

The Relation of Modern Evangelicals to the Catholic Party.

BY THE REV. W. ESCOTT BLOSS.

I.

DURING the last few years a great change has taken place among Evangelicals in their relation to the Catholic party. Many can remember the time when the introduction of even harmless practices excited opposition of the most determined character and was the occasion of disgraceful and scandalous scenes, which every Christian must deplore. The riots at St. Barnabas', Pimlico, and St. James', Hatcham, can be cited as typical cases. The opposition is still maintained by a certain section of Churchpeople, and is more pronounced in the North of England than in the South, yet the number of those who adopt this uncompromising attitude has steadily and continually decreased during the last few years, and the average Churchman to-day is prepared to tolerate the introduction of significant alterations in worship with little more than a formal protest. In many parish churches the whole character of the worship and teaching has been changed, and the objectors have formed a very small proportion of the congregation. The majority did not interest themselves sufficiently to care what was done. The alterations have been accepted as a matter of course, and their importance from a doctrinal standpoint has not been recognized. The incumbent has been a man of irreproachable life, an indefatigable worker, a godly man, who showed a keen interest in the welfare of the people; and other details have been regarded as matters of secondary importance. Through the carelessness and apathy of many Evangelicals an advance in ceremonial and teaching has been allowed to take place which would never have been tolerated had they shown an intelligent interest in the welfare of their Church.

Many causes have operated to produce this state of affairs.

The methods adopted to suppress ritual enlisted a great deal of sympathy with the men who were prepared to suffer rather than give up practices which they believed to be of Divine origin. The policy of the Church Association has unfortunately been frequently misunderstood, and consequently sharply criticised. Evangelicals to-day are often regarded as a party of mistaken enthusiasts, narrow in their outlook, who condemn any form of teaching which does not exactly coincide with their own. Modern toleration is in some measure due to the reaction from this extreme position.

A more powerful influence has been at work in the conspicuous piety of the leaders of the "Catholic" party. Their fruitfulness in good works was regarded as sufficient justification for their toleration within a National Church. A further stage has now been reached in the line of advance, and toleration is being merged into approximation. There is a marvellous attractiveness in an elaborate ceremonial, and a nature sensitive to the emotional type of religion will easily succumb unless some corrective is applied. The sacerdotal claim, which is capable of a strong logical justification, exercises a peculiar fascination, and by its offer of spiritual direction it appears to answer to a genuine need of mankind. It is always easier to follow the direction of others than to take pains to discover for ourselves what is the will or purpose of God. The difficulties in the way of the performance of this task increase the liability to forget that habitual direction of conscience is invariably associated with a stunted personality.

The piety of the laity is equally conspicuous. Frequent communions are the rule, and these, at least in the early hours of the day, are attended by a large number of communicants. The laity are prepared to give of their best to the Church, and the beautiful needlework and embroidery so willingly given to adorn the House of God is a sure indication of a sincere love for their Church and a desire to honour God by offering their best for His service. The manifold social activities for the welfare of mankind and the improvement of the conditions of life include

among their supporters numerous adherents to this school of thought. In this and many other ways there is much which is worthy of admiration and which calls forth our unstinted praise. At the same time it is only fair to notice that these characteristics are not limited to any one party. Evangelicals are equally ready, but their efforts are not always so noticeable.

These outward evidences of religion cannot fail to win sympathy with those who display them. There may be disagreement with their methods and teaching, but there is also a growing conviction that room must be found within the Christian Church for those who in their whole life and conduct exhibit the Christian spirit in such a marked degree.

A superficial survey or examination may lead to the conclusion that these differences are external; and, striking as they may be, they are relatively unimportant. But superficial judgments are, as a general rule, faulty; the crucial point is frequently overlooked; it lies far below the surface and does not attract immediate attention. The tendency for the various Church parties to draw more closely together has frequently been noticed, and it is highly desirable to foster this tendency; yet the cost of such an alliance must never be the sacrifice of those principles which are the life and soul of genuine Evangelicalism.

A more true estimate of the position will lead to the discovery that the wide differences in belief and practice are due to a radical cleavage, and the points of agreement are the results of an operating cause common to both and independent of these differences. The religious spirit is common to every form of religion; its method of expression varies according to the personality of the individual. In Christianity, the fruit of the religious spirit is a spiritual life; the Christian regards Jesus Christ as the source of this life. Union with Christ, and the partaking of His Spirit, will issue in good works. To attribute these "good works" to any other cause is a fatal error. If, then, it can be shown that they are due to this cause, and are not the legitimate fruit of sacerdotal teaching, then the ground upon which

Sacerdotalism commends itself to the modern mind is severely shaken.

For the sake of clearness, the matter can be put in another way: A person professes adherence to certain beliefs, he is faithful in the performance of certain ceremonial acts, and is conscious of a definite experience of fellowship with God. He goes on to interpret that experience as the result of conformity to a certain prescribed ritual. He honestly believes that his interpretation of the experience is the correct one. The point at issue is this: Is he right or wrong? May not his religious experience be due to another cause altogether? If once the experience can be clearly distinguished from the outward form or ceremonial act, the door is open for a closer examination of that experience. If, moreover, it can be proved that the experience is independent of the religious ceremonial, then the value of that ceremonial as a necessary means of grace will be proportionately decreased; then the good works and undoubted piety of the sincere High Churchman will no longer blind the eyes of the Evangelical and lead him to place an undue value upon what is, after all, an accidental feature, and which, if once admitted, would exercise an injurious influence upon genuine Evangelicalism.

II.

The teaching of the High Church party upon the Holy Communion and Auricular Confession will further illustrate this principle. Teaching upon other subjects could easily be adduced with the same end in view, but those named will furnish ample evidence for our immediate purpose.

The doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the Holy Communion determines the whole character of the ceremonial associated with that service. A communicant is taught to believe that Christ is really present under the forms of bread and wine; the deep impression which such a belief generates will be at once intelligible to any reverent mind. The greatest care will be exercised in preparation for this sacred service, the

act of reception will be performed with the greatest solemnity ; fasting Communion becomes an absolute necessity—there must be adoration if the localized Presence is a reality ! How can any communicant behave otherwise if he believes that his Lord is present upon the altar ? He goes back to his home fully assured of the reality of his fellowship with Jesus Christ, and will bear witness to the efficacy of the Sacrament in the celebration of which he has taken a part. Now, it is at once evident that his outward acts are the natural outcome of a certain form of teaching which he has accepted as true, but his religious experience is the result of his faith in Jesus Christ, and no one for a moment would question the reality of that experience. The experience is genuine, but the explanation is based upon a mistaken conception of the value of ceremonial acts. To some minds this distinction may appear artificial, but it is vital to a right understanding of the actual position of the so-called “Catholic” Churchman. The Evangelical equally insists upon the reality of fellowship with Christ in the Holy Communion ; his experience, too, enables him to testify that the service is a means of grace, but he attributes the efficacy of the Sacrament to faith, for him reception is a spiritual act, and therefore, if anything, a “more real” reception, for Jesus Christ makes Himself known in the “Breaking of Bread.” In both cases faith is the condition of blessing, and fellowship with Christ is the reward of faith.

The value of Auricular Confession equally depends upon the spiritual activity of the person who uses this so-called means of grace. The penitent is instructed to make a careful self-examination ; numerous manuals are published which contain questions suggesting sins of which the person may have been guilty ; a careful scrutiny of the life and motives for conduct is an essential part of preparation, and in some cases a written summary of the more serious sins is recommended. The kind of instruction given can best be illustrated by quotations from two popular manuals which have a wide circulation.

“As my Father hath sent Me,” etc. (St. John xx. 23). Our

Lord gave His "Apostles all powers that He exercised as Son of Man, that of performing miracles" (which power ceased when the need for them ceased), "and that of baptizing, celebrating, absolving," etc., the need for which still continues. These last powers they handed on to Bishops and priests of the Church. "In . . . Absolution, Christians are cleansed again from sin, and strengthened and gladdened by grace."¹

" Yes, I am going to God's Priest,
To tell him all my sin ;
And from this very hour I'll strive
A new life to begin.

When I confess with contrite heart
My sins unto the priest,
I do believe from all their guilt
That moment I'm released."²

The penitent comes to church at the appointed time, and audibly makes a confession of his several sins one by one. The priest, when assured of the genuineness of his repentance, pronounces absolution, and the person goes home fully assured of forgiveness. If asked to name the reason for his assurance, he will most probably ascribe his experience to the priestly absolution as "God's appointed means to pardon sin." Once again, Is this interpretation of his religious experience the true one? Criticism of the type of teaching contained in the quotations given above need not detain us now ; but, assuming these false statements about God's priest were really believed, the "Catholic" interpretation is a perfectly natural one. Our immediate concern is with the legitimate explanation of a religious experience. Suppose the penitent had made this careful preparation, and in his own room, or *alone* in the open church, had made this thorough confession of sin to God with full trust in God's mercy, and a reliance upon the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, would his experience of forgiveness have been any less real? At least, it can be said that it ought not to have been. A great company of Christians have

¹ "Before the Altar," p. 110.

² "Catechism for Catholics in England," p. 30.

possessed this experience who would never think of making their confession in the presence of a priest. The penitent's experience must be distinguished from his practice; his practice is the fruit of belief in the efficacy of certain prescribed forms; his religious experience is the fruit of faith in Jesus Christ. The religious value of Auricular Confession is to be traced to the thorough heart-preparation which the individual must undertake; in other words, the religious value is due to the spiritual activity of the penitent.

III.

The immediate object of this inquiry is not to criticise the beliefs of a large number of our fellow-Churchmen, but to indicate the true value of modern "Catholic" teaching, which exercises such a fascinating influence over many minds. No good purpose will be served by the abuse of those whose views are different from our own, yet the secession of many of the younger Evangelicals is a loss which the party can ill afford at the present time; this secession is largely due to the genuine piety of High Churchmen and the attractiveness of a more ornate ceremonial. The radical opposition is lost sight of in the apparent agreement upon matters of primary importance.

The value of the Tractarian Movement can be better appreciated by the present generation than by the generation which has passed, or is now passing, away. The passage of time renders it possible to view events in their right perspective. The growth of ritualistic practices has been attended by a real deepening of the spiritual life, and this feature has been the secret of its striking progress. On the other hand, the net result has not been all gain; rather the Church has suffered serious loss, a large number of devout Churchpeople have gone to swell the ranks of Nonconformity, and the strength of these great Christian denominations to-day is in no small measure due to the Oxford Movement. The people were dissatisfied on account of the innovations; they ceased to attend their parish church, and attached themselves to some other Christian

community. They did not make any commotion; quietly and unostentatiously they withdrew, and, in consequence, their secession passed almost unnoticed. The Church to-day is face to face with the results of this movement, results which may well cause alarm and give rise to heart-searchings. These features should be remembered when the excellent work of the ritualistic clergy is held up for admiration. To-day when any protest is made upon points of ritual, it is not infrequently said of the objector, "He ought to go to chapel." Can any Christian body legitimately claim the title of Catholic, which would in this way exclude sincere and devout Christians from her membership?

In the course of the present discussion, the changes which have taken place in the type of service in the Evangelical Churches will at once occur to many minds; obviously an examination of this point would unnecessarily prolong the present inquiry; moreover, it would divert attention from the main issue and give rise to controversy upon what are, after all, side issues. It is not possible to lay down any hard-and-fast rules; the character and needs of each particular parish must be taken into consideration, and, after all, the teaching from the pulpit is a matter of considerable importance. The introduction of practices which add beauty and dignity to the service can be easily defended. On the other hand, care must be taken to exclude those elements which are directly suggestive of sacerdotal ideas. A general statement of this kind will be to many minds unsatisfying, but at the present stage of the controversy, and for the reasons just given, it is not, in the opinion of the present writer, wise to speak more definitely. "Let each be fully persuaded in his own mind."

The importance of making a clear distinction between religious experience and ceremonial is specially pronounced at the present time. Among the results of modern research are to be included the origin of many so-called "Catholic practices," and thoughtful men are repelled by a Church which retains customs which in their minds are inseparably associated with

superstition. The modern need is for a religion which is essentially spiritual; men demand a vital Christianity. This demand is the opportunity of Evangelicalism, and if the Evangelical party is to take advantage of the opening, she must be uncompromising in her refusal to allow within her ranks a type of teaching which is commended almost entirely by the personality of its adherents, but which has little affinity with modern thought. The Evangelical faith is the foundation of a strong, vigorous, and healthy life, intellectually and morally; it is a faith which will commend itself to the conscience of the average man; it is a faith which is identical with the faith of the New Testament Church—a faith which makes a powerful appeal to the heart of mankind.

“The Gospel,” said St. Paul, “is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” (Rom. i. 16).

