

Adherence to the Apostolical Succession the Safest Course

by J.H. Newman

The sermon emphasizes the importance of preserving and transmitting the apostolic succession, which is the seal and warrant of Christ, and encourages the listener to prioritize this privilege over other considerations.

Scripture: Isaiah 6:8, 1 Corinthians 11:23, 1 Timothy 4:14, Hebrews 13:17, 1 Peter 2:9

Topics: "Apostolic Succession", "Church Authority"

Description

J.H. Newman preaches about the importance of acknowledging the high privilege of belonging to the Apostolic Church for those who believe in the Nicene Creed. He questions why many are indifferent to this privilege and explores the reasons behind this lack of enthusiasm, emphasizing the need to uphold the divine ministerial commission as conveyed through the hands of commissioned persons. Newman urges for a return to the principles of the early Church Fathers in valuing and preserving the Apostolic Succession as a means of ensuring the conveyance of Christ's sacrifice and maintaining communion with Him.

Transcript

WE who believe the Nicene Creed, must acknowledge it a high privilege, that we belong to the Apostolic Church. How is it that so many of us are, almost avowedly, so cold and indifferent in our thoughts of this privilege?

Is it because the very idea is in itself overstrained and fanciful, apt perhaps to lay strong hold on a few ardent minds, but little in accordance with the general feelings of mankind? Surely not. The notion of a propagated commission is as simple and intelligible in itself, as can well be, is acted on daily in civil matters (the administration of trust property, for example), and has found a most ready, sometimes an enthusiastic, acceptance, in those many nations of the world, which have submitted, and are submitting themselves to sacerdotal castes, elective or hereditary. "Priests self-elected, or appointed by the State," is rather the idea which startles ordinary thinkers, not "Priests commissioned, successively, from heaven."

Or is our languor rather to be accounted for by the want of express scriptural encouragement to the notion of a divine ministerial commission? Nay, Scripture, at first sight, is express, whether we take the analogy of the Old Testament, the words of our LORD, or the practice of His Apostles. The primitive Christians read it accordingly, and cherished, with all affectionate reverence, the privilege which they thought they

found there. Why are we so unlike them?

I fear it must be owned, that much of the evil is owing to the comparatively low ground which we ourselves, the Ministers of GOD, have chosen to OCCUPY in defence of our commission. For many years, we have been much in the habit of resting our claim on the general duties of submission to authority, of decency and order, of respecting precedents long established, instead of appealing to that warrant which marks us, exclusively, for GOD'S AMBASSADORS. We have spoken much in the same tone, as we might, had we been mere Laymen, acting for ecclesiastical purposes by a commission under the Great Seal. Waving the question, "Was this wise? Was it right, in higher respects?" I ask, was it not obviously certain, in some degree, to damp and deaden the interest, with which men of devout minds would naturally regard the Christian Ministry? Would not more than half the reverential feeling, with which we look on a Church or Cathedral, be gone, if we ceased to contemplate it as the house of GOD, and learned to esteem it merely as a place set apart by the State for moral and religious instruction?

It would be going too deep into history, were one now to enter on any statement of the causes which have led, silently and insensibly, almost to the abandonment of the high ground, which our Fathers of the Primitive Church, i. e., the Bishops and Presbyters of the first five centuries, invariably took, in preferring their claim to canonical obedience. For the present, it is rather wished to urge, on plain positive considerations, the wisdom and duty of keeping in view the simple principle on which they relied.

Their principle, in short, was this: That the Holy Feast on our SAVIOUR'S sacrifice, which all confess to be "generally necessary to salvation," was intended by Him to be constantly conveyed through the hands of commissioned persons. Except therefore we can show such a warrant, we cannot be sure that our hands convey the sacrifice; we cannot be sure that souls worthily prepared, receiving the bread which we break, and the cup of blessing which we bless, are partakers of the Body and Blood of CHRIST. Piety, then, and Christian Reverence, and sincere devout Love of our Redeemer, nay, and Charity to the souls of our brethren, not good order and expediency only, will prompt us, at all earthly risks, to preserve and transmit the seal and warrant of CHRIST.

If the rules of Christian conduct were founded merely on visible expediency, the zeal with which those holy men were used to maintain the Apostolical Succession, might appear a strange unaccountable thing. Not so, if our duties to our SAVIOUR be like our duties to a parent or a brother, the unalterable result of certain known relations, previous to all consideration of consequences.[1] Reflect on this, and you will presently feel what a difference it makes in a pious mind, whether ministerial prerogatives be traced to our LORD'S own institution, or to mere voluntary ecclesiastical arrangement. Let two plans of Government, as far as we can see, be equally good and expedient in themselves, yet if there be but a fair probability of the one rather than the other proceeding from our Blessed LORD Himself, those who love Him in sincerity will know at once which to prefer. They will not demand that every point be made out by inevitable demonstration or promulgated in form, like a State decree. According to the beautiful expression of the Psalmist, they will consent to be "guided by our LORD'S eye" the indications of His pleasure will be enough for them. They will state the matter thus to themselves: "JESUS CHRIST'S own commission is the best external security I can have, that in receiving this bread and wine, I verily receive His Body and Blood. Either the Bishops have that commission, or there is no such thing in the world. For at least Bishops have it with as much evidence, as Presbyters without them. In proportion, then, to my Christian anxiety for keeping as near my SAVIOUR as I can, I shall, of course, be very unwilling to separate myself from Episcopal communion. And in proportion to my charitable care for others, will be my industry to preserve and extend the like consolation and security to them."

Consider the analogy of an absent parent, or dear friend in another hemisphere. Would not such an one naturally reckon it one sign of sincere attachment, if, when he returned home, he found that in all family questions respect had been shown especially to those in whom he was known to have had most confidence? Would he not be pleased, when it appeared that people had not been nice for inquiring what express words of command he had given, where they had good reason to think that such and such a course would be approved by him? If his children and dependents had searched diligently, where, and with whom, he had left commissions, and having fair cause to think they had found such, had scrupulously conformed themselves, as far as they could, to the proceedings of those so trusted by him, would he not think this a better sign, than if they had been dexterous in devising exceptions, in explaining away the words of trust, and limiting the prerogatives he had conferred?

Now certainly the Gospel has many indications, that our best Friend in His absence is likely to be well pleased by those who do their best in sincerity to keep as near to His apostles as they can. It is studiously recorded, for example, by the Evangelists, in the account of our LORD'S two miraculous Feasts, that all passed through His Disciples' hands: (His twelve Disciples; as is in one instance plainly implied in the twelve baskets full of fragments.) I know that minute circumstances like this, in a Parable or symbolical act, must be reasoned on with great caution. Still, when one considers that our Blessed LORD took occasion from this event to deliver more expressly than at any other time the doctrine of communion with Him, it seems no unnatural conjecture, that the details of the miracle were so ordered, as to throw light on that doctrine.

But, not to dwell on what many will question, (although on docile and affectionate minds I cannot but think it must have its weight,) what shall we say to the remarkable promise addressed to the Twelve at the Paschal Supper? "Ye are they which have continued with Me in My temptation: and I appoint unto you a Kingdom, as My FATHER hath appointed unto Me; that ye may eat and drink at My table in My Kingdom, and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." Thus much nobody will hesitate to allow, concerning this Apostolical Charter: that it bound all Christians whatever to be loyal and obedient to CHRIST'S Apostles, at least as long as they were living. And do not the same words equally bind us, and all believers to the world's end, so far as the mind of the Apostle can yet be ascertained? Is not the spirit of the enactment such, as renders it incumbent on every one to prefer among claimants to Church authority those who can make out the best title to a warrant and commission from the Apostles?

I pass over those portions of the Gospel, which are oftenest quoted in this controversy; they will occur of themselves to all men; and it is the object of these lines rather to exemplify the occasional indications of our LORD'S Will, than to cite distinct and palpable enactments. On one place, however, the passage in the Acts, which records, in honour of the first converts, that "they continued stedfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship," one question must be asked. Is it really credible, that the privilege so emphatically mentioned, of being in communion with the Apostles, ceased when the last Apostle died? If not, who among living Christians have so fair a chance of enjoying that privilege, as those, who, besides Purity of Doctrine, are careful to maintain that Apostolical Succession, preserved to them hitherto by a gracious and special Providence? I should not much fear to risk the whole controversy on the answer which a simple unprejudiced mind would naturally make to these two questions.

Observe, too, how often these principles, which are usually called, in scorn, High-Churchmanship, drop as it were incidentally from the pens of the sacred writers, professedly employed on other subjects. "How shall they preach, except they be sent? Let a man so account of us, as of the Ministers of CHRIST, and Stewards of the mysteries of GOD." "No man taketh this honour to himself, but he that is called of GOD,

as was Aaron." I do not think it possible for any one to read such places as these with a fair and clear mind, and not to perceive that it is better and more scriptural to have, than to want, CHRIST'S special commission for conveying His word to the people, and consecrating and distributing the pledges of His holy Sacrifice, if such commission be any how attainable, better and more scriptural, if we cannot remove all doubt, at least to prefer that communion which can make out the best probable title, provided always, that nothing heretical, or otherwise immoral, be inserted in the terms of communion.

Why then should any man here in Britain, fear or hesitate boldly to assert the authority of the Bishops and Pastors of the Church, on grounds strictly evangelical and spiritual; as bringing men nearest to CHRIST our SAVIOUR, and confirming them most exactly to His mind, indicated both by His own conduct and by the words of His SPIRIT in the Apostolic writings? Why should we talk so much of an establishment, and so little of an APOSTOLICAL SUCCESSION ? Why should we not seriously endeavour to impress our people with this plain truth;-that by separating themselves from our communion, they separate themselves not only from a decent, orderly, useful society, but from THE ONLY CHURCH IN THIS REALM WHICH HAS A RIGHT TO BE QUITE SURE THAT SHE HAS THE LORD'S BODY TO GIVE TO HIS PEOPLE?

Nor need any man be perplexed by the question, sure to be presently and confidently asked, "Do you then unchurch all the Presbyterians, all Christians who have no Bishops? Are they shut out of the Covenant, for all the fruits of Christian piety which seem to have sprung up not scantily among them?" Nay, we are not judging others, but deciding on our own conduct. We in England cannot communicate with Presbyterians, as neither can we with Roman Catholics, but we do not therefore exclude either from salvation. "Necessary to Salvation," and "necessary to Church Communion" are not to be used as convertible terms. Neither do we desire to pass sentence on other persons of other countries; but we are not to shrink from our deliberate views of truth and duty, because difficulties may be raised about the case of such persons, anymore than we should fear to maintain the paramount necessity of Christian belief, because similar difficulties may be raised about virtuous Heathens, Jews, or Mahometans. To us such questions are abstract, not practical; and whether we can answer them or no, it is our business to keep fast hold of the Church Apostolical, whereof we are actual members, not merely on civil or ecclesiastical grounds, but from real personal love and reverence, affectionate reverence to our LORD and only SAVIOUR. And let men seriously bear in mind, that it is one thing to slight and disparage this holy Succession where it may be had, and another thing to acquiesce in the want of it, where it is (if it be any where), really unattainable.

I readily allow, that this view of our calling has something in it too high and mysterious to be fully understood by unlearned Christians. But the learned, surely, are just as unequal to it. It is part of that ineffable mystery, called in our Creed, The Communion of Saints, and with all other Christian mysteries, is above the understanding of all alike, yet practically alike within reach of all, who are willing to embrace it by true Faith. Experience shows, at any rate, that it is far from being ill adapted to the minds and feeling of ordinary people. On this point evidence might be brought from times, at first glance the most unpromising, from the early part of the 17th century. The hold which the propagandists of the " Holy Discipline" obtained on the fancies and affections of the people, of whatever rank, age, and sex, depended very much on their incessant appeals to their fancied Apostolical succession. They found persons willing and eager to suffer or rebel, as the case might be, in their system; because they had possessed them with the notion, that it was the system handed down from the Apostles, " a divine Episcopate," so Beza called it. Why should we despair of obtaining, in time, an influence, far more legitimate and less dangerously exciting, but equally searching and extensive, by the diligent inculcation of our true and scriptural claim ?

For it is obvious that, among other results of the primitive doctrine of the Apostolical Succession, thoroughly considered and followed up, it would make the relation of Pastor and Parishioner far more engaging, as well as more awful, than it is usually considered at present. Look on your pastor as acting by man's commission, and you may respect the authority by which he acts, you may venerate and love his personal character, but it can hardly be called a religious veneration; there is nothing, properly, sacred about him. But once learn to regard him as " the Deputy of CHRIST, for reducing man to the obedience of GOD," and everything about him becomes changed, everything stands in a new light. In public and in private, in church and at home, in consolation and in censure, and above all, in the administration of the Holy Sacraments, a faithful man naturally considers, " By this His messenger CHRIST is speaking to me; by his very being and place in the world, he is a perpetual witness to the truths of the sacred history, a perpetual earnest of Communion with our LORD to those who come duly prepared to His Table." In short it must make just all the difference in every part of a Clergyman's duty, whether he do it, and be known to do it, in that Faith of his commission from CHRIST, or no.

How far the analogy of the Aaronical priesthood will carry us, and to what extent we must acknowledge the reserve imputed to the formularies of our Church on this whole subject of the Hierarchy, and how such reserve, if real, may be accounted for;-these are questions worthy of distinct consideration!

For the present let the whole matter be brought to this short issue. May it not be said both to Clergy and Laity, "Put yourselves in your children's place, in the place of the next generation of believers. Consider in what way they will desire you to have acted, supposing them to value aright (as you must wish them), the means of communion with CHRIST, and as they will then wish you to have acted now, so act in all matters affecting that inestimable privilege."

ON ALTERATIONS IN THE PRAYER-BOOK.

THE 36th Canon provides that "no person shall hereafter be received into the Ministry except he shall first subscribe" certain " three articles." The second of these is as follows.

"That the Book of Common Prayer, and of Ordering of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons, containeth in it nothing contrary to the Word of God, and that it may lawfully so be used; and that he himself will use the form in the said Book prescribed, in public prayer, and administration of the sacraments, and none other."

NOW here is certainly a grave question to all who have subscribed this Article. We need not of course say, it precludes them from acquiescing in any changes, that are lawfully made in the Common Prayer, but surely it makes it most incumbent on them to inquire carefully whether the Parties altering it have a right to do so. E. g. should any foreign Power or Legislature, or any private Nobleman or Statesman at home, pretend to reform the Prayer Book, of course we should all call it an usurpation, and refuse to obey it; or rather, we should consider the above subscription to be a religious obstacle to our obeying it. So far is clear. The question follows: Where is the competent authority for making alterations ? Is it not also clear, that it does not lie in the British Legislature, which we know to be composed not only of believers, but also of infidels, heretics, and schismatics; and which for what we know may soon cease to be a Christian body even in formal profession? Can even a Committee of it, ever so carefully selected, absolve us from our subscriptions? Whence do the Laity derive their power over the Clergy? Can even the Crown absolve us? or a commission from the Crown? If then some measure of tyranny be ever practised against us as regards the Prayer Book, HOW ARE WE TO ACT?

OXFORD, Sept. 21, 1833.

1. Butler's Analogy, part ii. c. 1

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