

SERMON.

Preached at the Opening of the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces, at Pictou, June, 1869.

By REV. JAMES WATSON, Moderator.

JUDE, v. 3. "Ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered to the saints."

Controversy has, to a less or greater degree, existed, in every period of ecclesiastical history. It has dealt with subjects of every description, the most important and the most trivial, the most sublime and the most insignificant. It has ranged through the wide field of theology. It has discussed the being of a God, with all his exalted attributes; it has enquired into the decrees of heaven and the mysteries of predestination; it has debated the difficult metaphysical question of liberty and necessity; and it has condescended to reason about the commonest duties and obligations of man; in short, there is no subject into which it has not ventured to pry and which it has not examined thoroughly.

Some maintain that controversy, and especially religious controversy, is attended with greater evil than good, and have gone so far as to say, that to engage in it is unlawful, or at least inconsistent with the spirit of the gospel. It often takes a one-sided view of things; it warms the feelings, excites the passions, makes exaggerated representations, alienates friends, produces division, and exhibits the unseemly spectacle of brother warring against brother, both of whom should be combating the common foe. So far have some carried their views upon this point that they have declared:—"Controversy never yet made a christian."

On the other hand, others have said:—"There is a time for every thing under the sun," and there is time for controversy too. If it have its evils, it has its good; if it be not always pleasant, it is often necessary; if religion be attacked, it must be defended; if the truth be impugned, it must be vindicated; if the doctrines of the gospel be misrepresented, they must be set forth in their genuine light; if the feelings be warmed and the passions excited, the fault lies, not with controversy but with the controversialists themselves. Besides, have we not high and eminent examples for the use of controversy? Did not Christ reason or argue with the scribes and Pharisees? Is not the epistle to the Romans a controversial treatise from its commencement to its close? In addition to all this, have we not positive authority in scripture to engage in it? Is not the text evidently a specimen of this:—"Ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered to the saints?"

There is no need of dwelling largely on this topic. It requires no proof that in multitudes of cases, controversy has been of essential service to the cause of truth. What would primitive christianity have been, without the apologies of the early fathers; and what were these apologies but polemical discussions in defence of the gospel? What would Protestantism have done in its infant days, had it not been for the controversies of Luther, Melancthon, Calvin and Knox and other celebrated reformers? Unquestionably these helped in no small degree to push forward the glorious cause. And when it is asserted that there is positive authority in the text for controversy, the assertion cannot be considered wide of the mark. The apostle Jude is exhorting his "beloved," "earnestly to contend for the faith"—why?—What is the reason? In the 4th verse he gives this reason:—"For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ." These men, then, the disciples were to meet, confront, and oppose; they were, if possible to argue them down. Besides, the origin of the phrase itself—"earnestly contend"—greatly supports this view. The verb in its simple form, here translated "contend," or with the preposition prefixed and here translated "earnestly contend," literally signifies "to be deeply agonised." It is the same word as that used in Luke 13 and 24, "Strive—be agonised—to enter in at the strait gate;" and by Paul in Rom. 15 and 30, "Strive with me—be agonised together with me—in your prayers for me to God." The phrase, therefore, implies strong struggling, not only with earnestness, but with deep agony of spirit. We also know this phrase is borrowed from the state of mind of combatants when they competed at the Olympic games; and we are all aware what that mental state was. We know it was thorough earnestness and determination; we know that every power was put forth and every energy taxed; that every nerve was strung to its highest reach, and that every muscle was expanded to its fullest breadth; and that all were so concentrated and so controlled, as to bear down with tremendous impetus upon the adversary. Such is the state to which the verb in the text gives expression. It takes in all the earnestness and the determination, and all the energy and the nerve and muscle, and all the concentration of the wrestler, and applies it to the christian defender of the faith. And this is the sense in which we take the text. It implies striving with deep agony of spirit.