

The Means of Grace.

A Personal Confession.

I AM very dubious about possessing the proper qualifications for writing this paper. I am not well versed in the art of ecclesiastical conciliation. I have no genius for finding some *rapprochement* between conflicting and opposing views. Therefore I shall probably be dogmatic and controversial, and ought to leave the subject entirely alone. Yet I can never resist the lure of a theme that is perplexing.

PSYCHOLOGY AND DENOMINATIONALISM.

I find myself in a somewhat uncomfortable position to-day. After a few years of practical experiment in the direction of Church Union, I am being forced to the conclusion that denominationalism in some form or other is inevitable. It has its roots in Psychology. Here are some sentences from a fine little book on *Psychology's Defence of the Faith*, by Dr. Yellowlees, which express my point of view.

"The mental make-up of a High Church Anglican is quite different from that of a Baptist or a Quaker. The one must have certain elements in the expression of his religion which are necessary for his psychological satisfaction, though to a person of a different type these things are not only unnecessary, but may be a positive hindrance to his religious expression. It is thus a psychological impossibility for them ever to achieve any durable sort of uniformity in religious belief or practice, however much they may love each other, and however willing they may be to co-operate in practical affairs."

It is that "mental make-up" which begins to record its verdict as soon as you start to discuss the means of Grace. An honest attempt at self-analysis has left me rather bewildered about my own "mental make-up."

I find myself favourably predisposed to the Quaker view of Sacramentalism; that is, to recognise no special Sacraments, or rather to say that all life is sacramental. Yet I am strangely dissatisfied with that position.

I find myself intellectually unfriendly to the conceptions of the Roman and Greek Churches about Sacraments, with their list of the perfect seven: Baptism, Confirmation, The Eucharist, Penance, Extreme Unction, Holy Orders, and Marriage.

I find myself critical of the Reformers' point of view, with its insistence upon the two Sacraments of Baptism and The Lord's Supper, as having been instituted by Christ Himself.

In Protestant doctrine there seems little unanimity as to the precise significance of these Sacraments.

THE SACRAMENTAL CONTROVERSY.

I take it that what we understand by the means of Grace are the outward and visible acts that mediate the consciousness of God's presence and Grace to our lives. What I want to discuss is the question as to how far the coming of God to our lives is dependent upon objective realities. Are these objective realities in any way independent of our subjective reaction to them? Can we have a purely subjective experience of the Grace of God? Or must there be a continuous interplay of objective reality and subjective reaction in our apprehension of God? These are the kind of questions that create the sacramental controversy, and they are at least worthy of our serious consideration. For the conclusions we reach about them will affect tremendously our conception of the Church of which we are members, and of the ministry in which we are engaged.

I am well aware that the task of defining the grace of God is almost an impossible one. It is difficult to translate into words that will satisfactorily define the experience, the coming of God's Grace to a man. May we take it for granted that what we understand by the Grace of God is just a realisation of God's presence in our lives, bringing a sense of forgiveness and fellowship.

What we want to think about is the method by which that realisation can be reached, or the method by which it is brought to us. For, of course, in this mystery of fellowship between God and man, it is quite impossible to split up a whole experience into component parts, and say, "This part is God's revelation and that part is man's apprehension." The two processes are coincident. They coalesce into one harmonious experience. God's activity and man's activity can only be separate entities in some vague theoretical sense.

THE HUMAN MIND.

It will also be wise, in discussing this subject, not to forget the mind with which God has gifted us. In some ways the human mind is the supreme Sacrament. Our subjective reaction to an objective reality is a very important factor when we are thinking about the means of Grace. It is the indispensable equipment without which nothing that is merely objective could have any significance at all. In other senses than he intended, there is still something to be said for Bishop Berkeley's way with the materialists. The human mind is the essential Sacrament

by which God mediates Himself to me, though it is difficult to postulate precisely what sort of objective reality it possesses.

MEDIATIONS OF GOD.

It is also obvious that God mediates Himself to man in varying degrees, or if you prefer it, in varying aspects.

There is a mediation of God as Creator.

There is a mediation of God as Provider.

There is a mediation of God as Sustainer.

And there is the highest mediation of all, when God reveals Himself as active for the moral and spiritual salvation of man.

In writing of the means of Grace, I am thinking chiefly of God's coming to our lives to achieve that moral and spiritual regeneration. I want to concentrate upon that one aspect of the theme, and that will obviously limit the field of our enquiry.

NATURE.

Understood in this sense, it is no use going to Nature for a mediation of the Grace of God. It may be true to say that if you fully understood a flower in a crannied wall, you would know what God and man is. But Nature will also provide you with objective realities that are "red in tooth and claw," as well as your peaceful flower growing in the crannied wall.

In any case, the men who have got most out of Nature have brought to it other mediations of the Grace of God gained by other means.

MAN.

Nor will it do merely to concentrate upon your fellow-men as mediations of God's Grace. It is true that a kindly, helpful life can be of great assistance to you, or a man's poetry or prose, or his music, or his art. But in every instance you are dealing with something that has been given to you at second-hand. A man can help you to God, only because he has achieved the Grace of God in his own life by other means. Therefore you are driven further back to the real source from which the mediated Grace comes. Neither Nature nor man constitute ultimate means of Grace, though both may point out to you the road you must travel.

SPIRITUAL CONTACT.

Whatever may be the means of Grace, there can be no doubt about what happens finally. The Spirit of God and the spirit of Man come into contact.

“ Speak to Him thou for He hears,
 And spirit with spirit can meet.
 Closer is He than breathing,
 Nearer than hands or feet.”

Unless means of Grace lead to that end they are not worth bothering about.

Well then, is it necessary to have any intermediate means of Grace? Cannot the Spirit of God and the spirit of Man together dispense with intermediaries and find contact with each other?

PRAYER.

I am sure we all believe that to be possible. We believe, for example, that in simple direct PRAYER the contact is established. Simple Prayer has no objective embodiment, but it is really the highest means of Grace. Not even the Incarnation takes precedence over it. Otherwise you would have to throw away the Old Testament and the accumulated experience of the race. So long as the experience of Prayer remains, we must believe that the Grace of God can be mediated to men, without any physical embodiment.

THE BIBLE AND PREACHING.

Another means of Grace which requires no physical enactment, no symbolic representation, is the reading of the Bible. Coleridge's testimony about the finding quality of the Bible will be vouched for by most people who sit down seriously to read its pages. I think that finding quality persists, however much the Bible may be misunderstood. But I am sure that for the most effective understanding of the Bible, and therefore for the most effective use of the Bible as a means of Grace, instruction and teaching are necessary. I would therefore be inclined to combine the Bible and Preaching as a most effective means of Grace. There, of course, you have no presentation in symbolic form of the Grace of God, but simply the direct appeal of mind to mind, which for the greater part of His ministry was the method of Jesus.

THE INCARNATION.

Then there is the Incarnation. Christ is of supreme importance in any attempt to describe the means of Grace. Upon our understanding of His mind everything else will depend. The meaning and significance of all symbolic worship enshrined in the Church will depend upon our understanding of the life and death of Jesus. For example, a man's belief about the death

of Christ will affect tremendously his conception of the Communion Service as a means of Grace. If you accept Jewish interpretations of the death of Jesus as a sacrifice of Blood offered to God to secure His appeasement, your Communion Service may then become the Eucharist. I am sure all our views about the means of Grace depend greatly upon our conception of the significance of Jesus.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS.

All I can do now is to state briefly my own position. Jesus is God mediated to man's understanding—an objective reality—but only for the men who knew Him in the days of His flesh. I find that Jesus, and my own inner experience influenced by the teaching of Jesus, are the only assurances I have that there is a relationship of Grace between God and Man. Without Jesus I may speculate and explore, but it is the Grace of God that has tabernacled among men in the person of Jesus, that gives me my ground of trust in the grace of God.

All that I am quite clear about in my own mind without discussing theories of a virgin birth or theories of atonement. The Death of Jesus may be essential to a revelation of God's grace, but only in so far as it would have meant his own denial of the validity of His revelation, if He had refused to die. But Jesus remains for me the Grace of God made flesh. I find in the historic Jesus of Nazareth my most helpful and most dependable means of Grace.

THE TRINITY.

I cannot say anything about the Trinity or the inter-relationships of personalities within that Trinity. I have never found a doctrine of the Trinity in my own experience, and I always squirm when my Unitarian friends talk about "you Trinitarians." I have no separable, distinguishable experiences that I can call God or Christ or the Holy Spirit. All I have been able to attain is a spiritual consciousness of an Unseen Presence in my life, and the Presence has the values of Jesus of Nazareth. To me, the mediation of that presence is the mediation of the grace of God, and the means by which That presence is mediated are the means of Grace.

I do not know of any tangible presence that is mediated, but only the intangible, impalpable, consciousness of the Presence in the Mind!

OBJECTIVE ENACTMENTS.

On the other hand there are certain objective enactments, which by their symbolism, aid me to a consciousness of that Presence. They have not brought to me any presence that is

physical or tangible or occupying space. They have simply helped to make me more aware of a spiritual realisation.

PUBLIC WORSHIP.

First of all, I would mention the church assembled for worship. Christ once said, "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them." Again and again when I have been in church with like-minded people for worship, I have been specially conscious of a Presence pulsating in my thought. It may be mob Psychology turned into a Sacrament, but there it is. To me the church is a fellowship of the followers of Jesus, without any additional significance. And in that simple fellowship when it meets for worship I find a special means of Grace.

BAPTISM.

Then Baptism is reckoned by many to be a means of Grace. But the precise degree in which it is such a means of Grace, is a matter of very acute controversy. No one believes that Jesus originated the symbol of Baptism. It is even a debatable point as to whether or not Jesus instituted Baptism to be practised by the fellowship of His friends. It is an undoubted fact that the early church believed Jesus had instituted the ordinance and practised it. At first only adult believers were so baptised, but when Christian homes had been established by the second or third century, infants also were baptised, although the practice did not become very general till about the sixth century.

Personally I have always had great difficulty about this subject of Baptism as a means of Grace. Where there is a conscious, intelligent, subjective reaction, stimulated by a symbolic act, I can understand its value to the individual as a means of Grace. That it exerts any influence upon an undiscerning infant I cannot believe. That would require magical, mystery-religious views of God, which I am personally incapable of holding. I can understand the benefit for the child, if the act helps parents to dedicate themselves to the task of training the child for God, and if the act marks the Church's acceptance of its responsibility for watching over the spiritual welfare of the child.

Yet even in the case of the Baptism of a Believer, I can only find a symbolic act, the value of which depends upon the personal intelligent response to the spiritual fellowship, of which the act is an outward expression. Any magical regenerating power in the water used for the ceremony, is an idea beyond my power to understand. Baptism may help by its symbolism and the public nature of its avowal to bring to a focal point our

resolves to seek God. That, I believe to be its supreme value. But in the very nature of the case, it is a temporary and isolated experience.

THE COMMUNION SERVICE.

It is much the same with the Communion Service. Its significance as a means of grace will depend upon your whole theological system; your conception of the Death of Christ; your decision about His institution of the Lord's Supper; your understanding of the meaning He intended it to have; your reading of the historical development of ideas associated with the observance; all these will influence your views of the Communion Service as a means of Grace. All these are matters about which we might argue *ad infinitum*.

Personally I have found the Communion Service a great means of grace, because of its symbolism and its psychological suggestiveness. To me it is a simple, commemorative symbolic Act, in which the spirit of man pledges itself to the following of Jesus and in that very act reaps the harvest of an acutely discerned spiritual presence. At least I have found it so. The Bread and Wine are not indispensable to the preservation of the central vital experience of a Communion Service, but they help in the act of concentration.

CONCLUSION.

You can understand therefore that where sacraments are concerned, I have very little idea as to what particular species of theological animal I am.

I am ready to welcome any symbolic act, which by its suggestiveness will help to bring a realisation of the presence of God to a man's mind.

The psychological value of much ritual I recognise, even swinging censers, and incense and ornate altars. But means of grace, whatever they may be, are means and not an end. If any physical object mediates God's grace, I can only believe it does so by its psychological suggestiveness. The real presence of God can never be tangible or material in substance. It is a spiritual apprehension in the mind. "God is spirit, and they who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth, for the Father seeketh such to worship Him." Anything that helps to that end is, I am sure, legitimate, so long as the Presence is not identified with the thing that helps to its realisation. At least, that is how it seems to me.

For what it is worth, then, I have offered you this little contribution to a mighty subject, and I have offered it in the form of a personal confession!

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