

# The Visible Church, Letter Iii

by J.H. Newman

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*The Visible Church is a necessary institution for the preservation of the truth and the salvation of humanity.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:14, John 8:32, Acts 20:28, 1 Corinthians 1:10, 1 Corinthians 12:27, Ephesians 4:11, Colossians 1:18, 1 Timothy 3:15, Hebrews 10:25, 1 Peter 2:9

**Topics:** "Visible Church", "Divine Truth"

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## Description

J.H. Newman preaches about the importance of holding onto the doctrine of Scripture and the Visible Church, emphasizing the need to not surrender these to Papistical corruptions but to claim and utilize them for the purposes God has given. He highlights how before Christ came, Divine Truth was like a pilgrim in the world, and how Christ established a Visible Church to counter the world's enchantments and act as a witness for Him. Newman warns against neglecting the gift of the Visible Church, as it helps support the Truth and hinders the strength of Popery, ultimately preparing the way for it if not upheld.

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## Transcript

YOU have some misgivings, it seems, lest the doctrine I have been advocating "should lead to Popery." I will not, by way of answer, say, that the question is not, whether it will lead to Popery, but whether it is in the Bible; because it would bring the Bible and Popery into one sentence, and seem to imply the possibility of a "communion" between "light and darkness." No; it is the very enmity I feel against the Papistical corruptions of the Gospel, which leads me to press upon you a doctrine of Scripture, which we are sinfully surrendering, and the Church of Rome has faithfully retained.

How comes it that a system, so unscriptural as the Popish, makes converts? because it has in it an element of truth and comfort amid its falsehoods. And the true way of opposing it, is, not to give up to them that element, which GOD'S providence has preserved to us also, thus basely surrendering "the inheritance of our Fathers," but to claim it as our own, and to make use of it for the purposes for which GOD has given it to us. I will explain what I mean.

Before CHRIST came, Divine Truth was, as it were, a pilgrim in the world. The Jews excepted, men who had portions of the SPIRIT of GOD, knew not their privilege. The whole force and current of the external world was against them, acting powerfully on their imagination, and tempting them to set sight against faith, to trust the many witnesses who prophesied falsehood (as if) in the name of the LORD, rather than the still small voice which spoke within them. Who can undervalue the power of this fascination, who has had experience of the world ever so little? Who can go at this day into mixed society, who can engage in

politics or other active business, and not find himself gradually drifting off from the true Rock on which his faith is built, till he begins in despair to fancy, that solitude is the only safe place for the Christian, or, (with a baser judgment,) that strict obedience will not be required at the last day of those who have been engaged in active life? If such is now the power of the world's enchantments, surely much greater was it before our SAVIOUR came.

Now what did He do for us, in order to meet this evil? His merciful Providence chose means which might act as a counter influence on the imagination. The visible power of the world enthralled men to a lie: He set up a Visible Church, to witness the other way, to witness for Him, to be a matter of fact, as undeniable as the shining of the sun, that there was such a principle as conscience in the world, as faith, as fear of GOD; that there were men who considered themselves bound to live as His servants.

The common answer which we hear made every day to persons who engage in any novel undertaking, is, "You will get no one to join you; nothing can come of it; you are singular in your opinion; you do not take practical views, but are smit with a fancy, with a dream of former times," &c. How cheering it is to a person so circumstanced, to be able to point to others elsewhere, who actually hold the same opinions as himself, and exert themselves for the same objects! Why? because it is an appeal to a fact, which no one can deny; it is an evidence that the view which influences him is something external to his own mind, and not a dream.

What two persons see, cannot be an ideal apparition. men are governed by such facts, much more than by argumentative proof. These act upon the imagination. let a person be told ten times over than an opinion is true, the fact of its being said becomes an argument for the truth of it; i.e. it is so with most men. We see from time to time the operation of this principle of our nature in political matters. Our American colonies revolt; France feels the sympathy of the event, and is revolutionized.

Again, in the same colonies, the Episcopal Church flourishes; we Churchmen at home ail it as an omen of the Church's permanence among ourselves. On the other hand, what can be more dispiriting than to find a cause, which we advocate, sinking in some other country or neighbourhood, though there be no reason for concluding, that, because it has fallen elsewhere, therefore it will among ourselves? In order then to supply this need of our minds, to satisfy the imagination, and so to help our faith, for this among other reasons, CHRIST set up a visible Society, His Church, to be as a light upon a hill, to all the ends of the earth, while time endures.

It is a witness of the unseen world; a pledge of it; and a prefiguration of what will hereafter take place. It prefigures the ultimate separation of good and bad, holds up the great laws of GOD'S Moral Governance, and preaches the blessed truths of the Gospel. It pledges to us the promises of the next world, for it is something (so to say) in hand; CHRIST has done one work as the earnest of another. and it witnesses the truth to the whole world; awing sinners, while it inspires the fainting believer.

And in all these ways it helps forward the world to come; and further, as the keeper of the Sacraments, it is an essential means of the realizing it at present in our fallen race. Nor is it much to the purpose, as regards our duty towards it, what are the feelings and spiritual state of the individuals who are its officers. True it is, were the Church to teach a heretical doctrine, it might become incumbent upon us (a miserable obligation!) to separate from it. But, while it teaches substantially the Truth, we ought to look upon it as one whole, one ordinance of GOD, not as composed of individuals, but as a House of GOD'S building;--as an instrument in His hand, to be used and revered for the sake of its Maker.

Now the Papists have retained it; and so they have the advantage of possessing an instrument, which is, in the first place, suited to the needs of human nature; and next, is a special gift of CHRIST, and so has a blessing with it. Accordingly we see that in its measure success follows their zealous use of it. They act with great force upon the imaginations of men. The vaunted antiquity, the universality, the unanimity of their Church puts them above the varying fashions of the world, and the religious novelties of the day. And truly when one surveys the grandeur of their system, a sigh arises in the thoughtful mind, to think that we should be separate from them; Cum talis sis, utinam noster esses!—But, alas, AN UNION IS IMPOSSIBLE. Their communion is infected with heterodoxy; we are bound to flee it, as a pestilence. They have established a lie in the place of GOD'S truth; and, by their claim of immutability in doctrine, cannot undo the sin they have committed. They cannot repent. Popery must be destroyed; it cannot be reformed.

Now then what is the Christian to do? Is he forced back upon that cheerless atheism (for so it practically must be considered) which prevailed in the world before CHRIST'S coming, poorly alleviated, as it was, by the received polytheisms of the heathen? Can we conceive a greater calamity to have occurred at the time of our Reformation, one which the Enemy of man would have been more set on effecting, than to have entangled the whole of the Church Catholic in the guilt of heterodoxy, and so have forced every one who worshipped in spirit and in truth, to flee out of doors into the bleak world, in order to save his soul?

I do not think that Satan could have desired any event more eagerly, than such an alternative; viz. to have forced Christians, either to remain in communion with error, or to join themselves in some such spontaneous union among themselves, as is dissolved as easily as it is formed. Blessed be GOD! his malice has been thwarted. I do believe it to be one most conspicuous mark of GOD'S adorable Providence over us, as great as if we saw a miracle, that Christians in England escaped in the evil day from either extreme, neither corrupted doctrinally, nor secularized ecclesiastically.

Thus in every quarter of the world, from North America, to New South Wales, a Zoar has been provided for those who would fain escape Sodom, yet dread to be without shelter. I hail it as an omen amid our present perils, that our Church will not be destroyed. He hath been mindful of us; He will bless us. He has wonderfully preserved our Church as a true branch of the Church Universal, yet withal preserved it free from doctrinal error. It is Catholic and Apostolic, yet not Papistical.

With this reflection before us, does it not seem to be utter ingratitude to an astonishing Providence of GOD'S mercy, to be neglectful, as many Churchmen now are, of the gift? to attempt unions with those who have separated from the Church, to break down the partition walls, and to argue as if religion were altogether and only a matter of each man's private concern, and that the State and Nation were not bound to prefer the Apostolic Church to all self-originated forms of Christianity?

But this is a point beside my purpose. Take the matter merely in the light of human expedience. Shall we be so far less wise in our generation than the children of this world, as to relinquish the support which the Truth receives from the influence of a Visible Church upon the imagination, from the energy of operation which a well-disciplined Body ensures? Shall we not foil the Papists, not with their own weapons, but with weapons which are ours as well as theirs? or, on the other hand, shall we with a melancholy infatuation give them up to them?

Depend upon it, to insist on the doctrine of the Visible Church is not to favour the Papists, it is to do them the most serious injury. It is to deprive them of their only strength. But if we neglect to do so, what will be the consequence? Break down the Divine Authority of our Apostolical Church, and you are plainly

preparing the way for Popery in our land. Human nature cannot remain without visible guides; it chooses them for itself, if it is not provided for them. If the Aristocracy and the Church fall, Popery steps in. Political events are beyond our power, and perhaps out of our sphere; but ecclesiastical matters are in the hands of all Churchmen.

OXFORD,

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