

Via Media. No. II

by J.H. Newman

J.H. Newman argues for a second Reformation to restore the Church's adherence to its foundational principles and Sacraments amidst modern challenges.

Scripture: Ephesians 4:14, Colossians 2:8, 1 Timothy 4:16, 2 Timothy 3:16, 1 Peter 5:8

Topics: "Church Reformation", "Doctrinal Purity"

Description

J.H. Newman preaches about the need for a second Reformation in the Church, pointing out the forgotten principles of the Church and the discrepancies between historical practices and current beliefs. He emphasizes the importance of aligning with the doctrines and disciplines outlined in the Liturgy and Articles of Faith, highlighting the dangers of straying from these foundations. Newman raises concerns about the growing trend towards liberal and latitudinarian views, urging for a return to the core teachings and practices of the Church to maintain purity and faithfulness.

Transcript

Laicus

. I am come for some further conversation with you; or rather, for another exposition of your views on Church matters. I am not well read enough to argue with you; nor, on the other hand, do I profess to admit all you say: but I want, if you will let me, to get at your opinions. So will you lecture if I give the subjects?

Clericus

. To lecture, as you call it, is quite beyond me, since at best I have but a smattering of reading in Church history. The more it is the pity; though I have as much as a great many others: for ignorance of our historical position as Churchmen is one of the especial evils of the day. Yet even with a little knowledge, I am able to see certain facts which seem quite inconsistent with notions at present received. For my practice, I should be ashamed of myself if I guided it by any theories. Here the letter and spirit of the Liturgy is my direction, as it is of all classes of Churchmen, high and low. Yet, though I do not lay a great stress on such views as I gather from history, it is to my mind a strong confirmation of them, that they just account for and illustrate the conclusions to which I am led by plain obedience to my ordination vows.

L

. If you only wish to keep to the Liturgy, not to change, what did you mean the other day by those ominous words, in which you suggested the need of a second Reformation?

C

. Because I think the Church has in a measure forgotten its own principles, as declared in the 16th century; nay, under stranger circumstances, as far as I know, than have attended any of the errors and corruptions of the Papists. Grievous as are their declensions from primitive usage, I never heard in any case of their practice directly contradicting their Services;—whereas we go on lamenting once a year the absence of discipline in our Church, yet do not even dream of taking any one step towards its restoration. Again, we confess in the Articles the excommunication is a solemn duty of the Church under certain circumstances, and that the excommunicated person must be openly reconciled by penance, before he is acknowledged by the faithful as a brother; yet excommunication, I am told, is now a civil process, which takes place as a matter of course at a certain stage of certain law proceedings. Here a reformation is needed.

L

. Only of discipline, not of doctrine.

C. Again, when the Church, with an unprecedented confidence, bound herself hand and foot, and made herself over to the civil power, in order to escape the Pope, she did not expect that infidels (as it has lately been hinted) would be suffered to have the absolute disposal of the crown patronage.

L

. This, again, might be considered matter of discipline. Our Reformation in the 16th century was one in matters of faith; and therefore we do not need a second Reformation in the same sense in which we needed it first.

C

. In what points would you say the Church's faith was reformed in the 16th century?

L

. Take the then received belief in purgatory and pardons, which alone was a sufficient corruption to call for a reformation.

C

. I conceive the presumption of the Popish doctrine on these points to lie in adding to the means of salvation set forth in Scripture. ALMIGHTY GOD has said His Son's merits shall wash away all sin, and that they shall be conveyed to believers through the two Sacraments; whereas, the Church of Rome has added other ways of gaining heaven.

L

. Granted. The belief in purgatory and pardons disparages the sufficiency, first of CHRIST'S merits, next of His appointed sacraments.

C

. And by "received" belief, I suppose you mean that it was the popular belief, which clergy and laity acted on, not that it was necessarily contained in any particular doctrinal formulary.

L

. Proceed.

C

. Do you not suppose that there are multitudes both among clergy and laity at the present day, who disparage, not indeed CHRIST'S merits, but the Sacraments He has appointed? and if so, is not their error so far the same in kind as that of the Romish Church--the preferring Abana and Pharpar to the waters of Jordan? Take the Sacrament of Baptism. Have not some denominations of schismatics invented a rite of dedication instead of Baptism? and do not Churchmen find themselves under the temptation of countenancing this Papist-like presumption? Again, there is a well-known sect, which denies both Baptism and the LORD'S Supper. A Churchman must believe its members to be altogether external to the fold of CHRIST. Whatever benevolent works they may be able to show, still, if we receive the Church's doctrine concerning the means "generally necessary to salvation," we must consider such persons to be mere heathens, except in knowledge. Now would there not be an outcry raised, as if I were uncharitable, did I refuse the rites of burial to such an one?

L

. This censure would not proceed from the better informed or the rulers of our Church.

C

. Happily, we are not as yet so corrupted as at the era of the Reformation. Our Prelates are still sound, and know the difference between what is modern and what is ancient. Yet is not the mode of viewing the subject I refer to, a growing one? and how does it differ from the presumption of the Papists? In both cases, the power of CHRIST'S Sacraments is denied; in the one case by the unbelief of restlessness and fear, in the other by the unbelief of profaneness.

L

. Well, supposing I grant that the Church of this day is in a measure faulty in faith and discipline; more or less, of course, according to the diocese and neighbourhood. Now, in the next place, what do you mean by your Reformation?

C

. I would do what our reformers in the 16th century did: they did not touch the existing documents of doctrine--there was no occasion--they kept the creeds as they were; but they added protests against the corruptions of faith, worship, and discipline, which had grown up around them. I would have the Church do the same thing now, if I could: she should not change the Articles, she should add to them: add protests against the erastianism and latitudinarianism which have incrustated them. I would have her append to the Catechism a section on the power of the Church.

L

. You have not mentioned any corruptions at present in worship; do you consider that there are such, as well as errors of faith and discipline?

C

. Our Liturgy keeps us right in the main, yet there are what may be considered such, though for the most part occasional. To board over the altar of a Church, place an orchestra there of playhouse singers, and take money at the doors, seems to me as great an outrage as to sprinkle the forehead with holy water and to carry lighted tapers in a procession.

L

. Do not speak so harshly of what has often been done piously. George the third was a patron of concerts in one of our Cathedrals.

C

. Far be it from my mind to dare to arraign the actions of that religious king! The same deed is of a different nature at different times and under different circumstances. Music in a Church may as reverentially subserve the feelings of devotion as pictures or architecture; but it may not.

L

. You could not prevent such a desecration by adding a fortieth article to the thirty-nine.

C

. Not directly: yet though there is no article directly condemning religious processions, they have nevertheless been discontinued. In like manner, were an article framed (to speak by way of illustration) declaratory of the sanctity of places set apart to the worship of GOD and the reception of the saints that sleep, doubtless Churchmen would be saved from many profane feelings and practices of the day, which they give into unawares, such as the holding vestries in Churches, the flocking to preachers rather than to sacraments, (as if the servant were above the Master, who is LORD over His own house,) the luxurious and fashionable fitting up of town Churches, the proposal to allow schismatics to hold their meetings in them, the off-hand project of pulling them down for the convenience of streets and roads, and the wanton preference (for it frequently is wanton) of unconsecrated places, whether for preaching to the poor, or for administering sacred rites to the rich.

L

. It is visionary to talk of such a reformation: the people would not endure it.

C

. It is; but I am not advocating it, I am but raising a protest. I say this ought to be, "because of the angels," but I do not hope to persuade others to think as I do.

L

. I think I quite understand the ground you take. You consider that, as time goes on, fresh and fresh articles of faith are necessary to secure the Church's purity, according to the rise of successive heresies and errors. These articles are all hidden, as it were, in the Church's bosom, from the first, and brought out into form according to the occasion. Such was the Nicene explanation against Arius; the English Articles against Popery: and such are those now called for in this Age of schism, to meet the new heresy, which denies the holy Catholic Church--the heresy of Hoadley, and others like him.

C

. Yes and let it never be forgotten, that, whatever were the errors of the Convocation of our Church in the beginning of the 18th century, it expired in an attempt to brand the doctrines of Hoadley. May the day be merely delayed!

L

. I understand you further to say, that you hold to the Reformers as far as they have spoken out in our formularies, which at the same time you consider as incomplete; that the doctrines which may appear wanting in the Articles such as the Apostolical Commission, are the doctrines of the Church Catholic; doctrines, which a member of that Church holds as such, prior to subscription; that, moreover, they are quite consistent with our Articles, sometimes are even implied in them, and sometimes clearly contained in the Liturgy, though not in the Articles, as the Apostolical Commission in the Ordination Service; lastly, that we are clearly bound to believe, and all of us do believe, as essential, doctrines which nevertheless are not contained in the Articles, as e. g. the inspiration of Holy Scripture.

C

. Yes--and further I maintain, that, while I fully concur in the Articles, as far as they go, those who call one Papist, do not acquiesce in the doctrine of the Liturgy.

L

. This is a subject I especially wish drawn out. You threw out some hints about it the other day, though I cannot say you convinced me. I have misgivings, after all, that our Reformers only began their own work. I do not say they saw the tendency and issue of their opinions; but surely, had they lived, and had the opportunity of doing more, they would have given into much more liberal notions (as they are called) than you are disposed to concede. It is not by producing a rubric, or all insulated passage from the services, that you can destroy this impression. Such instances only show they were inconsistent, which I will grant. Still, is not the genius of our formularies towards a more latitudinarian system than they reach?

C

. I will cheerfully meet you on the grounds you propose. Let us carefully examine the Liturgy in its separate parts. I think it will decide the point which I contended for the other day, viz. that we are more Protestant than our Reformers.

L

. What do you mean by Protestant in your present use of the word?

C

. A number of distinct doctrines are included in the notion of Protestantism: and as to all these, our Church has taken the VIA MEDIA between it and Popery. At present I will use it in the sense most apposite to the topics we have been discussing; viz. as the religion of so-called freedom and independence, as hating superstition, suspicious of forms, jealous of priestcraft, advocating heart-worship; characteristics, which admit of a good or a bad interpretation, but which, understood as they are instanced in the majority of persons who are zealous for what is called Protestant doctrine, are (I maintain) very inconsistent with the Liturgy of our Church. Now let us begin with the Confirmation Service.

L

. Will not the Baptismal be more to your purpose? In it regeneration is connected with the formal act of sprinkling a little water on the forehead of an infant.

C

. It is true; but I would rather shew the general spirit of the Services, than take those obvious instances which, it seems, you can find out for yourself. Is it not certain that a modern Protestant, even though he granted that children were regenerated in Baptism, would, in the Confirmation Service, have inserted some address to them about the necessity of spiritual renovation, of becoming new creatures, &c.? I do not say such warning has not its appropriateness; nor do I propose to account for our Church's not giving it; but is it not quite certain that the present prevailing temper in the Church would have given it, judging from the prayers and sermons of the day, and that the Liturgy does not? Were that day like this, would it not have been deemed formal and cold, and to argue a want of spiritual-mindedness, to have proposed a declaration, such as has been actually adopted, that "to the end that Confirmation may be ministered to the more edifying of such as shall receive it ...none hereafter shall be confirmed, but such as can say the Creed, the LORD'S Prayer, and the Ten Commandments," &c.; nothing being said of a change of heart, or spiritual affections? And yet, upon this mere external profession, the children receive the imposition of the Bishop's hands, "to certify them by this sign, of GOD'S favour and gracious goodness towards them."

L

. From the line you are adopting, I see you will find Services more Anti-Protestant (in the modern sense of Protestant,) than that for Confirmation.

C

. Take, again, the Catechism. What can be more technical and formal (as the persons I speak of would say,) than the division of our duties into our duty towards GOD and our duty towards our neighbour? Indeed, would not the very word duty be objected to by them, as obscuring the evangelical character of Christianity? Why is there no mention of newness of heart, of appropriating the mercies of redemption, and such like phrases, which are now common among so-called Protestants? Why no mention of justifying faith?

L

. Faith is mentioned in an earlier part of the Catechism.

C

. Yes, and it affords a remarkable contrast to the modern use of the word. Now-a-days, the prominent notion conveyed by it regards its properties, whether spiritual or not, warm, heart felt, vital. But in the Catechism, the prominent notion is that of its object, the believing "all the Articles of the Christian faith," according to the Apostle's declaration, that it is, "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

L

. I understand; and the Creed is also introduced into the service for Baptism.

C

. And still more remarkably into the Order for Visiting the Sick: more remarkably, both because of the season when it is introduced, when a Christian is drawing near his end, and also as being a preparation for the Absolution. Most comfortable, truly, in his last hour, is such a distinct rehearsal of the great truths on which the Christian has fed by faith, with thanksgiving, all his life long; yet it surely would not have suggested itself to a modern Protestant. He would rather have instituted some more searching examination (as he would call it,) of the state of the sick man's heart; whereas the whole of the minister's exhortation is what the modern school calls cold and formal. It ends thus:--"I require you to examine yourself and your estate, both toward GOD and man; so that, accusing and condemning yourself for your own faults, you may find mercy, at our heavenly FATHER'S hand for CHRIST'S sake, and not be accused and condemned in that fearful judgment. Therefore, I shall rehearse to you the Articles of our Faith, that you may know whether you believe as a Christian man should, or no."

L

. You observe the Rubric which follows: it speaks of a further examination.

C

. True; still it is what would now be called formal and external.

L

. Yet it mentions a great number of topics for examination:-- "Whether he repent him truly of his sins, and be in charity with all the world; exhorting him to forgive, from the bottom of his heart, all persons that have offended him; and, if he hath offended any other, to ask them forgiveness; and where he hath done injury or wrong to any man, that he make amends to the uttermost of his power. And, if he hath not before disposed of his goods, let him then be admonished to make his will, and to declare his debts, what he oweth, and what is owing to him; for the better discharging of his conscience, and the quietness of his executors. Here is an exhortation to repentance, charity, forgiveness of injuries, humbleness of mind, honesty, and justice. What could be added?"

C

. You will be told that worldly and spiritual matters are mixed together; and, besides, not a word said of looking to CHRIST, resting on Him, and renovation of heart. Such are the expressions which modern Protestantism would have considered necessary, and would have inserted as such. They are good words; still they are not those which our Church considers the words for a sick-bed examination. She does not

give them the prominence which is now given them. She adopts a manner of address which savours of what is now called formality. That our Church was no stranger to the more solemn kind of language, which persons now use on every occasion, is evident from the prayer "for a sick person, when there appeareth small hope of recovery," and "the commendatory prayer;" still she adopts the other as her ordinary manner.

L

. I can corroborate what you just now observed about the Creed, by what I lately read in some book or books, advocating a revision of the Liturgy. It was vehemently objected to the Apostles' Creed, that it contained no confession of the doctrine of the atonement, nor (I think) of original sin!

C

. It is well to see persons consistent. When they go full lengths, they startle others, and, perhaps (please GOD) themselves. Indeed, I wish men would stop a while, and seriously reflect whether the mere verbal opposition which exists between their own language and the language of the Services (to say nothing of the difference of spirit), is not a sort of warning to them, if they would take it, against inconsiderately proceeding in their present course. But nothing is more rare at this day than quiet thought. Every one is in a bustle, being bent to do a great deal. We preach, and run from house to house; we do not pray or meditate. But to return. Next, consider the first exhortation to the Communion: would it not be called, if I said it in discourse of my own, dark, cold, and formal? "The way and means thereto [to receive worthily] is,--First, to examine your lives and conversations by the rule of GOD'S Commandments, &c. Therefore, if any of you be a blasphemer of GOD, an hinderer or slanderer of His word, an adulterer, or be in malice, or envy, or any other grievous crime, repent you of your sins," &c. Now this is what is called, in some quarters, by a great abuse of terms, "mere morality."

L

. If I understand you, the Liturgy, all along, speaks of the Gospel dispensation, under which it is our blessedness to live, as being, at the same time, a moral law; that this is its prominent view; and that external observances and definite acts of duty are made the means and the tests of faith.

C

. Yes; and that, in thus speaking, it runs quite counter to the innovating spirit of this day, which proceeds rashly forward on large and general views,--sweeps along, with one or two prominent doctrines, to the comparative neglect of the details of duty, and drops articles of faith and positive and ceremonial observances, as beneath the attention of a spiritual Christian, as monastic and superstitious, as forms, as minor points, as technical, lip-worship, narrow-minded, and bigotted.--Next, consider the wording of one part of the Communion Service:--"He was wounded for our offences, and smitten for our wickedness. Let us, therefore, return unto Him, who is the merciful receiver of all true penitent sinners; assuring ourselves that He is ready to receive us, and most willing to pardon us, if we come unto Him with faithful repentance; if we will submit our selves unto Him, and from henceforth walk in His ways; if we will take His easy yoke and light burden upon us, to follow Him in lowliness, patience, and charity, and be ordered by the governance of His Holy Spirit; seeking always His glory, and serving Him duly in our vocation with thanksgiving: This if we do, CHRIST will deliver us from the curse of the law," &c. Did another say this, he would be accused by the Protestant of this day of interfering with the doctrine of justification by faith.

L

. You have not spoken of the daily service of the Church or of the Litany.

C

. I should have more remarks to make than I like to trouble you with. First, I should observe on the absence of what are now called, exclusively, the great Protestant doctrines, or, at least, of the modes of expression in which it is at present the fashion to convey them. For instance, the Collects are summaries of doctrine, yet I believe they do not once mention what has sometimes been called the articulus stantis vel cadentis Ecclesiae. This proves to me that, true and important as the general Confession, which prays simply that GOD would grant us "hereafter to live a godly, righteous, and sober life." Righteous and sober! alas! this is the very sort of words which Protestants consider superficial; good, as far as they go, but nothing more. In like manner, the priest, in the Absolution, bids us pray GOD "that the rest of our life hereafter may be pure and holy." But I have given instances enough to explain my meaning about the Services generally: you can continue the examination for yourself. I will direct your notice to but one instance more, the Introduction of the Psalms into the Daily Service. Do you think a modern Protestant would have introduced them into it?

L

. They are inspired.

C

. Yes, but they are also what is called Jewish. I do certainly think, I cannot doubt, that had the Liturgy been compiled in a day like this, but a selection of them, at most, would have been inserted in it, though they were all used in the primitive worship from the very first. Do we not hear objections to using them in singing, and a wish to substitute hymns? Is not this a proof what judgment would have been passed on their introduction into the Service, by reformers of the nineteenth century? First, the imprecatory Psalms, as they are called, would have been set aside, of course.

L

. Yes; I cannot doubt it; though some of them, at least, are prophetic, and expressly ascribed in the New Testament to the inspiration of the Holy Ghost.

C

. And surely numerous other passages would have been pronounced unsuitable to the spiritual faith of a Christian. I mean all such as speak of our being rewarded according to the cleanness of our hands, and of our walking innocently, and of the LORD'S doing well to those that are good and true of heart. Indeed, this doctrine is so much the characteristic of that heavenly book, that I hardly see any part of it could have been retained but what is clearly predictive of the Messiah.

L

. I shall now take my leave, with many thanks, and will think over what you have said. However, have you not been labouring superfluously? We know all along that the Puritans of Hooker's time did object to the Prayer Book: there was no need of proving that.

C

. I am not speaking of those who would admit they were Puritans; but of that arrogant Protestant spirit (so called) of the day, in and out of the Church (if it is possible to say what is in and what is out), which thinks it takes bold and large views, and would fain ride over the superstitions and formalities which it thinks it sees in those who (I maintain) hold to the old Catholic faith; and, as seeing that this spirit is coming on apace, I cry out betimes, whatever comes of it, that corruptions are pouring in, which, sooner or later, will need a SECOND REFORMATION.

OXFORD,

The Feast of St. Bartholomew

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