

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

by J.H. Newman

The sermon emphasizes the importance of belonging to the Church of England, which is a branch of the true Church founded by Christ and guided by the Apostles.

Scripture: Matthew 10:40, 1 Corinthians 11:1, 2 Timothy 2:2

Topics: "Church Authority", "Apostolic Succession"

Description

John Evans meets Dr. Spencer, his parish Rector, after switching from attending the parish church to a dissenting congregation due to a preacher's fervor. Dr. Spencer discusses with John the importance of obeying God's command to belong to the Church, tracing the Church's lineage back to the Apostles and emphasizing the authority of successors like Bishops in the Church of England. He explains how reverence for these successors distinguishes the true Church of Christ from unauthorized sects, providing a clear test for identifying the genuine Church.

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 was walking along the lane between his own house and the common, when just at the place where the lane makes a turning, he suddenly met Dr. Spencer, the Rector of his parish. John was not particularly pleased at thus meeting his Pastor, for several reasons. He had formerly been a most regular attendant at the parish church, from which he had lately chosen to absent himself, with his family. not that he stayed away from idleness, or from any intentional disregard of the commands of GOD; he felt, as he imagined, the same reverence for the Divine Will as ever; it was, indeed, rather a mistaken zeal than any thing else, which had led to his change of conduct. He had been induced, one Sunday, by a friend who belonged to a dissenting congregation, to go with him to the meeting-house; and when he was there, there was something in the energy of the preacher's manner, in the vehement action by which his teaching was accompanied, and in his seeming earnestness in the holy cause of GOD, which, as it was quite new to John, was particularly striking to him. Compared with the fervour of this man, the quiet but

sound discourses of his Rector seemed spiritless and tame; and John came out of the meeting under the influence of such enthusiastic feelings, as led him to resolve to visit it again the first opportunity. And thus he was led on to go again and again, till at last he made up his mind to become a regular attendant there. Thither he accordingly took his family, Sunday after Sunday; and deserted, of course, the old parish church, the venerable building in which he and his had received the holy rite of Baptism; in which, as each of them in turn outgrew their infancy, they had heard for the first time the solemn sound of congregational prayer; and in which those who had arrived at a proper age had frequently received from CHRIST'S authorized Ministers, the symbols of His sacred Body and Blood.

It will be seen from what follows, that in making this change upon such grounds as have been described, John Evans did not understand that he was disobeying the GOD, whom he was trying to serve, and putting a slight upon that SAVIOUR, whose disciple he not only professed himself, but in good earnest desired to be. Yet though he did not enter into this view of the matter; though he knew not that he had shown disrespect to CHRIST, in His Minister; still he felt as though he had not been behaving with perfect respect to the Doctor, whom he loved on his own account, as he had indeed every reason to do. So what with his fear of a rebuke on this ground; a rebuke which he dreaded the more from the mildness of the language in which he knew that it would be clothed; what with the irksomeness of having to avow opinions which must be disagreeable to one whom he so highly respected; and, moreover, the suspicion which he could not help feeling, that in these new ways of his, so different from what he had been used to revere, and so suddenly taken up, he might possibly be wrong; for all these various reasons, he met his Pastor with a downcast and half-guilty look, very different from the open, honest smile with which he had till then, ever greeted the good Clergyman.

Dr. Spencer, however, took no notice of the difference. "Well, John," said he, "I am glad to see you. I was on my way to have a little conversation with you, and should have been sorry to have missed you."

John thought it best to be bold, and come out at once with his defence of himself "I believe, Sir," said he, "that I can guess what it is you were wishing to talk with me about. I have taken a step which I fear, I know, must be displeasing to you, Sir. I trust, however, that in exercising my Christian Liberty in the choice of my spiritual teacher, and joining the meeting instead of going to Church, I shall not seem to have acted from disrespect to you, Sir, who have so long been a good friend to me and mine."

Dr. Spencer--By no means, John; do not suppose either that I feel personally offended at your conduct, or that I do not regard you with feelings as friendly as ever. But, as to the Christian Liberty you speak of, we perhaps understand that matter rather differently; and it was because I thought you were in some mistake about it, that I was coming to see you to-day. I have missed yourself and family for some Sundays past in Church, and understood you had joined the meeting. Is not this the case?

John--It is, Sir; and, as I have already said, without the slightest notion of showing you disrespect.

Dr. Spencer--Say no more about that, John; I know you too well to suspect you for a moment of such a feeling as that. Speak to me as to your sincere friend and well-wisher, in perfect candour: and do not fear that I shall be offended at any thing you say, while you tell me fairly your reasons for this change in your conduct.

J. Evans--I am sure, Sir, that in the old Church I never heard any thing from you but what was good; and I never thought, till the other day, that I could pray better in any other words than in those of the Church Service. But there is something so fine in the prayers without book, as they are offered at meeting, and...

Dr.Â--And something perhaps in the manner and language of the preacher, who preaches there without a book also. But let me ask, had you no other reasons, than these, and such as these, for leaving the Church?

J.Â--None, Sir; but such as these; at least, none that I am aware of.

Dr.Â--You did not consider that either the Church Prayer-Book, or my Sermons, taught doctrines contrary to the great truths revealed in GOD'S Word?

J.Â--God forbid, Sir.

Dr.Â--You had, then, perhaps, some such notions as this; you thought that in the Church you could pray well, but at meeting you could pray rather better?

J.Â--Just so, Sir.

Dr.Â--And you thought that you were doing GOD service, then, by joining that worship which touched you most?

J.Â--And surely, Sir, I was right in that thought, at least.

Dr.Â-- You would have been right, if GOD had not chosen a Minister for you. In that case perhaps you might have used you Christian Liberty, as you call it, and joined any congregation and worship you pleased. But his having given a clear command alters the case, and makes that which would otherwise have been a matter of indifference, an act of disobedience and sin.

J.Â--But if I may be so bold as to ask, Sir, when did GOD give this command, and where is it to be found? I am not so ready with the Bible as learned people, yet I know it in my own way. That was the very thing I heard Mr. Tims, who preaches at the meeting, ask last Sunday. He said, "Where is the Church of England spoken of in the Bible? name chapter and verse where we are bid belong to it." And then he went on to say, that the new heart is every thing, and that we shall not be asked at the last day, whether we were Churchmen or Dissenters, but what the state of our heart is.

Dr.Â--We shall be asked at the last day whether we have obeyed GOD'S commandments; now, one of those commandments is, that we should belong to the Church, as I will soon show you. But, first, you shall tell me what has been your reason, till lately, for going to Church.

J.Â--I was born of Church-going parents, and that made me a regular Church-goer in my youth. And when I grew up, I always, at least till the other day, thought that I had the best of reasons for keeping regular to Church. In the first place, the Church was the Law Church; and that of itself would be a reason, even if there were no other, for good subjects keeping to it; and then, I knew it had been in the country many, many years whereas all the meetings about are (so to say) of yesterday, and in one sense upstarts. And then I had heard from you, Sir, that in former times it had Saints and Martyrs, such as were when our LORD was on earth. and I thought it therefore far more likely to be right, and had a stronger claim on me than any other religion; and especially since I was a pretty regular reader of my Bible, and never found the teaching which I heard at Church different from that which I thus picked up at home.

Dr.Â--All good reasons as far as they went; but I see that I was right in supposing the chief claim the Church has on all Christians is unknown to you. Our Church is sprung from that very Church which

CHRIST set up at Jerusalem when He came upon earth; and none of the sects have this great gift. It is a branch of that Holy Church which CHRIST promised to be with, "even to the end of the world." You must surely often have met in the Bible with mention of "the Church;" what did you suppose the word to mean?

J.Â--I do not know, Sir, that I had any very clear idea what it meant; but I rather thought it meant, all sincere Christians in all parts of the world, to whatever Church or sect they might belong.

Dr.Â--Then it seems you did not understand the word "Church" to signify a body of men, bound by the same laws, acting together, speaking the same thing, attending the same worship, reverencing the same Pastors and Teachers, and receiving at their hands the Sacraments which CHRIST has ordained. Yet it is quite certain that this is what our LORD meant, when He spoke of His Church. He meant a Church such as the Church of England. This will be clear to you from Matt. xviii. 15, 16, 17. In these verses CHRIST speaks of the Church; in the last of them He bids His disciples regard any one who should in certain cases refuse to "hear the Church," as a heathen and a publican; as an opposer of His authority, and an outcast from His sacred fold. Thus it appears the Church He speaks of is not a mere number of good people scattered over the world, who may or may not have communion with each other, (which was your notion of the word) but one public, orderly, visible body, consisting of Ministers and people, such as the Church of England. To be sure, the Church of England happens to have wealth and honour, and that first

Church has not; but this is but an accidental difference between them. If the Church of England were to lose its wealth and honour, it would not, could not, thereby cease to be a branch of the true Church; and by comparing the text just given you with Matt. xvi. 18, 19, you will see that it was to this visible Church that the promise was made, that the gates of hell should not prevail against it.

J.Â--If you would kindly write down these texts for me, I will turn them out of my own Bible, and think over them. There is one thing, however, Sir, which comes into my mind to ask you. Even supposing all Christians ought to join together into one, yet they do not. There are a good many religions among us, and how is a plain unlearned man like me to know which is the real Church spoken of in these passages?

Dr.Â--The matter is not so difficult as you imagine, even to the most unlearned. The true Church must possess, as I will now show you, certain marks; to which not even a pretence is made by the numerous sects of Dissenters with which our country, from different unfortunate circumstances, abounds. let me go back to the time when the Gospel was first preached, and converts made by the Apostles. Many of these believers, we find, acknowledged in the Apostles the authority which CHRIST had given them over the flock, and were followers of them even as they were of CHRIST, (1 Cor. xi. 1.) remembering them in all things, and keeping the ordinances which they had delivered to the congregation in each place; and for this conduct the Corinthians received the inspired praise of St. Paul. (ibid. 2.) But there were others, who called themselves Christians, who caused divisions among the brethren, (1 Cor. ii. 18, 19.) forming parties of their own, and setting at nought the Apostolical Authority. To these St. Paul spoke in vain, when he said, "I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our LORD JESUS CHRIST, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind, and in the same judgment." (1 Cor. i. 10.) They slighted the LORD'S accredited Minister, and said that his bodily presence was weak, and his speech contemptible. (2 Cor. x. 10.) Many of the sects which these men formed, fell, as was to be expected, into follies and heresies; but even without reference to this fact, even if we suppose them to have taught the great doctrines of Christianity with the same purity as the Apostles did, could a reasonable man entertain a moment's doubt, granting CHRIST had indeed founded a Church on earth, which that Church was; whether the name of Church belonged to the company of

Christians which obeyed His Apostles; or, on the other hand, to any one of the sects which vilified and despised them?

J.Â--Certainly not; that is, there could be no doubt, as long as the Apostles were alive, that the Christians whom they governed must have made up the true visible Church of CHRIST.

Dr.Â--But, John, it is plain you see, that there were a great number of sects then as there is now; so that a man, who wished to do his duty, would have to look about him carefully, and would be in danger of doing wrong, if he joined the first body of so-called Christians, which he met with!Â--a great number of sects, I repeat, even though the Apostles were alive; so that it is not the mere circumstance of the Apostles being dead, which makes a search necessary to find the true Church.

J.Â-- I see what you would say, Sir.

Dr.Â--Now then to proceed. You are disposed to doubt, whether one Church was truer than another after the Apostle's death. Surely is it not plain, that the Church would still be the true one, which they had governed? Now you will find, (Matt. xxviii. 19, 20.) that our LORD promised to be with His Apostles in their character of teachers and baptizers of the nations always, even unto the end of the world. What did He mean by that?

J.Â--He could not mean that Peter, James, or John, or their brethren, were to live for ever on earth; for we know that they are long since dead.

Dr.Â--Certainly not; and we must therefore ascribe to His words the only other meaning which they can reasonably bear. As he could not have spoken of the persons of the Apostles, he must have spoken of their offices. He must have meant that though Peter, James, and John should be taken from the world the true Church should never be left without Apostles, but be guided by their successors to the end of time.

John Evans had all this while been retracing with Dr. Spencer the way he had lately come, and had now arrived at the door of his own house. The good clergyman thinking he had given him matter enough to cast in his mind, took this as a fit moment to break off the conversation, determining to resume it some early day. He therefore merely went into his parishioner's house, to turn out for him the texts he had referred to, and then wished him good evening.

The next Sunday John was at Church; and after the service was over, he kept lingering in the path which led to the Dr.'s house, in hopes of being overtaken by his Rector. He was not disappointed. Dr. Spencer soon joined him, and the argument between them was resumed.

J.Â--If, Sir, as you were saying, our LORD meant, that there should be teachers and rulers of the Church, to stand in the place of the Apostles after their death, how is it we hear nothing of these successors, so to call them, in Scripture?

Dr.Â--On the other hand I affirm, we hear a great deal about them in Scripture, as you will agree with me. Surely you recollect the Apostles solemnly laying their hands on others, or, as it is called, ordaining them, to act as their assistants and fellows; and this they did, when Christians became too numerous for them to attend to them all by themselves. Such a person was Timothy, whom St. Paul thus consecrated by the putting on of his hands, (1 Tim. i. 6.) to bear rule over that branch of the Church which was established at Ephesus in Asia; such Titus, (Tit. i. 5.) whom he left with authority over the Church in the island of Crete, "to set in order the things that were wanting;" and such Epaphroditus, whom he sent to the Phillippians as

his "brother, and companion in labour, and fellow-soldier, but their messenger," or Apostle. (Phil. ii. 25.) Now in the absence of the Apostles, what do you suppose would have been the conduct of all true Christians to these whom the Apostles had appointed?

J.Â--Of course they would have shown them all honour and obedience, in order to show their respect for the Apostles themselves.

Dr.Â--Certainly; as reverencing St. Paul, they would have attended to his plain doctrine; "Whether any do enquire of Titus, he is my partner and fellow-helper concerning you; or our brethren (i. e. Luke and another sent to act jointly with Titus) be enquired of, they are the Apostles of the Church, and the glory of CHRIST. Wherefore show yet to them and before the Churches, the proof of your love, and of our boasting on your behalf." (2 Cor. viii. 23, 24.) On the other hand, how do you think these new Apostles would have been treated by those who slighted the authority of St. Peter and St. Paul?

J.Â--Those who set at nought the Apostles themselves, would also set at nought those who stood in their place.

Dr.Â--You see, then, that had we lived in the days of the Apostles, we should have had one plain test among others, for discovering the true Church, in spite of all counterfeits of it. The true Church was that Christian body, which was governed by men commissioned by the Apostles; and those who were perverse towards St. Peter and St. Paul, would have been disobedient towards them. But let us now go a step further. Do you suppose that Timothy, for instance, ceased to be an Apostles, such as St. Paul had made him, on the death of St. Paul?

J.Â--I do not see why he should; but I should like to know whether there is proof from Scripture that he did not?

Dr.Â--When St. Paul was just going to be put to death for the sake of the Gospel, he writes thus to Timothy: "Preach the Word! be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long-suffering and doctrine. . . . Watch thou in all things, endure affliction, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry. For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course." (2 Tim. iv. 2Â--7.)

J.Â--From these words it is certainly clear that St. Paul intended Timothy, whom he had appointed to act as his brother and fellow-labourer while he lived, to act as his successor when he should be no more.

Dr.Â--And all true Christians, who have revered Timothy as if really St. Paul, when that Apostle was removed from them for a time by distance, would no less reverence him as such, when the Apostle was removed once for all by death.

J.Â--They could do no less.

Dr.Â--It follows, then, that even when the Apostles had all entered into their rest, i.e. in the second age of the Gospel, we might still have used the test I have given, to distinguish the Church of CHRIST from sects falsely claiming that name. We should have found the one set of Christians reverently sitting at the feet of the successors of Apostles; all the others so called, openly rejecting their rightful authority.

J.Â--It is true; even while these successors of the Apostles lived, all who professed to obey CHRIST, were bound to pay them and would have paid them, a reverence which the false sects would not have paid; so

that in those times there would certainly have been no difficulty in finding which was the Church, which it was our duty to join.

Dr. A--And when Timothy, Titus, or Epaphroditus, as exercising the same full authority which had been exercised by St. Paul, themselves appointed fellow-labourers and successors, committing, as the Apostle had enjoined one of them to do, the things which they had heard to faithful men who might be able to teach others also: (2 Tim. ii. 2.) would not these faithful men be revered by all true Christians, for the very same reason which led them to reverence those who appointed them?

J. A--They would so, no doubt. As long as a direct line was continued from the Apostles themselves onwards, all consistent Christians must have paid them reverence. And such a succession might have gone on for a long while, A--an hundred years or more.

Dr. A--What if it have now gone on for eighteen hundred years? What if, by the good providence of GOD, the line which began with the Apostles Peter and Paul should have continued even to this very day? so that there are men who stand in the place of the Holy Saints and Martyrs of Scripture up to this very hour, under the great and eternal Head of the Church? You look surprised, but such is the fact; and if such persons do really exist, and if we find one community of Christians acknowledging and obeying, and ruled by them, while every other body of professing Christians in our island disclaims and rejects them, you will see that this test will enable the most simple-minded and unlearned person to discriminate between the true Church of CHRIST and the unauthorized sects which called themselves CHRIST'S followers now, almost as clearly as he could had he lived in the days of the Apostles themselves.

J. A--Yes; the body of Christians, which reverences and is guided by the successors of the Apostles, must be the true Church of CHRIST. But who are these successors of the Apostles in our country? though, to be sure, I think I know what answer you will give me.

Dr. A--The Bishops of the Church of England are they. There is not one of them who cannot trace his right to guide and govern CHRIST'S Church, and to ordain its Ministers, through a long line of predecessors, up to the favoured persons who were consecrated by the laying on of the holy hands of St. Peter and of St. Paul. This is a fact which dissenters from the Church of England do not, and cannot deny: nor do they profess that the authority of those, whom they call their ministers, to teach and to administer the Sacraments, rests at all on such grounds as these.

J. A--I understand you, Sir; but I have one remark to make, if you will please to hear it. Bishops do not work miracles, as the Apostles did; nor can you mean that we are to look upon their teaching and writings now, as dictated by immediate inspiration, and consequently infallible, like the New Testament. How then are they successors of the Apostles?

Dr. A--You are bringing me to a large subject, John; which we will discuss some other time, not on a Sunday evening, when you have your young ones at home, waiting to say their verses to you; and I had rather rest than argue after the Services of the day. We will have some further talk when occasion offers; meanwhile, in answer to your inquiry, I will but bid you compare John XX. with Acts ii. The miraculous gifts were sent down upon the Apostles on the day of Pentecost; but the commission to preach, teach, and ordain, was given, quite independently of all such extraordinary endowments, before our SAVIOUR ascended into heaven. One word at parting. A--You have had a good education; your mind has been opened to enter into arguments, to see objections, and answer questions: your understanding has been sharpened. This is a talent which may be used rightly, or abused; to the unwary all gifts are temptations.

As riches betray men into selfishness and an evil security, so does a sharp wit tend to make them self-confident, arrogant, and irreverent. Look at the advantages which GOD has given you, not as a cause of boasting and self-gratification, but seriously and anxiously, as a treasure of which you are steward for GOD, and concerning which you must one day give account to him.

OXFORD,

The Feast of the Annunciation.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/jh-newman/christian-liberty-or-why-should-we-belong-to-the-church-of-england-by-a-layman/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net