

BITTER OR HONEY-SWEET ?

THE student of ecclesiastical history, as he ploughs his way wearily through the interminable controversies of the Reformation period in the German-speaking lands, catches a sudden glimpse, at a certain epoch, of *one* controversy which can hardly fail to awake in him at least a lively sense of surprise and curiosity—unless his course of reading has banished all hope and all human interest from his mind. It is as though one went on foot through a dreary country of featureless barren hills, scarred and torn with the dry ugly channels of winter torrents ; and all at once one turned a corner, and saw afar off a vista of lofty mountains and of wide flats, half-lighted up by a brilliant sun, half obscured by thunder clouds. Here, at last, is something worth looking at, something which challenges and stimulates and rewards an eager curiosity, something as interesting as unexpected.

The controversy of religion to which I allude was that very remarkable—and surely very fundamental—one, in which the watchwords were those quoted above, and in which the combatants were the followers of Luther and Zwingli on one side and the (so-called) Anabaptists on the other. There were many things indeed on which they differed widely ; many points in respect of which the views of the better sort of Anabaptists were surprisingly “modern” as contrasted with those of their opponents ; but what really and truly divided them utterly and hopelessly was that diametrically opposite conception of the Christian life and calling in respect to this world which is briefly expressed in the question “bitter, or honey-sweet ?” Below and behind all other controversy about freewill, predestination, total corruption, justification by faith alone, eternal punishment, universal Fatherhood of God, internal

and innate witness of the Spirit, authority of the written Word, and so forth (as to all which it may be modestly but unhesitatingly claimed that the whole trend of modern religious opinion is towards the Anabaptist position) lay those two contrasted and irreconcilable ideals of what Christian life was meant to be, what its aim and object and motive. Quite apart from the extravagances of some, and the criminal follies of a few (upon which the ecclesiastical historians have unfortunately suffered themselves to dwell with exclusive attention), it was in fact this conception of Christian life and duty which made the Anabaptists so abhorrent to the ruling powers, both Catholic and Protestant, that they got no hearing and found no mercy. More than that, it was this same conception of Christian life and duty which made them so obnoxious to the great and successful leaders of the Reformation that these were (to say the least of it) grievously impatient and unfair towards them in word and deed. When any one tries to say a good word for "Anabaptists," people always think of Münster, and the horrible crimes which were perpetrated there. But it was many long years before John of Leyden came to the front, many long years before any excesses were even charged on these poor folk; it was at a time when even their enemies testified to the wonderful patience with which they endured affliction, that Zwingli advocated and Luther applauded the harshest measures against them. In this matter we need not judge them. They may have been quite justified. Truly the times were very difficult; and men who were in sore perplexity, and honestly believed that the attitude of the Anabaptists jeopardized the whole future of the Reformation, may be forgiven if they were not charitable, or even just. But it is at least right to point out that it was *not* the excesses of the Anabaptists (which did not then exist), but the peculiar convictions of the Anabaptists as to Christian life and duty, which aroused so

much wrath against them in the breast of Christian professors. Moreover, these convictions—however peculiar they may have seemed then, or seem now—cannot be set lightly aside or treated as wild extravagances by those who take the New Testament as their guide to faith and piety.

The Anabaptists were accused of preaching a “bitter Christ.” They accepted (in a certain sense) the phrase, and retorted by asserting that their opponents preached a “honey-sweet Christ.” The words sound strangely, and even offensively, in our ears; yet, if we examine them dispassionately, they serve to express a contrast which was no particular or partial one, but did in fact extend to the whole length and breadth of the religion which was inculcated on the one side or the other. None doubted then (nor does any one doubt now) that our Lord came, in part, to set a certain stamp upon the life of His followers here upon earth. What was that stamp—the seal of the living God—to be? What was to be the general character and colour of the Christian life, whereby they should be known as Christ’s disciples? Was a good Christian’s life to be pre-eminently a joyful one? joyful, because on the spiritual side Christ has done all, and suffered all, for us; joyful, because on the material side our heavenly Father giveth us all things richly to enjoy: joyful, therefore, without misgiving and without restraint—save such as prudence and decorum demand: joyful, even unto joviality, if the high spirits, if the necessary means, are given? Or was the Christian’s life intended and foretold to be an arduous and a sorrowful pilgrimage through a desert land, wherein the true disciple can never feel himself at home, never pretend that he has anything more than a very partial and fugitive interest, always having before his eyes the prospect of infinitely better things to come?

The moment we ask ourselves this question we perceive that it *may* be answered, that it *is* answered, in both ways.

As a matter of fact the former is commonly inculcated in the Christian teaching of to-day, while the latter is assumed or expressed in the hymns which we have inherited. There is nothing ridiculous in this discrepancy—though to ridicule it is so very easy—because it merely reflects a discrepancy deeper down, a discrepancy within the Christian revelation itself. Take, for instance, the view which commended itself to Luther and to the great Gospel teachers of that day: how much there is in the New Testament, and (let us add) in human nature at its best, to bear it out! Putting aside particular texts like S. Matthew vi. 33, or 1 Timothy iv. 8, the whole revelation of the Father delivered by our Lord Himself in the Gospels leads irresistibly to this conclusion. If it is Our Father who hath appointed us to glory and a kingdom hereafter, it is that same heavenly Father who hath sent us into this world now, and made this world so fair and so happy a place as (on the whole) it is, and given us a nature so that we must needs love life and want to see good days. If He is the Father for the aged man who turns his dim eyes wistfully towards the uncreated light, so He is for the little child that shouts and plays in absolute unconsciousness of any life but this; so He is for the young man and maiden who are (almost literally) all in all to one another. None who believes in “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”—the Father whom He taught us to love and trust and worship—could possibly want to silence the merriment of that child, or to stifle the happiness of those young people. But we are all of us children to a great extent, and if we are old in years the most of us (and the best of us) are always young in heart. Even in the days of persecution, therefore, we may be sure that most Christians were happy most of the time, for the simple reason that they too were human beings, and were intended by their Father in heaven to be happy, and were all the better able to be happy because they recognized His lovingkindness

and were not anxious about the morrow. When people think about the primitive Christians, in the days of the Apostles and afterwards, they seem so often to forget that they were our fellow-creatures, having the same instincts, the same limitations, the same necessities. The fountain of laughter, of merriment, of joy in things felt and seen, is inexhaustible in human nature. Nothing dries it up in good men's hearts, whatever their trials. Let the cloud lift ever so little, and they will begin to sing and play; they will "eat drink and be merry" whenever they have the chance. Who shall find fault, since the All-wise has made us like that—for the most part? How much better frankly to set the seal of God's approval, and of a clear conscience, upon a life as joyful, as full of vivid interest, as light-hearted, as the circumstances will allow! That was, and is—as everybody knows—the answer given by common sense and piety (which do ever go astray except they go hand in hand) taking their stand at once upon the broad facts of human life and the broad teachings of Holy Scripture. It is so obvious that God has made the world exceeding fair, and human life full of pleasures, great and varied; so obvious that He has, for His own purposes, made the pursuit of pleasure the dominant factor in our being, although it may, of course, be displaced partially and temporarily; so obvious that, if all men behaved as God would have them, the sum of human joy and gladness would be indefinitely increased; so obvious, again, that Christ came to redeem and ennoble human nature—not to alter it into something radically different. This answer, therefore,—this "honey-sweet" theory of the gospel, as the Anabaptists called it—commended itself (as it does still) not only to the unthinking multitude, but to a great part of the best and most thoughtful men. It commended itself in especial to the German Reformers, Luther and Zwingli: it fell in with the admirable "sanity" of their attitude towards

religion and common life, with that wonderful knowledge of and sympathy with human nature in its broad and everyday aspects, which made them so powerful—within limits, so irresistible. If a man heartily accepted the gospel of salvation, of reconciliation through the blood of Christ, of Christian liberty and abrogation of all demands and all restraints save those which were for his own good, how could he fail to be joyful? and if it pleased God (as it generally did) to give him the means of enjoying himself here and now, why should he not? The mere fact that God had implanted in his nature these desires of enjoyment, and granted these means of gratifying them, was warrant enough. Why should not a man spend his leisure hours in pleasant company, drinking good wine, and playing on an instrument of music? Why should any fellow Christian look sourly upon him for doing so, or suspect him without cause of excess or riot? “That man is a fool who does not love women, wine, and music.” It was a very courageous saying—but there was plenty of Scripture for it! All three were at the marriage feast of Cana in Galilee—and our Lord was there too. The asceticism in respect of these three which so early crept into the Christian Church (as early as the Second Epistle to Timothy, as early as the Acts of Paul and Thecla) is not Christian in character or origin, but “Manichæan.” If such a saying, therefore, offends the ears of many pious people nowadays, it is only because they draw a dangerous distinction between what one thinks in real life and what one is supposed to think in religion. Let us clear our minds of cant. It is possible, after a fashion, to get rid of the wine from the marriage feast of Cana, at which Jesus was, and His disciples. It is possible to do this indirectly by persuading oneself that it was unfermented—that it was only grape-juice. But not even this hardihood of explanation will get rid of that other and more dangerous element—the women. It is not the bride,

of course, but "the virgins that be her fellows," both wise and foolish, as always. They were good and innocent, it will be urged, as became the friends of the friends of Christ! So was the wine—however strongly alcoholic. It is the sad fate (let us say) of wine and of women, human nature being what it is, to cause the most dangerous excitements, perturbations and confusions in the minds and the affairs of men. All history, ancient and modern, heathen and Christian, is full of it. Three-fourths of our Christian literature (as *read*) turns on nothing else. You cannot drive away the women from the feast of Cana; why trouble about the wine? The intoxication which the former will produce among the unwary and excitable is far and away more dangerous to their religious peace and religious progress than any which the latter can set up. Nevertheless Jesus *was* there, and brought His disciples with Him; and as the wine loosed the tongues of the guests, He listened with kindly tolerance to the rising tide of merriment and laughter. They did not talk theology at that feast or discuss spiritual experiences, any more than at that other feast in Levi's house, when he entertained for the last time his old friends and acquaintance. The kind of talk which goes on at marriage feasts (barring the baser elements, of which we need not speak) is much the same all the world over. It is not spiritual in tone; it is not intellectual in character. If our Lord listened to it with kindly tolerance—as we are sure from His subsequent action that He did—it was not because it appealed to *Him*, but because He knew that "the love of women, wine, and music" is innate in every man, and must be reckoned with even by the Saviour of the World. Therefore (be it said with reverence) He set Himself not to cast out this love of the creature, but to educate, to refine, to restrain, to sanctify it. Thus argued the great leaders of the German Reformation, and we cannot say they were wrong: to do so would

be to set ourselves in contradiction to much that is most characteristic of the Gospels.

But the gospel which so many divines preached, and so many princes as well as peoples accepted with enthusiasm—broad and tolerant as it was, and level to the apprehension and the sympathy of the average man—did not commend itself at all to a great multitude who were afterwards known to the world as Anabaptists. It failed to convince them, or even to attract them. In order to understand, let us see first what manner of men they were. They were almost all of them working people, people of the lower class, who had been trained in the school of adversity to think instinctively of life as always hard and often bitter. That particular age was one of unexampled hardship for the poor. Again, they had behind them the lively memories of persecution. All through the middle ages, and especially in the last century, there had been men and women in plenty who found no satisfaction in the dominant religion, who cherished with ardour a secret faith whose foundation was the Book, whose strength was personal communion with God. Some were inside the Catholic Church, some outside. They were Fraticelli, Beguines, Friends of God, Mystics, and many other things. It made little difference. If their faith was known, the Church put forth her hand and crushed the life out of them, one way or another. When the breath of religious liberty passed over central Europe, in the beginning of the sixteenth century, all that were left of them, all that had learnt of them in secret, came forth from their holes and corners; they stood up on their feet, like an exceeding great army, because the hour was come that they should bear witness to their faith—to the amazement and confusion of the princes of this world. Again—and this was the chief thing—these men had read the New Testament for themselves, and to them it spoke a very different lan-

guage. They found little or nothing there about the joyousness of life, but very much about its sadness, its danger, its delusion. They read no precepts there about eating and drinking and being merry—except in the mouths of heathenish men and reprobates. They found the immediate followers of Christ spoken of and spoken to as a little flock, as sheep in the midst of wolves, as pilgrims passing through innumerable dangers and deceits to their true home beyond. No one can deny that they were right. Whatever there is to be set on the *other* side, there is beyond question a great deal on *this* side. The general tone of the New Testament writings is unmistakable, and this tone grows graver, sadder, as it draws towards the end. In 2 Timothy iii. 12, “*all that would live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution*”; in Rev. vii. (and *passim*) there are none in glory save those who come out of the great tribulation. It is only custom, and the blinding power of a vague human tradition, which enables us so largely to ignore the fact. The Anabaptists (we say) ought to have considered that the tone of the New Testament writings is in this respect determined by the circumstances of the first age, by the poverty and reproach and persecution which were the constant accompaniments of discipleship. To that there are two answers. As for the Anabaptists, their circumstances were not different. In all the wide-lying Austrian lands, in the thickly-peopled South-German lands, they died, not by hundreds, but by thousands. Even in the Swiss cantons they were slain. Men and women perished alike: the only difference was that the husband was burnt, the wife was drowned. They may be pardoned if they failed to appreciate the one feature which distinguished their case from that of the first Christians. These had been trampled upon and slain by heathen or Jewish rulers; they themselves by rulers nominally Christian. When Luther himself was firmly convinced that the Pope

was Antichrist, the Anabaptists may be forgiven if they saw the mark of the Beast on all the governments of that sanguinary and ferocious age.

The other answer is for us, as well as for them. Ought we to take the strong language of the New Testament with so light a heart as we generally do? If internal evidence goes for anything, neither our Lord nor His Apostles had the least suspicion that the epoch of suffering, of oppression, of necessary antagonism between the disciples and "the world," would ever cease, until the end came. Granted that the suffering and the oppression were to cease (since ceased they have for the great majority of Christians) ought we so lightly to conclude that the antagonism was to cease too? Is the picture drawn in such clear outline in the New Testament of a Christian community, grave, sedate, upright, kindly disposed towards all, tenderly affectioned one towards another, ready to share everything with the brethren, submissive to all outward rule (save when it meddled with the things of God), earnestly expectant of the new heavens and the new earth—is this picture obsolete? Is it wholly superseded by the modern vision (which in parts hardly draws at all upon the New Testament) of the man full of laughter and good spirits, of the successful merchant, of the strenuous citizen, of the ardent politician, of one who throws himself with whole-hearted enthusiasm into a dozen pursuits and interests which (as far as we know) have no influence upon the life of the soul, and (as far as we can guess) will have no recognition whatever in the life beyond? It is worth thinking about, because our religion must be false if it is not conformed to the New Testament, and because (all cultus of isolated texts apart) there can hardly be any serious doubt what the general tone and colour of the New Testament is in this respect. The crimes of the Anabaptists—which made them so hateful in the eyes of the rulers—were all to be found in the

persuasion that they ought to live as the first Christians were told to live. They lived separate, sharing all things voluntarily with one another. They obeyed the laws (save on religion) but they would not help to put the laws in exercise—for the laws were cruel and unrighteous. They told the truth, but would not take oaths—for our Saviour had forbidden that. They offered no resistance to violence and wrong, but they would not bear arms,—for how could brother stand up to slay his brother, simply because they were subjects of neighbouring and rival tyrants? Certainly there are few Christian Socialists to-day who would not heartily approve the principles on which they acted. Certainly no Christian folk ever had a better right to take to themselves the words, “For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we were accounted as sheep for the slaughter.” By the deliberate violence of their enemies they were slain, all the sort of them: by the hardly less cruel unfairness of their rivals their memory has been obscured or blasted even unto this day. Yet even so we have to ask ourselves to-day “Which was after all the true version of the Gospel, the bitter, or the honey-sweet?” Was so much of the New Testament, so much of its exhortation and precept, so much (above all) of its tone and colour, merely temporary and accidental? Is there no call *to-day* to come out and be separate? Is there no room *to-day* for communities, as well as for individuals, living and working on really Christian principles? Is that *diffused* influence of Christianity, which is at once so powerful and so weak, the only form which has the Divine sanction? If men and women are in earnest, and if they stand aghast at the evils of the time, should they not enter into closer partnership of life and means, forsaking the desires of the mind as well as of the flesh, in order to live more nearly as they pray? The Word of God has a wonderful vitality of its own. Buried in obscurity, which is often only the obscurity of

familiarity, it comes out of its grave in due season. There were large elements of the New Testament which, ignored for centuries, sprang to light and life again at the Reformation, and have so continued. There are other elements, perhaps, which awoke then likewise, only to be discredited and cast out. But if they are there, they also must live and work, and that mightily, for no word of God—no phase of New Testament teaching—can return unto Him void: it shall accomplish that which He pleases, it shall prosper in the thing whereto He sent it.

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THE INTERPRETATION OF HABAKKUK
CHAPTERS I. AND II.

CHAPTER I.

THERE has been considerable discussion in recent years regarding the interpretation of Habakkuk chapter i., and there are striking differences in the contending views which are presented. In connexion with those discussions certain proposals for the rearrangement of the text have received increasing prominence. The writer believes that the text of chapter i. may be restored to an older sequence in a very much simpler manner than has been proposed hitherto. This conclusion, and the interpretation of the chapter which goes along with it, rest on principles which have not received much attention, at least in this connexion. A fresh consideration of the whole subject is therefore offered in the hope that it may be of some value.¹

The chapter is generally divided into three sections—verses 2-4, 5-11, 12-17. There is controversy regarding (1) the subject matter or historical background of each, (2)

¹ A good account of the problems of the chapter and of the interpretations given to it will be found in G. A. Smith's *Twelve Prophets* (1898). See also *EXPOSITOR*, 1895.