

THE GOSPEL OF LAISSEZ FAIRE.

A Sermon preached by Rev. Alfred J. Bray.

Ecclesiastes, iv. 22.

I have called my subject for this evening "The gospel of letting things go," which is the best phrase I can find in the English tongue for expressing the thought I have in my mind. I do not exactly mean indifference, nor impotence, nor what we understand by chance, but what the French would call *laissez faire*—or meaning it a little more strongly, would call *laissez aller*—that is, you may as well have no plan, you had even better make no effort that shall be direct and have an aim; the world is going on very well, and everything will keep going very well, and end very well, if only everything is left alone; the machinery will work smoothly, if you do not interfere by flinging the bones of your body of mortality into the cogs of the wheels. You will recognize that sentiment, I am sure; it is common and quite popular. If the present condition of general mind and life would calmly enquire into itself, and then truthfully express itself, words very near like the ones I have used would be generally uttered. Men neither affirm nor deny the being of God; they do not even trouble themselves enough to be in any serious way sceptical about it. If pressed, they would say—well, in all probability there is a Supreme Being to whom there can be objection to apply the term God—but if you ask me what I mean by that, I must answer, I am not certain. I do not accept the conception Moses and David had of God as being complete and final, and if you ask me to take the Christian portraiture, I must ask which of them? for it has been changed with the years, and different bodies of Christians hold, or seem to hold different ideas. Thus there is God as taught in the Scriptures of science, and God as taught by the cultured sentimentalists of the day. But never mind, I am content that either conception shall live and prevail—or all of them—for all are in some way good, perhaps each has some phase of the truth, and perhaps all of them are needed to convey the full idea. That state of mind I believe to be very prevalent. Even among church-going folk—those most careful to hold and observe the outward decencies of Christian life—it holds. We preach and write books about the infinite Justice by which all men shall be judged and rewarded or condemned, a Justice which is infinitely wise and almighty; we demand that men think right thoughts and speak right words and do just, even charitable acts, and gain peace of conscience now and eternal joy, or be doomed to everlasting misery, but how many of those who hear us heed what we say so as to believe with the mind and heart? Not many. For if they did, congregations would be driven to a frenzy of penitent prayer, just as the colliers were when they swayed, and moaned, and cried to the heavens when Whitefield preached in his great fervid way. Sermons are just as powerfully conceived and delivered now as they were then; if hell is described less vividly, it is declared as a place of unutterable torment; preaching has changed a little, but congregations have changed enormously. They do not quake and fear as they once did; they do not accept our dicta as a direct revelation from heaven as they once did; the thought and sound of our sermons hardly pass the limits of the four walls of the church. The strong denunciations we utter against crime in commerce, crime in politics do not prevail by noon on Monday. Men are not much afraid of God; still less are they afraid of hell, and to no appreciable extent can they be said to desire heaven. They have an interest in this present life, and the earth in which it is rooted, which nothing we say can destroy, or even much weaken. When we ask that they "lay not up for themselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust do corrupt, and thieves break through and steal, but lay up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through and steal," if they arouse themselves sufficiently to regard it as anything more than a platitude, they will smile, as if to say—that is hardly practical, not at all a good speculation; possession is better than promise, and if we could only get that same treasure of the earth it would not be impossible to keep off thieves and rust. It is not that they have absolutely no faith in the treasures of heaven, but they are absolutely certain as to the present, and they are practical men. And it is partly because they are practical men that our teachings have less hold upon them. The intellect has been developed, and the emotions have been put under subjection; they are not so much under the influence of powerful imagery as they once were; their temperament as well as their occupations are against what is merely beautiful and glittering; they are not well able to live for an ideal; that is to say, they are not poetic.

Along with that you will find that mystery has almost completely lost its hold upon the general mind. Time was when if it could be shown that a certain doctrine was beyond the grasp of human reason; too big for argument; too subtle for analysis; too divine for what is merely finite to comprehend, it was enough to command faith. It is not too much to say that the greater the mystery; the more impossible it was for the mind to penetrate it with its strongest thought, the more eagerly was it believed. But all that is changed. Men are tired and can no longer do with mere vagueness and vision and dogmatic assertions based on them. They find themselves in a world of tremendous forces and boundless opportunities, where sometimes the whole energy is needed to barely sustain the life, and sometimes the appetites have unlimited

gratification, and where always the mind finds vast fields of activity awaiting conquest; and they say, explain this puzzle, or tell us how to do it; show us how to master the present, and for the future, with all your great words and noise about it, let it go.

I believe that a great deal of this was inevitable from the first. Men could hardly have a fixed, settled, restful belief unless they could be sure that it was firmly and securely based. See how the idea of God has been gradually changing, and it may be said, surely refining; the conception of God has been broadening and ever becoming more just. Of course science has done that. When Moses wrote the history of the Creation, he wrote of a time of no science, and he tells us that Adam's conception of God was just a child's idea. He heard his voice while walking in the garden; held communion with Him by word of mouth; accepted commands when they were issued; was driven out of Paradise by force—but when Moses speaks of Abraham it is different. To Abraham, God is a great invisible Leader and Judge, to whom he prays, and from whom he asks blessings. Moses makes it manifest that the thought is larger and juster in his mind than it was in the mind of Abraham; follow the writings of David, the great psalms he sang to the Shepherd of Israel and the Father of Spirits, and you will find another stage of progress; read the sermons of Jesus Christ, and you will see that a mighty revolution took place in men's ideas of God, even though they could but half understand the sublimity of His teachings.

Never did Science work upon Theology and compel such changes in it as it is doing now. For the last five centuries the conflict has been going on, and there has never been a battle where theology did not lose some ground. The reign of law has been established. The poetry of the Orientals—when they sang how the heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth forth His handiwork—has lost its sentiment since Kepler, Galileo and Newton taught us astronomy. We do not tremble and crouch down in fear when the thunders roll and the lightnings gleam in the sky, for we know that these are not the fearful tokens of Jehovah's anger—only the result of electric currents meeting. When famine or disease afflicts us, we do not call for general fasting and humiliation and prayer to appease the wrath of a vengeful God, for we know that they are due to preventible causes, and we look to better methods of agriculture, or to our drains. Throughout the array of human discoveries, through the field of human industry and labour, scientific laws and practical achievement have marched, producing such tangible, such undeniable results that theology must be modified and changed if it would command any reasonable respect at all. Moses could not hold his belief and a reputation for sanity in these days—Milton could not write his *Paradise Lost* now—theology of half a century ago is impossible in these times when Science has brought such incontrovertible facts to the light—the result is, that Theology is the vaguest of all vague theories. Try and reduce the general run of our teaching to common sense and understandableness and tell us the result. It is not a positive science, and has nothing to say to positive science. It was not always so. Time was when theology was in theory and practice coextensive with men's lives. Great as the sphere of thought and action might be, the circle of obligations imposed by God was greater still. It sought to harmonise the diversified in man and in society—to explain the mystery of being and sin and holiness, and man's relation to the world around him. Then there was something positive and practical in religion—something which caused great thoughts to move in men's minds, and great emotions to sway in their hearts. Although we can now see that the idea was crude, and the expression poor, it was well defined—it was an ideal—it was the source whence man found inspiration to live as saints and die as heroes; then religion was the controlling force of every phase of individual and commercial life—the king ruled in the name of heaven and not by the will of the people—the men who sat in the high places of authority were the people's *councillors*, and not merely representatives of passionate, avaricious, debauched majorities. But all that is changed—we have exchanged a living force for an indefinite hypothesis. Theology has nothing to do with science, politics, industry, culture and beauty—it belongs to a world of its own, and its glory is no more real to us than the stream of light we call the "Milky Way"—it is a neutral thing, and must not be dragged into any conflict with science—it is too ethereal to be brought down to gild and soften the hard facts of actual experience—too delicate to be brought into the arena of man's real life and external activity. What is there to give an earnest practical man with an interest in this life—with too much knowledge of human nature to trust over-much to unsafe emotions—but who asks that his life may have some centre and some aim—a religion that shall be commensurate with a life that is not mean and distorted, but with a life great in thought, in feeling and in conduct? What have we for him? Roman Catholicism comes with a Syllabus for science and society—a calendar of saints and a missal—most unsubstantial fare for a man who holds that he cannot live on fancy and feeling acting and reacting on each other. Calvinism still puts on savage airs, declaring that all science and all society are only worldly at the best, and to be shunned as contaminating things. There is something offered by both these. They have a word to say—a rule to give—a command to utter about life—practical life, thought, conduct, happiness. It is not enough, however. Roman