

Our Inheritance in Faith and Practice.

A Paper read by Bernard L. Manning, M.A., Fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge, before a Joint Assembly of the Hertfordshire Baptist Association and the Hertfordshire Congregational Union in their Jubilee Year (1878-1928) on Thursday, October 18th, 1928.

WE meet to celebrate jubilee and to remember our inheritance. We who meet are Baptists and Congregationalists; but, as before you had a Baptist and a Congregational Union in Hertfordshire, you had, I believe, a Union of Christians, I remind you that before we are Baptists and Congregationalists, we are Christians. I am to speak most of our peculiar inheritance as Baptists and Congregationalists, but before I do that let me assert our claim to the whole inheritance of apostolic, catholic, and evangelical Christianity. You may have observed that when a Unitarian minister of a Midland town recently joined the Established Church he expressed the opinion, if we may believe the newspapers, that the generality of Non-conformists would do well to follow him because there is in Anglicanism more fully than in any other section of the Church, the manifold inheritance of historic Christianity. I begin by repelling with violence and indignation the reflexion upon orthodox Dissenters contained in that remark. It is no business of yours and mine to ascertain nicely the relative merits of Unitarianism and the several schools of Anglicanism; but before anyone outside our communion offers us advice about the places in which we shall find a fuller inheritance of historical Christianity, let him explore for himself the inheritance that is ours.

I say temperately and emphatically for myself, and I hope for you, that I am not in the least disposed to receive advice about a fuller content of historical Christianity than we know from either Unitarians or Anglicans—no, nor even from those who occupy both positions. If asked, I am willing to suggest that from such a tradition as yours the Anglican may learn something more than he appears to know about the Crown Rights of the Head of the Church; and the Unitarian more than he appears to know of the faith once delivered to the saints. I say this, not from peevishness, but to remind you that the fulness of the inheritance of the faith is yours. Whatever faith or hope or love, whatever grace or glory or power, God has poured upon His Church by the Word and the Sacraments, by the sacred Ministry,

by the order and discipline of the Divine Society is yours where you stand. With St. Ignatius, you confess, "Our Charter is Jesus Christ: our infallible Charter is His Cross, His Death and His Passion, and Faith through Him." You are come in this year of jubilee to no inferior mount of an invalid or irregular covenant. "Ye are come unto Mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant."

This said about our common inheritance with all saints, I will suggest three points in faith and two in practice where our fathers received a peculiarly rich inheritance;

First, we have received, though it is hard to give it a name, an inheritance of intensity. A mark of Congregationalists and Baptists in the past has been a certain desperate concern about sacred things. They were not content with the usual ordinary decencies of religion. Like the men of Athens they were "too religious." The special sort of obloquy they suffered, the taunts of religiosity, fanaticism, otherworldliness were all aimed at their excess in what many of their critics believed in itself and in moderation to be no bad thing. I will call three witnesses: a great writer, a rather great writer, and a rather small writer. How does the great Gibbon sneer at us? "I will not, like the fanatics of the last age, attempt to define the moment of grace." *Fanatics*: you recognise your fathers. That rather great writer, Thomas Hardy, more kindly notes the same quality in *Far from the Madding Crowd*.

"I believe ye be a chapel-member, Joseph," says the inn-keeper. "That I do."

"Oh, no, no. I don't go so far as that."

"For my part, I'm staunch Church of England" . . .

"Chapel-folk be more hand-in-glove with them above than we," said Joseph thoughtfully.

"Yes," said Coggan, "we know very well that if anybody do go to heaven, they will. They've worked hard for it, and they deserve to have it, such as 'tis. I bain't such a fool as to pretend that we who stick to the Church have the same chance as they, because we know we have not." And that rather small writer, Mr. Arnold Bennett, until his writings began to move in a world so fashionable as not to know what a Dissenter is, bore wearisome testimony in book after book to this same quality: how the Dissenter overdoes his nasty religion.

And here let me administer to you a little comfort. Amid all the distressing phenomena of our times and the defects in

our Churches which our rather unmanly self-consciousness constantly drags to publicity, there is good evidence that our churches have not lost this note of intensity. We still pass on to other Churches, as we have always passed on, no inconsiderable number of persons who leave us (if the truth be told) because they want a less intense, less wearing, easier religion. Some of course leave for better reasons, but many (you know it) for this. They go where the benefits of religion may be had with less strain in conditions more decent and comfortable. It is easy at first sight to regret that with the removal of our legal disabilities and the blurring of social distinctions the old stigma on Dissent seemed but to come out more plainly, that whilst the parish church and the golf links are both socially sound on Sunday morning, Ebenezer and Sion are still not only not quite nice, but quite distinctly the wrong thing. But such regret is mistaken. We may rejoice that this drift from Dissent continues. It is evidence that we have not lost the old character of intensity. It is a different kind of intensity, but it is there. The men that do not lap with their tongues as a dog lappeth still go out from among us.

I should like to stop there. It is agreeable to be complacent. But what does this inheritance of intensity mean? It means that Christ's religion, as it comes to us, comes not as a sort of natural religion, part of the complete behaviour of the complete man, a thing which finds a place easily and naturally in life unless we crush it wantonly. Religion comes to us as something that we could by no means acquire for ourselves or from ourselves. The old phrase to "get religion" as you get measles or small-pox conveys a truth. Religion is, as the fashionable phrase goes, something given.

This has practical importance, because one of the most obvious things that is happening to-day is this: men and women who used to find an expression of natural religion in the services and ordinances of the Christian faith are finding that they can get along with their natural religion without the services and ordinances of the Christian faith. It is not merely that church-going is no longer necessary for respectability. A deeper change than that is come. If you ask the ordinary, quite decent, honourable, charitable, kindly person in no way opposed to religion why, whereas his father, just such a person as himself, attended service twice, he takes his family for a Sunday picnic, he will often tell you without the slightest insincerity, with perfect faith in the soundness of his position: "I find it does me as much good, more good. I believe refreshment for the body is good for the soul. The quiet you get once you are off the main roads refreshes and purifies my mind quite as much as an hour in church. After

all, God cannot speak to me better than through His own works. If I am going to be made good, I can't be in a better place." I often overhear such conversation, and almost as often I am surprised at the misdirected arguments put up on the church-going side. It is, surely, plain enough that if a man honestly says he gets as much from a Sunday picnic as from Divine Service he has no notion of what Divine Service exists to give him. Such a man possesses what I call natural religion: a sense of the mystery of creation, of its beauty, bounty, pathos, of its Maker; he values a pause in the activities of life, a chance to review his doings and consider his ways. This natural religion his father exercised in Church; but if that was all he had from Church the son is right in supposing that he misses little by not going there. That vague sense of mystery and peace which many found in Gothic architecture and a dim religious light, our generation satisfies at less expense in woods and rocks and sky, nature's cathedral. The Church service no longer provides the only oasis in work, the only glimpse into peace and mystery, the only convenient social fellowship (have we not women's institutes and rotary clubs?). If in the supply of such things only the Church hoped to exist, it is of all institutions most pitiable.

You see whither I am tending. It is our peculiar inheritance to emphasise that religion is something more than, and quite different from, all these things. We stand for unnatural, for supernatural religion. When we think of our forefathers in the faith we think of men whose services offered little satisfaction to the aesthetic sense, whose buildings had no mystery and often no beauty, who did not interest themselves in what was the decent and complete behaviour of a gentleman, who simply did not touch the argument of our Sunday picnicker at any point. The quality of intensity put them in another plane. What they looked for from religious exercises could not be picked up conveniently in a neighbouring wood. The neighbouring wood might speak of the Creator. It had but a dim word of the Father and no word of the Saviour, of the cross, of the resurrection, of sanctification, of the fellowship of the Holy Ghost and the communion of saints. And it has no word to-day. It may be religious: it is not Christian. Now our inheritance is not in the gentlemanly completeness of natural religion, but in the dedicated intensity of historic Christianity.

A certain school of ill-informed persons, of which the Bishop of Durham and Mr. Chesterton may stand as examples, please themselves by suggesting that our inheritance is Judaic, of the Old Testament rather than of the New. This is, of course, a scrupulously exact reversal of the truth. It may be claimed with more than a show of truth that the so-called catholic side of

Christianity satisfies those aspirations of natural religion to which the Old Testament gives so many magnificent expressions. The natural man is a catholic; and natural religion is a large part of so-called catholicism. But the Puritan, whatever evil may be said of him, is not a natural man, who can rejoice in the nature poems of Isaiah and the Psalms, but bridles at the scholasticism of St. Paul. It is all the other way round. Our inheritance is a religion of the most uncompromising, least generalised parts of the New Testament, of intensity and supernaturalism, or it is nothing at all. "We preach Christ and Him crucified."

I suggest to you that one of the questions your Jubilee raises is this: are we in danger of losing this conception of the Faith as it has come down to us? We are not doing our duty by a public and general witness to the world. Our business is the planting of personal religion of the intensest kind—a kind that is not in danger of thinking sunset hues a substitute for the blood of the cross—in as many people as possible; but our inheritance is a belief in quality rather than quantity. Unless our people have learnt the deepest things in our holy religion we have done nothing for them. The individual covenant with God, the constant exercise of the individual in the holy society, the constant discipline of the individual by the society: those marks of our forefathers' religion mean the same thing. We cannot exist as congregations however large and enthusiastic, however small and influential. We can exist only as churches. It is not difficult to lose sight of the main thing in the multitude of our cares, but that through our labour the Lord shall add to the Church such as shall be saved is the only care that we inherit.

See how great a flame aspires,
 Kindled by a spark of grace!
 Jesu's love the nations fires,
 Sets the kingdoms on a blaze.
 To bring fire on earth He came;
 Kindled in some hearts it is;
 O, that all might catch the flame,
 All partake the glorious bliss!

A second part of our inheritance in faith is this: the free course of the Written Word. Freedom and the Bible: talk with our forefathers would not have gone far before they claimed freedom as their peculiar inheritance and a special dependence on Holy Scripture as their badge. What is more they thought of these two as dependent on each other. They were free because they held close by the Bible. It was the charter of their freedom.

When our fathers spoke of themselves as peculiarly free and owing their freedom to the Bible, they were thinking of the manifold burden of tradition and accretion that had gathered about the faith since apostolic times, and of the authority which

Holy Scripture gave them for supposing that the Gospel of Christ did not depend on the inventions and appliances of a later age, useful as these might have been in their time. Our fathers were harsh in some of their judgements. They did not see, as we can see, that in a dangerous epoch like the earlier middle ages, with a chance of the whole of Christian society going down before barbarism and Mohammedanism, a certain amount of military discipline inside the faith was needed, that this discipline easily turned into a new legalism, but that men had to be thankful that from such a peril they got the faith preserved at all, overlaid though it might be in places with non-Christian materials. Now the danger was over and our fathers looked to the Bible, as distinct from all recorded decisions of men, creeds, councils and confessions, to remove the legal conservatism that almost hid the grace of God in the multitude of ceremonies and laws and obediences by which it came.

This attitude to the Bible, giving it a unique place in the Church, many tell us to-day, was but a new shape of that old conservative legalism that it claimed to dethrone; an infallible book was as much a foe of Christian liberty as an infallible Church; and so on. You get real freedom only when you recognise that the Bible, like creeds and council decisions, is but a set of historical documents valuable in the same way and to be treated in the same way. Our inheritance of freedom is freedom to emphasise this and discard that. "We should be far better without some of it," the Rev. John Bevan, speaking of the Old Testament, told the Oxford Congregational Conference. "I could without tears part with *Leviticus, Numbers, Judges, Chronicles, Ruth, Song of Songs, Esther*, and many of the *Psalms*—the blood-thirsty ones." These naive confessions that for our part we cannot agree with the verdict of all time about the merit of the classics have always a certain attractiveness: the attractiveness of honesty. But it is a mistake to attach too much value or importance to them. They tell us more about the defective perception of the people who make the confession than about the defects, real or alleged, of the classics concerned.

I do not want to leave the matter there, however. I want to submit to you that such views of our liberty and Holy Scripture deprive us of precisely that part of our heritage that we most need at this moment.

A Church which accepts as rigidly authoritative the accumulated burden of its own traditions, traditions which it has accumulated in circumstances of all kinds unfavourable as well as favourable, a Church which cannot afford to admit a blunder or a break in continuity, a Church which binds itself legally under pain of losing its temporal possessions and its social

prestige and more solemnly by sacramental ordination oaths to certain temporary expressions of eternal truth that were enunciated by generations less well-informed than our own, such a Church is simply asking for trouble. One of two things happens, each bad; or both happen, which is worse. You have one party always jealous to see that the expressions are sincerely and completely believed because of what is behind them. You have another anxious to re-interpret, to modify, to abandon all or part. One is accused of strangling infant immature faith by ancient swaddling clothes outgrown: the other is accused of throwing out the baby with the bath water. And both charges are true. It becomes increasingly hard for either side to be intellectually honest. (I do not say neither is; but I do say that it is stupid to create unnecessary obstacles to honesty.) The Fundamentalist—I suppose we must use this pair of names deplorable alike in etymology and theology—is accused of shutting his eyes to facts, a fool if not a knave. The Modernist is accused of reciting statements in a sense different from any they naturally bear, a slippery slope that leads anywhere or nowhere. You get the hideous result of good men on each side suspicious of each other and the world made to stumble by the sight and noise of Church leaders hurling at one another that most damning of all charges in religion: insincerity. This squalid controversy has produced a very definite impression in this country in Anglicanism and in wider circles in America; and in many an ordinary man's mind the suspicion is now pretty well rooted that people who hold the creeds as they stand are fools, and that people who re-interpret them are knaves. This wide-spread suspicion has done, at least among the people whom I know, infinitely more harm than all the things put together which Fundamentalists and Modernists will unite on public platforms to deplore.

Now our inheritance is freedom. But freedom, to be of any use to us, is not a freedom from Archbishop Laud or from the Athanasian Creed or even from the New Prayer Book. We want freedom from the evils of our own time, especially from this most malignant evil in the religious life of our time; and we have it. We are (do you realise it?) if we know how to enter upon our heritage, free, gloriously free, from the twin horrors of Fundamentalism and Modernism, from the venomous uncharity of the one and the arid superficiality of the other. The problems of Fundamentalism and Modernism do not arise for a Church endowed with our heritage. As by our sacrifice of position in the state we have secured freedom for the intenser and more independent life of our Church, freedom from those humiliating controversies that have vexed the Establishment

through the Prayer Book discussion, so by sacrificing the desire for a supreme and infallible authority on earth we have secured freedom from the degrading controversies of Fundamentalist and Modernist. Our first and last and middle word to them is: "A plague on both your houses." Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free and be not entangled with *their* yoke of bondage.

That is one side: there is another. Part of our inheritance is the knowledge of the unique position and value of Holy Scripture in the faith. Do not set that aside as an old-fashioned conventional assertion. It is a living issue. Muddled by rumours and misunderstandings of the results of historical criticism many even of our own people are losing all sense of the unique treasure that the Church has in the Bible. People repeat as a parrot phrase that the Bible is an historical document "exactly the same as any other," until they miss entirely what that means. The Bible *is* an historical document, but no historical document is like any other. Documents vary in their importance for human life according to what they contain. It is precisely because the Bible is an historical document with a particular historical content, that it is unique and has a unique value for our faith. It is, in the New Testament, the most immediate record that we have of the impact of the Incarnate Word on human life. It is, in the Old Testament, the record of the preparation in people and place for that impact. There is no history *like* that. To say that there is as much reason for reading the historical records of England or Italy as the historical books of Israel in a religious service is to betray a total lack of the historical sense.

To make of the Bible a book of moral lessons and human experience with precisely as much authority and importance as any other record of human experience may be a legitimate secondary use of it, but overlooks its primary quality. If the value of Bible history is to provide the same sort of lessons as may be drawn from the story of the Armada it has practically no value; for the more a man knows of history the less he is prepared to say what it teaches. "When I hear a man say *All history teaches*," confessed a great historian, "I prepare to hear some thundering lie." The Bible is not a useful scrap book of illustrations for our own ideas or of snippets for devotional use. It has a value of its own. The Written Word contains and shows forth the Incarnate Word. Modern study of the Bible as an historical document underlines our inherited conviction of the unique position of Holy Scripture in the Church. The prominence which our traditions give to expository preaching needs no apology. It needs respect.

A third part of our inheritance is more definitely theological. It is two-fold. Calvinism and Evangelicalism are the two lines of thought which converged to make modern Dissent. They are historically the two main currents in our thought, and though in theory perhaps in antithesis to one another, they have in common the fundamental quality. They provide a more than adequate basis for that intensity of which I spoke first. They turn our eyes away from ourselves and our fellows to the great things in our Faith, to the things that God does: to His Will; His Grace; His Passion. They emphasise at once the objectiveness of our religion and the direct immediate contact that it gives between the soul and God. Coming from this is the note of certainty and finality and joy. The ultimate truth about the religious life, as we have received it, is not that it is a pilgrimage, a development, an education, a struggle, in which we must take our part with such help as we can get. It is Good News. Whom He did predestinate, them He also *has* called. God *was* in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself. The powers of the new age are here. We have tasted the heavenly gift. We are more than conquerors through Him that loved us. The rapture of certainty about something already done for us, not waiting for us to do, is a part of our inheritance.

I have left little time in which to speak of our inheritance in practice. Let me make two points. First our inheritance is a full but pure churchmanship, churchmanship without clericalism. Here, if I may say so with respect and affection, our inheritance differs from, and is fuller than, that of the other great group of Free Churchmen, the Methodists. For the Methodists were not in origin or essence or intention a Church. They were, and so they called themselves till a generation ago, a Society in a Church. They were members of the Established Church, but the fellowship from which they drew the best of their religion was not their Church. There was a divergence between their spiritual experience and their churchmanship. They thought of the Church as something other than the most sacred brotherhood. They prayed:

Let us for each other care,
Each the other's burden bear;
To Thy Church the pattern give,
Show how true believers live.

“Thy Church” and “true believers”; not synonyms but in antithesis. It is the traditional Anglican idea of the Church as the whole of society, shot through now by an intenser experience. Of course the Methodists came in time to recognise that the Society which gave them the grace of God in the Word and the Sacraments was itself the Church.

Now I mention this not in derogation of the great Methodist Church, but to show you how august is your inheritance. We Congregationalists and Baptists have never been able to conceive of a churchless Christianity, a private sect, a Christian experience that is not also an ecclesiastical experience. We have always associated the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ with the communion of saints. That great vision of the Church unbroken through all our history is our inheritance, and it marks us as specially privileged above all other Christians. The Anglicans have been prepared to make of the Church something less than the free Bride of Christ, knowing only His sovereignty. The Methodists supposed that apart from the Church they could best find the Lord. The Society of Friends does not even know the value of some essential parts of churchmanship enough to care to claim them. The Romanists, like ourselves, have always recognised the supreme place of the Church in Christ's religion, but they have legalised and judaised the conception almost beyond recognition. I make bold to claim that in the despised Bethels of our denominations and in the Churches of the Presbyterians alone has the fullest inheritance of Churchmanship been preserved; emphasising equally the independence of the Church from all secular powers, the necessity of the Church for the means of grace, and the freedom of the Church under grace from clericalism, that is from judaic legalism.

It suffices to remind you that there has never been a time when the world needed this particular inheritance of ours more than to-day. To-day the great mass of Christians in the world have no choice but between an inadequate and a false conception of churchmanship. On the one hand is a conception of the Christian Society that makes of it something less than a true Church, at best only one help among others to the religious life, desirable, but not essential, and with this conception inevitably goes a failure to understand the importance of the sacred ministry and the sacraments; on the other hand is a conception of the Church right indeed in the place that it claims for the Divine Society, as of the very essence of Christianity, but marred almost to the point of being unrecognisable by what Lord Salisbury, with that blistering irony of his, used to call the "chemical theory of Orders," turning free grace into something like private magic. It is the bane of almost all Europe that it is offered a choice between a clerical Church and no Church at all, and as the worst of Fundamentalism is that it begets Modernism, the worst of clericalism is that it begets anti-clericalism. The steady triumph of the Latin party in the Established Church brings even this country nearer and nearer to that hateful dilemma: clericalism or anti-clericalism. What can save us? Nothing, NOTHING, but

your inheritance of a full and free and pure churchmanship. Your jubilee is a call that you hold fast this inheritance alike in its fulness and its purity.

We have too an inheritance in worship. It is fashionable to decry our tradition in worship. We are said to be fair preachers, but to have no sense of what is called the art of public worship. I suspect that both statements are exaggerated. To begin with, it is our inheritance to set a due value on Divine Service and the means of grace, on what our fathers called the exercises, on the regular use of prayer, preaching and the Sacraments. We are what the Roman Catholics call practising Christians. We do not teach that these things do not matter. We do hear (I confess it with shame) talk sometimes about the sacrament of Baptism which might lead the unwary to suppose that you Baptists cared only that infants should *not* be baptised and we Congregationalists cared only that adults should *not* be; but any light esteem of that Sacrament is a denial of our inheritance. I doubt, on the other hand, if on an average the members of any other Church in Christendom receive the Lord's Supper so regularly and so frequently as we do. The steadily maintained monthly communion of so large a proportion of our communicants leaves no room for the ignorant charge that we neglect this Sacrament—especially when the charge comes, as it sometimes does, from bodies which may have an enthusiastic minority of weekly or daily communicants but a vast majority who communicate far more infrequently and irregularly than we do. Decency forbids us to parade these things, but I remind you of them, first, because it is your bounden duty to maintain and improve this inheritance in practice, and, second, because it is well to repel a charge which, if it were half as true as it is common, would be very serious. The *fact* is that we have an unusually rich inheritance in this matter.

Yes, it may be said, you do set store by worship in a sort of way; but what sort of worship is it? Your bald, disjointed worship is a poor inheritance when contrasted with the liturgical riches of other Churches. Now I am ready to admit that our worship is rather an acquired taste, and like all the best things it is easiest acquired when one is young. Our worship often does seem rather unbeautiful to those who do not catch its true meaning. I am ready to admit too that some of us, in a frivolous objection to all ceremony, have allowed Divine Service to degenerate into a kind of public meeting at once stereotyped and disordered. But that is neither our tradition nor our inheritance: it is disloyalty to both. Our inheritance is a plain, but a dignified worship. In preaching, in prayer, in the administration of the Sacraments we use little ritual, not because what we do matters

little, but because it matters so much. To call upon the name of God, to claim the presence of the Son of God, these things, if men truly know and mean what they are doing, are in themselves acts so tremendous and so full of comfort that any sensuous or artistic attempt to heighten the effect of them is not so much a painting of the lily as a varnishing of sunlight. The very phrase "the art of public worship," (that art which scornfully men say we lack), with all the conceptions that lie behind it is to men bred in the heritage of our worship something approaching blasphemy. The grace of which our services and sacraments are the means is so irresistible that in their simplest forms Christian rites are utterly and eternally adequate. To us, if we have eyes to see, and ears to hear, and hearts to understand, it is superfluous and worse than superfluous to add to their august simplicity. That august simplicity more than elaborated ritual shows forth the eternal Sacrifice.

Enter'd the holy place above,
Cover'd with meritorious scars,
The tokens of His dying love
Our great High Priest in glory bears.
He pleads His Passion on the tree,
He shows Himself to God for me.

Emphasis on that drama, eternal in the heavens, not on the drama of earthly ritual, however moving, is *our* inheritance in worship.

I have spoken to you very partially, very feebly, very unworthily of our inheritance. Much of it I have not mentioned. It gathers unmentioned before your eyes as I conclude. Perhaps you expected me to speak of our public and social and national services. With intention I kept silence about them. Notable as they were, needful as a repetition of them is in the wilted public life of to-day, they were not of the essence of our heritage. They were incidental by-products of it, thrown off easily and almost accidentally by men whose hearts and treasure were elsewhere. It was other-worldliness that made our fathers of service to this world. "Other-worldliness"—would to God that your Jubilee may help to revive that charge against us. In other-worldliness I sum up the treasure of our inheritance, and where our treasure is, there, according to the Saviour's word, may our heart be also.

B. L. MANNING.