

**WAYSIDE SKETCHES IN
ECCLESIASTICAL
HISTORY; NINE LECTURES**

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Wayside sketches in ecclesiastical history; Nine Lectures by Charles Bigg

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ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY

NINE LECTURES

WITH NOTES AND PREFACE

BY

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PREFACE

THE three sets of Lectures which follow were delivered at different times and to different audiences. I have called them Wayside Sketches, because they had, at the time they were written, no more connection than the scenes which happen to catch the eye of a traveller upon a journey.

But a student's journey through the world of books is not a mere ramble in search of amusement. His mind is fixed upon one field of interest. He carries with him the lessons which he has already gathered, and tries to fit them on to the new ideas suggested by each fresh point of view.

So, when I come to read over these Lectures again, there appears to be a thread of connection running through the whole of them. They might have been called Essays on the Development of the Church. They refer to three great moments in that fateful process—the making of the mediæval system, the decay of the mediæval system, and the beginnings of modern Christianity.

The last triplet was suggested by the use which

has recently been made of Jewel's famous Appeal to the Six Centuries. It has been thought that by adopting Jewel's standard we might find a way out of those disputes which have been distracting and tormenting the Church of England.

I have endeavoured to show that this most desirable object cannot be obtained by the method proposed. Every one of the characteristic features (or, as some would say, of the abuses) of the mediæval Western Church existed in germ before the end of the sixth century. In germ—that is to say, they were held by some, and were gradually making their way towards universal acceptance.

Now the decisive question is not how many people entertained these ideas when first they emerge into view, or at what date they obtained official recognition, because many great truths, for instance, the conception of the divine nature and the belief in the immortality of the soul, have a history, were themselves evolved, and gradually won their way to recognition in the Old Testament; while, on the other hand, many beliefs which all would admit to be false and unwholesome, for instance, the legalism of the Pharisees, have also a history, and evolved themselves in a manner which in outward appearance is exactly the same. Every

belief, every institution, has its roots in the past, and may be called a development. Even reactions and revolutions fall under this category. The most conflicting forms of government, the most opposed philosophies, are yet the natural fruit of what has gone before, and it is the acknowledged task of the historian to trace the thread of continuity.

There is a development which produces a higher and finer organism, there is a development which issues in degradation. How shall we distinguish the one from the other? It is not an easy task, for the growth of the Church is not complete, and we are ourselves entangled in it.

May we not affirm that there is not, and never has been, any criterion except Scripture and Intelligence? Nobody really believes the Church to be infallible. Even within the six centuries there was one Council which no one received, there were Eastern Councils which were flouted by the West, and Western Councils which were flouted by the East. The Council of Trent relied upon the authority of the ancient Fathers in so far as it is consonant. But it is not consonant. There are very few points indeed upon which the ancient Fathers speak with one voice, and the points about which we are divided are not among these. To

whatever quarter we turn for information about the history of the Church we find ourselves driven to discriminate, to weigh, to compare, to criticise. No student of antiquity will maintain that Clement of Rome, or Ignatius, or Justin, or Irenæus knew more than is to be found in the Bible. The language of Scripture, like that of every unsystematic book or set of books, calls for interpretation. It was so interpreted, and in the result the creeds were formulated. We know the men by whom this work was done, we know the texts upon which they relied, and the reasoning by which they elucidated the texts. By intelligence this important task was achieved, and by intelligence we can test the soundness of the conclusion. The Fathers of the four great Councils would have been indignant if any one had charged them with going beyond the plain sense of their authorities, or with adding to Scripture a new revelation of their own. Whether they did so or not is another question, but certainly they would not have admitted that they did.

The field of Development, as the word is generally used, is quite different from this. It embraces ritual, ceremonial, discipline, and a host of subordinate beliefs, some of which have a vague and distant relation to Scripture, while others have none

at all. They would, one and all of them, possess little importance, if they had not been raised to the dignity of divine laws, and placed upon the same level as the Sabbath rules of the Pharisees, to which indeed they bear a close analogy.

Now, are they divine laws, or are they ecclesiastical bye-laws? This is the knot of all our difficulties, and the following Lectures may be regarded as a modest attempt to loosen it.

It is a controversial subject, but I trust nothing will be found here that can give reasonable offence. But there is no telling. What some regard as exceedingly important, I myself regard as indifferent, and this is always an irritating pose. But the desire of all right-minded men is to make things better, not to make them worse. This object has been kept in view throughout, and, if any expression is felt to be harsh or inconsiderate, I desire to express my regret beforehand.

C. BIGG.

CHRIST CHURCH,
March 9, 1906.