

ART. III.—LIMITS OF PARTY ACTION IN RELIGIOUS MATTERS.

(A PAPER READ AT THE SOUTHPORT EVANGELICAL CONFERENCE, JUNE 6, 1894, BY P. V. SMITH, LL.D., CHANCELLOR OF THE DIOCESE OF MANCHESTER.)

“I KNOW, sir, of but two parties in the world : Timists and Eternists. I am an Eternist.”¹ Such was once the reply of an Evangelical veteran now gone to his rest, to an unwelcome visitor who pestered him about a question of party. If this were the sense in which we were to understand “party” to-day, my task would be concluded in one sentence. With the assent of all, I should close the discussion by affirming that, in this sense, there were no limits to party action in religious matters. But of course we are now considering something altogether different—that, in short, to which Lord Harrowby referred, when at the recent Annual Meeting of the Church Pastoral Aid Society he said, “I hate this term ‘party,’ but for convenience one must use it.” Hateful the term has come to be, because it is usually associated with party spirit—“that baneful spirit,” to use the words of Handley Moule, which is “altogether different from a faithful and reverent jealousy for distinctive revealed truth.”² But the sting of the word is in its tail. Cut off its last letter, and its etymology and the truth which underlies it stand revealed. When we recognise that “party” is after all only a part, we are at once set upon the right track as to the true import and proper sphere of “party” in religion. We realize that its existence is due not to moral obliquity, but to the confined and imperfect range of the human intellect. How is it that one man belongs to one religious party, and another to another? Is it that the first has had more or better opportunities of studying the truth than the second, or has studied it with more singleness of aim, more prayerfulness, or greater intellectual grasp? This may sometimes be the case, but it certainly is not so always. The cause will more frequently be found in the accident of birth or training, or the circumstances among which the man’s lot is cast, or the influences to which he has been subjected. The turn of a man’s mind has also much, and occasionally everything, to do with it. There was an instance in the sixteenth century of two brothers, the one a Roman Catholic and the other a Protestant, each of whom, being convinced of the truth of his own faith, was sincerely anxious to convert the other. At the

¹ “Memoirs of H. Venn,” p. 364.

² “Memoirs of Charles Simeon,” p. 96.

close of a prolonged disputation both were successful, the Roman Catholic turning Protestant, and the Protestant turning Roman Catholic. These opposite results of the same line of reasoning can only have been due to the different complexions of the minds of the two disputants.

The breach between Romanism and Protestantism has so widened since then that a repetition of the occurrence would be hardly possible in the present day. But it is quite conceivable that if two friends, one an Evangelical and the other a Ritualist, were to engage in discussion, they might end by mutually changing sides, owing to the different effect produced by the same series of arguments upon their diversely constituted intellects. We have need to remember that while facts are absolute truths, the metaphysical explanations of those facts and of the consequences which flow from them are oftentimes relative truths, that is to say, they may be apprehended differently by different minds. Because, therefore, one party holds a particular view of them and another a diverse view, it does not follow that one or the other must be in error. It would be erroneous for the first party to hold the view of the second, or for the second to hold the view of the first; but each view may be true from the standpoint of those who hold it. Time will not permit me to enlarge upon this theme; but I am convinced that the saying, "What is one man's meat is another man's poison," is no less true for the intellect than for the body. We should do well also to bear in mind that in Scripture "the truth" and "sound doctrine" are contrasted either with moral evil or with falsehood as to actual facts or practical conduct, and not with what we call unsound views on mere questions of metaphysical dogma. The men of whom Jeremiah complains as "not valiant for the truth," proceed, on the contrary, "from evil to evil." St. Paul repeatedly speaks of the truth as the opposite, not of error, but of unrighteousness. In his Epistle to the Galatians it is contrasted, not directly with Judaizing opinions, but with the uncharitable and unchristian conduct of the Apostles Peter and Barnabas, and the unchristian resort to circumcision on the part of the Galatian converts, to which those opinions led. In the Epistles to Timothy and Titus sound doctrine is opposed to wickedness and immorality. In one of these Epistles Hymenæus and Philetus are said to have erred concerning the truth, in saying that the resurrection was already past. The wisdom from above is, according to St. James, first pure, not metaphysically but morally, as contrasted with the earthly wisdom, which is sensual and devilish. At the same time, we must not forget that abstract opinions lead to definite conduct and action; and that as we are morally responsible for our conduct, and even

innocent ignorance does not save us from the consequences of wrong or foolish acts, so, too, we are morally bound to form the best and most perfect abstract opinions that we can upon religious matters, and failure to do so, even though it be innocent, may be productive of disastrous results.

These considerations should serve to guard us from two opposite errors into which men of contrary tendencies not unfrequently fall. The one set affirm that there should be no such thing as party, and that they at all events will belong to none. They would declare with respect to our present proposition, that there ought to be no party action at all. The others, on the contrary, talk and act as if their party were the whole, and as if there could be no truth outside it. Their declaration would be that there ought to be no limits to party action. The upholders of both these opposite views err from ignoring the partial and limited scope of the human intelligence. The former, in repudiating party, imagine that they can and do grasp the whole orb of truth. Vain delusion! Omitting the uncomplimentary appellation, we might apply to them the words of Hesiod :

νήπιιοι οὐδ' ἴσασιν ὅσῃ πλεον ἤμουν παντός.

Alas! man knows not, simple fool,
How much the half exceeds the whole.

The result is that their appreciation of religious truth is, at best, feeble and faint-hearted. Archbishop Tait on one occasion remarked, "What is wanted is a deeply religious Liberal party. . . . The great evil is that the Liberals are deficient in religion, and the religious are deficient in liberality." The want has remained unsupplied, and the evil unremedied, since the cause of both lies in the essential conditions of finite nature. While a river remains comparatively narrow, the current runs strong and swift. But where the banks broaden out, it becomes feeble and sluggish. And so it is with religious emotion and religious work. A man can only fully perceive a truth by holding, as it were, his hand to his eye, and concentrating his gaze on that one particular portion of the metaphysical landscape. Only by isolating it from its surroundings can he fully realize it and assimilate it to himself, so that it becomes the mainspring of his action and a stimulus to his zeal. There are, no doubt, a few exceptions, but as a rule we find less religious enthusiasm and energy in the Broad School than among either High Churchmen or Low Churchmen; while the man of no religious party is usually a man in whom religious thought and life burn, if at all, with a very feeble and flickering flame. It is, no doubt, in one sense the case that, as Richard Cecil remarks, "All extremes are errors. The reverse of error is not

truth but error. Truth lies between these extremes." But the statement taken by itself is inadequate, and has a tendency to paralyze both thought and action. To strike the true balance, we require to set against it the apparently contradictory affirmation of Charles Simeon: "The truth is not in the middle and not in one extreme, but in both extremes. . . . If extremes will please you, I am your man; only remember it is not *one* extreme we are to go to, but *both* extremes."

The other mistake lies in the opposite direction. Conscious that they owe their religious vitality and power to their own party view of truth, men assume that this view is the whole truth, and that any divergence from it is error. Forgetful that "party" *ex vi termini* implies "part," they act as if their own section were the whole of genuine Christendom. Impelled by this mistake, Nonconformists have erected their parties into separate organizations, which they presume to designate by the name of "Churches." And Churchmen, after unduly limiting the conditions of Church membership by a too rigid Act of Uniformity, have in some cases endeavoured to strain the provisions of that Act to the uttermost in order to eject from the Church fellow-Christians who claimed to have an equally legitimate place within her fold, but who held, and felt conscientiously bound to teach and put into practice, different views of truth from their own. The conduct of the Nonconformists stands rebuked by John Wesley, who wrote, "We believe it to be utterly unlawful to separate from the Church unless sinful terms of communion were imposed." The Churchmen to whom I have referred showed themselves oblivious of the disproportion between party on the one hand and truth on the other, so well expressed by Richard Cecil in the following passage: "Truth must never bow to fashion or prejudice; but her garb may be varied. . . . A young minister should remember that she does not wear the dress of a party. . . . She is something different from the picture which a Churchman draws of her. A Dissenter misses her perfect figure. A Frenchman distorts her features in one way, and an Englishman in another. Every one makes his own cast and colour too essential to her."¹

The legitimate limits of party action are, therefore, transgressed when an attempt is made either to set up a separate party Church, or to eject from our own Church men of an opposite party. The limits are also transgressed by a refusal to unite with members of another party in resisting attacks on our common Christianity. It would be past belief, had we not positive instances of the fact, that any real Christians should

¹ "Richard Cecil's Remains—On a Minister Qualifying himself for his Office."

commit such a melancholy and disastrous mistake. But we are all aware of the controversy on the subject of religious instruction in the London Board Schools, which has now been raging for many months. A short time ago a Church party organ actually made the following comment on this controversy: "Has the Evangelical party fallen so low that it must needs join with Ritualists and Romanists to secure the teaching of Christianity?" And the passage in which these words occur was referred to with approbation as a "powerful indictment" in a letter written to one of the metropolitan daily newspapers¹ by a so-called orthodox Nonconformist, who had no scruple himself in joining with Unitarians, Agnostics, and Atheists to imperil the teaching of Christianity! Exhibitions of party spirit such as these are enough to make angels weep, and infidels point the finger of incredulous scorn. Can Christians, they may well ask, have any real faith in the supreme mysteries in which they profess to believe, when differences of opinion upon other points will prevent their joining to maintain these mysteries? What, then, are the proper lines of party action? They are twofold: the one having relation to the Christian, and the other to the non-Christian world.

I. Towards the Christian world our attitude should be, not destructive, but constructive; not obstructive, but instructive; not aggressive, but progressive. We are at liberty, nay, we are bound, to defend our own position, to hold it against aggression from another party. It is our duty vigorously to assert and maintain our rightful position as an integral portion of the Church. We cannot, moreover, be too zealous in our constructive and progressive work, that is to say, in spreading in a positive form our own distinctive views of Christian truth. We ought, for instance, to welcome most heartily and thankfully what is known as the Forward Movement of the Church Pastoral Aid Society, and do all in our power to promote it. We may hope that under God's blessing it may not only result in greatly developing the existing work of the society, but also that advantage will largely be taken of the opportunities which it offers of dedicating, on a secure basis, money or property to all kinds of home agencies and objects, whether general or local, calculated to advance and deepen Evangelical religion in our midst. But further than this we ought not to go. We must permit to another party the same liberty which we claim for ourselves. We must not be led into conduct towards them of which we should complain if they practised it towards ourselves. We must not engage in merely negative controversy. Our aim must be to instruct and not to subvert, to edify and not to demolish.

¹ *Daily Chronicle*, April 13, 1894.

II. But, on the other hand, towards the non-Christian world our party action cannot be too aggressive. Common sense would suggest, and experience has proved, that Christian work, whether amongst the actual heathen abroad, or the practical heathen at home, will, for the most part, be best carried on by co-operation among those who hold the same party views. It is well, occasionally and to some extent, to combine for these purposes with persons of another party, if only to remind ourselves and them and the outside world that after all there is such a thing as a common Christianity, deeper and more vital than the points on which we differ. But the details of missionary operations, both at home and abroad, will be carried out most heartily, most energetically, and most successfully by those who are agreed in their party views of religious truth. Let us by all means have party organizations to promote these operations. Only let us ever remember that these organizations maintain their party principles for the sake of carrying on the work, and do not carry on the work for the sake of maintaining the party principles. It is unseemly that at meetings of the Church Missionary Society and Church Pastoral Aid Society louder cheers should be evoked by a mention of our own adhesion to Protestantism and Evangelicalism than by the narrative of successful labours for Christ. The latter, and not the former, is the object for which the societies exist; and our party divisions, due as they are to human imperfection and human weakness, are not a fitting subject for exultation.

We arrive, then, at the following conclusions :

1. The human mind being what it is, party action is, for most of us, a necessary accompaniment of vitality in religious matters; but it ought to be kept within strict limits, both in conception and in practice.

2. In conception, it should be limited by the recognition that, as its name implies, a party is a part and not the whole of the true Church of Christ. That Church embraces ideally and invisibly, and ought to embrace organically and visibly, all professing Christians, that is to say, all who profess to acknowledge Christ as their Divine Lord and Saviour.

3. In practice, party action should, in harmony with this conception, be limited to (a) Promulgating constructively our own views of Christian truth and defending them when assailed; and (b) Carrying on, in accordance with these views, religious work, at home and abroad, among those who are not true Christians, that is to say, who do not acknowledge Christ as their Divine Lord and Saviour, and love Him in sincerity.

4. Lastly, the right limits of party action do not warrant us in adopting any of the following attitudes against true

Christians, as above defined, merely because their religious opinions and practices differ from our own, namely:

- (i.) Carrying on aggressive and destructive work against them;
- (ii.) Refusing to unite with them in the same organic Church under conditions which permit us, as individuals, to retain our own distinct views; or
- (iii.) Declining to join with them in resisting attacks against our common Christianity.

P. V. SMITH.



ART. IV. — HENRY SUSO: THE MINNE-SINGER OF ETERNAL LOVE AND WISDOM.

THERE were two main forces at work in Christendom previous to the Reformation, *Mysticism* and *Scholasticism*, the one fostered chiefly amongst the branches of the Germanic stock, the other belonging more to the Romanic tribes. The one deals with Christianity from the subjective side, as a frame of mind, an inward spirit, a Divine life; the other is enlisted for the most part upon the objective side, and recognises Christianity more as a doctrine and revelation than a life. Mysticism preserved among the nations the Christian spirit in its fulness of life and practical power. Scholasticism devoted its chief attention to the formal elaboration of Christian ideas, and the exercise of argument in the schools. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries it became ever more and more exclusively theoretical and pedantic, wedded to formalism and subtleties, and useless for life. On the other hand, mysticism grew and spread abroad, especially in Germany and the Netherlands. It contained a more vigorous germ of vitality, assumed a more popular and practical character, and appropriated increasingly the new and important element of Scripture truth which was in that day of growing thought making itself felt on every side. Allying itself with the freshly-emerging love of the Bible, it hastened on the Reformation; whereas scholasticism—antiquated, artificial, unpractical—was assailed and routed from the field. The mystic turns in his inmost heart directly to God; he yields up himself to Him; he desires even to become one with Him. One of these mystics makes the soul to speak, "I have found rest in nothing but in Nothing." This Nothing is the pure Deity; for "the place out of which I was born is the Deity—it is my fatherland." He is his own priest, altar, and sacrifice; and even