

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07555-8 - The Life and Work of the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury: Volume 3

Edwin Hodder

Excerpt

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THE  
LIFE AND WORK  
OF THE  
EARL OF SHAFTESBURY.

—♦—  
CHAPTER XXIII.

THE INNER LIFE.

Unpopular Religious Views—An Evangelical of the Evangelicals—Disclaims Leadership of the Evangelical Party—The Old School—Justification by Faith—Inspiration of the Scriptures—Dogmatic Truth—Simple Preaching—How to Meet Opponents—Divine Providence—The Second Advent—Collected Passages from the Diary on Religious Themes—The *Sortes Biblicæ*—The “Little Flock”—The Incarnation—Prayer—Sins of Omission—Science and Revelation: a Sunday Dream—Distraction the Order of the Day—The Highest Point of Christian Life—The Religion of the Future—Neology—“Schools of Thought”—Evangelical Union—The Vicarious Sacrifice—Intellect and Heart—Merit—Limiting the Almighty—Calvin’s Commentaries—“It is Finished”—“It is I”—Elias and John the Baptist—A Good Friday Meditation—Preaching Smooth Things—Easter Day—Fears—The Seven Churches—The Song of Moses.

“I HAVE no desire whatever to be recorded, but if, against my will, I must, sooner or later, appear before the public, I should like the reality to be told, be it good or be it bad, and not a sham.” So wrote Lord Shaftesbury to the daughter of one of his oldest friends\* when the shadows of time were lengthening. When,

\* Letter to Mrs. Corsbie, daughter of Mr. Alexander Haldane.

during the last year of his life, it was the privilege of the writer to hear from his lips the story of many of the incidents recorded in these volumes, it was his frequently reiterated wish that no attempt should be made to tone down, or explain away, his “unpopular religious views,” as he called them. This wish has, of course, been reverently respected; and if these views have not been made clear throughout the preceding chapters, the writer has failed to depict Lord Shaftesbury.

The narrative is now approaching a period in his career, when he was more than ever to stand in the forefront of religious movements, and to be the Evangelical leader in religious controversy. Moreover, Lord Palmerston was Prime Minister, and his Church appointments were in great measure to be made under the guidance of Lord Shaftesbury. It will be appropriate in this place, therefore, to pause in the narrative, and examine what were his distinctive “unpopular religious views,” and what was his position among the Evangelical party. In doing so, we shall confine ourselves, as much as possible, to his own spoken or written words; and it may be remarked here, that in quoting from them, the chronology has been to some extent disregarded, as, from youth to old age, from the commencement of his stewardship until the time when he gave in his account of the same, his theological opinions knew neither variableness nor shadow of turning.

“I am essentially, and from deep-rooted conviction,”

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## THE EVANGELICAL PARTY.

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he said to the writer on one occasion, "an Evangelical of the Evangelicals. I have worked with them constantly, and I am satisfied that most of the great philanthropic movements of the century have sprung from them. I stand fast by the teachings held by that party, but I am not, and never have been, a leader of that party."

That was said in 1884. In 1856 he wrote to Mr. Haldane as follows:—

*Lord Shaftesbury to Mr. Haldane.*

PARIS, Sept. 9th, 1856.

DEAR MR. HALDANE, . . . . You wrote to me the other day, and were kind enough to address me as a 'Leader of the Evangelical Party.' This is a position too perilous, too uncertain, and too useless for any one to accept. No one can be an effective leader unless those who follow him are prepared to repose confidence in his judgment and guidance, not during smooth and easy times alone, but in times of doubt and perplexity. No one in these days has such a sentiment. All confidence has ceased; and people, from a variety of causes, take up their opinions, and let them fall, entirely in reference to themselves or their particular sections. A man that aspires to be a leader, or rather to assume the importance of one, must now either drive or be driven. The first is impossible in the state of men's minds; the second is disgraceful.

Besides, though there are very many points, indeed most points, in which I concur theologically with the Evangelical party, there are some in which, as friends or counsellors, &c., &c., I think several of them very far from charity or justice. Let them catch me tripping (and who can always walk upright?), and there would be as much real spite (though veiled under regret) and pleasure, as among the editors of newspapers or the congregation of Puseyism.

I will do all that in me lies, under God's blessing, to aid their endeavours, advance the good cause, and maintain the simplicity of

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‘The Truth,’ but I will not aspire to ‘lead’ them, notwithstanding the band of worthy, noble, pure-minded beings to be found in their ranks.

Yours very truly,

S.

Lord Shaftesbury belonged to the older order of Evangelicals—to the Venns, Romaines, Topladys, Berridges, Simeons, Grimshaws, Herveys, Scotts, and Newtons of a former day—to the school represented by Hugh Stowell, Haldane Stuart, Edward Bickersteth, Hugh McNeile, Henry Venn, William Marsh, Alexander Haldane, in his own day.

He believed in the doctrine of the total depravity of the human heart by nature; in the necessity of a “new birth” through the “revelation to each individual soul, by the agency of the Holy Spirit and the Word, of the great saving truths of the Gospel of the grace of God, by which the understanding is spiritually enlightened and the character transformed.” He believed in the Christian life as a humble, “continuous trust in the Atoning Blood,” a simple faith in Scripture, a constant prayerfulness, and a recognition of the Hand of God in all the events of life.

He ever maintained that the Evangelicals of his day had deteriorated, on the ground that they were not as clear in their views, as distinctive in their principles, or as thorough in their dogmatic teaching, as of old. While acknowledging that there was a great increase in zeal, he believed there was a great decrease of spiritual teaching. “The old standard was lowered, the pure

## PROTESTANTISM.

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milk was mixed with water, if not with something more deleterious.”

His Protestantism was not political. It was not asserted simply as the source of freedom, the basis of civil and religious liberty: it affected the very springs of his spiritual life.

True Protestantism, in his view, “asserts the right of private judgment; but it asserts, at the same time, the inspiration of the Scriptures; it asserts the all-sufficiency of the Scriptures for man’s salvation; asserting, along with it, that except in the belief of those Scriptures, there is no salvation at all; and it labours to effect the unity of the Churches by an unity in Christ, far more than by assailing or defending establishments (mistaking externals for internals), all the combatants getting thereby their share of the nutshell, but losing the whole of the kernel.” \*

On the doctrine of Justification by Faith, his trumpet never gave any uncertain sound. He speaks of it as “That grand doctrine, the very life of the Bible and the Keystone of the Reformation,” a doctrine which he felt was rapidly on the decline among all classes and degrees of religionists. “The prominence almost universally given to works apart from doctrine,” he says, “to deeds of charity and benevolence, to a good life, to philanthropy, so called, to splendour and liberality in sacred things, to ‘love of the brethren,’ to labour for others, to everything where the notion of merit of one form or another, consciously or unconsciously, can enter

\* Lord Shaftesbury’s Preface to *Life of Luther*, by A. L. O. E.

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in, marks the spirit of the day, and we shall relapse into the civilisation of Athens and Rome, with much brilliancy and softness of exterior, worshipping heroism, science, commerce, wealth, art, and everything human and superhuman, but the One True God.” \*

“I hold to the doctrine of Justification by Faith,” he said on one occasion to the writer, “and go not only the whole length of Luther, but farther still; I accept the axiom of Doddridge, ‘The best act that the best man ever did, contains in it that which is worthy of condemnation’—of course, that is, as measured by the standard of God Himself.”

His faith in the Scriptures, the whole Scriptures, and nothing but the Scriptures, was as simple as it was sincere.

“My invariable and invaluable guide was this,” he said, on the occasion to which reference has already been made, “never to go in action or belief where the Scriptures would not guide me. This never failed me; and if at any time it brought me where I might have had doubt, I gave the Scripture the benefit of the doubt. For example, there is that question of the Eternity of Punishment, so much discussed now. If I maintain it, I do not wish it. I find it revealed, and must believe that, somehow, it is the just judgment of God—to be explained hereafter, if it cannot be understood now.”

Lord Shaftesbury never questioned the inspiration of the Scriptures; his faith was never staggered by the

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difficulties involved in the acceptance of the whole of the Bible, from the first chapter of Genesis to the last chapter of Revelation. "What thou knowest not now, thou shalt know hereafter," was a favourite text with him, and he applied it to questions upon which other men's minds were perplexed. For himself, he was content to wait: convinced that for all the things hard to be understood there was an explanation forthcoming, even though it might not come to him.

Speaking at a meeting of the Church Pastoral Aid Society on one occasion, he said :—

I have heard with my own ears a master in Israel remark in a public assembly, that to say that the Book of Chronicles and the Gospel of St. Luke stood on the same ground of inspiration was to utter an untenable proposition. I say that to make such a declaration is to concede the whole question. Moreover, men contend that one part of the Bible is inspired, and that another is not, or that there are differences in the degrees of inspiration. The whole authority of the Bible is thus cut up from beginning to end. Depend upon it, my friends, that there is no security whatever except in standing upon the faith of our fathers, and saying with them that the blessed old Book is 'God's Word written,' from the very first syllable down to the very last, and from the last back to the first.\*

Next to searching the Scriptures, "experimentally, spiritually, dogmatically, for the soul's own good, and as a matter of personal religion, with much retirement and prayer," Lord Shaftesbury considered it was the duty of every one to set forth before the world the one "clear, distinctive, experimental, dogmatic truth, summed up in the word Gospel.'" It was his constant

\* Church Pastoral Aid Society, May 8, 1862.

lament that clergy and laity alike, were engaged in caring about many things, and forgetting the one thing needful—"the Divinity of Christ, His Atoning Sacrifice, and His Coming Kingdom." It was a frequent saying of his that "the offence of the Cross has not ceased;" and he urged at all times—in the midst of threatened dismemberments and disruptions, of disturbances of heart and feeling, of strange and novel theories—the great duty of all to "know nothing among men save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified."

Thus, when speaking of the distracted state of the Church, he exhorts the clergy to make these truths continually the burden of their preaching.

For my own part, I believe that the sole remedy is one of the simplest and one of the oldest; not amusements for the people, or a system of secular education, or this thing and another, that are suggested; the sole, the sovereign remedy, in my opinion, is to do what we can to evangelise the people by preaching on every occasion and in every place, in the grandest cathedral and at the corner of the street, in the royal palace and in the back slums, preaching Christ to the people, determined, like St. Paul, to 'know nothing among men save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.' I do believe that the preaching Christ is still the power of God unto salvation. It may, indeed, have ceased to produce its proper effect upon the generation in which we live; but why? Because in many of the pulpits—not of the Church of England only, but of many Nonconformists—preaching gives so uncertain a sound; preachers refrain so completely from dogmatic teaching. It is because so many of the sermons preached in these days, instead of setting forth the Gospel in its simple yet majestic power, are mere essays: milk-and-water dilutions of the saving truths, which those who deliver them have undertaken to proclaim. It is because there is in the pulpits to which I allude, no preaching to satisfy the heart, to meet the affections, to purify the moral nature, that the power of preaching



*PRACTICAL TRUTHS.*

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has lost so much of its effect. I am not speaking now of fine folks who attend fashionable places of worship, nor am I speaking of that large class called 'skilled artisans,' a very numerous and powerful body, who will, no doubt, in future, largely influence the legislation and destinies of this country ; but I am speaking of the great mass of the poorer sort of people whom we find in our large towns, and of our agricultural labourers. To these people the power of preaching is just the same as it ever was, provided it comes from a truly pious man, who appeals to the heart and preaches the simple truths of the Gospel. I have been very much among this class, and I know that they will either have religion of the best quality or none at all. And the religion which is of the best quality, in their estimation, is that which addresses itself to their inmost affections, softens all their sorrows, and alleviates their miseries by showing them that they have the sympathy of their fellow men and the still higher sympathy of the God who created them.\*

Again, when urging upon the clergy the necessity of being able to meet every man with his own kind of weapons, he counselled them never to let this be done at the expense of the great practical truths of Christianity :—

Answer him by saying that he has a witness in his own heart, that he needs a Saviour ; tell him not to trouble himself about these minute things, for which he has little time or leisure, but to examine his own heart ; hold up before him that truth which is most opposed by the natural heart of man—he will admit everything rather than that—hold up clearly before him the great truth of a crucified Saviour. This is the great crucial, the great testing point. That school of objectors will give you every single thing but that. They will give you the Incarnation, the Divinity of our Lord : they will give you almost every single thing that an Evangelical heart can desire—but that they will never give you. That is the way in which they are now deceiving so many, and that is especially the way—I know it from practical experience—in which they are getting

\* Church Pastoral Aid Society, May 7, 1868.

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hold of so many highly-educated young women of this country : speaking to them about our Lord as if they loved Him more than any other class of men loved Him, and considered Him the very height of human perfection ; and thus turning them away from the great saving truth, without which no other truth in Scripture would be worth having—salvation by a crucified Redeemer. I say, therefore, that though it is not necessary for you to deal with controversy, you should be armed at all points, and ready to give a reason for the hope that is in you.\*

Of Lord Shaftesbury's unfaltering belief in the special and particular operation of Divine Providence, even in matters of comparatively minor importance : of his childlike confidence in God as the "hearer and answerer of prayer," we have already spoken in these pages. There is one other subject to which reference has also been made, but which should be mentioned more particularly now—his belief in the doctrine of the Second Coming of our Lord. It entered into all his thoughts and feelings ; it stimulated him in the midst of all his labours ; it gave tone and colour to all his hopes for the future. The motto engraven upon the flaps of the envelopes he daily used, bore the inscription, "Even so come, Lord Jesus," in the original Greek.

"I cannot tell you how it was that this subject first took hold upon me," said Lord Shaftesbury to the writer ; "it has been, as far as I can remember, a subject to which I have always held tenaciously. Belief in it has been a moving principle in my life ; for I see every thing going on in the world subordinate to this one great event. It is not a popular doctrine ; it is

\* Church Pastoral Aid Society, May 5, 1864.