

CHURCH GOVERNMENT.¹

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IN approaching the consideration of the government of the Church, which professes a Revealed Religion given by God to man, the first question naturally is: Has there been any revelation of the constitution and mode of government of that Church, considered as a Society composed of human beings? The term "Society" raises in our minds the ideas of organization, rules, officers and other minor matters, in addition to the great and principal matter, the "Objects" for which the Society is formed. Now when I take the Gospels, I fail to find in them anything to indicate the formation of any organized Society at all, much less any Constitution or mode of government, but equally I do not find anything which excludes any Society or organization.

Man has been placed by the Creator on this earth, endowed with conscience and intellect, and with an instinct to live in community with his fellow-man, a social animal, but with no revealed rules according to which he must form himself into communities. He has been left to work out those rules for himself, and he has done it according to the circumstances in which he finds himself, and according also to the ideas he has inherited from his forefathers. Amongst these he has gradually grown. The physical characteristics of the land in which he dwells, its climate, its proximity to the sea, its proximity and means of access to the lands inhabited by other communities of his fellows, have all contributed to the formation of his political institutions, to the character of his government, whether monarchical, oligarchal, democratic, republican or anarchic, to his methods of legislation, to the administration of justice, to his economic conditions, and in short to all his concerns. In these respects we shall probably all find ourselves in general agreement that God has left man to work out his own salvation, that man has been so formed and constituted that he must of necessity and by his very nature form himself into societies, greater or smaller, and perhaps with a tendency to weld all these societies ultimately into one great society.

¹ A paper read at the Cheltenham Conference.

Now if there has not been any form of civil or secular government prescribed by God for man in respect of things temporal, it is not surprising that there has not been any form of religious or ecclesiastical government prescribed by our Lord for man in respect of things spiritual and eternal. And if no such form of religious government has been clearly prescribed to be observed by man at all times and in all places, we may conclude that man has been left to work out his own forms according to his necessities and particularly according to the genius he has inherited and certainly in such manner as to weld all into one great Society, one not only outwardly, but also inwardly and spiritually, and thereby lead the way to a political union of all mankind. The fact that we have clear revelation of the mind of God that man shall be one with Him, and of the means by which that union shall be brought about, namely, faith, and that in this and other revealed doctrine universally applicable there is one unvarying standard, assures us that one Society is the ultimate end.

But just as man gains his political and social wisdom by repeated attempts and failures, with no apparent finality, so, it may be, he must in like manner gain his ecclesiastical wisdom, and what he has learned in the former domain he may bring to his assistance in the latter, and just as one society or nation has found that somehow or other it is possessed of ideas and sentiments which render one form of political government more suitable to it, so another may find one form of ecclesiastical government more suited to it than another and better fitted to enable it to advance to union with the Creator.

This brings me to the thesis which I submit to the Conference, that for Church Government in England, which I understand is what we are here this evening to consider, it will be well for us to strive for a Constitutional Government similar to that of the Limited Monarchy under which we dwell, a government in which there is a clear separation of the Legislative, Judicial and Executive functions from one another, though as a matter of fact some individuals may take part in discharging two or all of those functions. The peculiar genius of the English people and those tribes most nearly akin to them has led them to retain the Legislative function in the hands of the people themselves when meeting in their various assemblies. The earliest records show the English

as meeting in their various "Motes," Town Mote, Ward-mote, Hundred Mote, Shire Mote, Witenagemote, with their various officers, King, Heretoga, Alderman or Earl, Shire-gerefa or Sheriff, Borough-reeve, Port-reeve and so forth. The Manorial system of a later day preserves the same form in substance, particularly in the Court Baron and Court Leet, the members of which were the freehold tenants, and which made all sorts of regulations in matters of food, drink, sanitation and good order, and adjudicated in the litigation conducted in the court. In our own day the setting up of Parish and District and County Councils, with their powers of making By-laws, i.e. town laws, for their own areas bears witness to the fact that this system is ingrained in our very nature. The limitations which have step by step been placed upon the Legislative, Judicial and Executive powers of the King have simply brought the holder of that office back to the position which his earliest-known predecessors held, namely, the embodied expression of the unity of the nation. That strong and praiseworthy bent of our race seems to me to find expression also in the Church of England Assembly (Powers) Act, 1919 (commonly called the Enabling Act), and in the Parochial Church Councils (Powers) Measure, 1921. If it be given free expression and fuller development, what will the resulting form of Church Government be?

We shall retain our Archbishops, Bishops and other officers as the Executive. We shall have our National Assembly of clergy and laity as the supreme legislative body, with Diocesan and Ruridecanal Conferences making by-laws and local regulations and our Church Courts as the Judicial Authorities. The Executive and Judicial Authorities as well in civil as in ecclesiastical matters must be conditioned to the Legislative Authority. That is so in the most primitive forms of civil society, even where the word of the chief makes the law, his executive and judicial actions are conditioned by the law which he himself and his predecessors have laid down, and even by those sentiments which he in common with his subjects holds, and from which even an autocrat cannot wholly escape. The Legislative Authority is therefore the basis of government, and according to the genius of the English people it must be representative of the whole people, in this instance, of course, the whole people who rank themselves as members of the Church. Legislation in its broadest sense includes minute directions to the

Executive Authority, and I so use it. The Legislative Authority gives general or particular and minute directions, the Executive Authority carries them out, but the latter authority is not precluded from everything else, it may still come to the Legislative Authority and ask for new directions and for directions to embark on new forms of activity.

Now for centuries we have not so acted in England in matters Ecclesiastical, if we have ever done so ; certainly we did not after the Norman Conquest until the time of the Reformation, and then only in a confused and partial manner. Perhaps in Anglo-Saxon days things may have been different, but with the Normans there came the Monarchical Idea more clearly defined, and it extended to ecclesiastical government in the person of the Bishop. But now nothing but the definition and statement " of the doctrine of the Church of England on any question of theology " is withheld from the National Assembly. (In passing I may point out that the exception of this power from the functions of the National Assembly does not vest the power in the Bench of Bishops, or the House of Bishops, or in any other body or person which does not already possess it, though many persons seem to have some confused idea or feeling that it does.)

The Assembly may legislate on the qualifications to be possessed by candidates for Holy Orders, the conditions on which Bishops may ordain those candidates, the qualifications to be possessed by clergy for the holding of Bishoprics, Deaneries, Benefices and other church preferments, the rights and duties of the holders of those offices, the conditions on which the tenure of those offices may be ended, the division or union of dioceses and other ecclesiastical areas, the discipline to which members of the Church are to be subject, the finances of the Church and the administration of its endowments, the powers and duties of inferior assemblies and a thousand and one other subjects.

In a system of this nature it will probably in time fall to the Archbishops to bring forward most new matters requiring legislation and to ask for changes in old matters which affect the whole Church or the whole of their respective Provinces, whilst the carrying into effect will be entrusted to them.

In matters affecting one Diocese only the Conference of that Diocese will be the normal Legislative Body, with the qualification

that the National Assembly will see to it that the proceedings of each Conference are limited to its own proper affairs and do not impinge upon the position and rights of the whole Church or another Diocese. For example, the alteration in the areas of Archdeaconries and Rural Deaneries, the union and sub-division of parishes, the raising and allocation of moneys in wealthy parishes for the assistance of poorer ones, the maintenance and provision of Day and Sunday Schools, the maintenance of clergy and lay agents, the establishment and maintenance of Training Colleges for Clergy and Teachers, are all matters which with varying qualifications or limitations in the exercise thereof may well be left to the Diocesan Conference. These alterations would mostly originate with the Bishop, and when approved by the Conference would be put into execution by him or under his direction.

In a less degree the Ruridecanal Conference would concern itself with, say, the pooling of funds raised in two or more parishes, so that the strong might help the weak, that the wealthier parts of the Deanery might take part in establishing and manning Mission Rooms or Churches in the poorer parts, that newly built districts might speedily be provided with Churches and Schools, that recommendations might be made to the Diocesan Conference and thence to the Assembly on all questions of administration in Church matters. Many of the scandals now existing in many parishes might also be removed by giving power to the Ruridecanal Conference to make complaint instead of leaving the duty, as at present, to the parishioners or parochial authority, who may be disinclined or afraid of moving.

The powers proposed to be entrusted to Parochial Church Councils are principally Legislative Functions within the definition of Legislation, which I have taken, but I do not propose to examine the proposals which have been already approved or the proposals which will be renewed in connexion with the patronage of livings, and will content myself with considering the question of the conduct of Divine Service.

In this matter the first and principal consideration which arises is as to the allocation of different parts of the service to the congregation and the minister, the second, and for present-day purposes the most pressing, is as to the powers of the minister over those parts which are allocated to him, and a third question is whether

the service shall be liturgical or not. We have decided that our services shall be liturgical, in which definite parts are rendered by the congregation, but the lead in them as well as the rendering of the remainder and major portion are allotted to the minister, with the consequence that the external character, at least, of every service is almost wholly what he chooses to make it. That position is not satisfactory to large numbers of the lay-folk, probably not to the majority of them, and they wish an alteration ; but the alteration is a very delicate matter, and the framing of any regulation or measure to effectuate any alteration is a matter of extraordinary difficulty. The delicacy and difficulty of the problem, however, are not as great in dealing with a liturgical service as would be the case with the other type. The wording of the prayers, canticles, psalms, versicles and responses remains constant, and the only legal variations which can be made are in cases which are provided for by the service book, and there seems to be little or no reason why a Church Council or Parochial Church Meeting should not be empowered to choose which of two alternatives should not be adopted, or at any rate why some regard should not be paid to their deliberately expressed preference, and why in case of continued difference between the clerical and lay authorities, it should not be determined by the superior authority of the Archdeacon or Bishop.

The hours at which Divine Service shall be held afford another instance where the laity ought to have an influential voice. I call to mind a case where an Incumbent appointed six o'clock in the evening as the ordinary hour for burials in the Churchyard of a suburban parish, for the unworthy purpose of exacting double fees for burials at the hours at which the sentiments and habits of the parishioners demanded they should bury their dead. We now have an increasing practice of substituting the Holy Communion under the name of the Holy Eucharist, or even the Mass for Morning Prayer, whilst that service is relegated to some hour at which the parishioners are unwilling to attend. At present the people are helpless in the matter, and have only the choice of abstention, which sadly too often is the choice they make, especially when the service is gabbled through at breakfast-time, with no choir present, no singing and no sermon, in short, with the absence of all the accompaniments to which the English people have been accustomed for centuries. On the other hand, many have come to appreciate

an early morning Administration of the Holy Communion, and many find it their only opportunity, but no power exists to compel the grant of that very reasonable facility, which so far as I know offends the conscience of no one. As a concession to some consciences, I for my part would be willing to except from any such power the right to require an afternoon or evening Communion, much as I value the latter.

The leading part in our ordinary services which is assigned to the minister and his right to the conduct of Divine Service, extends to the minutest detail, so that the whole external character of the services may become the manifestation of his own preferences to the utter disregard of those of the worshippers and would-be worshippers, however lawful those preferences may be, and however helpful they may find them to their spiritual life. If the people had had the right of an effective voice in fixing the character of the services in their Parish Churches, how much controversy and how much desertion of the Church for Nonconformity would have been prevented! The worship in Church is their worship, for which they are responsible to Almighty God, and if one lawful mode of conducting Divine Service appeals to them more than another, it seems difficult to justify the present arbitrary power of one man to deny it to them and to force upon them another which is distasteful and unprofitable. The unfettered power of the pulpit should surely suffice for teaching and persuasion.

Hymn-books and hymn singing are now universal and there are wide differences in the books and the hymns. The importance of the particular hymn-book and of the use of particular hymns cannot be gainsaid at the present day, but in case of conflict of wishes between the Incumbent and the people, the latter must yield, the matter is one of the conduct of Divine Service. Teaching strongly objectionable to the general sentiment of the people may be conveyed by the hymns, and particularly objectionable to parents who are concerned for their children, and it is not edifying that a parent should, after service, have to explain to children that the doctrine conveyed by a particular hymn which has been sung during its course is false. It is not only not edifying, but will very possibly be injurious, and the fact that there are such differences of belief may turn children away from any belief whatever. In any case the result will be to weaken the influence of the minister

on the minds of the children, and his object will be defeated. In a system of Constitutional Government where that particular question has been debated, the chances of all these various evils will be very much lessened, the position of the minister will be strengthened, the faith of the children will be confirmed.

Peculiar views may be held by some clergymen about the State Prayers and the occasional Prayers and Thanksgivings, and the people who desire them denied the opportunity of uniting in them. It seems a difficult thing to require of a clergyman that he should recite prayers to which he objects, but at all events he has voluntarily placed himself in his position, and if his flock desire them and are in position to demand them, reason says that the majority should have the decisive voice in requiring those particular parts of the Liturgy, to which he has declared his assent.

The question of music in the services is very often a burning one and leads to a sad lack of harmony. It is one of government and theoretically still belongs to the Incumbent, but practically it is now in the hands of the Church Council, if they will but imitate the example of their fathers in the House of Commons. The appointment of Organists, Choristers and Bell-ringers was proposed by the Parochial Church Councils (Powers) 1920, to be effected by the Council and minister in conjunction, but was struck out by the National Assembly, and is not in the Powers Measure, 1921. The power of the purse, and even the threat of the exercise of it, was sufficient to curb powerful Kings of England in times past, and to win for us the liberties and constitutional government we enjoy to-day, and to make the Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland the most liberal Republic in the world. That power in parochial concerns has been conferred by the Powers Measure, 1921, upon the Church Council, Sec. 4 (i) (ii) (a), and Sec. 6 (i) (iv), and by the withholding of moneys for the salaries of organists and the expenses of choirs, the people through their Councils will be able in most cases to secure the fulfilment of their proper wishes. These existing powers are as follows: By Section 4 there have been "transferred to the Council of every parish . . . all powers, duties and liabilities of the churchwardens of such parish relating to

"(a) The financial affairs of the Church, including the collection and administration of all moneys which may be raised for Church

purposes," which clearly includes all collections made for Church expenses.

By Section 6. "The Council of every parish have the following powers in addition to any powers conferred by the Constitution or otherwise by this Measure :—

"(i) Power to frame an annual budget of moneys required for the maintenance of the work of the Church in the parish . . . and to take such steps as they think necessary for the raising, collecting and allocating of such moneys," which gives the Council power to fix beforehand the purpose of the offertory or collection at every service in the year, and deprives the Incumbent of the power which he had previously, of announcing the object of any collection, and of appointing the persons to receive it for any purpose other than Churchwardens' Expenses or the Alms at Holy Communion and of administering it himself.

"(iv) Power, jointly with the Incumbent, to determine the objects to which all moneys to be given or collected in Church shall be allocated, subject to the directions contained in the Book of Common Prayer as to the disposal of money given at the offertory." The precise meaning and effect of sub-section (iv) may be doubtful, and may be that sub-section (i) is controlled thereby, and that the Church Council cannot of their own motion raise the moneys required for the maintenance of the work of the Church by collections in Church, or it may be that it only governs collections for other purposes, such as Missionary, Philanthropic, School and other such purposes. The precise meaning of the expression, "Power jointly with the Incumbent" is equally doubtful, and the difficulty is not lessened by the circumstance that the clause does not seem to take account of the fact that the Incumbent is not only Chairman of the Council, but also a member of it with a vote, but appears to contemplate for the moment that the Council and the Incumbent are two separate and independent bodies. It may be that the decision of a majority of the Council is the decision of the whole Council, even though the Incumbent voted in the minority, and that the Council has therefore jointly with the Incumbent determined the objects in question, or it may be that he can paralyse the decision of the majority without being able to exercise his former powers over collections in Church. The result appears to be that either the Council can override the Incumbent, or that a

deadlock will result. In either case the funds for musical purposes will not be forthcoming, and sub-section (i) will prevent moneys being raised by donation, if they are not provided for by the budget.

The extraordinary difficulty of dealing with the conduct of the services is illustrated by what happened in July in the National Assembly when Section 3 of the Further Powers Measure, 1921, was under consideration. As introduced it read as follows:—

“ Nothing in this measure or in the Parochial Church Councils (Powers) Measure, 1921, shall affect the rights, liabilities or duties of the Incumbent in respect of the Church or the Services or public worship therein, or of the churchyard, or of any property belonging to the benefice. Provided that the Incumbent shall from time to time consult with the Council concerning the services of the Church, and particularly concerning any important changes which he may propose to make in such services. And if, after such consultation, the Council shall be opposed to any such change, they shall have the right to make representations to the Bishop in respect thereof.”

As amended on Revision it reads: “ Nothing in this Measure or in the Parochial Church Councils (Powers) Measure, 1921, shall affect the rights, liabilities or duties of the Incumbent in respect of the Church, or the services or public worship therein, or of the churchyard or of any property belonging to the benefice, Provided that nothing in this Measure shall hinder the Council from making representations to the Bishop in respect to the services in Church, by exercising the power conferred upon the Council by sub-section (v) of Section 6 of the Parochial Church Councils (Powers) Measure, 1921,” a lame and impotent conclusion which will satisfy very few laymen. The expression “ important changes ” in the original draft probably accounted for the readiness with which many members of the Assembly accepted the amendment. The expression is too vague to use in a legal enactment by reason of the lack of any standard or gauge of “ importance ” or what is important, but perhaps the difficulty might have been met by substituting for “ any important changes ” the expression, “ any other than occasional changes ” in which case, the proposal would have read, “ The Incumbent shall from time to time consult with the Council concerning the services of the Church and particularly concerning any other than occasional changes,” and the test would have been one of time or frequency, which are much more susceptible of assessment by an outside authority.

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In all these various particulars of Government, I submit that the adoption of the Constitutional Principle, as we understand it, would make for the welfare of the whole Church, and not less for the Clergy than the Laity. The clergy would be giving up autocratic powers and would have to rely upon influence, character and the trust and respect of their people, and they would find that the position which depends upon such trust and respect is much to be preferred to that of the autocrat. Most if not all the evils which the clergy fear arise from the very fact that the people know and feel their present impotence, and when improper attacks are made upon the Incumbent the support of many of his sympathizers is withheld or weakened by the fear that some day that same autocratic power may be used in a less worthy cause. Men in other walks of life have to fight the battle of right against wrong, and to fight it from positions where they have no prerogative, no autocratic power, from which they may be removed by an adverse vote, but they do make the fight, they do win the victory, not by their own power, but by the support, advice and sympathy of the majority behind them, and by the inherent righteousness of their cause, and they find their positions secure. What can be more secure than the position of the Chairman of a Committee, Society or Company? If he does what is right, even though his action may be unpalatable to many, he is in the vast majority of cases so respected for his conduct that even his opponents resent any attempt to remove him or undermine his position, and if he is defeated in his aim, there is for most of the important questions another day on which, like him who runs away, he may fight again. Beyond this consideration, however, we Englishmen may look at another. Consider what has happened in the last four years in Europe. The King of England and the Kings of countries which have imitated our form of Constitutional Government remain, the autocrats have passed away, the influence of the King of England is greater to-day than ever before and greater than the power of any of the autocrats who have passed. Prophecy is dangerous, but I venture to prophesy that the position and power for good of an English clergyman under a constitutional Government of the Parish will surpass all that we and our fathers have ever seen.

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