God of Israel, he sacrificed a large sow upon the altar of burnt-offering: and broth being by his command made with some part of the flesh boiled in it, he caused it to be sprinkled all over the temple for the purpose of defiling it utterly. After having done this, he sacrilegiously plundered it, by taking away the altar of Incense, the shew-bread table, the candlestick of seven branches that stood in the holy place, which were all of gold, together with several other golden vessels, utensils and donations of former kings, to the value of eighteen hundred talents of gold. Making the like plunder in the city he returned to Antioch carrying with him the spoils of Judea. Diod. Sic. Lib. xxxiv. Ecl. i.

Two years after this he returned and committed further devastations in the holy city. And having gone to the eastern part of his extensive dominions, where he heard of the revolt of the Jews, he determined to cut off the whole nation, and set out with that intention on his return to Jerusalem. He had not proceeded far when he was seized with a horrible disorder, and died in the most miserable manner, in the town of Tabae, on the confines of Persia and Babylonia. See II. Macc. ix. 9—11. Appian. in Syriacis. Q. Curtius Lib. v. c. 13.

These instances are quite sufficient to convince us that property, dedicated to religious uses, was far from being held sacred by the heathen nations of antiquity. At the same time no one, who traces the history of the desecrator or polluter, can help being struck with the visible and manifest manner in which the displeasure of God has been invariably shewn towards him. The Sons of Eli, Belshazzar, and Antiochus Epiphanes, met with speedy manifestations of the divine vengeance; and their crime and its punishment remain on the page of history to guide the practice, and to stay the rash ambition of future generations. From these and such instances there may be clearly inferred the danger and the guilt of laying unholy hands on what has once been set apart for the service, and of appropriating to other purposes than those of forwarding and supporting the interests of true religion. Property of this nature is a sacred trust, committed to the keeping of men, and set apart for the service of God. The same Providence which anciently watched over 'the treasure of the Lord's house,' is still watching over it; and his vigilance, we are sure, is by no means decreased. The same punishments which were anciently inflicted on the heads of transgressors in this particular, still hang over those, who presume to touch with polluted hands the sacred deposit, which the piety and devotion of others led them to dedicate to the service of God and the interests of eternity. Let the ministers of William IV. think well on this, and then consider the consequences. CRIFO.