

aces of the earth. How much of the lofty eminence to which our country has risen during the last half century, is due to the healthful influences that have flowed from the British throne, and the high example of its God-blessed occupant, I cannot say. But I am sure that neither the depth of our thanksgiving, nor the richness of our charities, nor the splendour of our celebrations will outweigh the inestimable worth to the Empire of her long and happy reign.

#### SPIRITUAL LOYALTY.

Our Presbyterian Church came into existence in the same year (1837) as Victoria came to the throne. And now, after this long tract of time, I am asked to say whether we have proved ourselves as loyal to our Head and Heavenly King as we claim to have been to our earthly Sovereign. These sixty years have brought many notable changes in the thoughts and beliefs of men. Do we as a Church, remain unchanged,—holding to our faith as firmly, and teaching God's truth as clearly, as at the first?

It may surprise some persons that such questions should be supposed to possess any public interest. It happens, however, that at this moment they have a very special interest. For we have just reached the further end of that period, during which we were told some fifty years ago (by men who stood upon the watch-tower of the Church), that Christianity was about to be subjected to a severe and searching trial, which would prove her origin, whether she were from Heaven or of man, and would probably last till the century came to a close. But they had no fear for the result. The outworks of religion might be disturbed, and some of the moulds, in which our theological opinions had been cast, might be broken; but Christianity itself would suffer no harm. On the contrary, its truth would be seen to be more manifestly and gloriously true; and quickened by the fiery trial, it would assert itself with increased vigor to be still the Wisdom of God and the Power of God unto Salvation. Now, it surely ought to be a matter of no small interest to inquire how far these anticipations have been realized. Strauss, from his German watch-tower, gave us his forecast. He announced that before fifty years had passed, Christianity would have disappeared from the earth. These fifty years have come and gone. Has Christianity gone with them?

#### THE TRUTH THAT ENDURES.

Far as we are from the seat of war, we have shared in this trial, and contended in this conflict. And I think that we are warranted to add our verdict to that of the Church at large, that it has left us on firmer ground and under a clearer sky. Neither the rationalism of the philosopher, nor the positivism of the agnostic, nor the materialism of the scientist, nor the assaults of the hostile critic (the four successive assailants of Christianity), has dislodged a single stone in the temple of God's truth, or robbed us of any God-given article of the faith. I might cite many witnesses in proof. I shall produce only one,—G. J. Romanes, one of the most accomplished scholars and scientists of our age. In 1870, he tells us that Christianity seemed to him "to be played out." In 1893 he wrote that "all was changed;" that, more or less, all who held the modern theory of Creation "had come to see that there was no antagonism between it and the necessary doctrines of Christianity;" "and that the outcome of the great textual battle (in regard to the dates and historical facts of the New Testament) was a signal victory for Christianity." "All this kind of scepticism," he declared, was now, and "for ever impossible."

But, when the question asked refers, not to the substance of our Faith, but to the authority of our creeds, a different answer must be given, for now we are not dealing with God's revelation, but with man's interpretation of it. And you could cast no darker reflection on the Christian Church than to say that after sixty years of earnest and prayerful study of the Scriptures, with growing knowledge coming in from every quarter, and a scientific apparatus in its hands of increasing accuracy and power, there had been no result; no new light shining on its dark places,—no doubt cleared away and obscure meanings made plain,—no larger insight into the ways and thoughts of God, and no accumulating proofs of the power of Christ to deal with human difficulties and redress human wrongs. And so, although we cannot comply with Dr. Parker's call to fling our creeds to the winds, we, at least, have given a very practical recognition of the fact that we do not hold them to be infallible, or to stand in need of no explanation.

#### THE FORM THAT CHANGES.

Finding that certain passages in our confession, bearing upon the character of God, and the freeness of the Gospel were misunderstood, our Assembly passed an act in 1882 declaring that these passages were to be held as in no sense inconsistent with the doctrines that God willeth not the death of any sinner, but rather that he should turn and live, that the salvation provided by God in Christ was sufficient for all, and was freely offered to all; and that, while salvation comes only through Christ, God may extend it to those who are outside the means of grace, as it seems good to Him. Besides that Declaratory Act, we have taken this further step; when any one desirous of entering our ministry finds himself held back by any confessional difficulty, he is allowed to state it, and if it cannot be altogether removed, the Church takes upon itself the responsibility of judging whether it is of so serious a nature as to bar his admission to office. This procedure has brought relief and gladness to many tender consciences, and has enriched the Church with the services of not a few good men, who would have otherwise been obliged to stand idle in the market-place, or to go to work in some other part of the vineyard.

As to our pulpit work. Here there has been a change of a definite and very delightful character. Among our old people there are few, I am afraid, who have any happy memories of the sermons of their childhood. They were so very long, and so very dry. My first minister was a certain Dr. Knox, who had been intruded upon the parish of Larbert at the point of the bayonet. I don't know that we children would have minded that, if he had looked upon us kindly, and told us "What a friend we had in Jesus." But he preferred the gloomy places of the Bible to the green pastures, and spoke oftener of the sorrows of Job than of the wonderful love of Christ. In that first quarter of this century, however, there began the dawn of a better day for Scotland, which, in the next quarter, broke out into clear sunshine. The Gospel Trumpet, in the hands of Thomas Chalmers, Andrew Thomson, Robert Gordon, and John Brown, now gave forth a very certain and joyful sound. Dr. Knox's successor in Larbert was one of the older Bonars, and he was assisted by such men as Moncrieff, McCheyne, and Somerville, while other men, who had come to feel, like them, that they were not Churchmen merely, but Christ's-men,—His ambassadors,—went forth everywhere publishing peace and beseeching men, in Christ's stead, to be reconciled to God.

#### THE GAINS OF CONFLICT.

In the meantime, in the world outside, men were growing weary of the old Gospel, and were crying out for another and a newer Christ; one who would show better in the eye of reason, and whom men of culture could worship and not be put to shame. And so the conflict of this half century began, which has brought out for us, as we have seen, a very blessed, Divine effect. It wrought, I believe, in this way. The chief attack being directed upon the central doctrine of our faith,—Christ the Son of God, crucified for the sins of men, the chief defence was maintained there,—Christ Himself being not the subject only, but the substance of it as well. Thus His life was used to prove His sinlessness; His words to prove His wisdom; His mighty and merciful works to prove His power and goodness; His death to prove His Deity,—for He died because He could not deny it; and His Resurrection from the dead, and His conquests in the world to prove His acceptance by the Father, and His accession to the Throne. In maintaining this defence the Church had to make sure of her weapons,—had to search anew and satisfy herself that her facts were relevant and absolutely true, which she could only do by coming into close and intimate acquaintance with the living Christ, and by placing herself under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, whose very work it is to take of those things of Christ and show them to men. And so, out of this good fight there has come to her a mighty reinforcement of her faith, and Christ is now seen to be "standing among us, face to face, more clearly than in any age since that of the Apostles." Such, at least, is the conclusion to which Professor Fairbairn brings us in his recent work upon "Christ's Place in Modern Theology."

But are these words true? That is a question which each of us ought to answer for himself. But among various things which may be alleged in support of their truthfulness, I may mention two.