

THE
SWORD AND THE TROWEL.

OCTOBER, 1887.

The Case Proved.

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THE controversy which has arisen out of our previous articles is very wide in its range. Different minds will have their own opinions as to the manner in which the combatants have behaved themselves; for our own part we are content to let a thousand personal matters pass by unheeded. What does it matter what sarcasms or pleasantries may have been uttered at our expense? The dust of battle will blow away in due time; for the present the chief concern is to keep the standard in its place, and bear up against the rush of the foe.

Our warning was intended to call attention to an evil which we thought was apparent to all: we never dreamed that “the previous question” would be raised, and that a company of esteemed friends would rush in between the combatants, and declare that there was no cause for war, but that our motto might continue to be “Peace, peace!” Yet such has been the case, and in many quarters the main question has been, not “How can we remove the evil?” but, “Is there any evil to remove?” No end of letters have been written with this as their theme—“*Are the charges made by Mr. Spurgeon at all true?*” Setting aside the question of our own veracity, we could have no objection to the most searching discussion of the matter. By all means let the truth be known.

The Baptist and *The British Weekly*, in the most friendly spirit, have opened their columns, and invited correspondence upon the point in hand. The result has been that varied opinions have been expressed; but among the letters there has been a considerable number which may be roughly summarized as declaring that it would be best to let well alone, and that the writers see little or nothing of departure from the faith among Baptist and Congregational ministers. This is reassuring as far as it goes, but how far does it go? It goes no farther than this—it proves that these worthy men view matters from a standpoint which makes them regard as mere changes of expression novelties which we judge to be fatal errors from the truth; or else they move in a peculiarly favoured circle; or else they are so supremely amiable that they see all things through spectacles of tinted glass. We cannot help it, but in reading these carefully-prepared epistles, there has passed

before our mind the vision of the heroic Nelson, with the telescope at his blind eye, and we have heard him say again and again, "I cannot see it." With a brave blindness he refused to see that which might have silenced his guns. Brethren who have been officials of a denomination have a paternal partiality about them which is so natural, and so sacred, that we have not the heart to censure it. Above all things, these prudent brethren feel bound to preserve the prestige of "the body," and the peace of the committee. Our Unions, Boards, and Associations are so justly dear to the fathers, that quite unconsciously and innocently, they grow oblivious of evils which, to the unofficial mind, are as manifest as the sun in the heavens. This could not induce our honoured brethren to be untruthful; but it does influence them in their judgment, and still more in the expression of that judgment. With one or two exceptions in the letters now before us, there are evidences of a careful balancing of sentences, and a guardedness of statement, which enable us to read a good deal between the lines.

If we were not extremely anxious to avoid personalities, we could point to other utterances of some of these esteemed writers which, if they did not contradict what they have now written, would be such a supplement to it that their entire mind would be better known. To break the seal of confidential correspondence, or to reveal private conversations, would not occur to us; but we feel compelled to say that, in one or two cases, the writers have not put in print what we have personally gathered from them on other occasions. Their evident desire to allay the apprehensions of others may have helped them to forget their own fears. We say no more.

Had there been no other letters but those of this class, we should have hoped that perhaps the men of the new theology were few and feeble. Let it be noted that we have never made an estimate of their number or strength: we have said "many," and after reading the consoling letters of our optimistic brethren we try to hope that possibly they may not be so many as we feared. We should be rejoiced to believe that there were none at all, but our wish cannot create a fact. There is little in the letters which can affect our declarations, even if we read them in their most unqualified sense, and accept them as true. If twenty persons did *not* see a certain fact, their *not* seeing cannot alter the conviction of a man in his senses who has seen it, has seen it for years, and is seeing it now. The witness rubs his eyes to see whether he is awake; and then, bewildered as he may be for a moment that so many good people are contradicting him, he still believes the evidence of his own senses in the teeth of them all. I believe in the conscientiousness of the divines and doctors of divinity who tell us that all is well, and I cannot but congratulate them upon their ability to be so serenely thankful for small mercies.

But over against the bearers of cheering news we have to set the far more numerous testimonies of those to whom things wear no such roseate hue. What we have said already is true, but it is a meagre and feeble statement of the actual case, if we judge by the reports of our correspondents. We have been likened by one of our opponents to the boy in the fable who cried, "Wolf!" The parallel only fails in the all-important point that he cried "Wolf!" when there was none, and we are crying "Wolf!" when packs of them are howling so loudly that it would be superfluous for us to shout at all, if a wretched indifferentism had not brought a deep slumber upon those who ought to guard the flocks. The evidence is to our mind so overwhelming that we thought that our statements only gave voice to a matter of common notoriety. Either we are dreaming, or our brethren are; let the godly judge who it is that is asleep. We consider that what we have written in former papers is quite sufficient to justify our earnest endeavour to arouse the churches; but as more proof is demanded we will give it. Our difficulty is to make a selection out of the mass of material before us, and we will not burden our readers with more than may suffice.

In the month of July last the secretaries of the Evangelical Alliance issued a circular, from which we quote a paragraph:—

"It is only too evident to all who are jealous for God and his truth, that on one side there is a perilous growth of superstition and sacerdotalism, and on the other, of unbelief and indifference to vital religion. The substitutionary sacrifice of our blessed Lord and Saviour is lightly esteemed, and even repudiated, by some prominent teachers; the future destiny of the sinner has become, in consequence, a vain speculation in the thoughts of many. The plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, the personality of the Holy Ghost, and his presence and power in the church of God, with other verities of the faith of Christ, are qualified or explained away in many instances. The results of this erroneous teaching and perversion of the gospel are painfully apparent; worldliness, sensuality, and luxury, with the desecration of the Lord's day, abound, and Christian liberty has become license in the walk and conversation of many professed disciples of Christ."

This circular we had not seen or heard of when our first "Downgrade" article appeared in August. We had had no communication, directly or indirectly, with the Alliance. This Association has a Council, by no means fanatical or precipitate, and we are prepared to say, with no disrespect to the happy brethren who judge everything to be so eminently satisfactory, that we think as much of the judgment of this Council as we do of theirs. Possibly we now think far more of that opinion, since we have seen extracts from letters of brethren of all denominations, sent to the Alliance, in which they cry "Wolf!" intones as earnest as our own.

There is no use in mincing matters: there are thousands of us in all denominations who believe that many ministers have seriously departed from the truths of the gospel, and that a sad decline of spiritual life is manifest in many churches. Many a time have others said the same things which we have now said, and small notice has been taken of their protests. Only this day we have received by post the Report of the Gloucestershire and Herefordshire Association of Baptist Churches, issued in June last. It contains an admirable paper by its President, of which the keynote will be found in the following sentences:—

“We live in perilous times: we are passing through a most eventful period; the Christian world is convulsed; there is a mighty upheaval of the old foundations of faith; a great overhauling of old teaching. The Bible is made to speak today in a language which to our fathers would be an unknown tongue. Gospel teachings, the proclamation of which made men fear to sin, and dread the thought of eternity, are being shelved. Calvary is being robbed of its glory, sin of its horror, and we are said to be evolving into a reign of vigorous and blessed sentimentality, in which heaven and earth, God and man are to become a heap of sensational emotions; but in the process of evolution is not the power of the gospel weakened? Are not our chapels emptying? Is there not growing up among men a greater indifference to the claims of Christ? Are not the theories of evolution retrogressive in their effect upon the age? Where is the fiery zeal for the salvation of men which marked the Nonconformity of the past? Where is the noble enthusiasm that made heroes and martyrs for the truth? Where is the force which carried Nonconformity forward like a mighty avalanche? Alas! where?”

Dr. David Brown, Principal of the Free Church College, Aberdeen, in a valuable paper upon Scepticism in Ministers, which will be found in *The Christian Age* of Sept. 14th, says:—

“This is a very covert form of scepticism, which is more to be feared than all other forms combined; I mean the scepticism of ministers of the gospel—of those who profess to hold, and are expected to preach, the faith of all orthodox Christendom, and, as the basis of this faith, the authority of Scripture; yet neither hold nor teach that faith, but do their best to undermine the sacred records of it. Now, what is the root of this kind of scepticism? I answer, just the same as of the more sweeping and naked forms of it, the desire to *naturalize*, as far as possible, everything in religion.”

“The one thing common to them all is the studious avoidance of all those sharp features of the gospel which are repulsive to the natural man—which ‘*are hid from the wise and prudent, and are revealed only to babes.*’ The divinity of Christ is recognized indeed; but it is the loftiness of his human character, the sublimity of his teaching, and the unparalleled example of self-sacrifice which his death exhibited that they dwell on. The

Atonement is not in so many words denied; but his sufferings are not held forth in their vicarious and expiatory character. Christ, according to their teaching, was in no sense our Substitute, and in justification the righteousness of the glorious Surety is not imputed to the guilty believer. It is not often that this is nakedly expressed. But some are becoming bold enough to speak it out.”

“I should not have said so much in this strain were it not that all our churches are honeycombed with this mischievous tendency to *minimize* all those features of the gospel which the natural man cannot receive. And no wonder, for their object seems to be to attract the natural mind. Wherever this is the case, the spirituality of the pulpit is done away, and the Spirit himself is not there. Conversion of souls is rarely heard of there, if even it is expected, and those who come for the children’s bread get only a stone—beautiful it may be, and sparkling; but stones cannot be digested.”

We have occupied no time in selecting these three testimonies, neither are they more remarkable than a host of others; but they suffice to show that it is not a solitary dyspeptic who alone judges that there is much evil occurrent.

The most conclusive evidence that we are correct in our statement, that “the new theology” is rampant among us, is supplied by *The Christian World*. To this paper is largely due the prevalence of this mischief; and it by no means hides its hand. Whoever else may hesitate, we have in this paper plain and bold avowals of its faith, or want of faith. Its articles and the letters which it has inserted prove our position up to the hilt; nay, more, they lead us into inner “chambers of imagery” into which little light has as yet been admitted. What is meant by the allusion to the doctrine of the Trinity in the extract which is now before us? We forbear further comment, the paragraph speaks very plainly for itself:—

“We are now at the parting of the ways, and the younger ministers especially must decide whether or not they will embrace and undisguisedly proclaim that ‘modern thought’ which in Mr. Spurgeon’s eyes is a ‘deadly cobra,’ while in ours it is the glory of the century. It discards many of the doctrines dear to Mr. Spurgeon and his school, not only as untrue and unscriptural, but as in the strictest sense immoral; for it cannot recognize the moral possibility of imputing either guilt or goodness, or the justice of inflicting everlasting punishment for temporary sin. It is not so irrational as to pin its faith to verbal inspiration, or so idolatrous as to make its acceptance of a true Trinity of divine manifestation cover polytheism.”

Nothing can be required more definite than this; and if there had been any such need, the letters which have been inserted in the same paper would have superabundantly supplied it. As several of these are from Baptist ministers, and are an ingenuous avowal of the most thorough-going advance

from the things which have been assuredly believed among us, we are led to ask the practical question: *Are brethren who remain orthodox prepared to endorse such sentiments by remaining in union with those who hold and teach them?* These gentlemen have full liberty to think as they like; but, on the other hand, those who love the old gospel have equally the liberty to dissociate themselves from them, and that liberty also involves a responsibility from which there is no escaping. If we do not believe in Universalism, or in Purgatory, and if we do believe in the inspiration of Scripture, the Fall, and the great sacrifice of Christ for sin, it behoves us to see that we do not become accomplices with those who teach another gospel, and as it would seem from one writer, have avowedly another God.

A friendly critic advised us at the first to mention the names of those who had quitted the old faith; but, if we had done so, he would have been among the first to lament the introduction of personalities. At the same time, there can be no objection to a gentleman's coming forward, and glorying in his "modern thought": it spares others the trouble of judging his position, and it is an exhibition of manliness which others might copy to advantage. Those who have read the statements of the advanced school, and still think that from the orthodox point of view there is no cause for alarm, must surely be of a very sanguine temperament, or resolutely blind.

Our lament was not, however, confined to vital doctrines; we mentioned a decline of spiritual life, and the growth of worldliness, and gave as two outward signs thereof the falling-off in prayer-meetings, and ministers attending the theatre. The first has been pooh-poohed as a mere trifle. *The Nonconformist*, which is a fit companion for *The Christian World*, dismisses the subject in the following sentence: "If the conventional prayer-meetings are not largely attended, why should the Christian community be judged by its greater or less use of one particular religious expedient?" What would James and Jay have said of this dismissal of "conventional prayer-meetings," whatever that may mean? At any rate, we are not yet alone in the opinion that our meetings for prayer are very excellent thermometers of the spiritual condition of our people. God save us from the spirit which regards gathering together for prayer as "a religious expedient"! This one paragraph is sorrowfully sufficient to justify much more than we have written.

The same newspaper thus deals with our mention of theatre-going preachers. Let the reader note what a fine mouthful of words it is, and how unwittingly it admits, with a guarded commendation, that which we remarked upon with censure:—

"As for theatres, while we should be much surprised to learn that many ministers of the gospel take a view of life which would permit them to spend much time there, yet, remembering that men of unquestionable piety

do find recreation for themselves and their families in the drama, we are not content to see a great branch of art placed under a ban, as if it were no more than an agency of evil.”

Let it never be forgotten that even irreligious men, who themselves enjoy the amusements of the theatre, lose all respect for ministers when they see them in the play-house. Their common sense tells them that men of such an order are unfit to be their guides in spiritual things. But we will not debate the point: the fact that it is debated is to us sufficient evidence that spiritual religion is at a low ebb in such quarters.

Very unwillingly have we fulfilled our unhappy task of justifying a warning which we felt bound to utter; we deplore the necessity of doing so; but if we have not in this paper given overwhelming evidence, it is from want of space, and want of will, and not from want of power. Those who have made up their minds to ignore the gravity of the crisis, would not be aroused from their composure though we told our tale in miles of mournful detail.

It only remains to remark that brethren, who are afraid that great discouragement will arise out of our statements, have our hearty sympathy so far as there is cause for such discouragement. Our heart would rejoice indeed if we could describe our Nonconformity in a very different manner, and assure our friends that we were never in a sounder or more hopeful condition. But encouragement founded upon fiction would lead to false hopes, and to ultimate dismay. Confidence in our principles is what is most to be relied on, next to confidence in God. Brave men will hold to a right cause none the less tenaciously because for a season it is under a cloud. Increased difficulty only brings out increased faith, more fervent prayer, and greater zeal. The weakest of minds are those which go forward because they are borne along by the throng; the truly strong are accustomed to stand alone, and are not cast down if they find themselves in a minority. Let no man’s heart fail him because of the Philistine. This new enemy is doomed to die like those who have gone before him; only let him not be mistaken for a friend.

Deeply do we agree with the call of the more devout among the letter-writers for a more determined effort to spread the gospel. Wherever more can be done, let it be done at once, in dependence upon the Spirit of God. But it is idle to go down to the battle with enemies in the camp. With what weapons are we to go forth? If those which we have proved “mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds” are taken from us, what are we to do? How can those evangelize who have no evangel? What fruit but evil can come of “the new theology”? Let us know where we are. In the meantime, those of us who raise these questions are not among the idlers, nor are we a whit behind the very chief of those who seek to win souls.

Some words have been used which call the writer a Pope, and speak of this enquiry as an Inquisition. Nothing can be more silly. Is it come to this, that if we use our freedom to speak our mind we must needs be charged with arrogance? Is decision the same thing as Popery? It is playing with edged tools when the advanced men introduce that word, for we would remind them that there is another phase of Popery of which a portion of them have furnished us grievous examples. To hide your beliefs, to bring out your opinions cautiously, to use expressions in other senses than those in which they are usually understood, to “show,” as *The Christian World* so honestly puts it, “a good deal of trimming, and a balancing of opposite opinions in a way that is confusing and unsatisfactory to the hearer,” is a meaner sort of Popery than even the arrogance which is so gratuitously imputed to *us*. It is, however, very suggestive that the letting in of light upon men should be to them a torment equal to an Inquisition, and that open discussion should so spoil their schemes that they regard it as a torture comparable to the rack and the stake. What other harm have we done them? We would not touch a hair of their heads, or deprive them of an inch of liberty. Let them speak, that we may know them; but let them not deny us the same freedom; neither let them denounce *us* for defending what they are so eager to assail.

What action is to be taken we leave to those who can see more plainly than we do what Israel ought to do. One thing is clear to us: we cannot be expected to meet in any Union which comprehends those whose teaching is upon fundamental points exactly the reverse of that which we hold dear. Those who *can* do so will, no doubt, have weighty reasons with which to justify their action, and we will not sit in judgment upon those reasons: they may judge that a minority should not drive them out. To us it appears that there are many things upon which compromise is possible, but there are others in which it would be an act of treason to pretend to fellowship. With deep regret we abstain from assembling with those whom we dearly love and heartily respect, since it would involve us in a confederacy with those with whom we can have no communion in the Lord. Garibaldi complained that, by the cession of Nice to France, he had been made a foreigner in his native land; and our heart is burdened with a like sorrow; but those who banish us may yet be of another mind, and enable us to return.