

ARTICLE VIII.

BAPTISTS AND LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE.

THE ENGLISH BAPTISTS, 1500-1643:

BY HENRY C. VEDDER.

"It belonged to the members of a calumniated and despised sect, few in number and poor in circumstances, to bring forth to public view, in their simplicity and omnipotence, those immortal principles which are now recognized as of divine authority and universal obligation. Other writers of more distinguished name succeeded, and robbed them of their honor; but their title is so good, and the amount of service they performed on behalf of the common interests of humanity is so incalculable, that an impartial posterity must assign to them their due meed of praise."* That such is the testimony of history with regard to the Baptists of England, and their struggle for liberty of conscience, is conceded by many learned and candid historians of different communions.† But recently men, neither learned nor candid, have not scrupled to deny that this praise is well bestowed; and others, learned but not candid, have devoted themselves to the ungrateful task of vilifying the men to whom the cause of religious liberty owes so large a debt. It has been vehemently affirmed that Baptists, so far from being pioneers in this cause, were no whit in advance of the Presbyterians and Independents in de-

* Price, "History of Non-conformity," I, 522.

† See Stoughton's "Ecclesiastical History of England," II, 232: "The Baptists were foremost in the advocacy of religious freedom, and perhaps to one of them, Leonard Busher, citizen of London, belongs the honor of presenting, in this country, the first distinct and broad plea for liberty of conscience." See, also, Lecky's "History of Rationalism," Chapter iv.

manding soul-liberty; that a part of them avowed persecuting principles and attempted to carry them into practice; that, in fact, the Presbyterians were the only advocates of a genuine toleration in England.* It will be the object of this paper to compare these conflicting statements with the facts of history, as attested by documents of unquestionable authenticity and by the writings of the opponents of the Baptists.

The assertion that Baptists have never persecuted, but have been the consistent advocates of entire freedom of conscience from the beginning, would perhaps have been contradicted with less heat if more pains had been taken to weigh its meaning. It was no doubt convenient, for purposes of controversy, to assume that it had a meaning which the words will not bear. It is not pretended that there has never been a Baptist false to the principles avowed by himself and his brethren. I maintain that no case has ever been produced of a persecutor who held substantially the views of Christian truth now professed by Baptists; but if such a case could be produced, it would not disprove the assertion that Baptists have never persecuted. Until it can be established that some body of Baptists avowed persecuting principles, and attempted to execute them, the assertion will stand uncontradicted. Then, too, the word "persecution" seems to need definition. By it is not meant the expression of mere opinions, in however violent terms, nor the application of ecclesiastical discipline, † but the punish-

* The writer fears that this may be taken by the readers of the REVIEW as a clumsy attempt on his part to perpetrate a joke at their expense, so he adds two brief quotations from articles by Professor Charles A. Briggs, of the Union Theological Seminary, in the *Presbyterian Review*: "If the Baptists or Quakers, or any other of the sects, had come into power, they would have been no less intolerant and persecuting than the others." (IV, 663.) "They [the Westminster divines] were not a whit behind the Independents and Baptists in forbearance and charity. . . . The one sought peace, charity, and the unity of Christ's Church. The other sought sectarian strife, division of Churches and families, and toleration in the exercise of all kinds of intolerance." (Ibid., p. 863.)

† A Presbyterian journal of high standing declares that Baptists still

ing of all dissent from a given standard of religious faith and practice by physical pains and penalties. What I assert, therefore, and what I expect to prove, is, that no body of Baptists ever advocated or practiced the punishment of dissent from their belief by the imposition of physical pains and penalties upon the dissenters. More: no reputable Baptist writer of any age can be quoted in the advocacy of persecution. If any dispute this, let them cover me with confusion by producing the quotation.

The earliest recognition in the literature of England of the principle of religious liberty is found in Sir Thomas More's "Utopia," which was printed in Latin at Louvain in 1516, and in English at London in 1551. In the account of the domestic institutions of that fabulous island, a decree of King Utopus is described. I quote from the revised translation of Ralph Robinson (1556), preserving its quaint orthography:

"Firste of all he made a decree that it should be lawful for eurie man to faouere and folow what religion he would, and that he mighte do the best he could to bring other to his opinion, so that he did it peaceable, gentelie, quietlie, and soberlie, without hastie and contentious rebuking and inuehing against other. If he could not by faire and gentle speche induce them vnto his opinion yet he should vse no kinde of violence, and refraine from displeasaunte and seditious woordes. To him that would vehemently and frequently in this cause striue and contende was decreed, banishment or bondage."*

We are further told that King Utopus decreed this liberty on the ground that, "thoughe there be one religion, whiche alone is trew, and al other vaine and superstitious, yet did he wel foresee (so that the matter were handled with reason, and sober modestie) that the trueth of the own powre would at the last issue out and come to lyghte." † It is sufficiently astonishing to find so broad-minded and liberal a view as this taken, even as a mere speculation, by a Roman Catholic statesman of the sixteenth century; but

show a persecuting spirit because they practice so-called "close communion." See *The Evangelist*, for August 30, 1883.

* Arber's reprint, p. 145.

† Ibid., p. 146.