

The Visible Church, Letters I and II

by J.H. Newman

J.H. Newman emphasizes the essential role of the Visible Church in the Christian faith and the necessity of obedience to its teachings for salvation.

Scripture: Matthew 16:18, 1 Corinthians 12:12, Ephesians 4:5, 1 Timothy 3:15, Hebrews 13:17

Topics: "Church Authority", "True Faith"

Description

J.H. Newman preaches on the importance of the doctrine of 'the Holy Catholic Church' as taught in Scripture and the Creed. He addresses the argument that a correct Creed and spiritual affections should be enough for salvation, but emphasizes the necessity of consistent conduct as a test of true faith. Newman urges the congregation to search Scripture to understand the importance of obeying the Church and its teachings, highlighting the significance of the Visible Church as a means of grace and salvation.

Transcript

You wish to have my opinion on the doctrine of "the Holy Catholic Church," as contained in Scripture, and taught in the Creed. So I send you the following lines, which perhaps may serve, through GOD'S blessing, to assist you in your search after the truth in this matter, even though they do no more; indeed no remarks, however just, can be much more than an assistance to you. You must search for yourself, and GOD must teach you.

I think I partly enter into your present perplexity. You argue, that true doctrine is the important matter for which we must contend, and a right state of the affections is the test of vital religion in the heart: and you ask, " Why may I not be satisfied if my Creed is correct, and my affections spiritual? Have I not in that case enough to evidence a renewed mind, and to constitute a basis of union with others like minded? The love of CHRIST is surely the one and only requisite for Christian communion here, and the joys of heaven hereafter." Again you say, that they are constant in their prayers for the teaching of the HOLY SPIRIT; so that if it be true, that every one who asketh receiveth, surely they must receive, and are in a safe state.

Believe me, I do not think lightly of these arguments. They are very subtle ones; powerfully influencing the imagination, and difficult to answer. Still I believe them to be mere fallacies. Let me try them in a parallel case. You know the preacher at ---, and have heard of his flagrantly immoral life; yet it is notorious that he can and does speak in a moving way of the love of CHRIST, &c. It is very shocking to witness such a case, which (we will hope) is rare; but it has its use. Do you not think him in peril, in spite of his

impressive and persuasive language? Why?—You will say, his life is bad. True; it seems then that more is requisite for salvation than an orthodox creed, and keen sensibility; viz. consistent conduct.—Very well then, we have come to an additional test of true faith, obedience to GOD'S word, and plainly a scriptural test, according to St. John's canon, "He who doeth righteousness is righteous." Do not you see then your argument is already proved to be unsound? It seems that true doctrine and warm feelings are not enough. How am I to know what is enough? you ask. I reply, by searching Scripture. It was your original fault that, instead of inquiring what GOD has told you is necessary for being a true Christian, you chose out of your own head to argue on the subject;—e. g. "I can never believe that to be such and such is not enough for salvation," &c. Now this is worldly wisdom.

Let us join issue then on this plain ground, whether or not the doctrine of "the Church," and the duty of obeying it, be laid down in Scripture. If so, it is no matter as regards our practice, whether the doctrine is primary or secondary, whether the duty is much or little insisted on. A Christian mind will aim at obeying the whole counsel and will of GOD; on the other hand, to those who are tempted arbitrarily to classify and select their duties, it is written, "Whosoever shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven."

And here first, that you may clearly understand the ground I am taking, pray observe that I am not attempting to controvert any one of those high evangelical points, on which perhaps we do not altogether agree with each other. Perhaps you attribute less efficacy to the Sacrament of Baptism than I do; bring out into greater system and prominence the history of an individual's warfare with his spiritual enemies; fix more precisely and abruptly the date of his actual conversion from darkness to light; and consider that Divine Grace acts more arbitrarily against the corrupt human will, than I think is revealed in Scripture. Still, in spite of this difference of opinion, I see no reason why you should not accept heartily the Scripture doctrine of "the Church." And this is the point I wish to press, not asking you at present to abandon your own opinions, but to add to them a practical belief in a tenet which the Creed teaches and Scripture has consecrated. And this surely is quite possible. The excellent Mr. —, of —, who has lately left —, was both a Calvinist, and a strenuous High-Churchman.

You are in the practice of distinguishing between the Visible and Invisible Church. Of course I have no wish to maintain, that those who shall be saved hereafter are exactly the same company that are under the means of grace here; still I must insist on it, that Scripture makes the existence of a Visible Church a condition of the existence of the Invisible. I mean, the Sacraments are evidently in the hands of the Church Visible; and these, we know, are generally necessary to salvation, as the Catechism says. Thus it is an undeniable fact, as true as that souls will be saved, that a Visible Church must exist as a means towards that end. The Sacraments are in the hands of the Clergy; this few will deny, or that their efficacy is independent of the personal character of the administrator. What then shall be thought of any attempts to weaken or exterminate that Community? or that Ministry, which is an appointed condition of the salvation of the elect? But every one, who makes or encourages a schism, must weaken it. Thus it is plain, schism must be wrong in itself, even if Scripture did not in express terms forbid it, as it does.

But further than this; it is plain this Visible Church is a standing body. Every one who is baptized, is baptized into an existing community. Our Service expresses this when it speaks of baptized infants being incorporated into GOD'S holy Church. Thus the Visible Church is not a voluntary association of the day, but a continuation of one which existed in the age before us, and then again in the age before that; and so back till we come to the age of the Apostles. In the same sense, in which Corporations of the State's creating, are perpetual, is this which CHRIST has founded. This is a matter of fact hitherto; and it

necessarily will be so always, for is not the notion absurd of an unbaptized person baptizing others? which is the only way in which the Christian community can have a new beginning.

Moreover Scripture directly insists upon the doctrine of the Visible Church as being of importance. E. g. St. Paul says; "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one LORD, one faith, one baptism, one GOD and Father of all." Ephes. iv. 5, 6. Thus, as far as the Apostle's words go, it is as false and unchristian, (I do not mean in degree of guilt, but in its intrinsic sinfulness,) to make more bodies than one, as to have many Lords, many Gods, many Creeds. Now, I wish to know, how it is possible for any one to fall into this sin, if Dissenters are clear of it? What is the sin, if separation from the Existing Church is not it?

I have shown that there is a divinely instituted Visible Church, and that it has been one and the same by successive incorporation of members from the beginning. Now I observe further, that the word Church, as used in Scripture, ordinarily means this actually existing visible body. The possible exception to this rule, out of about 100 places in the New Testament, where the word occurs, are four passages in the Epistle to the Ephesians; two in the Colossians; and one in the Hebrews. (Eph. i. 22; iii. 10. 2 I; v. 23--82. Col. i. 18. 24. Heb. xii. 23.) And in some of these exceptions the sense is at most but doubtful. Further, our SAVIOUR uses the word twice, and in both times of the Visible Church. They are remarkable passages, and may here be introduced, in continuation of my argument.

Matt. xvi. 18. "Upon this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Now I am certain, any unprejudiced mind, who knew nothing of controversy, considering the Greek word [ekklesia] means simply an assembly, would have no doubt at all that it meant in this passage a visible body. What right have we to disturb the plain sense? why do we impose a meaning, arising from some system of our own? And this view is altogether confirmed by the other occasion of our LORD'S using it, where it can only denote the Visible Church. Matt. xviii. 17. "If he (thy brother) shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the Church; but if he neglect to hear the Church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican."

Observe then what we gain by these two passages;--the grant of power to the Church; and the promise of permanence. Now look at the fact. The body then begun has continued; and has always claimed and exercised the power of a corporation or society. Consider merely the article in the Creed, "The Holy Catholic Church;" which embodies this notion. Do not Scripture and History illustrate each other?

I end this first draught of my argument, with the text in 1 Tim. iii. 15, in which St. Paul calls the Church "the pillar and ground of the truth,"--which can refer to nothing but a Visible Body; else martyrs may be invisible, and preachers, and teachers, and the whole order of the Ministry.

My paper is exhausted. If you allow me, I will send you soon a second Letter; meanwhile I sum up what I have been proving from Scripture thus; that ALMIGHTY GOD might have left Christianity as a sort of sacred literature, as contained in the Bible, which each person was to take and use by himself; just as we read the works of any human philosopher or historian, from which we gain practical instruction, but the knowledge of which does not bind us to be Newtonians, or Aristotelians, &c., or to go out of our line of life in consequence of it. This, I say, He might have done; but, in matter of fact, He has ordained otherwise. He has actually set up a Society, which exists even this day all over the world, and which (as a general rule) Christians are bound to join; so that to believe in CHRIST is not a mere opinion or a secret conviction, but a social or even a political principle, forcing one into what is often stigmatized as party

strife, and quite inconsistent with the supercilious mood of those professed Christians of the day, who stand aloof, and designate their indifference as philosophy.

LETTER II.

I AM sometimes struck with the inconsistency of those, who do not allow us to express the gratitude due to the Church, while they do not hesitate to declare their obligation to individuals who have benefited them. To a vow that they owe their views of religion and their present hopes of salvation to this or that distinguished preacher, appears to them as harmless, as it may be in itself true and becoming; but if a person ascribes his faith and knowledge to the Church, he is thought to forget his peculiar and unspeakable debt to that SAVIOUR who died for him. Surely, if our LORD makes man His instrument of good to man, and if it is possible to be grateful to man without forgetting the Source of all grace and power, there is nothing wonderful in His having appointed a company of men as the especial medium of His instruction and spiritual gifts, and in consequence, of His having laid upon us the duty of gratitude to it. Now this is all I wish to maintain, what is most clearly (as I think) revealed in Scripture, that the blessings of redemption come to us through the Visible Church; so that, as we betake ourselves to a Dispensary for medicine, without attributing praise or intrinsic worth to the building or the immediate managers of its stores, in something of the like manner we are to come to that One Society, to which CHRIST has entrusted the office of stewardship in the distribution of gifts, of which He alone is the Author and real Dispenser.

In the letter I sent you the other day, I made some general remarks on this doctrine; now let me continue the subject.

First, the Sacraments, which are the ordinary means of grace, are clearly in possession of the Church. Baptism is an incorporation into a body; and invests with spiritual blessings, because it is the introduction into a body so invested. In 1 Cor. xii. we are taught first, the SPIRIT'S indwelling in the Visible Church or body; I do not say in every member of it, but generally in it;--next, we are told that the SPIRIT baptizes individuals into that body. Again, the LORD'S Supper carries evidence of its social nature even in its name: it is not a solitary individual act, it is a joint communion. Surely nothing is more alien to Christianity than the spirit of Independence; the peculiar Christian blessing, i. e. the presence of CHRIST, is upon two or three gathered together, not on mere individuals.

But this is not all. The Sacraments are committed, not into the hands of the Church Visible assembled together, (though even this would be no unimportant doctrine practically,) but into certain definite persons, who are selected from their brethren for that trust. I will not here determine who these are in each successive age, but will only point out how far this principle itself will carry us. The doctrine is implied in the original institution of the LORD'S Supper, where CHRIST says to His Apostles, "Do this." Further, take that remarkable passage in Matt. xxiv. 45--51. Luke xii. 42--46, "Who then is that faithful and wise Steward, whom his Lord shall make ruler over His household, to give them their portion of meat in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his Lord, when He cometh, shall find so doing!" &c. Now I do not inquire who in every age are the stewards spoken of, (though in my own mind I cannot doubt the line of Bishops is that Ministry, and consider the concluding verses fearfully prophetic of the Papal misuse of the gift;--by the bye, at least it shows this, that bad men may nevertheless be the channels of grace to GOD'S "household,") I do not ask who are the stewards, but surely the words, when He cometh, imply that they are to continue till the end of the world. This reference is abundantly confirmed by our LORD'S parting words to the eleven; in which, after giving them the baptismal commission, He adds, "Lo! I am with

you always, even unto the end of the world." If then He was with the Apostles in a way in which He was not present with teachers who were strangers to their "fellowship," (Acts ii. 42.) which all will admit, so, in like manner, it cannot be a matter of indifference in any age, what teachers and fellowship a Christian selects; there must be those with whom CHRIST is present, who are His " Stewards," and whom it is our duty to obey.

As I have mentioned the question of faithfulness and unfaithfulness in Ministers, I may refer to the passage in 1 Cor. iv. where St. Paul, after speaking of himself and others as "Stewards of the mysteries of God," and noticing that "it is required of Stewards, that a man be found faithful," adds, "With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you or of man's judgment therefore judge nothing before the time."

To proceed, consider the following passage: "Obey them that have rule over you, and submit yourselves." Heb. xiii. 17. Again, I do not ask who these are; but whether this is not a duty, however it is to be fulfilled, which multitudes in no sense fulfil. Consider the number of people, professing and doubtless in a manner really actuated by Christian principle, who yet wander about from church to church, or from church to meeting, as sheep without a shepherd, or who choose a preacher merely because he pleases their taste, and whose first movement towards any clergyman they meet, is to examine and criticize his doctrine: what conceivable meaning do they put upon these words of the Apostle? Does any one rule over them? do they in any way submit themselves? Can these persons excuse their conduct, except on the deplorably profane plea, (which yet I believe is in their hearts at the bottom of their disobedience,) that it matters little to keep CHRIST'S "least commandments," so that we embrace the peculiar doctrines of His gospel?

Some time ago I drew up a sketch of the Scripture proof of the doctrine of the Visible Church; which with your leave I will here transcribe. You will observe, I am not arguing for this or that form of Polity, or for the Apostolical Succession, but simply the duties of order, union, ecclesiastical gifts, and ecclesiastical obedience; I limit myself to these points, as being persuaded that, when they are granted, the others will eventually follow.

I. That there was a Visible Church in the Apostles' day.

1. General texts. Matt. xvi. 18; xviii. 17. 1 Tim. iii. 15. Acts passim, &c.

2. Organization of the Church.

(1.) Diversity of ranks. 1 Cor. xii. Eph. iv. 4--12. Rom. xii. 4--8. 1 Pet. iv. 10, 11.

(2.) Governors. Matt. xxviii. 19. Mark xvi. 15, 16. John xx. 22, 23. Luke xxii. 19, 20. Gal. ii. 9, &c.

(3.) Gifts. Luke xii. 42, 43. John xx. 22, 23. Matt. xviii. 18.

(4.) Order. Acts viii. 5, 6, 12, 14, 15, 17; xi. 22, 23; xi. 2,4; ix.27; xv.2, 4, 6, 25, xvi. 4; xviii. 22; xxi. 17--19. conf. Gal. i. 1, 12. 1 Cor. xiv. 40. 1 Thess. v. 14.

(5.) Ordination. Acts vi. 6. 1 Tim. iv. 14; v. 22. 2 Tim. i. 6. Tit. i. 5. Acts xiii. 3. conf. Gal. i. 1,

(6.) Ecclesiastical obedience. 1 Thess. v. 12, 13. Heb. xiii. 17. 1 Tim. v. 17.

(7.) Rules and discipline. Matt. xxviii. 19. Matt. xviii. 17. 1 Cor. v. 4--7. Gal. v. 12, &c. 1 Cor. xvi. 1, 2. 1 Cor. xi. 2, 16, &c.

(8.) Unity. Rom. xvi. 17. 1 Cor. i. 10; iii. 3; xiv. 26. Col. ii. 5. 1 Thess. v. 14. 2 Thess. iii. 6.

II. That the Visible Church, thus instituted by the Apostles, was intended to continue.

1. Why should it not? The onus probandi lies with those who deny this position. If the doctrines and precepts already cited are obsolete at this day, why should not the following texts? e. g. 1 Pet. ii. 13, or e. g. Matt. vii. 14. John iii. 3.

2. Is it likely so elaborate a system should be framed, yet with no purpose of its continuing?

3. The objects to be obtained by it are as necessary now as then. (1.) Preservation of the faith. (2.) Purity of doctrine. (3.) Edification of Christians. (4.) Unity of operation. Vid. Epists. to Tim. & Tit. passim.

4. If system were necessary in a time of miracles, much more is it now.

5. 2 Tim. ii. 2. Matt. xxviii. 20, &c.

Take these remarks, as they are meant, as mere suggestions for your private consideration.

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