

THE
PRESBYTERIAN MAGAZINE.

JANUARY, 1854.

Miscellaneous Articles.

CHURCH ATTACHMENT AND SECTARIANISM.

BY THE LATE SAMUEL MILLER, D.D.*

As this periodical professes to issue from a Presbyterian source, and to be devoted more particularly to the prosperity and extension of the Presbyterian Church, it is important to mark the distinction between an attachment to one's own church and an offensive sectarianism. Is it wrong to love the particular denominations of Christians with which we have intelligently and conscientiously thought proper to connect ourselves? Is it wrong to take counsel, and labour, and make sacrifices for its enlargement and prosperity? Surely an opinion so manifestly erroneous will scarcely be deliberately maintained.

In countries in which there is an *established religion*, those religious bodies which separate from the establishment, and form distinct denominations, are called *sects*, and those who belong to them *sectaries*. But in countries where there is no established religion, as in our happy land, in which all denominations, in the eye of the law, are on a level, there can be no *sectaries* or *dissenters* in the technical sense of these words. All denominations are equally *sects*, *i.e.*, separate divisions or departments in the great family of nominal Christians. And, of course, when we speak of the Episcopal sect,

* This article has never been before published. When a Magazine, similar in general plan to the present Magazine, was projected in 1846, Dr. Miller, of Princeton, kindly consented to write an introductory article for the first number. The work, relinquished at that time, was afterwards commenced in the form of "*The Presbyterian Magazine*;" and this communication, (accidentally mislaid) from the pen of the venerable servant of Christ, who is now removed from earth, will be read with additional interest by all who love his memory. C.V.R.

the Methodist sect, or the Baptist sect—we mean—without the smallest disrespect—simply to designate the different bodies of professing Christians known by those names respectively.

It is indeed, not only a misfortune, but a sin, that the Church of Christ which ought to be one in name, and in profession, as well as in fact, is divided into so many different denominations. But so the melancholy fact is. Now each of these divisions is a *sect* or *section* of the general visible Church. And yet the individuals who adhere to these several bodies, provided their adherence be characterized by a truly Christian spirit, may still be considered in an important sense, one in Christ. A man may be a member, and a very devoted, zealous member of a *sect*, and yet not deserve to be stigmatized as a *sectarian* in the common and unfavourable sense of that word.

To be a *sectarian*, in the popular sense of the term, is to be *inordinately*, *unworthily*, and *offensively* devoted to a sect. Those who deserve this appellation, are habitually governed by party zeal, and that zeal at once narrow and excessive. They can see little or no good *out* of their own denomination, and little or no evil *within* it. They are so blindly prejudiced in *favour* of their own church, and so blindly prejudiced *against* every other, that they can take no pleasure in the prosperity of any but their own. Hence the praises of their own they are continually sounding; the advantage of their own they are exclusively seeking; and as to the edification of any other, they not only seldom think about it, or pray for it, but when it occurs, it really appears to give them pain, as an event which seems to demonstrate that there may be something good out of their own pale. In short, the *sectarian*, properly so called, is one who is shut up in his views and affections within his own little community, and seldom or never looks, with an enlarged mind, and a benevolent heart, beyond this narrow circle.

Now the term *sectarian*, thus defined and explained, scarcely any one, however abandoned to this spirit, would be willing to have applied to himself. None so impatient of the name as those who are most deserving of it. None so intolerant of bigotry as the most blinded bigot. Let us pray, then, without ceasing, that the word and the Spirit of God may so enlighten and guide us in regard to this matter that we may learn how to regulate our denominational attachments so as, on the one hand, not to be indifferent to truth; and on the other, not to infringe that charity which loves all good men, and which delights in the advancement of the cause of Christ by whomsoever promoted.

Let none imagine, then, that in order to avoid the charge of *sectarianism*, it will be necessary, or even desirable, that we should give up the peculiarities of our own church, or cease to have any special attachment to our own denomination. It were just as reasonable to tell the head of a family that, in order to establish a character for patriotism and general benevolence, he must abandon all special attachment and care for his own household, and devote as much attention to the families of others as his own. This would be con-

trary to every dictate of reason and of natural affection. Equally false and absurd would it be to tell any man that, in order to exemplify the character of a Bible Christian, he must relinquish all peculiar attachment to any system of doctrine or ecclesiastical order, and love, and help systems of error just as much as that which is believed to be in accordance with the Scriptures of truth. Would this be acting the part of a faithful *witness* for Christ? Would this be “holding fast the form of sound words once delivered to the saints?” Would this be answering the great purpose for which the Church was founded by her Divine Head and Lord, viz., faithfully maintaining and keeping pure and entire all such religious truth and ordinances as Christ hath appointed in his word? The fact is, that what many call their “liberality”—their “charity for professing Christians of other denominations,” is nothing more nor less than *indifference to truth*, or that blind persuasion, which many semi-infidels cherish, that *all forms of religion are very much alike, and equally safe*. As long as any believe this, they can surely have no rational motive for striving to defend and maintain the truth. Truth, according to this mode of thinking, is not better than error. But can it be an act of fidelity to our Master in heaven thus to abandon what He has commanded us to hold fast ; or to carry our complaisance to those around us so far as to suffer the enemies of truth and righteousness to have every thing, without resistance, their own way ? Is this reasonable, or in accordance either with the word of God, or the welfare of society ? Surely not. The instinctive feelings of every enlightened and pious mind will revolt against the thought. What, then, is the *proper course in regard to this matter*? Manifestly the following.

If we believe the doctrines and order of the Church with which we are connected to be more in harmony with the word of God than any other—and surely, we must be supposed to believe this, after solemnly placing ourselves in connection with the ministry and ordinances of that Church—it is undeniably our duty to *hold fast those doctrines and ordinances* ; to profess, without scruple or disguise, our *attachment* to them ; and our *preference* for them ; and *to do* all in our power to *maintain* them in their *purity*, and to *extend* their influence as far as possible. To hesitate to do this, or to be afraid of doing it, is in the first rank of moral absurdities. A man might just as well doubt whether it were his duty to be more attached to his own family, and to labour more for its support and comfort, than for the families of his neighbours. A truly patriotic and benevolent man, indeed, while his first care is directed to the sustenance and comfort of his own children and household, will feel bound to promote, as far as he can, the welfare and comfort of his neighbours. He will feel it incumbent upon him to visit them in their distress ; to minister to their necessities ; to take a kind interest in their happiness ; and to do all in his power to promote the well being and enjoyment of every individual, and every family within his reach. But he that does not, first of all, and above all, care and provide for his own, and especially

for those of his own household, the voice of inspiration declares, "hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel." This is not *selfishness*; it is pursuing such a plan as will best secure universal order, comfort, and domestic prosperity.

In like manner, our own church ought, upon every principle of common honesty and honour, to be dearer to us than any other. We ought to take a deeper interest in its support, prosperity, and enlargement; to be more willing to labour, to "devise liberal things," and to make sacrifices for its comfort, honour, and extension, than for any other. If we have pecuniary means to bestow on ecclesiastical objects, our first and largest contributions should be devoted to that portion of the great Christian family which we call *our own*. And for that portion our prayers should especially and constantly ascend. We should pray, indeed, unceasingly, for all men; for all Christians; for all in every land, and of every denomination, who profess to follow Christ:—our cordial aspirations should go forth daily and hourly for the edification and enlargement of the Redeemer's kingdom in every quarter of the globe; and when we hear of the triumphs of the Redeemer's grace among any denomination of Christians, we ought cordially to rejoice, and praise the Lord; remembering that all who believe in Christ, in every quarter of the world, are "one body in Him," and "members one of another." And, therefore, that Presbyterian who cannot cordially rejoice when he sees good done, or apparently doing, in a Methodist, Episcopal, or Baptist body, has reason to fear that he is to a criminal degree under the influence of *a sectarian spirit*. Nay, a Presbyterian of the true Bible stamp, will love an ardently pious Methodist, or Episcopalian, or Baptist far better than a cold formal Presbyterian, however loudly that Presbyterian may proclaim his denominational attachments, and obtrude his denominational zeal.

The writer of these pages once knew an eminent physician, who was bred a Presbyterian, and who had been, for many years, a communicant of that Church. Happening in the course of an ardent conflict, on a subject altogether unconnected with religion, to become strongly prejudiced against a distinguished Presbyterian clergyman in his neighbourhood, he suffered his hostile feelings so far to govern him, that he left the Presbyterian church, united himself with the Episcopal, and remained in the latter connection to the end of life. And yet this man, as long as he lived, still professed his preference for the Presbyterian church; embraced every convenient opportunity of attending on its communion; and whenever he wished to enjoy a free, confidential conversation on experimental religion, always resorted to the study of a neighbouring Presbyterian minister, in whose wisdom and piety he had peculiar confidence. What infatuation was here! To suffer a personal pique to separate him from a church which he professed to prefer and to love, and to carry him into a denomination in the teachings and ministrations of which he manifested that he had not entire confidence, and did not feel himself, in spiritual things, at home. What an erroneous judgment was here as

to that which ought to guide us in forming ecclesiastical connections ! And what an unhappy example of escaping from a less and a temporary evil, by plunging into a greater !

How much more wise was the conduct of another Presbyterian, a pious and exemplary elder of the church to which he belonged ! He had an unhappy controversy with his pastor, which very much interested the feelings of their respective families. On a certain Saturday afternoon, when they had come together for the purpose of adjusting their difficulties, and reconciling all parties, they were so far from gaining their end, that their controversial feeling became more intensely excited than ever, and they parted in a state of mutual irritation which seemed to preclude all hope of being reconciled. The next day, the pastor appeared in the pulpit as usual, and the elder and his household appeared in his family pew. At the close of the service, as he walked down the aisle, the pastor accosted the elder, and said, " I did not expect to see you here to-day." " Why not ?" said the elder. " Why you have not forgotten, replied the pastor," what passed between us last evening." " No," rejoined the elder, " I have by no means forgotten it." My feelings were greatly wounded, and I thought you behaved extremely ill. I thought so then, and I think so still. But though I quarreled with you, I have not quarreled with my Saviour. This is *his* sanctuary, not *yours*; and that gospel with which you are entrusted, you have faithfully preached to-day. I did not think proper, on your account, to deprive myself of the privilege which I have enjoyed. I have heard God's precious truth dispensed; and I bless him for the opportunity." Here was practical consistent wisdom; and here was an instance of an enlightened elder taking more just views of duty than his spiritual guide.

The writer of this humble essay thinks he cannot be mistaken in believing, as he most sincerely and deliberately does believe, that of real *sectarianism*—in the sense which he has defined—there is less, much less in the Presbyterian Church than in any other body of professing Christians in the United States. The great Searcher of hearts is his witness that he says this, not for the purpose of emblazoning or flattering his own denomination ; but because he is persuaded it would be unjust to withhold this praise. The truth is, we have hardly enough of, the *esprit du corps* in our Church to prompt us to take the trouble of defending ourselves when attacked by other denominations. And this not because we have a less clear and strong conviction than others of the truth of our system; but *because our system itself is more pacific, and less exclusive than that of any other which holds to the importance of truth.* For one instance in which a Presbyterian minister says a word in the pulpit to recommend the peculiarities of his own church, or to disparage those of other denominations, the writer will venture to produce many examples of this conduct in the churches around us. Our ministers, in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of a thousand, seldom utter anything, either in prayer or preaching, but what any evangelical, pious Christian, of any denomination might hear without invasion of his principles or feelings.

Let no Presbyterian, then, be reluctant or **afaid** to manifest a warm attachment to his own church, or to step forward, on all proper occasions, to promote her comfort, her enlargement, and her edification. Let him not hesitate to declare his belief in her doctrines ; to defend her when attacked ; to consider himself as charged with a portion of her support and honour: and to pray without ceasing for her extension and spiritual prosperity. Let him not fear, while he does all this, lest any impute to him the want of Christian “ charity,” or the indulgence of censurable “ bigotry.” But, while he prefers his own church to any and every other; and while he does all in his power to build it up, let him “ hold the truth *in love*.” Let him see to it that he loves the image of Christ wherever he finds it; and that when he sees others “ casting out devils,” he is never to “ forbid them, because they follow with us.” Let him see to it that he rejoices in the prosperity of all who manifest the spirit of the gospel ; and that much as he loves and prefers his own church, he never allows himself to imagine that she has no defects; and that there is no good out of her pale. In fine, let him do all he can to show by his own spirit and conduct, that the Presbyterian church is a liberal church ; that its whole spirit and structure admit of free intercourse with sister churches on just principles ; and that it is much more anxious to see the world converted to the holiness and happiness with which Christ came to bless mankind, than to see the peculiarities of its own body gaining universal dominion.

A PRESBYTERIAN.