

Christian Liberty; Or, Why Should We Belong to the Church of England? by a Layman. (Continued).

by J.H. Newman

The sermon emphasizes the importance of the Church of England as the true and original Church of Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit, and warns against the sin of schism and the misuse of Christian liberty.

Scripture: Matthew 10:40, Luke 10:16, John 14:16, Acts 8:17, 1 Corinthians 14:33, Ephesians 4:11, 1 Timothy 4:1, 2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 13:17, James 4:7

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Church Authority"

Description

J.H. Newman preaches about the importance of understanding the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the purpose of miracles in the establishment of Christianity. He emphasizes that while miracles were necessary to confirm the truth of God's Word during the Apostolic age, the true importance lies in the inward gifts of the Spirit that believers receive. Newman explains the significance of Apostolic authority, the continuity of God's gifts in the Church, and the dangers of schism and heresy. He clarifies the historical context of the Church of England and its position as the original Apostolic Church in the region, highlighting the importance of unity and obedience to Church authority.

Transcript

He that receiveth you, receiveth me; and he that receiveth Me, receiveth Him that sent Me.

He that receiveth a prophet, in the name of a prophet, shall receive a prophet's reward; and he that receiveth a righteous man, in the name of a righteous man, shall receive a righteous man's reward. Matt. x. 40, 41.

JOHN EVANS did not fail to look out in his Bible the texts to which Dr. Spencer had referred him; and he saw clearly that the miraculous powers with which it pleased GOD to endue the Apostles, were by no means necessarily connected with the commission which those Apostles had previously received from our LORD; the commission, we mean, to teach and baptize all nations.

John was seen again on the next Sunday, at his accustomed place in church. The doctor preached from the text, Mark xvi. 17,18; "And these signs shall follow them that believe: in My name shall they cast out

devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover."

He pointed out to his congregation the beautiful regularity which pervades the works of God; the settled laws, the established order, with which our Maker guides the course of things around us; the certainty with which the stars rise and set, the moon waxes and wanes, the flower follows the bud, and the seed the flower. He reminded his hearers how truly, from the times of the flood, GOD'S promise has been fulfilled: and seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, have not ceased. (Gen. viii. 8.) "And surely," said he, "we see in these things the proofs that GOD is a God of order; that He would not lightly or without important reasons change the system which he has established, the laws which he has framed. If then we were to hear that the ALMIGHTY had on a certain occasion broken through these laws, and violated by miracles the established order of nature, we should have the strongest reason to suppose, 1st, that He had only done so in order to accomplish something which could not conceivably have been accomplished without such interpositions; and 2ndly, that He would discontinue these interpositions as soon as they became no longer necessary.

"Now both these conclusions," continued the Doctor, "we find to agree alike with the Bible and with the recorded history of mankind. It was necessary that the doctrines of Christianity should be known to be the infallible truth of GOD; that what the Apostles said or wrote on the subject should be received as the words of GOD Himself speaking to mankind. Now this authority, as far as we can see, can be given to mortal man only by GOD'S visibly interfering in his support; and such interferences are what we call miracles. We see then, that for the establishment in the world of Christianity, and of the authority of those sacred books which form the New Testament, miracles were necessary; and we find from Scripture that miracles were then vouchsafed. But when the interference had been fully proved, when evidence of it could be handed down by ordinary means to following generations; and when no more divine truth was to be revealed, miracles were needed no longer; and the history of the world informs us, that they have ceased for seventeen hundred years."

And while the Doctor, in conclusion, pointed out on the one hand the folly of expecting a recurrence of such marvels in our own days, an expectation which amounts to an acknowledgment that Christianity is as yet imperfect, and that we are to look for a more complete revelation; he dwelt with much earnestness on the danger of imagining that GOD'S peculiar protection of Christianity, GOD'S peculiar inward gifts to believers, ceased with the cessation of the outward signs and wonders which at first accompanied the revelation of His Word.

John listened with great attention; and, when the Service was over, he thought long and deeply upon what had been said. He looked out also the different texts which the Doctor had mentioned in his Sermon; and in so doing he came to one which rather puzzled him. It was John xiv. 16. "It is strange," said he to himself: our LORD promised that the COMFORTER whom He would send, should abide with his followers for ever; I really do not see why this promise should be given, if the greatest and most striking gifts which that COMFORTER was to bestow, were to cease at the end of one, or at most of two generations."

That evening, as he was strolling in the fine summer twilight along the banks of the river, he met the Doctor, who had walked that way to enjoy the fineness of the season, and to refresh himself after the holy labours of the day. He told him his difficulty, nearly in the words in which we have expressed it; and the Doctor, smiling good-naturedly, thus replied.

Dr.Â--Are you quite sure, John, that you have stated your case aright? Is it perfectly certain that miraculous powers were the greatest gifts which the ETERNAL SPIRIT was commissioned to bestow upon mankind?

J.Â--It certainly appeared to me that they were; such marked, such striking instances of God's favour were surely greater boons than any thing else which we can conceive to be given to mortals in this present life. I think, Sir, that I have heard you yourself call these gifts of the SPIRIT, as opposed to others, His extraordinary gifts.

Dr.Â--You may very probably have heard me so call them; but "extraordinary" only means "unusual;" and it does not always follow that what is unusual is more important than what is of frequent occurrence. But tell me, John, in the case in which one thing is done in order to prepare for the doing of some other thing, which is the most important of the two; the first of these things or the last; the means or the end?

J.Â--The end, of course, is more important than the means; no man would venture to call the scaffolding which is raised that the house may be built, more important than the house itself.

Dr.Â--Now think a moment, John, before you answer me; why were the miraculous powers bestowed on the Apostles?

J.Â--To make men believers in CHRIST.

Dr.Â--To prepare the way, that is, for their receiving those inward gifts of the SPIRIT, in which true believers now participate as fully as those who lived in the days of the Apostles.

J.Â--I see, Sir; the extraordinary gifts might be compared to the scaffolding, the ordinary ones to the house.

Dr.Â--Exactly so, John; marvellous and striking as were the signs and wonders of the Apostolic age, we should ever recollect that they were not greater gifts, or even gifts so great as those inward ones which are our evangelical inheritance, as well as that of the primitive Christians. When the doctrine of the HOLY GHOST, and of His inward influence, was new to the world, it pleased GOD to confirm it, and to show that the influence was real, by permitting, in some cases, those on whom it descended to perform works which they could not have done, had not God been with them. Thus the real importance, even then, of these miraculous gifts consisted in their bearing witness to the inward and unseen ones which GOD still showers upon His Church.

J.Â--And which we dare not suppose to have ceased, merely because the outward signs of them did, when GOD Himself had promised that they should last for ever.

Dr.Â--Well; the promise of support to the Apostles, in the performance of their ministerial duties, was equally perpetual; CHRIST was to be with them, we have seen, as the teachers and baptizers of all nations, "always, even unto the end of the world." The reality of their powers, and, among others, of their power of conferring the HOLY GHOST on others, was attested at first by miracles. (Acts viii. 17, 18.) But we have no more reason for supposing that the true powers of the ministry ceased with the outward signs, in the case of the Apostles, than we have for supposing, in the case just mentioned of the gifts of common believers, that from the moment miracles were no longer vouchsafed, the HOLY SPIRIT withdrew Himself from the guidance of the Church for ever. That GOD has bestowed Apostolic gifts upon Apostles, and the regenerating influences of His HOLY GHOST upon other believers, we know from the recorded testimony

of those who witnessed the miracles by which the reality of those gifts and influences was at first established. That those gifts and influences will be alike perpetual in the Church, we are bound to believe upon the solemn word of Him who gave them.

J.Â--Miracles, then, performed in one age, and handed down by history to others, form the standing proofs of the reality of those gifts which were given to the church for ever; and one of those gifts was undoubtedly the Apostolic power; which we must believe, upon this evidence, to be still existing.

Dr.Â--Exactly so; and infallibility of doctrine, itself a miracle, ceased with miracles in general. We cannot see any reason for the continuance of such a gift to the successors of the Apostles, when the Apostles themselves have recorded all things necessary to salvation in those sacred Scriptures, which have come down to our times, and to which we can all refer. Nor have we the slightest ground for doubting the permanence of those Apostolic privileges which were of perpetual necessity, merely because a miraculous gift, evidently no longer necessary, has been discontinued.

J.Â--This, Sir, I understand; but there is one difficulty which occurs to me. As the rulers of the true Church are no longer in fallible, what is to prevent their all falling together into error, and thus leading astray the whole Church committed to their care?

Dr.Â--We may infer from CHRISTÂ'S promise already mentioned, that this will never happen to the whole Church at once; that some true Apostles will be found on earth in every age, until that last period of the worldÂ's history, which shall witness His coming. But that with regard to particular branches of His Church, this may happen, and has happened, is a melancholy truth. There is one simple test, however, by which we may at once assure our selves that the Church of England has not so fallen away, or, as it is called, apostatized from the faith of her Lord and Master.

J.Â--And what is that, Sir?

Dr.Â--As the eternal truth of GOD is contained in His revealed word, the Bible; no Church, whatever may be the errors of its individual members, can be said, as a Church, to have fallen away, and consequently to have lost her claim to the obedience of CHRISTÂ'S true disciples, while she still reverences that Bible;Â--while she puts it into the hand of each of her followers, and bids him read it, and seek there, and there only, the proofs of the doctrine which she inculcates; and while she declares, as the Church of England does in her sixth Article, that "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation."

J.Â--Then according to you, Sir, the Church of England is not only the true, but the original Church of CHRIST established in this kingdom.Â--Now Sam Jones, the Catholic, who attends the Popish Chapel in the next parish, tells me that his is the original Church, and that the Church of England is a new one.

Dr.Â--That which is truly the Catholic Church, is indeed the oldest; but though we in a common way call the Papists, or followers of the Pope, Catholics yet it is we who are the true Catholics; for the term only means members of CHRISTÂ'S universal Church. The history of the Papists is this. Many centuries ago, strange and corrupt notions and practices prevailed in many of the Churches in Europe. Among others, people thought the Pope or Bishop of Rome was gifted with authority from Heaven to controul all the branches of the Church on earth, and that his word was to be of more weight than even the Holy Scriptures themselves. But about three hundred years ago, the Bishops of the Church of England saw

these errors in their true light; they saw that the Pope's authority was not founded on Scripture, and they consequently refused to acknowledge it, while they at the same time corrected, upon scriptural principles, the other errors and evil practices which I have alluded to. These changes did not make the Church of England a new Church, nor prevent that body which was CHRIST'S true and original Church before from being CHRIST'S true and original Church still. Some Bishops of that day, it is true, disapproved of these changes, and refused to accede to them; but as, when they died, they providentially appointed no successors, there has never since been any real ground for doubt which was the true Church of CHRIST in this favoured land. The Bishops of the Church of England, and they only, are the representatives by succession of those who, more than a thousand years ago, planted the Gospel on our shores [1].

J.--But there are persons whom the Papists call their Bishops --whence do they come?

Dr.--They derive what they call their right from their appointment by foreign Bishops in an unauthorized manner. The Pope and his followers would by no means acknowledge the changes which had taken place in England; they declared that our Church had apostatized from the faith, and refused to communicate with us, till we should return to all our ancient errors They have since, upon the alleged ground that our line of Bishops was extinct, given commission from time to time to different persons to exercise episcopal authority here; but as the ground was false, the commission was of course void. We acknowledge the Pope and his Bishops in foreign countries to be, by station, ministers of the Church, though we admit and lament the fact, that they have led the branches of it over which they preside into apostasy and shame; yet we feel that in sending their representatives hither, to act in defiance of the Church already established, they are exceeding the limits of their authority. We feel that GOD, who is not the author of confusion, but of peace, in all churches of the saints, (1 Cor. xiv. 33.) cannot sanction the intrusion of one Bishop, however duly consecrated, into the See of another, with a view to the usurpation of his name and office, and to the organizing a systematic opposition to his authority. We are compelled therefore to regard those who are ordained, as Popish Priests are, by these intruding Bishops, as unauthorized and schismatical ministers of religion, and as violaters, like the other dissenters around them, of the laws of CHRIST'S Church, and of the unity of His fold.

J.--I thank you, Sir, for giving me so good an answer to Sam when next I meet him. And I thank you, too, deeply and sincerely do I thank you, for teaching me the nature of one great branch of Christian duty which I never understood before. I seem now to see that there is a sin of which a Christian may be guilty, of which I never before thought; the sin, I mean, of refusing obedience to the command of our REDEEMER to hear His Apostles; to demean ourselves as dutiful members of the Church which those holy persons founded, and over which He Himself, invisibly, presides; a sin, of which they are deeply guilty who separate themselves from that Church altogether, and join one or other of the many sects which reject her authority. Pray, Sir, by what name is such a sin properly called?

Dr.--It is called "schism," from a Greek word signifying "division." A man may forfeit the privileges enjoyed by him as a member of CHRIST'S Church in two ways:--either on account of "heresy," of his adopting opinions opposed to the great truths of the Word of GOD; or through schism, through a disregard of Church authority, and a notion that so long as his doctrine is pure, he may join what sect he pleases, or even set up one for himself. The exercise of such a privilege I have heard some people call "Christian Liberty."

J. (smiling).--I understand you, Sir: but you shall hear me use the words in this improper sense no more. The true liberty where with CHRIST has made us free, is theirs alone, who in reverencing His ministers,

walk in the way of His commandments. Admitting, as I now do, the force of what you have said; convinced, as I now am, that the Church of England is the Apostolic Church of CHRIST, established by our LORD Himself, I cannot but see that their sin is indeed great, who wilfully reject and despise it.

Dr. A--Such persons would do well to consider our SAVIOUR'S words to those Ministers whose successors they slight. "He that despiseth you, despiseth Me; and he that despiseth Me, despiseth Him that sent Me." (Luke x. 16.)

J. A--They would indeed, Sir; and I thank GOD that you have shown me the meaning of this text before I had completely separated myself from the Church to which my SAVIOUR has commanded me to belong. GOD knows, I meant to do no such thing when first my curiosity led me to the meeting.

Dr. A--I know it, John; but let me show you the danger of making the first step, of yielding to the first temptation. Curiosity led you to a place, to which, if you understood your duty, you had no business to go; you were pleased, and tempted to repeat your visit, and might soon have been led to unite yourself entirely to that unauthorized congregation; in defiance, as I have now shown you, of the solemnly declared will of the ALMIGHTY.

J. A--Well, Sir; I will, by GOD'S blessing, keep myself from such temptations for the future. I trust that on each succeeding Sunday, while life and health are spared me, I shall be found in my old accustomed seat at Church, and kneel in the sacred spot where my forefathers knelt before me: and GOD grant that no temptation may ever again lead me astray, or induce me to separate from the holy Church of my REDEEMER.

Dr. A--It gives me, John, the sincerest pleasure to hear you express such sentiments as these. One good effect will, through GOD'S grace, result even from this your temporary wandering from the fold. You will now know better than you did, what we mean when in the words of our Liturgy we pray for "the good estate of the Catholic Church;" and you will be enabled, I trust to join more fully than heretofore in the beautiful prayer, "that it may be so guided and governed by GOD'S good SPIRIT, that all who profess and call themselves Christians may be led into the way of truth, and hold the faith in unity of spirit, in the bond of peace, and in righteousness of life."

J. A--I hope, Sir, that I shall: I hope that I shall ever feel duly thankful for the blessing of being called into CHRIST'S Church, thus happily established among us; and I trust that when in the name of the congregation you put up the prayer for protection against "false doctrine, heresy, and schism," my heart and soul may accompany my lips in the response, A--"Good LORD, deliver us!"

OXFORD,

The Feast of the Annunciation.

FOOTNOTE

[1] In the same manner it may be shown, that the established Church of Ireland alone represents that Church which the labours of St. Patrick, in the fifth century, planted in that island. Those who preside over the Romanists have received consecration from Rome, at a very recent period. And the corruptions which prevail in their religion, and which distinguish it from ours, became prevalent long after the Saint's death. Our doctrines therefore approach more nearly to his than theirs do; and our Church is the true and original Church of CHRIST in Ireland, in every sense which the words will bear.

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