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Benjamin Laney :

THE LAUDIAN SCHOOL AND THE NONCONFORMIST.

BENJAMIN LANEY, Bishop of Lincoln, enjoyed the privilege of preaching before the King at Whitehall on March 12, 1665, and he took the opportunity thus afforded of expressing his thoughts on the ecclesiastical situation of the moment.

Laney was a scholar of repute, a High Churchman of the Laudian school, and a devoted Royalist. It goes therefore without saying that he found no favour when Parliament, in its struggle with King and Church, gained the ascendancy. He was driven from his rectory at Buriton, from his residentiary canonry at Westminster, and from the mastership of Pembroke Hall, Cambridge. Deprived of all preferment, he attached himself to the person of Charles I., whose chaplain he was ; serving Charles II. in the same capacity after his father's execution.

As one of the victims of the reign of nonconformity he had suffered much, and it was only reasonable that at the Restoration he should receive a measure of compensation. Accordingly, he was at once made Dean of Rochester, and later in the same year (1660) he was consecrated to the See of Peterborough. On the death of Bishop Sanderson in 1662 he was translated to Lincoln, and on the death of Bishop Wren in 1667 to Ely, where he remained until his death in 1675 at the age of eighty-four. He never married, and he enjoyed the reputation of great generosity in the use of his substance for works of piety and philanthropy.

No biographer has told the story of Laney's life, and for this reason little has come down to us of his personal history ; but (independently of his rapid promotion after the return of the King) that his reputation for scholarship and influence stood high among his contemporaries is vouched for by the fact that on two important occasions he was put forward to

represent the interests of the Church of England. When Parliamentarians and Royalists met for conference at Uxbridge in 1644 Laney was one of five divines chosen to represent the King. When the Savoy Conference was summoned in 1661 he was again a chosen representative of the Anglican Church. On the former occasion the result, or rather lack of result, was a foregone conclusion. As Thomas Fuller quaintly remarks, the Conference "was born with a dying countenance." Laney's experience was characteristic of the whole procedure. "Dr. Laney proffered to prove the great benefits which had accrued to God's Church in all ages by the government by Bishops, but the Scotch Commissioners would in no wise hear him; whereupon the Doctor was contentedly silent."¹ Laney had sense enough to see that any attempt to unfold his views would be waste of breath. The end of the Assembly was that it dwindled to nothing without ever being formally dissolved. On the second occasion on which Laney was called upon to represent his Church—namely, at the Savoy Conference—Richard Baxter was there to report him. He does so in the following words: "Bishop Laney of Peterborough was sometimes present, but did not speak much. Once, however, he spake too much. For Mr. Baxter, charging the episcopal Impositions as sinful, was accused of uncharitableness and boldness in that he thereby charged all the Churches of Christ with sin. Mr. Baxter asserted that there were many Reformed Churches free from such Impositions;² but, if there were not, he thought it no arrogance or uncharitableness to charge all the Church and the world with sin; for that in many things we offend all: and freedom from sin is the privilege of the Church triumphant. Bishop Laney here cried out that *justified persons have no sin, and are no sinners, because justification taketh it away*. The arguing of which left him in no small confusion."³

¹ "Church History," book xi, pp. 214, 215, First Edition, folio.

² Impositions—*e.g.*, kneeling to receive the elements, use of the sign of the Cross in baptism, wearing the surplice, consent to the doctrine of baptismal regeneration.

³ "Abridgment of Mr. Baxter's History of his Life and Times," vol. i., p. 173.

We are not altogether surprised at the Bishop's confusion. But this extract from Baxter's account of the Savoy Conference gives a good idea of the captious spirit in which the discussions were carried on, and affords a good specimen of the "little personal brangles" which Baxter notes as frequently taking place.

If we had no monument or record of Bishop Laney's life but the sermon he preached before the King in 1665, we should infer that Nonconformists had little to expect but repression and persecution at his hands. The discourse, even if it does not breathe threatening and slaughter, savours of dislike, scorn, antagonism. His text on the occasion was 1 Thess. iv. 11, "And that ye study to be quiet," a text that might have prompted the hope that an olive-leaf would be held forth from the pulpit. Any such hope would have been disappointed. Not peace, but a sword, would seem to be the gist of the sermon. With all the greater satisfaction, therefore, we learn that the bark of this learned prelate was worse than his bite. High Churchman though he was, he was distinguished above many of his brother Bishops for his courtesy and forbearance towards dissenters in the dioceses which he successively ruled. To quote his own words, he "looked through his fingers" at them. Instead of finding satisfaction in the vigorous execution of the Act of Uniformity and the penal laws passed with the view of putting down dissent, he carried out the policy of suppression with much reluctance; and his treatment of the Nonconforming community corroborates the verdict of history that, however great the suffering in very many individual cases, yet, speaking generally, "the leniency in carrying out the laws against the Nonconformists forms a pleasing contrast to the harshness of the laws themselves."¹

The sermon itself is interesting as the work of a man who, like so many of his colleagues on the Bench and of the clergy generally, was fully convinced not only that nonconformity was indefensible, but that it was a duty owing to Church and State

¹ Overton, "English Church, 1660-1714," p. 342.

alike to suppress it, if possible by persuasion, but, persuasion failing, by the strong arm of the "powers that be." Deeply we regret that the spirit of charity is so grievously violated by the Bishop's utterance. At the same time we must make allowance for human nature, and remember that the speaker looked back upon many years of personal loss from the temporary triumph of nonconformity. We must also bear in mind that the spirit of toleration was yet in its infancy, and that the Anglican Church of the Restoration was but using the selfsame weapons which had been employed with such severity against itself. It may be perfectly true, as historians assure us, that the House of Commons at this period was more intolerant than the House of Lords or even the Bench of Bishops, but there is no doubt that a large proportion of the clergy came back to their own with no mind to let bygones be bygones or return good for evil. It is not without significance that six months after this sermon was preached the tyrannous and oppressive "Five Mile Act" became a part of the law of the land.

After a very brief exposition and application of his text, the Bishop gets to his main point, which is to prove that dissent must be put down with a high hand. He begins by endorsing that part of the Act of Uniformity which asserts the principle of non-resistance,¹ urging that, however justifiable war may be when waged with a foreign foe, civil and domestic war can under no circumstances be lawful: "for the composing of all quarrels that may arise between subjects, God hath by His ordinance provided a remedy in princes and magistrates, from whom alone we are to seek for refuge or defence." Civil wars may not actually take their rise from questions of religion, but religion becomes inevitably mixed up with revolt; "therefore you shall scarce hear of a rebellion of late times in which religion did not carry the colours at least, if not command in

¹ The Act of Uniformity required that all incumbents, dignitaries, officers in universities, public schoolmasters, and private tutors, should subscribe a renunciation of the covenant, and a declaration of the unlawfulness of taking up arms against the Sovereign under any pretence. See Lingard, "History of England," vol. ix., p. 16.

chief." Schism is the great disturber of peace, and England will study to be quiet in vain, unless schism, which is only another word for dissent, can be effectually dealt with. Schism is the same to the Church that rebellion or treason is to the State. He appeals to the action of the ancient Church, with its *altare contra altare*, "which, in our modern dialect, is a conventicle against the Church."

He proceeds to deal with false principles which lie at the root of dissent, then with the true principles which should insure loyalty to the Church. And first of the false. Religion, says dissent, must be free, and all compulsion be avoided. The Bishop's reply to this rests on the fallacy of instituting an exact parallel between crime punishable by the law of the land and the adoption of religious views not authorized by the Church. As the one, so the other, must be corrected by punishment, for "*spes impunitatis est illecebra peccandi.*" And in support of his argument he borrows a weapon from the armoury of Rome, and quotes the words of our Lord: "Compel them to come in."

But, urges the schismatic, error in judgment is not of the nature of sin, "because no man be abler and wiser than God made him." Laney meets this by stating what he could not have proved—namely, that the *will* participates in the error, and this makes it sin. Proceeding, he deliberately repudiates the right of private judgment. Dissenters have no right to say that, not understanding certain tenets, they cannot hold them; "whereas, in truth, it is not required; they are not bound to know them, but believe them; for it is the mercy of God that the defect of our knowledge may be supplied by the knowledge of others; for to believe is to see with other men's eyes, as knowledge is with our own."

The Nonconformist raises the objection that the omission of religious forms and ceremonies is more severely punished than some foul and scandalous crimes. Are these schismatics, asks the Bishop with scorn, to be trusted with the balance of sins? "for we know how the market went for them, when they held the scale: obedience to the King and the laws and serving God

according to them were the great scandalous crimes." But is not the dissenter completely mistaken on this point? Earthly tribunals must make punishment commensurate with the mischievous results of conduct. "Treason and rebellion are more severely punished in the State than many other heinous crimes, because they destroy the very foundations of government and society." The same principle must be applied to schismatical disobedience, which undermines the very foundations of the Church.

But, pursues the dissenter, "if fewer articles and points of religion were defined, it would make more room in the Church for those that dissent." The Bishop agrees that "the Church-door should always stand open, *but for such as shall be fit to enter*; for it would be a dangerous thing to set any door so wide open to let in an enemy upon us. But to what purpose would we have the Church-door so wide open, when the gate of heaven is strait? Why should they be taken in here if they shall be turned back there? The Church is a city that is at unity in itself; so it is a city too that hath gates and walls to shut out others." Why was there no Richard Baxter or John Howe present to convict the preacher of shamelessly begging the question, while at the same time, in imitation of Rome, defining a Church outside which there is no salvation?

Surely, however, urges the dissenter, it would make for peace "if men only of moderate opinions were taken into employment in the Church." A strange request, replies the Bishop, for, according to the objector, "the man of moderate opinions is he that is part Churchman and part schismatic. . . . The truth is moderate opinions are a chimæra, a fancy; either nothing at all, or somewhat worse than nothing."

"The last, and most importunate, pretender to peace is *liberty of conscience*." This the preacher describes as "the most popular, and therefore the most dangerous, principle in the study of quiet." Is there not rather "a great deal of reason to restrain the conscience"? Think of "the mischief it doth to quiet when it is at liberty; for all the discord both in Church

and State arises from this false principle of the liberty of conscience. . . . Ask the schismatic why he joins not with the congregation of God's people?—he will tell you his conscience will not suffer him. Ask the rebel in the State why he takes up arms to the ruin of his King and country? and his conscience will answer for him, that it is God's cause, and it is to do Him service. Ask him again why he doth not repent of the mischief done by it? (for that they seldom do) and the conscience will serve that turn too. . . . Thus we see, the conscience, as it is used, doth not only open a door to sin, but shuts the very door to mercy—that is, repentance." Talk of the Church domineering over conscience! It is rather conscience that domineers over the Church. "If any list to see the conscience acting all this, we need go no further than our late times, when conscience was loose for a while: one would think Hell had broke loose, so filled, on a sudden, was the Church with sects and the commonwealth with confusion."

Having to his own satisfaction disposed of the false principles pleaded by the dissenter, Dr. Laney expatiates on the more excellent way, and shows the student of quiet how he may attain his object. But before argument he insists on fact. He reminds his hearers that the way to peace is the King's highway. "With the King's way I shall not meddle, as being fitter matter for our thankfulness than instruction, who hath already paved the way for us by wholesome laws for that purpose." And we think of the King sitting in the royal pew—the most irreligious monarch, perhaps, that ever sat on the throne of England—and who, always at heart a Papist, in his last hours was received into the Roman Church. If listening, he could scarcely have concealed the smile of the cynic.

Having thus summoned his most religious and gracious Sovereign to the defence of the truth, he proceeds to deal with some of the principles which will save men from the snares and perils of schism. Let a man study himself; let him cultivate a spirit of humility, and find out how little reason he has to trust himself and his own conclusions. Does not Scripture teach us

to obey our governors ? (Heb. xiii. 17). To dissent from "the whole eldership, all our governors jointly," is presumption indeed.

Further, let a man take heed lest he be deceived. "Truth is many times so like error, and error comes so near to truth, that he had need be careful and circumspect that shall distinguish them in some cases. Truth lies hid under many folds, especially the ambiguity of words—the common cheat of all students—who are more often *deceived* into opinions than *convinced*. It is not strange to see so many go astray from the Church, to whom the things of it are represented under the covert of false names, when they hear the government called tyranny ; obedience, slavery ; contempt, courage ; licence, liberty ; frenzy, zeal ; order, superstition."

Think, again, continues the Bishop, how often men are misled by prejudice, passion, or favour. "The sum and upshot of the faith of most that dissent is the credit given to some weak, private, ignorant instructor, whose person they have in admiration, without any great cause, God knows."

Once more he turns to Rome for an argument when he urges that for our own safety we shall be well advised to conform to Church doctrine and order, for if we err in following the Church, the chief part of the responsibility, and therefore guilt, lies at the door of the Church ; if, on the other hand, we err through following our own judgment, "the blame and guilt must of necessity, and inexcusably, fall upon ourselves."

In his concluding remarks the preacher appeals to history and experience. If anyone wants to know how precious a thing is quiet, let him think of England's near past during those disastrous years when England was in rebellion against her lawful King. "In troubles and dissensions every good thing goes backward, only mischief thrives. It fares with troubled times as with troubled waters ; all the filth, dirt, and mire, in the bottom then gets up to the top. What a deal of filth, dirt, and mire, what sordid stuff, was then got up to the top, and highest place of rule and command ! So much more are we obliged to study that peace and quiet which hath sunk them to

their proper place again—the bottom; and there let them lie if you would be quiet.”

The sermon closes with solemn words of warning to those who persist in standing outside the Anglican fold. Their punishment will be appropriate to their sin. When Christ left the world He bequeathed to it the legacy of peace—*My peace I leave with you*. “And when He comes again to judge the world, we have reason to look that He will call us to a reckoning how we use His legacy. And so He will too; for He is that Lord that, when He came and found some smiting their fellow-servants, commanded them to be cut asunder and have their portion with hypocrites, a punishment well fitted to their offence. There was a schism in the fault, and there shall be another schism in the punishment: they who sundered and divided from their brethren should themselves be cut asunder, and have their portion with the hypocrites.”

We think of such men as Philip and Matthew Henry, Richard Baxter and John Howe, and wonder whether Benjamin Laney, Bishop of Lincoln, with an honest and clear conscience, pronounced on these men and their like the doom of the hypocrite. The Nonconformist might well have asked who, in the sight of the God of truth, at that particular period of history were smiting their fellow-servants.

The sermon extends to forty-two pages, and the briefest outline has here been given. Its interest chiefly lies in the typical example it affords of the arguments which an acute and conscientious Churchman summoned to his support in penalizing fellow-Christians who differed from him in the interpretation of Scripture and ecclesiastical history. The general impression it leaves upon the mind is the same that is made by the clever advocate in a law court—it is a conspicuous instance of special pleading—specious, ingenious, altogether one-sided, only waiting for an equally clever exponent on the other side to show how illogical as well as unfair is the statement of the case. “He that is first in his own cause seemeth just, but his neighbour cometh and searcheth him.”