

T H E

PROVINCE AND USES OF BAPTIST HISTORY.

I WAS not uninfluenced by personal considerations in accepting the invitation which has brought me to your presence to-day. I came to meet old friends, whose grasp always repays a long journey, needing no pledge of welcome save that which is furnished in recollections of former intimacies, and of labors in a common and blessed service. This hill, whose winding ascent is shaded by venerable elms,—the beautiful panorama which delights the eye from its summit,—are not more familiar than the faces which assemble here on these sacred occasions. They differ in this, that while the former abide with the constancy of nature, knowing no change save that of increasing beauty, the latter reveal the touches of time and care, each year reminding us, by their absence, of some whom we shall not greet again, and whom we in our turn shall successively follow. I may too early attune your thoughts to sadness; but these allusions force to my mind and to yours the name of one whose recent departure, in the very vigor of his days, we all have mourned as the loss of a brother. It is not my province to utter his eulogy; and yet, the

part which I have to perform in the exercises of this anniversary, permits and invites a brief reference to his virtues. He was my friend. When he came to the pastorship of the ancient church in Providence, I was the pastor of a rural church in this state, at no great distance from him, and was honored with his confidence. From that time I knew him well. I never knew integrity more perfect than his. Prudent and reserved, when he spoke his words were the exact transcript of his thoughts. Of ripe judgment, he was a sagacious and wise counsellor. With wonderful faith in right and in God, he looked for the triumph of truth and righteousness with a confidence as unquestioning as that of the astronomer looking for the calculated phenomena of the planets. Perhaps it required somewhat of intimacy to know his emotional nature,—the depth, the unchangeableness of his love, which, as a pervading, characterizing sentiment, embraced his friends,—his work as a pastor,—and the cause of Christ, whether as a whole or in its special departments of education or missions, whether as connected with his own denomination, or with that true church catholic which embraces the faithful of every clime and name. He was a rarely developed Christian man, whom, to human seeming, the church on earth could not afford to lose. We feel the pang of his absence here to-day, and before we pass to other themes we pay this brief tribute to the memory of JAMES N. GRANGER.

I had another reason for obeying the summons which called me hither. It was my privilege to bear a part in the formation of this Historical Society; anterior,

indeed, to the formation, I bore a part in the public and private discussions which led to that event. There were those among us who felt that materials for our denominational history were dropping away beyond recovery, for the lack of some repository in which they might be gathered, — that we were in danger of losing the historic spirit, for the lack of something to remind us of the names and deeds of our fathers — those true men who, in this and other lands, labored and suffered for our faith. It was our wish to link the living generation with those who in all preceding times have been the representatives of our ideas of the Christian economy, and with those who shall come after us in the same evangelical succession. We believed the purpose a worthy one — one which would minister to faith, and hope, and charity, and which would grow in the interest and regard of the thoughtful and cultivated in our ministry and our churches. I am still impressed by similar convictions, and these gave the weight of authority to your wishes.

In occupying your attention for an hour, I shall restrict myself to topics closely related to the purposes of this society. I propose to offer some remarks on the *Province and Uses of Baptist History*; and if I dwell somewhat disproportionately on a single branch of the former of these topics, it will be from my desire to direct your attention to questions relating to the rise of our denomination which seem to me to have been studied less than they deserve.

By Baptist History, I mean history with the restriction implied by that epithet, taken in its ordinary sense.

In that sense the epithet is modern, belonging wholly to the period of the Reformation and the times succeeding. There are those who regard it as the chief and distinguishing province of Baptist history to trace the stream of our sentiments from their primal fountain in the churches of the apostles, down through successions of organized communities, to the Baptists of modern times. I have little confidence in the results of any attempts of that kind which have met my notice, and I attach little value to inquiries pursued for the predetermined purpose of such a demonstration. The past opens her testimonies not to those who approach her in the spirit of dictation, and to serve the ends of sect or party, but to those who come in a docile temper to accept her lessons, whatever they may be. It is a more legitimate task to search for the good seed of the kingdom, wheresoever or howsoever scattered in the lapse of ages, — whether manifesting itself in individual minds distinguished by faith and genius, in sects struggling to restore the primitive economy, and hunted and destroyed as heretics, or mingled with the mass of evangelical germs which never perished in the great apostasy; and to note how that seed, when the Reformation came to the church like vernal suns and airs to the teeming, waiting earth, started into rank and even unhealthy growth. This is preliminary to Baptist history. It explains how and why there came to be a Baptist denomination, and hence a history with that epithet. In that sense it is within the province of Baptist history, but it is not that history itself. American history falls back upon English, and English in its turn upon Continen-

tal, and this again upon Roman, Grecian and Asiatic; but when, in the forces and events of these anterior periods, American history has accounted for its existence and character, its province becomes peculiar and restricted. It is so with Baptist history. It falls back upon the anterior periods with which it is linked, and of which it is the offspring; but, having in this way accounted for its rise, and explained its character, it becomes distinct and substantive, and belongs exclusively to modern times.

It by no means follows, from the distinction which I have named, that this preliminary chapter is in any sense unimportant. I should be misconceived, were it supposed that I am aiming at that inference. It is, on the contrary, with the closing section of that chapter that I am now for some little time, and as a leading topic, to occupy your attention. I shrink from no scrutiny in regard to the principles or the facts which gave rise to the Baptist denomination. I am not unfamiliar with the facile and stereotyped reproaches which are cast upon our pedigree. It is easy for any sectary of the nineteenth century, judging of his own communion as he sees it now, and of other communions as they were, or as they were represented by their enemies to be, two or three centuries ago, to institute offensive comparisons. He may make the Episcopal Church odious, by presenting to the modern sense the revolting scenes of Smithfield, or the more refined atrocities of the period of the Corporation and Test Acts; or the Church of Holland odious, by reminding the world that when the reformed of that country were yet in their

deadly struggles with the human fiend of Spain, they were reproaching the great Prince of Orange because he would not let loose the fury of persecution against the Anabaptists; but he has in this process only revealed the unloveliness of his own temper, and engaged in a game at which any number can play. It should rather be our interest to cast the veil over common infirmities, and to look, in that memorable period of the world's commotion, for those better moral forces which, under God, have given us the bloom and beauty of our later Protestant unity. In order to detect these forces, we must learn to go beyond abnormal developments — beyond the abuse of power in church and state, on the one hand, and beyond the excesses of ignorant fanaticism on the other, to that great mass of Christian PEOPLE, as distinguished from priests and rulers, from zealots and madmen, who made little figure in the public affairs which form history, but whose faith and piety constituted in fact the leaven of the world. Those who can trace their spiritual pedigree to such a source, have no occasion to blush for their origin.

I think that the *people* of the period of the Reformation, and of the ages immediately anterior, will rise in our estimation, in proportion as we know them more intimately. Luther sprung from the people, and addressed himself to them. The Reformation embraced doctrines as well as morals, — doctrines relating to the profoundest questions of spiritual life, — and yet the people felt and appreciated the discussions, and were swayed by them as the harvest is swayed by the summer wind. The “guilds of Rhetoric” which flourished in

the cities of the Netherlands, and contributed so largely to the religious reformation and the political revolt, furnish a striking illustration of the intelligence and cultivation of Dutch mechanics of that period. "They ridiculed, with their farces and satires," says Motley, "the vices of the clergy. They dramatized tyranny for public execration."¹ Princes could neither seduce them by asking to be admitted as members, nor break them down by power or menace. Earlier than this, in England, the brilliant period of Edward III. was crowned with the rise of Wickliffe. In the minds of most men, Wickliffe stands out solitary, amid general gloom, — one star on the broad face of surrounding night. Such a view of him is a grand historical mistake. Wickliffe rose on a movement which embraced a large portion of the English people, and was himself but the representative of that movement. Old Henry De Knyghton, contemporary and antagonist of the great reformer, declares that the adherents of Wickliffe were so held in honor, and multiplied, that of every two men met in the way, one or the other might be supposed to belong to the sect.² Wickliffe translated the Bible for a people whose conscious wants required it. Frag-

¹ *Dutch Republic*, Vol. I. p. 89. No unfavorable opinion can be formed as to the culture of a nation, whose weavers, smiths, gardeners, and traders, found the favorite amusement of their holidays in composing and enacting tragedies or farces, reciting their own verses, or in personifying moral and æsthetic sentiments, by ingeniously arranged groups, or gorgeous habiliments. — *Ib.*

² *Secta illa in maxime honore illis diebus habebatur et in tantum multiplicata fuit, quod vix duos videres in via, quin alter eorum discipulus Wyclefi fuerit.* Quoted in Gieseler's *Ecccl. Hist.*, Vol. III. p. 147.

mentary portions—the work of pious priests, who had sought in this good way to feed the flock of God—had created an appetite for more of that heavenly food. His resistance to the pretensions of monks and friars, was a resistance which he echoed from classes extending downward to the very humblest of the people. This is strikingly illustrated in that curious old poem belonging to this time, the Creed of Piers Ploughman. An humble and earnest inquirer is represented as going, in pursuit of religious instruction, from one order of friars to another, but failing utterly in the search. They are skilled in the art of abusing each other, but not in the divine art of directing the penitent to the way of life. He has parted from the last of the orders, “wepyng for sorowe,” when he meets an humble ploughman, who inquires the cause of his grief.

“I can fynden no man,”

the wanderer replies,

“That fulli byleveth,
To techen me the heyghe weie,
And therefore I wepe;
For I have fonded the freres
Of the foure ordres:

* * * * *

And al myn hope was on hem,
And myn herte also;
But thei ben fulli faithles,
And the fend sueth.”