

ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY.

REFORMATION.—LUTHER.

The ways of Providence are mysterious, but it works by ordinary means. It seems a divine law, that there shall be no waste of miracle; for miracle disturbs, to a certain degree, the activity of human agency which it is the obvious purpose of the divine government to sustain in its vigour. Where the work can be effected by man, it is done by man; where it partially transcends human powers, a partial aid is given. The unmingled power of Heaven is alone displayed where the faculties of its creatures are incapable of influencing the great design; where man is the dust of the balance, unfelt in the swaying of the mighty scales.

When an empire was to be found, a daring soldier was summoned to break down the barriers of surrounding realms, and crush resistance with the sword; while a succession of tranquil sovereigns followed, to form the religion, laws, and manners of the people.

Where the magnitude of the design partially transcended the powers of man, the assistance was given up to the point, and no further. The apostles required the possession of miraculous gifts, to ensure the public belief in their mission. They required, above all, the gift of tongues, to be able to communicate the revelation to the ends of the earth. Those gifts were bestowed. But no new miracle gave them the knowledge that was attainable by human means. And St. Paul, eloquent, accustomed to the business of life, to the habits of Greece and Rome, and to the learning and philosophy of the time, was chosen to struggle with the courtiers, the populace, and the philosophers of Greece and Rome.

What St. Paul was to the first century, Luther was to the sixteenth.

The apostolic age has yet had no second, and no similar. The magnificent fabric of the Roman empire, the mightiest ever raised by man, was at its height. The arts of war and government, the finer embellishments of genius and taste, volumes from which even modern refinement still draws its finest delights, works of art that will serve as models of excellence and beauty to the latest hours of the world, the finest developments of the human mind in eloquence and philosophy, were the external illustrations of the first age.

The moral empire was more magnificent still. The dissonant habits, feelings, and prejudices of a host of nations, separated by half the world, and yet more widely separated by long hostility and barbarian prejudices, were controlled into one vast system of submission; peace was planted in the midst of furious communities, agriculture reclaimed the wilderness, commerce covered the ocean and peopled its shores. Knowledge unforced, and thus the more productive and the more secure, was gradually making its way through the extremities of the great dominion; intellectual light spreading, not with the hazardous and startling fierceness of a conflagration, but with the gentle and cheering growth of dawn, over every people.

But the more magnificent characteristic still, was Christianity; the diffusion of a new knowledge, as much more exalted, vivid, and essential, than all that had ever been wrought out by the faculties of man, as the throne from which it descended was loftier than the cradle and the tomb; the transmission of new powers over nature and mind, over the resistance of jealous prejudices and furious tyranny, and over that more mysterious and more terrible strength that in the rulers of darkness was against the human soul. And above all glory and honour, the presence of that Immanuel, that being whom it is guilt lightly to name, that King of kings, whom the heaven, and the heaven of heavens cannot contain,—God the Son, descending on earth to take upon him our nature, and, by a love surpassing all imagination, submitting to a death of pain and ignominy, that by his sacrifice he might place us in a capacity to be forgiven by the justice of the Eternal.

The glories of that age throw all that follows into utter eclipse. Yet the age of Luther and the Reformation bears such resemblances as the noblest crisis of human events and human agency may bear remotely to the visible acting of Providence.

The empire of Charles the Fifth, only second to the Roman, was justly consolidated. A singu-

lar passion for literature was spreading. Government was gradually refining from the fierce turbulence of the Gothic nations, and the headlong tyranny of feudal princes. The fine arts were springing into a new splendour. The power of the sword was on the verge of sinking under the power of the pen. Commerce was uniting the ends of the earth by the ties of mutual interest, stronger than the old fetters of Rome. A new and singular science, Diplomacy, was rising to fill up the place of the broken unity of Roman dominion, and make remote nations feel their importance to each other's security. The New World was opened to supply the exhausted ardour of the European mind with the stimulus of discovery, and, perhaps, for the more important purpose of supplying, in the precious metals, a new means of that commercial spirit which was obviously destined to be the regenerator of Europe. Force was the master and the impulse of the ancient world. Mutual interest was to be the master and the impulse of a world appointed to be urged through a nobler and more salutary career. To crown all, arose that art of arts, by which knowledge is preserved, propagated, and perpetuated; by which the wisdom of every age is accumulated for the present, and transmitted to the future; by which a single mind, in whatever obscurity, may speak to the universe, and make its wrong, its wisdom, and its discovery, the feeling and the possession of all—that only less than miracle, the art of printing.

But in this expanse of imperial and intellectual splendour, there was one lingering cloud, which, though partially repelled, must have rapidly returned and overspread the whole. As in the ancient Roman empire, idolatry degraded the natural understanding of the people, and finally corrupted their habits into utter ruin, idolatry had assumed the paramount influence in the rising European empire,—with the same seat, the same ambition, and still deeper and more corrupting arts of supremacy.

To rescue Europe, one of those great instruments that Providence reserves to awake or restore the hopes of nations was summoned.

Martin Luther was born on the 10th day of November, 1483, at Eisleben, a small town in the country of Mansfield, and electorate of Saxony. His father, John Luther, was employed in the mines, in which he had raised himself, by his intelligence and good conduct, to property and respectability, and held the office of a local magistrate.

To his mother, Margaret Lüdeman, a woman of known piety and virtue, Luther chiefly attributed his early ardour for devotion. At Eisleben he was placed under the tuition of a man of learning, George Emilius. At fourteen he was sent to school at Magdeburg. From which, after a year, he was transferred to a distinguished seminary at Eisenach, under the care of the Franciscans. Here the first evidences of the vigour of his application and abilities were given in his school successes, his knowledge of the abstruse grammar of the day, and the spirit and ease of his Latin versification.

In 1502 this distinguished pupil was transferred to the college of Erfurt, where he made himself master of the Aristotelic logic, and of the more valuable knowledge of the Latin classics, then becoming popular from the authority of Erasmus. Greek and Hebrew were comparatively unknown; for the first professorship of Greek in the University of Wittenberg was that of Melancthon, sixteen years after.

In 1503 Luther took the degree of Master of Arts; and now, completed in all the science and fame that universities could give, he was urged by his family to apply himself to the study of the law, as the most eminent road to fortune. His mind already pointed to theology; but he gave way to opinion, and began a reluctant study of the Civilians. A singular accident changed the course of his life; deprived the law of a man whose eloquence and sagacity might have conferred new honours on the profession, but whose daring vigour and lofty devotion of heart were destined to labours before which all human honours sink into nothing.

In 1504 Luther, walking in the fields one day with Alexius, a young friend, was overtaken by a thunder-storm: and saw with terror and sorrow his friend struck dead at his side. At this frightful catastrophe the thought of the utter uncer-

tainty of life, and of the necessity of devoting it to the preparation for the final hour, smote him. It was the monastic age, and piety could conceive no higher form of service to God or man than seclusion within conventual walls. On the spot he made a solemn vow to abjure the world, and take the cowl.

The determination was communicated to his parents; and, after some remonstrance on this sacrifice of emoluments and distinctions, was complied with. But his younger friends and relatives were still to be acquainted with his retirement from life. This was done in a curiously characteristic manner. Luther was, like most of his countrymen, attached to music; he sang and performed with skill. He summoned his friends to an evening entertainment; gave them music; and at the close declared to them his unchangeable resolution to bid farewell to the habits and pursuits of man.

In 1505 Luther became a member of the Augustines at Erfurt. He commenced his career with that fulness of determination which formed so striking a feature of his life. He sent back his lay habits to his father's house, returned his Master of Arts' ring, and declared his intention of changing his Christian name for that of Augustin. He not merely submitted to the severe discipline which was prescribed by the rules, however practically evaded by the members of the religious orders; he courted their extreme rigour, and soon became remarkable for his mortifications, his labours, his fastings, and his prayer. He abandoned all his previous studies, and took with him only Virgil and Plautus; the latter a singular choice, but which we cannot attribute to a love for its peculiar style in the mind of a young ascetic who had so sternly renounced the thoughts of the world.

But the personal drudgeries of the conventual life were not less severe, and were more galling, than even its religious restrictions. Among other offices, Luther was compelled to stand porter at the gate; he was sent through the town with a bag at his back to beg for the convent. But this constant succession of mean labours, which at once deprived him of time for study, and occupied it in pursuits of exhausting and humiliating, at length became too heavy for even the vigorous buoyancy of his mind, and he sunk into a state of despondency which rapidly influenced his religious opinions. To find his way out of this labyrinth, he applied to the head of the Augustines in Germany, Staupitz, a man of sense and feeling. Staupitz recommended to the inquirer submission to the course of his duty; but sent to the Prior of the convent the more effectual command to relieve him from those drudgeries, and give time for study to a mind which he already pronounced likely to render distinguished services to religion.

At this period the Bible had never been in the hands of Luther. Fragments of it were read in the church service, but beyond this the wisdom of Revelation was a dead letter. The Faculty of Theology at Paris, then one of the most distinguished sources of literature, had just branded itself to all succeeding ages by the declaration that "religion was undone if the study of Greek or Hebrew were permitted." And the general opinion of the Romish Ecclesiastics seems to have been comprehended in the speech attributed to a popular monk,—“They have invented a new language, which they call Greek; you must be on your guard against it. There is in the hands of many a book which they call the New Testament; it is a book full of daggers and poison. As to the Hebrew, it is certain that whoever learns it immediately becomes a Jew.”

The year 1507 was a memorable epoch in the life of this great servant of religion. It was the year in which the Bible first fell into his hand. He had just taken orders, when he found a neglected Latin copy of the Scriptures lying in the library of the convent. The subject instantly laid hold of his mind. He was astonished to discover the grossness of the monastic doctrines, its omissions, interpolations, and false readings of the divine word. The study became at once fearful and delightful to him. Deprived of all assistance in an inquiry which had been hitherto closed on Christendom by the Papacy, he was driven to his own resources; and he suffered no text of the sacred volume to escape him without the most eager effort to ascertain its meaning.