

[Cheltenham Conference Paper.]

## LIMITS OF VARIATION IN A UNITED CHURCH.

BY THE BISHOP OF WARRINGTON.

MY subject this morning is of a very speculative nature ; I can picture a writer, blessed with a more vivid imagination than myself, revelling in the opportunity which such a subject affords of drawing fancy sketches of a purely visionary Church, Utopian in the truest sense of the word, realizable only in the Millennial period, which, as far as one can judge from the utterances of those who talk most about it, is to be that happy time when every one has come to be in complete agreement to the very last detail with the particular person who is indulging in the vision.

I cannot put before you any such Turneresque picture ; the colours on my palette are the more drab hues of daily life ; and I want to keep, not indeed to the realized, but at least to the realizable, when the varied factors are taken into account : our problem is surely this, the relation between unity and variety ; our question, how far can a strong and vital unity in structure be combined with a wide variety of function and expression ?

I do not think that we can do better than start with the definition of the Church in the Nicene, or rather Constantinopolitan, Creed, as One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic ; for I believe that we shall find, in the attempts which have been made to realize this, warnings as to certain roads which have led men astray.

The fact that I am asked to deal with variations in a *united* Church absolves me from the necessity of any argument as to whether the *one* Church refers to a visible or invisible unity ; in the light of the invitation to speak upon such a topic, I can safely assume that we are agreed that the Unity which is the ideal of the Church is a visible unity of organization, not a vaguer unity of intention and aspiration.

Now the history of the Church shows clearly that unity has often been confused with uniformity ; the great difficulty which lies before us at the present time is the situation which was mainly created in English Christendom by the Act of Uniformity ; and this is but one of the many warnings that history gives of the fatal

danger of that confusion ; until the Church can make room within her borders for all the variations due to race, culture, heredity, and temperament, she can never be really *one*.

When we turn to the second mark, that of sanctity, we find it less directly germane to our purpose ; but while the developments of monasticism warn us of the dangers of an official recognition of two standards of holiness, one for the workaday life of the world and the other possible only in the seclusion of the cloister, on the other hand the schisms of Donatus and Novatian, and in our own day the existence of such bodies as the Plymouth Brethren, are standing admonitions against a narrow and pharisaical application of the Christian ethic.

Catholicity is more to our purpose ; the contrast of the derivation of the word with its popular connotation is provocative of thought ; it is commonly used now of a narrow, rigid and exclusive system, thoroughly logical in its development, once its premises are granted, and, with the confidence of all deductions, flatly denying the reality of all facts which do not fit into its frame ; it is essentially exclusive, drawing a definite limit and excluding all that is without ; that such a system should arrogate to itself the name of Catholic is surely its condemnation. But it is due to the exclusive policy which the Church has pursued in its career, an exclusiveness which may have had justification when it was fighting for its existence, not only with the political powers of the day but also with competing syncretistic rivals, who would have destroyed it by permeation, but which is now an outworn and an injurious policy. I venture to suggest that the exclusive theory of the Church, which is by no means combined to so-called Catholics, is the outcome of conditions which have now passed away, and that the true Catholicity of the future will be inclusive in principle.

The mark of Apostolicity raises problems of rather a different order ; it might be possible to treat them along the lines suggested by that favourite quotation of the late Archbishop Temple : "*Vindicamus nobis Apostolorum, non honores, sed labores,*" and to interpret the word as purely qualitative, not as historical : yet I cannot help feeling that such a treatment would be a deliberate discarding of the meaning of the word as it stands in the creed, and, what is more serious, an ignoring of the strength and cohesion which are given by continuity ; and this reminds us that one side of our pro-

blem is the combination of catholicity in the true sense of the word with continuity.

Another conclusion which may, I think, be drawn legitimately from the subject prescribed me is that I am not to consider any scheme of mere federation between separate bodies or Churches, but an attempt to forecast the variety within one great society.

If we are going to proceed upon inclusive lines, we have got to get down to essentials, to the absolute differentia of Christianity in worship, doctrine and polity; these must be insisted upon, and all else be left for a wide variety of practice and belief.

*Worship.* Is there anything which can be insisted upon as distinctively and essentially Christian in worship in the *agenda* as contrasted with the *credenda*, save the two sacraments of the Gospel? Baptism with water in the Name, and the Common Meal, normally of bread and wine, set apart by prayer in which the words of Institution have been used, are the distinctively Christian rites. What beyond this can be insisted on as essential? Neither free prayer nor set forms belong to the essence of Christian worship. Venerable liturgies have their place, but they themselves are outcome of years of free prayer; free prayer has its place, but it is subject to the inevitable tendency to drift into set formulæ. I want to suggest that we must get into the way of going right down to essentials, when we are considering the question of "limits of variation," that the limit must be rather that set by a common centre, than circumferential delimitation, however widely the bounds may be cast.

If we turn from worship to doctrine, the matter would appear upon the surface to be much more complicated; the creeds are so detailed and explicit, the confessions of the various communions so elaborate that it would seem at first sight almost impossible to find any single dominating principle, the acceptance of which could be allowed to stand as the one essential of membership. And yet I venture to suggest that this is not so hopeless as at first appears. The creeds and confessions of Christendom are, all of them, explications or safeguards of the primitive and apostolic formula, "Jesus is Lord." The distinguishing feature of Christian belief is the worthiness of Jesus of Nazareth to receive *worship*. Even the Athanasian Creed testifies to this aspect: "The Catholic Faith is . . . that we *worship*." A man may from mental obliquity or lack of logical precision decline to call Him God; but if he wor-

ships Him, he gives in act what he refuses in word. Here is the differentiating feature of Christianity as contrasted with simple Theism, and this would seem to be the supreme test of Christian doctrine.

But it is the clearest teaching of experience that different men will interpret the same fact in different ways, ways so different as to appear diametrically opposed; mental training and outlook, temperament, social conditions, and many other factors, all combine to vary the way in which different men look at the same fact, and the deductions which they draw from it; nowhere has this been more true than in the sphere of religion; and the intensity of their religious convictions has led men to maintain them against the conclusions of others with a vigour, which has been a fruitful source of division; men have not been content with the affirmation, "I am right"; they have gone on to the negation, "You are wrong." And unity will never be really possible till men have abandoned the "magnifying of their certainties to condemn all differences." Dogma will always be divisive.

When we come to the question of polity, we find ourselves faced by a different problem; I do not think that we can claim that any form of organization has the right to be regarded as the one authoritative Christian type; for while episcopacy was for centuries the universal polity, it was only evolved gradually in the Church; and no one who is willing to give facts their true value can deny that Christian Churches have flourished, and do flourish, with other forms of organization. But on the other hand the unity of a society finds its expression in the organs through which it functions; and the officials of any society, whatever theories may be put forward as to their origin, or the source of their authority, are, by differentiation of function, the organs of that society. Consequently the question of the ministry comes very near to being fundamental to reunion,

But the lessons of history and experience cannot be ignored; in the course of history the Christian Church evolved the threefold ministry as that best suited to its needs; and I want to suggest that the experience of the present shows how Churches which have formed themselves on what they believed to be a more primitive model are being driven by force of circumstances in the same direction; think of the Bishops of the Lutheran Churches of Scandi-

navia, of the Superintendents of the German Lutheran Church ; watch the development of the superintendent ministers in the Baptist and Independent churches, and study the map of their districts ; and perhaps most striking of all listen to the confession from strong Presbyterians of the weakness which they feel as the result of a system of annually elected moderators, due to the facts, that the office of oversight is held only for a year, and that the holder is not freed from his particular charge, to exercise oversight.

But the essential function of the historic episcopate is oversight, as its name implies ; all sorts of theories have grown up round it in the course of centuries, as to its origin and authority ; these have greater or less value in the eyes of different sections of the Christian Church ; and here I venture to differ from the reader of the first paper this morning ; I am not prepared to insist that we must "decide which" of the various conflicting theories "is right." The Church of England has been wise in her generation in fastening no theory upon her members, but leaving them free to interpret the fact in the way which subserves best their spiritual life. I want to emphasize the point that the historic episcopate, or better, the historic threefold ministry, preserves that continuity with the past which it would be rash to sacrifice ; we can accept it, not indeed, as is sometimes loosely stated, without any theory as to its nature, but without enforcing any *one* theory as to its nature ; we can accept the fact, and vary in our interpretation of its significance (cp. Monarchy). But on the value of continuity in the service of unity I cannot do better than quote from Dr. Garbie's very important essay on the Reformed Episcopate in the recently published volume *Towards Reunion* ; he is examining the Essays in Dr. Swete's volume on *The Early History of the Church and Ministry*, and in summing up his criticism of Dean Armitage Robinson's contribution he says : "I can accept the statement that he makes in support of the threefold ministry, even in the later sense of the terms which he has in view. 'It is for the unity of the whole that the Historic Threefold Ministry stands. It grew out of the need for preservation of unity when the Apostles themselves were withdrawn. . . . This is not to say that a particular doctrine of Apostolic Succession must needs be held by all Christians alike. But the principle of transmission of ministerial authority makes for unity.' "

I may seem to have trenched somewhat on the province of the

previous speaker ; but I have ventured to do so because I am convinced that limitations must be found in the common consent to a few fundamentals, in worship, creed, and organization ; and under the last head the ministry is the essential factor.

I do not suppose that the many variations which would naturally exist in common with loyalty to the few fundamentals would be simply individual variations ; I take it that there would be combinations of those who worshipped, or taught, or organized upon similar lines ; the present divisions would largely reproduce themselves in the new order, representing as they do the varying emphasis on aspects of Christian teaching laid by men of varying temperament or environment ; the Baptist would still insist upon the baptism of believers, and organize himself with those who held the same views ; the Congregationalist might still retain his democratic system of government, and emphasis on the independence of each congregation ; the Connexional or Conciliar communions would still if so desired retain their carefully balanced system of Church Courts. While there would probably be a large central community, content with a considerable agreement in worship and doctrine, and without special leanings to any highly specialized system of Church government, there would be considerable freedom in, to use a phrase rendered familiar by much recent legislation, "contracting out." Bodies would be formed and recognized, bearing much the same relationship to the whole Church that her various orders do at the present moment to the Church of Rome. Such contracting out might work in other directions ; why should not those who desire a more elaborate ritual, a more cohesive system of doctrine, and whose theory of the ministry takes a rigid and, to our mind, mechanical form, group themselves into an order, or orders, within the reunited Church, provided that the ministry of that Church retained that connecting link with the past which is essential upon their theories ? To lose their contribution to the United Church would be a disaster ; it would be equally disastrous, were the attempt at Reunion to result in emphasizing the line of cleavage between the Institutional and Experimental aspects of religion, between, to use the common language of the day, Catholic and Protestant Christianity.

To sum up, the Sacraments of the Gospel in Worship, the Lordship of Jesus in creed, and the Common Ministry, as the expres-

sion and organ of a differentiated but continuous life, in polity, would seem to be the common ground of the United Church. These once agreed upon and safe-guarded there seems but little limit to the variations of worship, belief, and organization, to which the Church might be led by the diverse operations of the One Spirit of the One Lord.

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## PROBLEMS OF EVANGELISTIC WORK.

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THE Church has a Divine commission given it by its Divine Lord—"Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature." This is accompanied by Divine power, for He Who gave the command said "All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore." It is followed also by Divine assurance of success, for He said, too, "Lo, I am with you all the days, even unto the end of the world." Yet after nearly twenty centuries we are faced in the Archbishops' Report on Evangelistic work with a condition of things in the Church which is deplorable and which many of us know all too well is lamentably true. The people do not come to Church. They hold aloof from organized religion, and personal religion is, we are told, on the wane. Surely this is due to failure on the part of those to whom the command and enablement were given. Obedience, fearlessness and triumphant confidence are not the characteristics of our lives and work as they ought to be. The endeavour of this paper is to examine these problems of Evangelistic work and to attempt to suggest some solution.

When Christ was upon earth, multitudes hung upon His words and the common people heard Him gladly. It was because He knew men and knew what was in man, and because when He spoke "He taught with authority," and that, not the least, the authority of understandable truth. Many reasons might be given for non-attendance at public worship so common to-day, and indeed are given in the Report, but is not the truest reason that clergy are out of touch with the people?