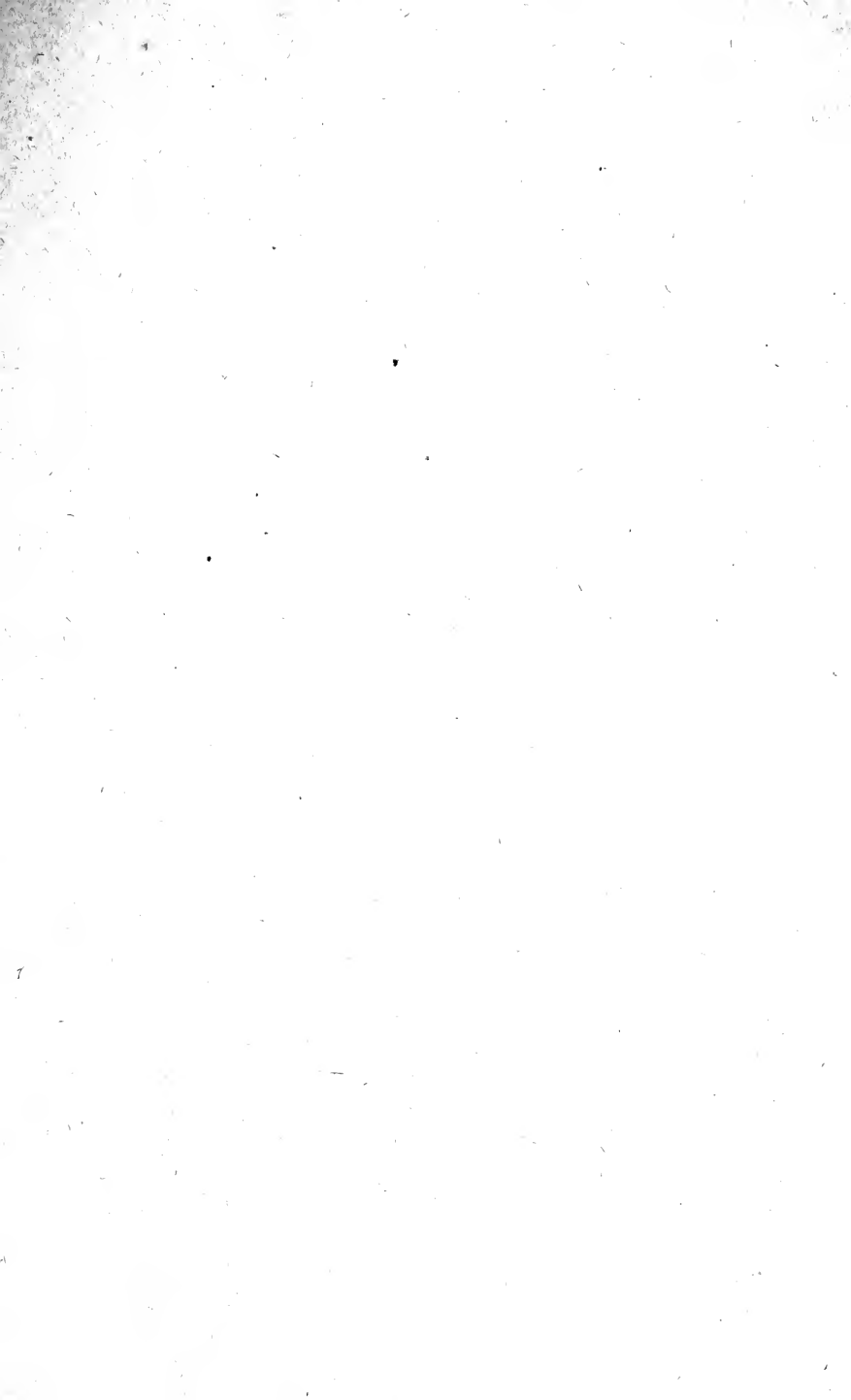






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A PLEA FOR
CHURCH DEFENCE;

OR,

WHAT HAVE THE DISSENTERS TO OFFER
AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR THE CHURCH WHICH THEY
SEEK TO DESTROY?

BY A

DISSENTING MINISTER.

A LECTURE DELIVERED IN THE CORN EXCHANGE, PRESTON,
FEBRUARY 10TH, 1873,

BY

THE REV. ROBERT CHRISTISON,

INDEPENDENT MINISTER, ORRELL, NEAR WIGAN, LANCASHIRE.

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[ENTERED AT STATIONERS' HALL.]



LECTURE.

Mr. Chairman, ladies, and gentlemen,—I suppose it is not a very usual thing to find a Dissenting Minister on a Church of England platform, and that, too, for the purpose of lecturing in defence of the Church. Allow me, therefore, at the outset to offer a word or two by way of explanation.

Although through a sort of concurrence of circumstances, which delicate health had much to do with, I came to be associated with the Dissenters, I cannot say that ever I have been a very hard and fast one, *i. e.*, after the modern English type of them. The Dissenterism of the Baxters, and Owens, and Henries, and Howes of other days I could sympathise with, but the Dissenterism of Mr. Miall and his followers I do not and never could agree with.

Moreover, I have of late been more carefully examining the whole of this subject. I have had my eyes open on the working of Dissent around me for the last ten years, and have learned a good deal of what it is elsewhere in this country; and while I freely grant that Dissenters do, and have done, much good in their way, and that there are a great many excellent people among them—people for which our country and our Christianity have cause to be proud of—people from whom I myself have experienced personal kindness, and whom I will regard with feelings of gratitude and respect as long as I live—yet I have arrived at the conviction—the honest conviction—that the principles on which their system is founded are erroneous, and that the policy which so many of them are at present pursuing towards the Established Church is altogether wrong—that it is unwise and rash, unfair and unjust, unprovoked, and uncalled for, and that were it carried out, would ere long bring about a religious state of things in this country so sad that I believe many of the wisest and the best people among themselves, would be the first to deplore.

With these convictions I feel it a duty to oppose them in their attack upon the National Church, and this all the more that the system which they have to offer as a substitute for an Endowed Established Church is so faulty and defective, as I will this evening endeavour to show. In the third place, if in what follows I may seem a little severe on Dissent, my only apology can be this—that were I to tell you one-half the suffering that I and my family have quietly and for years endured under that system, and this simply and solely because I honourably stood my ground against the tyranny of a few imperious leading Dissenters, who attempted to trample my rights into the dust, and outraged their own professed principles—were I to tell you this, your only surprise would be, how I could possibly deal so leniently with a system under which I had suffered so much. But enough of these personal allusions, they are not agreeable, and I shall not trouble you with another to-night. I now proceed with my lecture, which is entitled—

“A Plea for Church Defence; or, what have the Dissenters to offer in room of the Church which they seek to destroy?”

It is in vain then, for Churchmen any longer to shut their eyes to the fact that there is a deep and wide-spread hostility to the Church, both as a Church, and especially as an Established Church existing in this land. And here, at the outset, it may not be amiss to take a glance at the various parties of which the Church's foes are composed.

First, there is a large class of persons, who know nothing, or next to nothing, and care as little, about religion at all, but who have an average intelligence about other things. They seldom, or never, darken the door of any place of worship. Religion to them is a thing of no account whatever. But these people, while they may look with no favour on the Dissenting chapel, look with a jealous eye upon the Church. They have a sort of idea, however erroneous, that the Church is somehow eating up a good deal of the fat of the land, which, as they think, might go for another and better purpose. Now these people, while not the first to move in the matter, will be ready enough to follow and join in the cry, “Down with the Church,” and apply her revenues to other purposes.

Then there is a large class of infidels and sceptics of all sorts—especially in our cities and large towns—men who deny the truth of the Bible, and hate the very name of Christ and Christianity, and who would rejoice to have the opportunity of joining any class of men to pull down the Established Church. These, the enemies of all religion, have their organized societies, paid agents, and publications, for disseminating their pernicious principles all over the country. They are bold and active, as they are unscrupulous and profane, and headed by such men as Bradlaugh and others, these men will work with a will to destroy the Church, in order to destroy the Christian religion itself. Then there is the whole body of the Roman Catholics. Sorely grieved that their own religion is not the established religion of this country, they will almost to a man join in the crusade against the Church. Unfortunately, too, there are some within the Church itself, who, whatever their motives may be, are most unwisely, and I should think sinfully, taking part with her enemies. Then lastly, there are the Dissenters, or Nonconformists, who form by far the larger and more important class of the assailants of the Church. These are the leaders in the attack, and seem to have taken an oath that they will never lay down their arms till their object is gained, and the Church is broken into fragments and laid in ruins.

The enemies of the Church are therefore composed of a strange medley and mixture of people, of all shades of opinion and religious creed, and people of no creed, together with all the infidels and open enemies of religion in the land. But while sadly disagreeing amongst themselves over most things, yet just like Pilate and Herod of old, who, being at enmity between themselves, became good friends over the condemnation and crucifixion of Jesus Christ; so these people—the Dissenters and Roman Catholics, and all the waifs and infidels of the land—are ready to shake hands and make friends over the disestablishment and ruin of the National Church. This being the case, surely it is time, and more than time, that the friends of the Church everywhere were also bestirring themselves and putting on their armour of defence, for the attack has already commenced.

I would not attempt to defend the Church, nor would I advise any of her friends to do it, simply on the ground that she is an

old and venerable Institution, or because I believe her to be altogether perfect or anything like it. Some institutions are old and venerable, but are neither true nor good, and as for perfection, in any institution that men in their imperfect state have got much to do with, it is in vain to look for it beneath the sun. But I would defend the Established Church for these reasons: First, because I believe her to be a true Church of Christ. 2nd, because that with all her faults I believe that she has been and is still one of the greatest blessings as well as the chief glory of England. And 3rd, because I believe that to disestablish and disendow her would be one of the greatest mistakes that the people of this country ever committed, and nothing less than a great national calamity.

Notwithstanding the tendency towards Romanism on the part of some, and towards infidelity on the part of others of her ministers, which is deeply to be deplored: yet there can be no question, that for the last 300 years the Church of England has been, and is still, the great bulwark against both Popery and infidelity in this land; and there can be as little question that she has been, and is still, the great Protestantizer and Christianizer of the mass of the people of this country, and at the present time is more alive, doing more good, and more for the glory of God and the salvation of men than ever, and is therefore more than ever worthy of the countenance and support of all good men.

To disestablish and disendow her would be to rob her of her rightful inheritance, given at various times by her own children to enable her to hold forth the lessons of Christianity to the people in every parish and corner of this land, and that the poor might have the Gospel preached to them without money and without price. It would be to rend her in pieces, and reduce the fragments to so many more additional sects in the land, of which there are far too many already. It would, moreover, mean that by and by thousands and tens of thousands, if not millions of the people in the parishes, villages, and rural districts of the country, and the poorer and more densely populated parts of our towns, would be left without the means of grace and religious instruction altogether—left to relapse and live and die in a state of practical heathenism.

Supposing, then, that the Church were disestablished and des-

troyed, let us see what the Dissenters have to offer the people of England as a substitute for all the benefits and blessings she is now the means of bestowing. Surely they have, or at least they ought to have, something at all events equally good if not better, or it is simply outrageous in them to attempt to pull down and sweep away the National Church. When I speak of Dissenters you will understand me to mean chiefly the Independents and Baptists, for these are out of sight the more clamorous and formidable enemies of the Church. As for the Methodist bodies, who are doing ten-fold more than the Independents and Baptists to reclaim the poor and the ignorant from vice and heathenism, they are taking but little or no part in this matter at all. As a matter of course the Dissenters consider their own system better than yours, and no doubt would like to see it embraced by you and by all. Let us see then what they have to offer.

In the first place they have to offer you what is called the "Voluntary Principle." Now this voluntary principle has a very wide signification, and in the lips and writings of debaters and agitators frequently means something like this:—They believe, or at least they say they believe, that if it is a sin to have an Established Church at all, seemingly forgetting that for some 1,000 or 1,500 years the Jewish Church of old existed as an Established Church, by the express appointment and command of God himself. Nevertheless, they have somehow discovered that an Established Church is a sin, and altogether wrong; that it is wrong for the Government of a nation, as such, to give any pecuniary support to the cause of religion in any shape or form whatever, and that it is wrong for a Christian Church to accept any such aid to support the ministers of the gospel and promote the glory of God in a land, or in the world, Yea, this voluntary principle says that it is wrong to give any of the nation's money to help to support the nation's schools, *i. e.*, if the Bible is read in these schools, and the first principles of religion are taught to the nation's children. One would have thought that a little of the nation's money could not have been given for a better or nobler purpose than this; but the voluntary principle says no, and therefore opposes it with all its might.

But this voluntary principle goes a step yet farther and it says

that it is wrong for the Government of a nation, as such, to take any notice of religion at all, "that religion has nothing to do with the State, and the State has nothing to do with religion." The Voluntaries seem not to understand that the world itself, with all its states and nations, belong to the Lord as well as the Church, and that surely the first duty of every Government of a nation where God is known, is to acknowledge Him as "King of Kings and Lord of Lords," and to govern in His fear and according to His word. But the voluntary principle says no.

Now, if this is not an atheistical sort of principle it certainly looks very like it, for it is an ignoring of God and all His claims in the highest councils and tribunals of the land, and in all the nation's actings as a nation. According to this principle, so far as the official actings of the Queen, Parliament, judges and magistrates of our land are concerned, this might be a nation of heathens or atheists, without either the knowledge or the fear of God in it. Where this principle was first got I know not, but there is one Book from which I am sure it was not got, and that is the Bible. It has no place there, unless to be reprobated and emphatically condemned.

Then voluntarism, and perhaps in its more ordinary sense (for it has two or three senses, or there are two or three kinds, or parts of it), means, that as religion ought not in any sense or degree to be supported by the State, no, nor even as it appears, by the bequests of our ancestors, or the property set apart from time immemorial for that purpose, but solely and wholly by the voluntary or free will offerings of those that care, and are able to pay for it, or on the "free trade" principle of demand and supply.

Well, I am one of those who believe that religion is a thing worth paying for, and so did all those who centuries ago voluntarily gave their property to endow the church; but then what of the thousands and tens of thousands all over the land, and over all the world, who do not consider religion a thing worth paying for, and to whom, unless they are to be left to live and die in vice and heathenism, the gospel must be sent and offered to them without money and without price, at the cost of others than themselves. What of these? A time may indeed come when there may be no need for endowed churches—a time when the spirit of true religion

will so pervade all classes of society, and the tide of liberality flow so freely and fully that there will be enough and to spare for the support of all the ministers and ordinances of religion, and to carry on all the works of Christian beneficence and missionary enterprise without the aid of anything either from the State, or from the present rightful heritage of the Church. I could conceive of such a state of things as this. But the Dissenters themselves being witnesses, we are yet a long, long way from it at least in this land—the richest land in the world.

The Dissenters have now had a long and a fair trial of the voluntary system. It ought by this time to be nearly if not altogether in its perfection with them. What then has it done? Has its success really been so great as to make it wise and safe to at once sweep away the endowments of the National Church and leave the whole Christianity of the country to its mercy? It has erected a great many chapels of one sort or other, and a number of schools, that is true. It is, however, one thing to build a chapel or school—a spasmodic effort on the part of a few individuals in almost any locality will accomplish that; but it is quite another and a very different thing from year to year, to maintain in decency and comfort, a minister for the chapel and a teacher for the school. What then has the voluntarism of the voluntaries done in the way of maintaining its own ministers? It has done this: it has given some few of them something like a prize—a £700, £800, or £1,000 a year. It has given perhaps a third of them, what might be called a respectable living, while the remaining two-thirds it has kept and is still keeping at a point next to starvation itself, or at least, on a pittance so miserably small that it is simply impossible for men to live in any degree of comfort and respectability as becomes teachers of religion; of this there can be no doubt whatever.

Then what has the voluntarism of the Dissenters done in the numberless localities and districts, especially of the poorer sort both in town and country, whose populations have outgrown the provision of the Church, and which were perfectly open to their enterprise? It has simply all but let them alone; it flees from such localities and leaves them to the Church, or to the Methodists, or a prey to the evil one himself, because they won't pay. Yea,

probably nearly one-third of the chapels it has built are without ministers altogether, and this simply and solely because there are not means to support them, not even at the starving point. There are men enough to fill them all, if the voluntaries would only out with the money. Such an idea of the voluntary system, the all sufficiency of which the Dissenters so frequently boast, and which they have to offer as a substitute for the sure provision which the endowments of the Church make for her ministers and ordinances even in the poorest corners of the land, and but for which the voluntaryism of the Dissenters would have left in benighted heathenism to this day, if not to the end of time.

Let us now look at the system of Church policy or Government which they have to offer you. It is what is called "Congregational or Independent," *i.e.*, each chapel, congregation, or society of Dissenters stands, or at least ought to stand by itself, independent of all others. It manages all its own affairs, elects and instals its ministers and officers, and each member or the society, old and young, learned and ignorant, wise and foolish, have an equal right to vote and decide on all matters, from the election of the minister, what he is to receive as his hire, whether he is to be retained or dismissed, down to the sweeping of the chapel, and who is to do it, and from this vote of the society there is no appeal. It may be right or it may be outrageously wrong, as it often is, but no matter. It is the voice or decision of the Church, they will tell you, and this means much the same, as if it were the voice of God, and therefore it is decisive and final.

Now this system of congregationalism or independency might do very well in a society or world of angels, but unfortunately for it, this is a world of men, and not of angels; and unfortunately too, the angelic spirit is by no means not much more prominent in the societies of Dissenters than amongst other people. I have said that the vote of the majority is called the voice or decision of the Church, which would seem to mean something of very serious import if we did not happen to know a little more particularly about it. Well, this voice or decision of the Church in the great majority of cases just means the voice or votes of one, two, or three dozen, or score of people, often by no means very remarkable for either their intelligence or piety, headed or presided over by some well to do

grocer or draper, who generally manages to get things very much his own way, or there is rough work, and to whom the minister, if there is one, must be ready to bow, or it will not be so well for him.

No doubt in larger and well to do congregations, numbers of which are found chiefly in the larger towns, and where there are a number of sensible persons, the voice of the Church may have a little more sense and importance in it. But in every case it just means the vote or decision of the majority of each separate society entirely by itself. Each congregation or society has the fullest liberty to carry out its own views or notions of doctrine, worship, and discipline, and everything else without being amenable in any degree to any authority whatever for its doings, be they right or be they wrong. This then is Independency, or Congregationalism pure and simple. It is the principle on which all the Independent and Baptist, and a number of other Dissenting places of worship is founded.

Such being the principle or theory on which English Dissent is founded, let us next advert for a little to its practical working. As each separate congregation, whether great or small, is considered a complete Church in itself, and can make or break its own laws at pleasure, and as each member of the society, even the most ignorant and stupid, has and claims an equal right and power with the most intelligent and discreet, as might be expected, wranglings and heart burnings are hardly ever at an end in these societies. A Church Meeting, *e.g.*, is held say once a month. The members assemble and proceed to business, and too often the affair is something like this:—Jones, the shoemaker, must have things his way, and Hardy, the draper, must have things his way, and Williams, the tailor, sides with Jones, and Wilkes, the grocer, sides with Hardy, and Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Hardy are exchanging anything but kindly looks, and Miss Meek, the dressmaker, and Miss Moses, the confectioner, are winking and smiling to one another—and so these dear brethren and sisters are all at it in right earnest. Such is but a too faithful representation of many, many of these Dissenting Church meetings.

Although their congregations, at least the majority of them are, comparatively speaking, but handfuls, yet they generally manage to form two or three different cliques or parties in each, and

too often over the most wretched trifle they will fall out, and then the contention is for the mastership. Clique against clique, and party against party, they will sometimes insult and abuse one another in such a manner as would disgrace the market-place. In course of time matters are again made up, only, however, to again by and bye fall out over some other affair; and such is the history of vast numbers of these Dissenting places of worship during their whole existence. I have said that after they have thrashed each other to their hearts content, it may be for months or years before the rival parties agree to make matters up, and work together again; but often they never. A ten, twenty, or thirty of them will bid the others good bye, as if in sworn hate for ever. They will then go, as if for the glory of God and the good of the souls of men, and set up a new interest or chapel of their own, and christen it Salem, Zion, Bethel, Ebenezer, or some Scriptural name, and then the two parties will go on in holy rivalry, speaking ill of each other so long as they live, and hand down their mutual ill feeling as a legacy to their children when they die. Now this is no caricature of Dissent that I am giving, it is no false report that I am raising, as Dissenters themselves well enough know. I shall doubtless be called, yea, I am called already, anything but a gentleman, for publishing it; but I hold it to be but right that Church people should know the sort of thing that the Dissenters have to offer you in place of your Church which they seek so earnestly to see disestablished and destroyed. They say all manner of hard things, and not a few false things against the Church, and therefore they have no reason to complain if a little of the truth is told about themselves.

Another thing that deserves notice in the system of Dissent, is the position and standing of its ministers. Each congregation being independent of the others, as a matter of course the minister is all but entirely in the hands of the people. It is they alone that give him his position, so that at any time, or under any pretext they can deprive him of it, or render it so unhappy that often he is only but too glad to give it up of his own accord, even though poverty and want are staring him and his family in the face. The truth is, that an Independent or Baptist minister has hardly any standing at all, or if he has, it is the most insecure and precarious

of any class of men I know. Instead of being placed in a position in which he can faithfully and fearlessly proclaim the truth of God without the fear of suffering from the consequences, as the ministers of the Established Church happily are, and as every minister of religion ought to be, he poor man must take good care what he says and how he says it, least he offend his hearers, and especially the lords of his congregation, and they be revenged on him, either in the way of castigating him, reducing his income, or giving him notice to quit, a thing by no means unknown among them.

The Dissenting minister is regarded very much as the mere paid agent of the society, whose services may be retained or dispensed with at pleasure. The Scriptural idea of the position of a minister of Christ, is that he is over the people in the Lord, to teach, rule, warn, and rebuke them when needful, according to the word of God; and the people's part is to hold him in honour, to obey and submit themselves to him according to the same divine word. But amongst the Dissenters, instead of the minister being over the people he is actually under them, so that the divine order is just completely reversed—that instead of the shepherd guiding and ruling the flock, with them, it is the sheep that guide and rule the poor shepherd—yea, and very often the goats, much more than the sheep.

Such being the Dissenting minister's position, if he is a man at all, he sometimes cannot help giving offence in speaking the truth; for the lords of his congregation are seldom all of them angels. But then woe be to him, when the truth cuts a proud hypocritical sinner to the quick. This often seals a faithful Dissenting Pastor's doom. Then when tyrannized over, and unjustly and cruelly wronged, as he often is, by the members of his flock, there is simply no help for the Dissenting minister. He has neither Bishop, Council, Presbytery, Synod, nor law nor justice of any kind to appeal to, or take his part. He must just quietly submit, and in the silence and bitterness of his own soul, or the bosom of his own family, bear it all, without uttering a complaint. Or should he be provoked to speak out and tell the world his wrongs, then he is immediately a marked man through the whole denomination, or the lords at head-quarters will strike off his name from

the list altogether, and he is but too glad to betake himself to some other employment. Or, if he is advanced in life and fit for nothing else, then he longs for the time to lie down in the grave to be away from his troubles and tormentors.

Through the merciless tyranny and ill usage to which they are often subjected, many good and noble-hearted men in the Dissenting ministry, are actually robbed of all their manliness and independence of mind, and reduced to the pitiable condition of a set of crushed, downtrodden, browbeaten serfs, and not a few are sent with broken hearts to untimely graves. This is strong language, but I tell you it is not one whit stronger than true. God knows, and scores and hundreds of Dissenting ministers in England, in their sad and bitter experience know, that it is but too true, although they hardly dare even to whisper it.

Under such a state of things as this, the constant removing from one place to another on the part of Dissenting ministers need hardly excite any surprise. Although when first settled at a place, the understanding is, that all things going well, the settlement is for life; yet through the quarrels and persecutions, that are so rife among their flocks, the average duration of their ministry in one place cannot be more than five or six years, and in multitudes of cases not more than two, three, or four years. Lest it might be supposed that I am giving an unfair representation of the state of things, I will just give an illustration of the truth of what I have said, from the locality with which I am best acquainted.

In the town of Wigan and its immediate neighbourhood, there are fourteen Dissenting places of worship, or ministerial charges. Well, in seven and a half years' time, with the exception of my own, I saw every one of these Dissenting pulpits emptied of their occupants, and several of them twice over. I saw eighteen removals of ministers from thirteen of the chapels, and only two of these by the hand of death; and it is known to me that not a few of these men were "of all men most miserable," before they left.

As to how the Dissenters sometimes go about the work of getting quit of their ministers when they take a spite at them, or want to get a fresh hand, the following cases will give an idea:—A respectable elderly minister was going about his duties as usual,

with no other thoughts in his mind than that all was right between him and his flock. One evening, however, when the old gentleman went to a neighbouring chapel for the purpose of installing a young brother in office (I saw him there), that same evening the members of his beloved flock quietly took the opportunity of meeting together in his absence, and passed a resolution to the effect that his services were no longer desired.

Another case, the truth of which was vouched to me by a neighbouring minister, is as follows:—A minister in the prime of life was settled in a chapel, at which a rich man who drove his carriage attended, and who of course was the lord of the concern. The minister had laboured away to the best of his ability for some time, seemingly with very considerable success, and had no idea but that all things were going on well with him. One evening, however, when the rich man had invited him to tea, and the ladies had withdrawn and left them alone, the rich man coolly told the minister “that as Mrs. So and So (meaning his own wife) felt that she was not quite so well edified with his sermon as she could wish, he had better take his notice and leave as early as convenient.

Now just fancy what a position is this for men sustaining the office of ministers and ambassadors of Christ to be placed in!—a position which is not safe for a single week, hardly even a day, for on any day a squabble may arise in the Dissenting chapel which is sure in one way or other to involve the minister, and perhaps end either in his abrupt dismissal or in rendering his position so utterly unbearable that he is but too glad to escape from it of his own accord.

Another thing that here deserves notice is that now-a-days, Dissenting ministers must be strong political partizans, or they are almost nowhere. The quiet, earnest, godly men among them—the men who attend only to their spiritual duties, and who shrink from appearing and speechifying on political platforms—as a general rule are but of small account in their ranks; whereas the noisy men—the men who accustom themselves to pour forth from pulpit and platform bitter invectives against the Church—soon become men of mark, and stars of the first magnitude in the horizon of Dissent. These are the men who, for the most part,

find their way into all the best paid pulpits, and other places of influence and power in their denominations, and then when they get there (as in various ways they have in their power) these men often become nothing less than hard, imperious, unmerciful tyrants over their poorer and less fortunate brethren, as hundreds of these brethren feel and know. The hard, unjust, and cruel things that the rulers of Dissent, both lay and clerical, are capable of doing would to me have been utterly incredible but for my too certain knowledge of them, and I may add my too severe experience of them.

I have said that Dissenting ministers must now become political partizans, or they may reckon on being almost nowhere; they are driven to it by the principal men in their congregations, many of them, I believe, against their will. The truth—the sad truth—is this, that the political element is now fostered to such an extent that many congregations of Dissenters are becoming nothing better than a sort of mere half religious, half political clubs. The earnest piety that characterised many of the Dissenters of former days is evidently fast dying out, and a state of things setting in among them which would hold but poor prospects indeed for the future religious condition of this country were it to be shaped and fixed by them.

Were those worthy men, the Baxters, and Owens, and Howes, and Henries of other days again to appear amongst us, they would most assuredly disown the great bulk of the Dissenters of this generation as their representatives, yea, they would accuse and condemn them as being traitors to their principles, as most certainly they are in the course they are pursuing towards the National Church. These men, the brightest ornaments of Non-conformity, held fast and firm by the principles of a national establishment of religion, and the duty of kings and rulers as such, to uphold and promote the interests of the true religion among their subjects, and thus honour and obey “Him who is king of kings and lord of lords.” Alas, that those who claim to be their children should have degenerated so far from their piety and principles.

Just fancy then the state of things which those reckless men who are crying for disestablishment and disendowment would

introduce, and then judge if it would be for the good of religion and the good of this country to sweep away the National Church. We have referred to the principles on which their whole system is founded, and have seen something of its practical working in their own hands. It is the worst suited imaginable, either for preserving uniformity of doctrine, supplying religious ordinances to the mass of the people, or for promoting that peace, harmony, and concord which ever ought to characterise those who profess the religion of Christ. From the very constitution of their societies, quarrellings and heartburnings are hardly ever at an end, nor need ever be expected, and for this it is the system more than the people that is to blame.

They object to the Church they say because there is deadly error as well as God's truth taught from numbers of her pulpits. A pity they should have such a thing to say—a pity there should be a single pulpit in the Church of England from which anything but the pure truth of God's word should be heard, and a pity that such reforms had not long ago been effected, by which unsound ministers could have been more easily reached, and either corrected or expelled from the Church altogether, and it is fain to be hoped that this may ere long be the case.

But then, if the Dissenters themselves came with clean hands in this matter, or anything like it, their objection might have had some more sense in it. The fact, however, is that there is hardly a vagary in religious doctrine under the sun which you will not find among themselves. Their hands are anything but clean in the matter of doctrine.

Or again, what to them is, perhaps, the most serious objection of all, is this. They say that so long as there is an Established Church, there is not religious equality, and this inequality is an injustice to them which they cannot bear. From this it would almost appear as if they meant to take up the programme of the old Chartists and Socialists and level all distinctions. Now what does this religious equality really mean? If I understand, it means something like this—they are envious beyond measure at the respectable and independent position in which the ministers of the Established Church are happily placed; and they want to see them levelled down to the same dependent and humiliating condition in

which they place their own, and this, so far as I can understand it, is just about the sum and substance of the sore grievance of the religious inequality. Now, I would humbly submit that this great question of a National Endowed Church, ought never to be treated on such low, I had almost said unworthy grounds, as a question of mere equality as regards a number of rival sects, goading one another almost to atoms and to religious death ; but rather as a great question of religious justice to the mass of the people—the toiling millions of our British population—whose rights and everlasting interests seem to have little or no place in the programme of those who have raised the cry of religious equality.

Then they would banish the Bible from the National Schools, which, so far as they are concerned, would leave the great mass of the youth of our land, to grow up without any knowledge of the God that made them, and the Saviour that redeemed them, which most assuredly is the highest and most important part of all right education, and especially the education that should be given in a professed Christian land. They would pull down and rend in pieces the National Church, which so far as they are concerned, would soon leave millions upon millions of the people in the parishes, villages, and rural districts of the country, and the densely populated poorer parts of our towns, without the stated means of grace altogether ; or to be ministered to only by the stray local preacher, the shoemakers, drapers, and grocers of the towns, or the still more untutored, though well enough meaning, coal miners and day labourers of the country.

This in fact then, is just the sort of religious provision which a leading Nonconformist minister was not long ago recommending for the villages and rural districts. Finding that the wealthier congregations in the towns selfishly expended nearly all the money they raised upon themselves, and left the country and poorer congregations to sink or swim for aught that they cared or did to help them—in other words, finding that their boasted voluntarism either would not, or could not, supply means to support ministers in any degree of decency and comfort in villages and rural districts, he recommended that the thing should not be attempted at all ; that, instead of having ministers in such places as these, that cannot afford to decently support them, the members of the nearest

town churches who had got the gift of holding forth, should go out on the Sabbath days, and undertake the religious instruction and pastoral care of our village and rural populations. In this age of progress, what a nice exchange would this be for the regular ministrations of religion by an educated resident minister of the Gospel.

Now, while I have no doubt at all, that many of these lay preachers are good men, if not much learned men—who out of love to God really desire to do good to their fellow men. Yet there can be as little doubt that there are not a few rather strange fish among them—men who, it is feared, would be quite as anxious to draw the villagers' custom to their shops during the week, as to impart spiritual instruction to them on the Sabbath. As an illustration of what some of these lay preachers can do, what I am about to tell you will give an idea. In a Dissenting place of worship, with which I am but too well acquainted, a preaching draper was one day officiating, and, as the people themselves told me, when he descended from the pulpit at the close of the Sabbath evening service, what did he do think you? He actually displayed and offered for sale certain goods which he had brought with him and, if my memory serves me right, several bargains were struck that evening.

To the preaching laymen, then, it is proposed to hand over the religious instruction and spiritual care of the millions of our village and rural population, as the best provision that voluntaryism can make for them. So much, then, for the supposed sufficiency of the voluntary system, or rather so much for its confessed failure, and hence so much stronger the reason for upholding and defending the Established Church.

We are frequently asked to look at America, and there behold the triumphs of voluntaryism in the multitudes of its thriving and overflowing congregations, and the magnificence of its Bible, Tract, and Missionary Societies, &c. Now we are quite aware of all this and rejoice in it. But then how little do we hear of the millions upon millions of the people of that land who are known to be living entirely estranged from all religious ordinances—multitudes of them living in localities where no place of worship is within their reach, and hardly ever hearing a gospel sermon in their lives—

and multitudes more of them repelled from the existing churches by the system of high pew rents, because they have no endowments.

Without wearying you with a multitude of extracts from American publications, showing the sad state of things there, I shall just give you a few sentences from a writer not long ago in the *New York Christian Examiner*, and who may be supposed to know something about what he is writing. Referring to the working of the voluntary system in the towns of New England, that part of America which has been considered by far the best part of it as respects religion and morality, and for this reason, too, because till within the last forty or fifty years religion there had all the advantages of being established by law and endowed out of the taxes of the country. Speaking only of the towns, and it is well known that the country districts and villages are in a much worse condition, he says, "The voluntary system has been tried in our New England towns—tried but imperfectly and in part—tried under a thousand helping influence of old association—tried in a community unusually sober, intelligent, and self-restrained—tried for a generation only; and already, as we have seen, it has gone far to undermine the institutions fortified by centuries of sacred and unchallenged custom, and renders the future extremely doubtful. The multitude of petty sects are goading one another to atoms, not only logically but also financially. What started in religious fervour, or passion, or pique, will scarcely command the personal sacrifice of a second generation to keep it going. These voluntary institutions at the best secure only for a few individuals—and those the richest, the most privileged and cultured—something of that privilege which should be the aim of religion to bestow upon all. The churches supported by exorbitant pew rents, and fitted up like splendid parlours for the comfort and luxury of the rich, existing side by side with the unchurched masses, are at once the most gorgeous and painful proofs that the voluntary system has failed to do its work." Look to America, say our voluntary and disestablishment friends. Yes, we reply, and look ye also to America, one glance of which might well suffice to close your mouths for ever.

Such then is an idea of the sort of thing which the Dissenters have to offer the people of England, in room of the Church which they are

seeking to disestablish and destroy. If they had had anything decent or feasible to offer—anything equally good, or better, than that which they wish to take away, one might not have wondered quite so much at their conduct. But to come forward with such an affair as they have to offer, their proposal is simply outrageous, and indicates a recklessness and want of enlightened patriotism, not to speak of religion, that is truly astonishing, as it is lamentable.

If for nothing else, one wonders how for very shame they could hold up their heads and ask the people and Government of this country to sweep away the Established Church—a Church which is dear to what may be called the head, the heart, and the feet of the English nation—and which at the present time is more alive than ever to the great work of preaching the everlasting Gospel to the mass of the people at home, and sending it abroad among the millions of the heathen in foreign lands—a Church under whose shadow many even from among themselves are glad to take refuge from the bitter animosities, the strife, anarchy, and tyranny that ever reign in the ranks of Dissent. I say the wonder is how that for very shame, and under pretence, too, of love to God and good to man, these people could hold up their heads and join with all the Papists and infidels of the land to clamour and agitate for the overthrow of the National Church. I only trust the people of this country will have more sense, more patriotism, and religion, too, than ever listen to their overtures and clamours.

I have already spoken of the practical failure of the voluntary system, after a long trial and a fair field. I have referred to the many localities and moral waste of our land unprovided for by the Church, and invitingly open to the Dissenters to take up and display the triumphs of their voluntarism, but which they have failed to do. I have referred to the failure of the system in so far as one half or two-thirds of Dissenting ministers are doomed to live on salaries so small as can hardly afford the necessaries and decencies of life, and often received by them, too, under circumstances of the most humiliating character—salaries so miserably small that the coal miners and mechanics of our land would utterly scorn to accept as the price of their daily labour.

I have referred to the fact that not less than one fourth of their chapels all over the country, and especially in villages and rural

districts, and places where they are most needed, are without ministers altogether, and this simply and solely because of the want of means to support them. They have men in abundance to fill them all, but the everlasting cry and lament is the want of means to support them.

Now, if all this does not prove something; if it does not proclaim, as with trumpet voice, in the ears of all men, and especially in the ears of Churchmen, that the voluntary system is a failure; if it does not do this, it can only be said that the logic of facts is no longer understood. And all this failure, too, must be patent to the eyes of those who are crying for disestablishment. They cannot be ignorant of it, and, therefore, we say the more shame to them for seeking to pull down the Church and bring about the same pitiable state of things over all the land as exist among themselves.

They say too, that it is for the good of religion, and the good of the Church herself, that they are seeking to disestablish and disendow her. It would be a strange and a new way to do a man good, to throw him to the ground and rob him of his property; and it would be quite as strange a way to do the Church good to take away her property, the very means by which she is enabled to maintain her ministers and their families in decency and comfort, and uphold the ordinances of religion in every parish of the land. The longer I live and the more I see and know, the less do I believe that the great majority of those who are crying for disestablishment are actuated by pure religious principle at all. There may be a mistaken few; I simply don't believe there are many.

At all events, so far as the Dissenters are concerned—and these form the great majority of the assailants of the Church—with such a manifest failure of the voluntary system in their own hands, before their own eyes, and before the eyes of the people of this country, it appears to me that for the sake of decency alone, they ought to be the last people in the world to attempt to tear down the framework of the Church, and sweep away the material support of her ministrations.

As Dr. Chalmers said many years ago,—“ We must first behold the moral triumphs of voluntarism in the many surplus localities

which are before our eyes, ere we can consent to give up the whole territory into their hands ; and do think that men who have evinced so little their power to build, should be somewhat less fiery and precipitate in their zeal to destroy.”

To disestablish and disendow the Church—at least until things are in a very different condition than they are at present, or are likely to be, perhaps, on this side the millenium—would be one of the greatest mistakes that the people and Parliament of this country ever committed. It would manifestly be both a great national sin, and a great national calamity.

By all means let the Church be reformed where this is needed, so as to adapt her more to the altered state of society, and the moral and spiritual wants of the country. Repair and improve the great machine, and put it in better working order, but do not tear down the framework, do not take away the supports. It is easier to pull down than to build up ; and this machine of the Church, with a little adjusting of its parts, is capable of becoming a far more powerful engine for good than ever.

Let her ministers awake to a sense of the solemn responsibilities of their high and sacred calling, as many of them are doing, and let a pure Gospel be preached from all her pulpits, and she has nothing to fear. The millions of her own friends and adherents all over the land, will love her more dearly and cling to her more firmly than ever, and multitudes even of those who have left her pale will again be seen flocking to her gates, and God will bless her and make her a greater blessing to this nation and people in the future than in the past. Reform the Church, we say, but for Heaven’s sake, until you have something better to put in her place, save and protect her from the hands of those who, in a mistaken and fiery zeal, would waste and destroy her.

Let those who cannot conscientiously worship within her pale be satisfied to worship in their own chapels, and work for the glory of God outside. There is room enough for them and to spare. This would be far more creditable and honourable to them, as it certainly would be far more Christian, than to sound the trumpet of war and summon to their aid all the Papists, Infidels, and waifs¹ of the land for an onslaught on the National Church—the only religious institution of their country about which there is any real per-

manency and stability, and which alone has the the capability of supplying the mass of our population with the lessons of Christianity, and is showing in so many unmistakeable ways her desire to accomplish her great mission

Mr. Lowe, in his memorable speech for the disestablishment of the Irish Church, compared that Church to an exotic, *i.e.*, to a plant or tree brought from a foreign land and planted in a soil and climate in which it would not grow, and hence he cried, "Cut it down ; why cumbereth it the ground ?"

But neither Mr. Lowe nor any one else can say the same thing respecting the English Church. The Church of England is not an exotic. She is rather like a noble tree which, springing up in its own native soil, whose roots having been watered with the blood of many of England's noblest sons, the confessors and martyrs of primitive times, and the Riddleys, and Cranmers, and Latimers, and the hundreds and thousands of the excellent of the earth who suffered and died for the protestant faith in Reformation days ; the tree has taken deep root, and grown and prospered, and spread out its branches till they have reached over the whole land, and under the shadow of which the people of England have assembled in peace and comfort to eat the bread and drink the waters of life, and worship the God of their fathers for the last 300 years under a reformed Christianity.

The Church of England is therefore not like a sickly dying plant from a foreign clime. England is her birthplace and her home. If there are some sour grapes on her branches, yet on the whole she is bringing forth more good fruit—there are more life and vigour and usefulness in her now than perhaps for the last 200 years, and with a little adjusting of her parts and machinery she is capable of becoming far more useful than ever.

Englishmen, then, we would say, be up and defend your Church. It would be unnatural and unwise, it would be unholy work, to cut down such a tree ; and it would be nothing less than unpatriotic, un-English, and cowardly to stand idly by and see it done. Prune, trim, and beautify the sacred tree where it is needful, but for the glory of God and the highest welfare of the people of this land, even for generations to come, spare it—spare it, protect it, and wisely and nobly defend it from the violence of those who would so rudely and cruelly lay the axe to its roots.



