

What is Christianity?

BY THE REV. BARTON R. V. MILLS, M.A.

V. THE QUESTION ANSWERED.

WE are now in a position to give some answer to the question which forms the title of this series of papers. Let me recall the attention of my readers to the nature of that question. It is not whether the Christian religion is true, but to what we are committed by our membership of the Christian Church. To find out this we have had to study in some detail the teaching of the Apostles, who, as its human founders, gave it its constitution and formulated its beliefs. We have now to consider how much of what passes as Christianity can claim their sanction.

I.

Now, at the outset, I shall indicate three rules which must govern our inquiry into the Apostolic character of any doctrine or practice.

First, anything on which the Apostles insist is for ever binding on Christians, and no one who rejects any of it can claim that title. Such things are matters of obligation, from which no branch of the Christian Church can absolve its members. Secondly, doctrines or practices condemned by the Apostles, or essentially inconsistent with their teaching, are excluded, and no one who holds them can be a Christian. Nor can any branch of the Christian Church permit them to be held by its members. Thirdly, all that does not come under one or other of these heads is admissible, but not obligatory. This includes by far the greater part of current religious belief. The characteristic error of the Church of Rome lies in the erection into dogmas of opinions which are often questionable, and at best only permissible, rather than in the assertion of what is false. The characteristic error, on the other hand, of some Protestant bodies has been the condemnation of doctrines or practices

simply because they are not explicitly prescribed in the New Testament. If these new forms of undue exclusiveness were found only outside the Church of England, their interest for readers of this magazine would be academic rather than practical. Unfortunately each of them has its adherents amongst our own members. We not unfrequently, *e.g.*, hear people say that some doctrine or practice is an essential part of the Catholic faith, when it had never been heard of in the Apostolic age. Others retort that it must be wrong, and that they will not accept it, because they cannot find it in the Bible. The doctrine of the Eucharistic Sacrifice and the practice of Fasting Communion are instances of these. These clearly belong to the third of the categories just mentioned, whereas many religious controversialists try to place them in the first or second.

This undue narrowness on the part of some Christians has led to an equally unwarrantable and more disastrous breadth on the part of others. The position of these people was described in the first paper of this series, and I need not now repeat what I then said. The point which I now desire to press is that, in their reasonable resentment of the exclusion from Christianity of many who have a just place within its borders, they claim admission to its pale for some who have no right to be there. If space permitted it would be most interesting to try to indicate the limits of permissible belief, and to see what Apostolic Christianity forbids, as well as what it allows. But our present inquiry is a narrower one. By the question, "What is Christianity?" I mean what it *requires*, not what it *allows* or *forbids* us to accept. It must not, therefore, be assumed that Christianity includes nothing, or that it allows everything, outside these essential points.

II.

It will be convenient to follow the same line of investigation that has been taken in previous papers, and to consider what the Apostolic Church held to be essential as to *facts, doctrine, worship, and discipline*:

i. The Apostles are uncompromising in their insistence on five fundamental facts. These are :

(i.) The miraculous birth of our Lord of a Virgin Mother without a human father.

(ii.) His actual bodily death upon the cross.

(iii.) The resurrection of His glorified body from the empty grave.

(iv.) His visible ascension into heaven in bodily form.

(v.) The descent of the Holy Ghost on the Apostles with certain visible signs.

These are occurrences as to which there are only two alternatives—their truth or their falsehood. If they are false the Christian religion does not exist, as its original purpose was to proclaim them. If they are true, no one who doubts or denies them can be a Christian.

2. The Apostolic Church asserts three great doctrines with such insistence as to make their acceptance a test of Christian membership :

(i.) The first of these is the efficacy of the death of Christ as a propitiation for our sins. This we call the doctrine of the Atonement. It is most significant that nothing is said as to the way in which this death gives satisfaction. We are not committed to any of the various views of the Atonement which have been held in the Christian Church, but we are bound to accept the principle that by our Lord's death—as distinct from His life—our sins are put away.

(ii.) The second essential doctrine is that of the Incarnation of Christ, including, of course, His Divinity. This, though it precedes the Atonement in the order of thought, comes after it in the time of its proclamation.¹ Here, again, we must distinguish between the simple definiteness of the Apostolic teaching and the more elaborate statements of the later Creeds. The Apostles assert the Godhead of Christ in terms which admit of no misconception ; but they do not enter into those curious speculations as to the way in which Divine and human nature

¹ See "The Christianity of St. Paul" in the *CHURCHMAN* for June.

were united in Him which were so productive of controversy—and heresy—in the fifth and sixth centuries. It is the doctrine of the Incarnation itself—not any particular statement of it—which is of the essence of Christianity.

(iii.) Much the same must be said of the doctrine of the Trinity, the third great truth on which the Apostles insist. This differs from the other cardinal doctrines of the Church in that it is a *doctrine only*, not, as they are, the *explanation of an event*. This is what makes it so unacceptable to many minds, and is, in the present writer's opinion, the chief ground of the widespread objection to the Athanasian Creed. There is, therefore, more room for difference of opinion as to the teaching of the Apostles on this than there is on the other doctrinal points. But though the term "Trinity" does not occur in the New Testament, the unity of the Godhead and the Divinity of each of the three Persons are so clearly asserted that no one can doubt that this doctrine was regarded as essential in the Apostolic age. If this be so, no one who rejects it can be a Christian, and we must, however reluctantly, refuse that title to those who do not believe in the Divinity of our Lord.

3. When we come to worship we find that our inquiry leads to equally definite results. In addition to prayer and the study of Holy Scripture, which belong to other religions besides Christianity, three ordinances are required of all who claim to be Christians: The first of these is baptism, not only as a form of admission or token of repentance, but as a means of grace. In our review of the Pauline period we saw that baptism is closely connected with the new birth, and there is nothing in the teaching of the later Apostolic age to throw doubt on that connection; on the contrary, the third chapter of St. John supports and emphasizes it. The second essential ordinance is the laying on of hands. To this, throughout the Apostolic age, a place is assigned hardly less important than that of baptism. The close resemblance to confirmation of the rite described in Acts viii. is too obvious to need statement. It is difficult to see how any community which dispenses with this Apostolic

ordinance, or any person who declines to receive it, can be recognised as Christian. To these two ordinances must be added a new and greater one—the Sacrament of the Holy Communion. We have seen that less is said in the New Testament about this than about the other two. Its nature as a means of grace is not so clearly proclaimed; there is a doctrine of baptism and of the laying on of hands (Heb. vi. 2), but there is no defined doctrine of the Eucharist. Its obligation, however, is undoubted, and it is as essential to Christianity as the other two ordinances. This is one of the things in which it is particularly necessary to observe the distinction between what is obligatory and what is tenable. The sacramental principle comes under the former head; almost all the explanations of what it involves belong to the latter.

4. The most difficult point to decide is what is essential to Christianity in the way of Church membership. This is probably the point on which the modern mind is least in accordance with the Apostolic age. For there are now a large number of persons who regard Christianity as a body of belief, or a system of morals, or an indefinable sense of a personal union with Christ, but who entirely ignore its institutional character. Yet that character is conspicuous throughout the Apostolic age. It is demonstrable that from the Day of Pentecost onwards Christians were regarded as *members of a society*, and were not recognised as Christians in any other capacity. It is true that early Christianity was in a very real sense “undenominational.” But that is because the formation of denominations is forbidden as a breach of Catholic unity (1 Cor. i. 10-12). Such expressions as “Christians unattached” or “Christ not the Church” would have been simply unintelligible to St. Peter, St. Paul, or St. John.

This broad principle is quite unmistakable, and its application excludes a good deal of so-called modern Christianity. It is clear that there is a Christian *ecclesia*, and that the claim of some persons to be outside it and remain Christians cannot be allowed. It is equally clear that there is no Apostolic authority

for the notion that this *ecclesia* is merely an invisible society, whose members are known only to God. It is of its essence that it should also be a visible society, and should have marks whereby its membership should be known. But it is by no means easy to say what these marks are, or what in its constitution is of permanent obligation, and what is temporary and a matter of expediency.

Three questions in particular claim our attention :

1. On what do the Apostles insist as essential to the character of the Christian ministry ?
2. Is there a Scriptural obligation on all Christians in the same area to belong to the same *ecclesia* ?
3. Under what—if under any—circumstances may individuals secede from the Church and form a new society ?

Now, it must be admitted that the Apostolic Church does not answer these questions with the same clearness and certainty with which it speaks on other points.

1. As to the first, it is evident that the right to exercise the Christian ministry depends on commission, not on personal fitness, and that such a commission can only be conferred by the *ecclesia* as a whole acting through its regular representatives. There is one expression—the significance of which seems to have escaped the attention of the commentators—which is nearly decisive on this point. In the Old Testament we constantly read that “the word of God came” to some selected individual. Once only in the New Testament is such an expression used, and that is of St. John the Baptist (St. Luke iii. 2). It would seem that after the Day of Pentecost individual commission ceases, because the authority to ordain ministers is permanently vested in the Church. But more than this we cannot prove. It cannot be demonstrated from the New Testament that such authority can only be exercised by Bishops. The epistles of Ignatius prove that episcopacy was deemed essential within twenty years of the death of St. John. That it is necessary to the *bene esse* of the Church does not admit of doubt ; the New Testament does not in itself prove it to be so

to its *esse*. In short, episcopacy is the only means that has ever been found of securing the organic of the Church on which the Apostles absolutely insist.

2. The second question has a very close bearing on religious controversies of the present day. For it amounts to this — does Apostolic Christianity admit the existences of “Churches,” or does it bind us to belief in *the* Church? It must be remembered that the question is not whether there is an universal Church, which must be the same throughout the world. It is whether there can, or cannot, be two *ecclesie* in the same area. If the New Testament gave a positive answer to this question, half the controversy between Protestant Christians would not exist. Unfortunately it does not deal definitely with the matter, which must therefore be included in the category of open questions. But it does give us a principle which may help in the solution of the problem. For it shows that *the same rule must govern civil and ecclesiastical society*. The claim of the State to the obedience of Christians rests, in ultimate analysis, on the fact that such obedience is expressly commanded in the New Testament. No distinction is drawn between civil and ecclesiastical rulers—neither has greater claims to allegiance than the other. From this it follows that if there can be two *ecclesie* there can be two *civitates* within the same area, and if there can be only one State there can be only one Church. The New Testament does not decide between these two alternatives, but it most certainly limits our choice to them.

3. The same answer must be given to the third question. “Schism” and “rebellion” are two names for the same act, as committed in the ecclesiastical or civil spheres respectively. Each incurs the same guilt and needs the same justification. As to this, no better definition has perhaps ever been given than that of Bishop Wilberforce, who says that obedience to authority is an absolute duty unless it involves disobedience to the law of God. The fact that a law is not a good one does not justify a subject in disobeying it—it is necessary that the

law repudiated should be one that cannot be obeyed without sin.¹ Such cases have occurred in human history—two are recorded in the Book of Daniel, but they are extremely rare. The decision must rest with the individual conscience, but he who disobeys incurs a fearful responsibility. For our present purpose the important thing to remember is that the authority of Church and State stand on exactly the same footing.

III.

This brings us to the conclusion of the whole matter. Two things are sorely needed in the Christianity of the present day—greater definiteness in the assertion of things essential, and a fuller recognition of liberty to differ in matters on which the Apostolic Church lays down no law. In fact, we need to realize in our religious thought the famous saying of the broad-minded Melancthon, which, with a few words of application, may well bring this series of papers to a close.

In necessariis unitas.—The line must be drawn more clearly and deeply between those who are Christians and those who are not. We must not let our love of toleration lessen our insistence on the fundamental articles of our faith. It is not pleasant to have to refuse to men whose intellect and character we respect the most honourable title that a man can claim. But our duty in the matter is plain. These people are not Christians. It would be more straightforward if they would admit this and declare themselves the opponents of the religion which has regenerated the world. But if they will not do so, we must do it for them. We would gladly welcome them into the Church of Christ—their exclusion from it is their own doing, not ours. We do not settle the limits of Christianity—that was done by its founders nineteen centuries ago. It is ours to guard the walls which they built—to see that no breaches are made in them, and that none are admitted except through the regular gates.

In dubiis libertas.—We want less toleration, but more

¹ "Addresses to Candidates for Ordination," p. 263.

breadth. These two things are by no means the same. If we draw the line between Christianity and unbelief with inflexible strictness, we must allow the fullest liberty to all within the Christian pale. The test of the lawfulness of any doctrine is not its agreement with our own opinions, but its accordance to the teaching of the Apostles. In this series of articles we have endeavoured to show what they required, and we can require no less. But we are not entitled to insist on more. No one who fails to comply with the Apostolic test can be recognised as a Christian. But such recognition cannot be refused to any who do comply with it. We have no more right to narrow than we have to enlarge the bounds of the Christian Church. This error is committed not only by those who denounce what the Apostles did not condemn, but by those who insist on things which they leave open. The tendency of the present day is much more to undue laxity than to excessive strictness, and it is with the former that these papers deal. But our apprehension of the one danger must not lead us to ignore the existence of the other.

In omnibus caritas.—This really is the solution of the problem, It connects the two preceding precepts, and makes them consistent with each other. For it reminds us that in refusing to recognise as Christians those to whom we cannot give that title, we are actuated by no personal hostility. It is the opinion, not the man, that we condemn. We hold his action to be mistaken and disastrous, and we are bound to oppose it by every means in our power. But we do not presume to encroach on the prerogative of God. To Him only it belongs to justify or to condemn. We have no right to say that the worst criminal will be eternally lost, much less that those who reject the Christian religion will incur that awful fate. We must treat them as opponents—but in many cases as honourable and conscientious opponents. Our defence of Christianity must indeed involve us in controversy, but it need not, and should not, involve us in bitterness. Our object in contending for the faith is not to discomfit our opponents, or to glorify ourselves, but to defend, strengthen and propagate the religion for which our Saviour lived and died.