

THE VITAL LINK IN THE CHURCH'S SACRAMENTAL SYSTEM.

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THE norm of Holy Baptism, both in Scripture and in the Church's system, is that of the adult, and it is on this that her statements of doctrine in the latter part of the Catechism are based. She there makes it quite clear that of the baptized person is required the double condition of Repentance and Faith before he can be admitted into the Church of Christ.

This still obtains in any place where the Gospel is first preached, but, where parents are themselves Christians, Infant Baptism is the natural corollary, yet only on the condition of the provision of Sponsors. The Sponsors at Baptism, as Bishop Moberley stresses in his Bampton Lectures, do not merely "stand for" the child, as the common phrase goes,—though they *do* this, by answering in his name,—but they also stand for the Church in her corporate capacity, and thus undertake personally to see that the child shall be taught the meaning of Repentance and Faith (with their consequent, Obedience), so to ensure that, when the "years of discretion" (the period when the Baptismal vows are thoroughly understood) arrive, Confirmation will follow. Hence the final charge to the Sponsors in the Baptismal Service, "Ye are to take care that this child be brought to the Bishop, to be Confirmed by him."

Now it is at Confirmation that the genius of the Church of England is so strikingly Scriptural, as well as almost unique. In the Greek Church Confirmation may be administered directly after the Baptism, and in the Roman Church seven years later, as if only the act of laying on of hands were of any importance. But the Church of England calls for much more; she demands reality; she makes the condition of Confirmation to consist of "discretion," in the sense of a spiritual understanding, and, as a result of that, she requires from every Confirmeer the solemn and public acceptance of the conditions of an Adult Baptism, i.e. the profession of both Repentance and Faith. But where these exist, not as a mere statement with the lips, but in all heart sincerity, there you have the personal acceptance of Christ, that spiritual change which we call Conversion. How wholly Scriptural! How absolutely clear and definite! The now understanding person must experience Conversion, and must openly and publicly declare his Decision for Christ. It is this fact—the definite Conversion of the person about to be confirmed—which is *the* vital link in the Sacramental System of the Church of England.

But if this vital link is missing—if a person, unable or unwilling to make this public declaration, is therefore not Confirmed—what

then? Then the Church definitely repudiates the already baptized person as not being a Christian at all. And this she does by shutting out that person from the Holy Communion (see rubric at the end of the Confirmation Service)—the great privilege and the outstanding means of grace for the true disciple of Christ. Why? Because where there is no personal acceptance of Christ, no real Conversion to God through Him, there can be no true discipleship and therefore no right to partake of the Holy Communion. The Church actually declares this Sacrament to be "necessary to salvation," so that, in thus excluding from it, she makes it plain that in her view the person excluded is unsaved, or, as she puts it, not "in a state of salvation"; she treats him as outside her fold—in fact, as a heathen. Her view with regard to the baptism of such a person is exactly that of St. Paul toward the rite of circumcision, on which the Jew relied as *his* credential of salvation, namely, that where the demands of God are not complied with, the circumcision becomes uncircumcision (Rom. ii. 25), since the one thing that matters is whether the person is a "new creature" in Christ Jesus (Gal. vi. 15).

Nor does the Church thus exclude—as thousands mistakenly suppose her to do—because of the absence of the outward form of Confirmation, i.e., the act of laying on of hands. She carefully distinguishes between the letter and the spirit of the Ordinance. The rubric referred to above makes this quite clear. For by this rubric even an unconfirmed person may be admitted to the Holy Communion, provided that he be "ready and desirous to be Confirmed," that is, be spiritually ready because truly converted; in other words, *the* thing that matters is the condition and state of the heart of the Confirmer—whether there be the real acceptance of Christ, and therefore the true relationship to God.

Nothing, surely, could be plainer. It is because Churchpeople do not grasp the continuity of their Church's thought and teaching in this matter, and do not ascertain the reasons for and the meaning of her rubrics, that they constantly overlook this most important necessity of Conversion; so important that, where it is absent, the Church reckons the Baptism at an unconscious age as having become valueless, and holds the baptized but unconverted person to be in the position of an unbeliever. Conversion, then—let me repeat—is the vital link in the Church's Sacramental System, without which it simply falls to the ground and becomes meaningless.

This great necessity of Conversion remains true, whichever of two diverse views of Infant Baptism may be held. There is the view that in the unconscious infant, in response to the vicarious faith of its parents or sponsors, there is in Baptism implanted the seed or germ of spiritual life. Assuming this view, the undoubted fact remains that in a large majority of cases there is no evidence, in after years, of a real spiritual life, as should be the outcome of the development of this implanted germ, which must, therefore, be considered as latent or dormant since the Baptism. Obviously,

then, the need for all such persons is an awakening of the soul, and such a definite turning to God as is meant by Conversion. Bishop Moberley, who held strongly this view of Infant Baptism, declares his intense belief in the necessity of Conversion ; he says, " I hail the preaching of Conversion as a great need of these unspiritual times," and proceeds to explain that by this he means " such a preaching of Conversion as might, by the blessing of God, be not unhelpful towards wakening up the beginnings of that personal faith and repentance—that conscious and willing faith and repentance—which, alike in the baptized and those who are not yet baptized, leadeth the way unto salvation."

Or there is the view that, while God does admit an unconscious infant to the benefits of that salvation which is by faith in Christ, yet such admission is provisional, insomuch as, when the child becomes a conscious and responsible being, the conditions of Infant Baptism are no more applicable to it than would be the garments of its infancy, and hence there must of necessity be manifested that personal faith and obedience, without which the Baptism of infancy is as if it had not been. So that, in this view also, Conversion is still the outstanding necessity. My point is that, by whatever avenue of belief in Infant Baptism you may approach it, Conversion is still the vital link in our Sacramental System.

But I would not be supposed by any means to tie the experience of Conversion to the period of Confirmation. There are undoubtedly many cases in which Conversion has taken place before Confirmation has even been thought of, and others in which the Conversion has taken place so gradually, and by such imperceptible steps, that it would be impossible for the person to name the day, or even indicate the approximate date, when it took place. The passing of the soul from death unto life, which takes place at Conversion, may indeed be the work of a moment, but it may not always be a conscious moment. My contention is that Conversion must take place at Confirmation, unless it have taken place previously, otherwise Confirmation becomes merely a meaningless form to the person Confirmed.

This all-important fact of the necessity of Conversion before Confirmation has a very practical bearing upon (1) The Confirmation Class, (2) The Confirmation Candidates, and (3) The Confirmation Service.

(1) *The Confirmation Class.* At every Baptismal Service the Sponsors are duly reminded that their duty is to see that the child is taught, not only the Creed, Lord's Prayer, and Ten Commandments, but " all other things which a Christian ought to know and believe to his soul's health," which must of necessity include personal Decision for Christ ; also the child is to be " instructed in the Church Catechism," which sets forth the essentials of a true Conversion—Repentance and Faith, followed by Obedience. But scarcely any Sponsor in the present day discharges this duty to the child. In olden days some care was taken to ensure the fitness of persons coming forward as Sponsors, all such being examined

by the Vicar and Churchwardens, in the presence of the congregation before the Baptism took place, to see whether they themselves knew the Catechism in which they were to see that their god-child was instructed. But nowadays the most unfit persons may come to a Baptism as Sponsors, and there is no means of testing or refusing them. It would be an enormous gain if some rule were laid down to ensure, at least, that every Sponsor was a Communicant. When persons, themselves unconfirmed, and therefore reckoned by the Church as unbelievers, come forward and promise that the child shall make that Decision which they themselves have never made, it is no wonder that the whole atmosphere of many a Baptism is that of obvious unreality. The inevitable result of this state of things is that not one child in a thousand comes forward for Confirmation with the least shadow of preparation having been given by the Sponsors. Hence the enormous importance of the Confirmation Class, where the whole work neglected by the Sponsors must be done by the Incumbent, if it is to be done at all, and the Candidate adequately prepared for the solemn rite.

Yet even here, alas! how often is the great opportunity let slip, and the whole instruction based on the assumption of the Candidates being already Christians, when no real Decision for Christ has been made, and no Conversion has taken place. In a clerical discussion on this subject some years ago, a well-known Evangelical leader actually contended that so long as the candidates were decent and moral young people, nothing further should be required! I have asked candidates, who were prepared elsewhere, whether in the preparation any instruction had been given on the way of salvation, and received the answer that they had heard nothing about it! A man, who was once a cathedral choir boy, told me the other day that at his Confirmation the Bishop's only requirement was belief in a Supreme Being! Apparently, therefore, a Mohammedan would have been accepted for Confirmation!

Can anything be more important than that in the Confirmation Class absolutely clear instruction, on the basis of the Catechism, should be given as to the meaning of Decision for Christ and the nature of Conversion?

(2) *The Confirmation Candidates.* When this "vital link" is clearly understood, it becomes obvious that "years of discretion," rightly interpreted, does not apply to any age in years at all, but that the phrase points to the time, early or late, when the spiritual understanding of this vital truth has come about. A Missioner whom I know, told me he was horrified at a certain Mission, at the close of the Children's Thanksgiving Service, by the Vicar first telling the children that if they did not now come forward for Confirmation they were everything that was bad, and then ordering all to be seated while the curate went round and took down the name of every child over twelve, with a view to being prepared for Confirmation! Yet how many candidates are presented every year on this same absurd principle? It is, of course, true that a child of twelve *may* have sufficient spiritual understanding to accept

the Saviour, but such cases are exceptional. When, therefore, children are presented on the "age" basis, very many are far too young to have any actual experience of a spiritual change; no one can be present at a Confirmation where such children are presented without surely feeling distressed at their listlessness and inattention, which indicate only too plainly that they are simply bored by the whole thing!

A Church newspaper recently pointed out that in 1927 there were 213,040 persons Confirmed, and that there had been an average of 200,000 Confirmees for many years; yet the Easter Communicants in 1927 only numbered 2,309,978. Why do these masses of Confirmees drift away? One of the great reasons is that in so many cases the "vital link" of Conversion had not been assured, and, as a chain is no stronger than its weakest link, the ties that should have bound them to their Church and to its Lord gave way. The result is that everywhere there are crowds of Churchpeople who have never understood, because they have never been taught, the great truth of Conversion, and therefore have no personal experience of it in their own lives. In the Parochial Mission of the present day what Missioner has not found that, while an occasional outsider may be reached, the majority of those brought to accept Christ are regular members of the Church, and very frequently Communicants too? The Mission has simply done for them the work that should have been done at their Confirmation. Hence the need for Parochial Missions is still as urgent as ever, since they carry out the task which the present Primate described some years ago in that strikingly true saying—"The Church must evangelize herself."

Where an Incumbent is not satisfied as to the Conversion of any candidate, the Confirmation of that candidate should undoubtedly be postponed, until this vital link is assured. Can any greater wrong be done to any person, of whatever age, than to present him or her for a Rite the great essential of which is entirely absent, to say nothing of cases where the person has been left in complete ignorance even of what the essential is?

(3) *The Confirmation Service.* If the position set forth in this article were generally recognized, would it not make a vast difference to some of our Confirmation Services? One has been to such which were cold and formal to a degree, and where the whole impression given was that of a mechanical performance, to be got through as rapidly as was decently possible. But to what a high spiritual level such a service would be lifted, if everyone present understood that the candidates had all professed their Decision for Christ, and were standing there to make their public confession of their recently accepted Lord!

And what a theme, too, would thus be provided for the Bishop's address! A Bishop, a personal friend, told me once that one of the ablest men on the Episcopal Bench had confessed to him that he was in despair over his Confirmation addresses; that he found it impossible to interest or impress ploughboys; and that often when he returned home from a Confirmation he could almost weep!

But if the Confirmation were looked on as their first great confession of Christ by the young people gathered before him, it would seem as if any Bishop must rise to such an occasion, and could speak to them, however simply, of the great step they had taken and of what their new discipleship of Christ must mean to them. Only the essential is, of course, that the preparation of the candidates should have been such as to mean their real Conversion to God before they came to their Confirmation.

Again, how much force would be added to the whole Service if the practice of some Bishops were universally adopted, the Bishop calling on each candidate by name from the lists previously supplied to him, and each rising one by one to make their confession in the answer "I do." Then one can picture the Bishop afterwards passing to the church door, and there, as the newly Confirmed passed out, taking each by the hand, with some brief word of fatherly greeting or blessing, such as the Confirmer would never forget. It might add ten or fifteen minutes to the length of the Service, and to the Bishop's labours, but would it not be well worth while, for the impression thus made upon the young souls, who had just confessed their Lord?

We hear much to-day of "The Way of Renewal." I venture to assert that one of the great lines along which renewal of the Church's spiritual life would come is the recognition of Conversion to God as the vital link in the Church's Sacramental System.

"The County Authologies," issued by Elkin Matthews & Marroh, Ltd., under the general editorship of Mr. R. Pape Cowl, M.A. (3s. 6d. net each), represent something of a new departure in selective literature. They make an attempt to survey and illustrate the debt of English literature to the scenery and special genius of individual counties in the British Isles. In his general preface, Mr. Cowl gives an interesting account of the rise of regional literature, as it has been described, and shows its characteristics and its value especially for the young, by bringing literature into relation with familiar scenes and objects. The three volumes already issued are *Yorkshire in Prose and Verse* by G. F. Wilson, *Derbyshire in Prose and Verse* by Thomas Moulton, and *Lanarkshire in Prose and Verse* by Hugh Quigley. In each case the selection of passages represents a wide range of interests and the introductions bring out with clearness the respective characteristics of the contribution of each district to our literature. The volumes are well printed and well bound and should prove attractive to wide circles of readers.