

Pride, Prejudice or Principle

THE REV. J. E. FISON, M.A.

I

IN this time of war many people find their habits altered by force of circumstances. In reading, it is doubtful if anyone is sticking just to his peace-time routine.

Is not this an opportunity for getting to grips with the really great Christian classics, and for doing away with the potted second-hand devotional and theological summaries of other people's views? I believe we all agree with this in our Bible reading. Those who are at all interested in the Bible want to read it itself and not merely books about it. There is a real desire to get to grips with the Word of God Himself.

Is there the same desire to grapple with the great Christian classics outside the Bible? Are "Catholics" really grappling with Thomas Aquinas? Some are. Are Evangelicals really getting to know at first hand the Fathers and the great Reformers? I can only speak for myself. I have felt the need of doing this and to some extent have discovered recently the joy of undertaking a far too long deferred duty. Let us tap the springs of life. And let us examine our great inheritance at first hand.

And it is here of the utmost importance that we should know not only the great authorities of our own tradition, but also the great authorities to which others refer when they oppose us. Is it any exaggeration to say that, apart from John Oman, the only living Protestant theology of to-day is the work of Barth and Brunner, or work influenced by them? The reason of this is twofold: (1) Barth and Brunner have really grappled with the Bible and taken its revelation seriously. (2) Barth and Brunner really know the early Fathers and St. Thomas Aquinas as well as the great Reformers, Luther and Calvin. One great consequence of this is that the Church of Rome really takes them seriously: it realizes their strength a great deal more clearly than many Protestants do.

Now if Karl Barth at Basle, within sound of the guns as long as France was fighting, can go on with his great Dogmatic Theology, cannot we Evangelicals in this country dig the deep springs of life again? Can we in time of war afford time on miserable second-hand "Theologies without Tears"?

II

As a practical illustration of this may I give my own experience? I have recently read right through for the first time the *Letters of Ignatius*, Bishop of Antioch at the close of the first century, and almost certainly martyred at Rome during the reign of Trajan. Now Ignatius may not be one of the greatest Church Fathers, but he is one of the earliest, and in the allegorical or platitudinous sub-apostolic writings his work (with perhaps the Didache) stands out as definite, bold and original. Opinions vary about him enormously. But his letters were written to the main Christian Churches of Asia Minor as well as to the Church of Rome. They were written by a man who was Bishop of Antioch within fifty years of St. Paul's first Missionary Journey. They were written by a contemporary of Polycarp, and by one who, like him, must have overlapped St. John. Polycarp writes of these letters that they 'contain faith, patience, and all the edification which pertains to our Lord.' And the Churches concerned preserved them: a fact which proves that they had a high regard for them and their author.

In view of all these facts these letters should be taken seriously by Evangelicals, even though they may not like their teaching. Therefore I propose to summarize what Ignatius says on the more controversial questions which are still with us to-day—very well-known passages, often bandied about in controversy, but all too seldom read in their living context.

First as to the Episcopate and the Ministry, Ignatius is very emphatic. He says: "It is written, 'God resisteth the proud': let us then be careful not to oppose the bishop that we may be subject to God," and again, "it is clear that we must regard the bishop as the Lord himself"; and again, "let all respect the deacons as Jesus Christ, even as the bishop is also a type of the Father, and the presbyters as the council

of God and the college of Apostles. Without these the name of 'Church' is not given."

Then as to the Church and the Eucharist, he says: "Let no man be deceived: unless a man be within the sanctuary (thusiasterion) he lacks the bread of God." And again he speaks of those who are "inseparable from God, from Jesus Christ, and from the bishop and the ordinances of the Apostles. He who is within the sanctuary is pure, but he who is without the sanctuary is not pure: that is to say, whoever does anything apart from the bishops and the presbyters and the deacons is not pure in his conscience." In a passage, which may be compared and contrasted with Ephesians iv. 4-6, he writes: "Be careful therefore to use one Eucharist for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ and one cup for union with his blood, one altar (thusiasterion) as there is one bishop with the presbytery and the deacons my fellow servants." And finally, "Let no one do any of the things appertaining to the Church without the bishops. Let that be considered a valid Eucharist which is celebrated by the bishop or by one whom he appoints. Wherever the bishop appears let the congregation be present: just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. It is not lawful either to baptize or to hold an 'agape' without the bishop." "... Obey the bishop and the presbytery with an undisturbed mind, breaking one bread, which is the medicine of immortality, the antidote that we should not die, but live for ever in Jesus Christ."

III

These are strong "Catholic" statements, though it would be utterly false on any view to read back into first century words twentieth century meanings. One view is that they mark the beginning of "Catholic apostasy." It is possible that the writing called the Didache comes from Syria and from the same time as Ignatius, and, if so, it may represent a Primitive Evangelicalism which was stamped out by a monarchic Episcopate. In writing to Smyrna, Ignatius tells the members of that church that they "ought to appoint for the honour of God a delegate of God to go to Syria and congratulate them (i.e. the Syrian Church) that

they have gained place and have recovered their proper greatness and that their proper constitution has been restored." Does this refer to the suppression of the evangelical liberty and freedom and variety of church order which some find in the Didache? It is possible. But this is A.D. 100, not A.D. 325 or A.D. 451. This is not the squabbling political hair-splitting of the later Greek theologians. Ignatius was alive when St. John was alive. His letter to Ephesus must have been read to a church which knew St. John personally. Is it not possible that on the greatest problems of Protestant and Catholic controversy we need to remember Charles Simeon's words: "The truth is not in the middle and not in one extreme but in both extremes. . . . So that if extremes please you, I am your man: only remember that it is not one extreme we are to go to but both extremes"? This quotation was followed in the *Record* of October 4th by another, even more striking, "I should be cautious of making up my mind strongly on anything that is not clearly defined in Holy Scripture. Nothing is easier than to lay down an apparently good principle and to err in following it. Many think the opposite to right must be wrong; but the opposite to right may be right. . . . I know I may be called inconsistent and unstable, and be represented as conceding too much to the opinions and prejudices of men. But I should account it a small matter to be judged of man's judgment, if only I approved myself to God and to my own conscience. . . . The human mind is very fond of fetters, and is apt to forge them for itself."

Simeon would be the last person to deny the reality of the differences among Christians. No one could accuse him of compromising Evangelical truth. His words might well make us pause before we easily argue that our old controversies still have reality to-day. Battle fronts change. And human sin often makes us conceal the real points of difference behind the traditional positions. Let us dig the springs of life again—first in the Bible, then in the great Church Fathers of the Early Church and of the Reformation, and finally in a frank and open-minded facing-up to God as He speaks to-day in unexpected places and through unexpected people. The wind still only "blows where it lists." Jerusalem never expected that wind to blow from Galilee and when its power could no longer be denied, it

committed the unforgivable sin of denying its goodness. Let us take warning and not be afraid to "launch out into the deep," remembering that in the storm—and we are all in the storm now—there is a safety on the ocean which will never be found by hugging the shore. "Go to it," evangelicals, for God's sake, for "only when the ship is in motion does the helm guide." It is one of Ignatius' greatest words which says: "He who has the word of Jesus for a true possession can also hear His silence."

(Quotations from Ignatius are from the Loeb Translation.)

THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD :

Church and Society in England from 1800. Vol. III.

By *M. B. Reckitt*. (George Allen & Unwin) 7s. 6d.

We have here a book "not intended for scholars in the more restricted sense of that term, but for those who have not the leisure or the opportunity to devote much time to the reading of standard works upon the subject." The author traces historically the attitude of the Church to social problems from the time when Evangelicals and others alike as a whole would have little concern with what are termed social evils to the Oxford Conference on "Church, Community and State," and the present day. One of the most heartening things that the ordinary reader will find in it is the effect that this altered view-point has had on the attitude of the working classes to the Church, alienated seriously by the latter's assumption of indifference. In this connection Mr. Reckitt instances the courageous appeal of Archbishop Davidson for the use of conciliation in the General Strike of 1926. In his opinion, "The Church of England came nearer at this moment to popularity with the labouring classes than at any time since the Reformation." In this respect it is a heartening narrative that is told, as is the growing recognition of the need for united action by the Christian bodies in this country, in these as in other questions, if any result is to be obtained. The story is as absorbing as it is vital, and, as told, an intensely interesting one. Theological difficulties are not shirked. It only remains to add that the book is necessarily well documented and the author's comment throughout is sane. It has a bibliography at the conclusion of each chapter, and an epilogue on the contemporary situation and its problems in which are included totalitarianism and pacifism, but, perhaps wisely, not capitalism. It is just the book needed to give a right perspective to those problems, and that within the compass of 250 pages.

L. J. M.