

The Evangelical Tradition— What We Believe About The Church.

BY THE REV. R. S. DEAN, B.D.

THE Evangelical teaching about the Church is based upon the authorised teaching found in the formularies and liturgy of the Church of England, which from the time of the Reformation have themselves been rooted in Holy Scripture as the sole seat of authority. Article XIX reads thus: "The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same." That statement plainly asserts the primacy of Faith over Order, and significantly places the preaching of the Word before the administering of the Sacraments, a fact which is further emphasised in the Prayer for the Church Militant which speaks of Word and Sacraments in precisely that order. Its importance for any doctrine of the nature of the Church is plain, for such phrases as above quoted insist that the Sacraments have validity only in consequence of the Word preached, that is to say, they are not bare sacraments, but Sacraments of the Gospel bearing fruit, according to the New Testament, only in the lives of those who have accepted the Word, i.e., those who have manifested the faith that gives the Sacraments their relevance and their meaning according to the purpose of Christ in initiating both Sacraments for the use and acceptance of believers.

The second Post-Communion prayer is consonant with the stress laid by the Article on faith as a basic note of the Church when it says; "that we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of Thy Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people."

It is not too much to claim that in these brief notes from the formularies and liturgy of the Church we have the germ of the whole doctrine of the Church as we find it in the pages of Holy Scripture.

Any such review, however brief, must take the Old Testament into serious account, for in this as in all else, to commence with the New Testament is to be like a surveyor disregarding the foundations of the house when he is asked to report on its condition, as well as to set aside the consistent practice of Our Lord Himself. The doctrine makes its initial individual appearance in the call of faithful Abraham and finds its first corporate expression in the book of Exodus in words which are formulative for all later development. "Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people; for all the earth is mine: and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation."¹

That is to say, Israel was to stand in a special relationship with Jehovah which was covenantal and not of nature, and which was called into being by God and not attained unto by the people. The

emphasis even there is on Faith and Obedience and it was a covenant into which, in a very real sense, all the people were active participants in such a way as to be called a "kingdom of priests." As we know, this office of priesthood could not in the nature of things be performed by every one of the kingdom of priests, and so it came about that one tribe was set aside for the observance and performance of the priestly functions; but the priestly tribe held this relation to God only as the representatives of the whole nation, and it was therefore as delegates of the people that they offered sacrifice and made atonement. In the words of Bishop Lightfoot; "When the sons of Levi are set apart, their consecration is distinctly stated to be due under the divine guidance not to any inherent sanctity or to any caste privilege, but to an act of delegation on the part of the entire people. The Levites are, so to speak, ordained by the whole congregation. 'The children of Israel,' it is said, 'shall put their hands upon the Levites.' (Numbers viii. 10). The nation thus deposes to a single tribe the priestly functions which belong properly to itself as a whole."²

From then onwards the history of Israel as an 'ecclesia' is vastly interesting and highly significant from our present point of view. For while under the terms of the covenant, the whole people continued in a specified relationship to God, it became for the great majority one of outward form rather than of inward loyalty, and it is not long before we see the beginnings of the doctrine of the Remnant which was to play a tremendous part in the nation's history and materially influence the New Testament writers in their portrayal of the nature of the Church. As soon as prosperity waned in Israel, inevitably it needed more and more loyalty and sense of obedience to respond to God in the face of calamities, and equally inevitably the number of people who attained that loyalty decreased. The covenant relationship with the demands it made on faith and allegiance ceases to be the ideal for the nation, and becomes an ideal for a faithful few within the nation whose covenantal position then depends not so much on their biological status as Israelites as on their inward heart and motive. Thus we read in the context of Elijah's conflict with Baalism on Carmel; ". . . yet will I leave me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him."³

This is the beginning of the Remnant, the 'pious kernel' as Dr. Skinner calls them, the Israel within Israel, to whom belongs the promise of the future. That represents a tremendous advance on the original ideal, for while membership in the nation—and therefore into the covenant—came by accident of birth, in the Remnant it is a matter of deliberate choice by the individual—a new relationship which could not be entered into by any other means.

That is plain in what eventually followed. The promulgation of the Deuteronomic law in 621 B.C. by Josiah was in brief a serious attempt to bring the people of Judah as a whole under the obligations and privileges of the Remnant. The conceptions and aims of that book are thoroughly prophetic, for it seeks to realise the hoped-for Kingdom of God as promised by the prophets, and in terms of which Israel is to become a holy people governed by the will of God. But it attempts to do this by external means and that is the secret of its

failure, as Jeremiah very speedily saw and which led him, under God, to enunciate the New Covenant ⁴ of which inwardness is the keynote.

The Deuteronomic reform sought to bring about by legislation and ordinance what could only be achieved by deliberate and personal choice. In a word, it is an attempt to make a Church by external order rather than by the response of conscious and inward and voluntary faith.

Time and time again did that happen in the history of Israel, notably in the period of Haggai and Zechariah and of Ezra and Nehemiah, and it emerges against the background of the New Testament in the Pharisees who were a body of men more favourably to be regarded than is customary, and who yet failed because of the self-same-thing—by striving to secure by ordinance which affected the externals of life, that which could only come about by an inward and responsive allegiance of heart and soul. The conflict between faith and order together with all that is implied therein is rooted in the pages of the Old Testament, and we shall have shown ourselves to be but poor students of history if in our own day and age we do not learn the lessons so plainly set forth there. Faith and Order must both be found in any doctrine of the Church, but the primacy of faith and the chaos which results if the order is reversed is a warning plainly and terribly written in the Old Testament. As we leave its pages we can write over them the words of the XIXth Article of Religion, substituting only 'Israel' for 'The visible Church.' . . . "The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of *faithful men*."

When we begin to look at the New Testament we are not surprised to find that it is the same viewpoint which undeniably greets us, and which equally forbids us to allow the equation of Faith with Order. The references to the Church in the Gospels by name are few, in fact the word is mentioned twice therein, and in one of them it has its reference more properly to the synagogue than to the ecclesia. The sole effective reference therefore is that contained in the word of our Lord addressed to Peter at Caesarea Philippi consequent upon Peter's confession, by revelation, of the Lordship of Christ. "Now when Jesus came into the parts of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, Who do men say that the Son of Man is? And they said, Some say John the Baptist; some, Elijah: and others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. He saith unto them, But who say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon bar-Jonah: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee but My Father which is in Heaven. And I also say unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." ⁵ From this it is plain beyond doubt that what allowed the divine organism to be founded in the world of men was the human response on the part of Peter. The foundation of the Church was based on and brought forth in historic time by a confession of faith, which is a deliberate endorsement by Our Lord Jesus Christ of the whole tenor of the teaching of the Old Testament on this subject, *i.e.*, that Faith and not Order, inward and spiritual loyalty and not external ordinance and regulation is of the 'esse' of the Church. It is noteworthy in passing, that it is

St. Peter himself who in his first epistle uses the same metaphor of the rock and says to the elect ; " Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ . . . for you therefore which believe is the honour." ⁶ Both the inwardness of the faith and the historical continuity with the Remnant in the Old Testament are unmistakable and amply justify the words of Dr. Streeter ; " The first Christians did not regard themselves as a new society, but as the ancient ' People of God,' that is, that portion of the Church of the Patriarchs and Prophets which had not, by rejecting the Messiah, forfeited its birthright and cut itself off from the ' promises of Israel,' " ⁷ and again, " Theoretically Christians were the ' new Israel ;' and members of a ' nation ' scattered amid other peoples have a natural tendency to cohere with one another without the assistance of any external organisation. Hence the precise method of organisation would seem relatively unimportant. Membership of the Ecclesia, the ' congregation of Israel,' was the important thing ; and all who were baptised in the name of the Lord were *ipso facto* members of the ' remnant,' however it might locally be organised." ⁸

A consideration of the references in the Acts of the Apostles is patent of the same result ; after Peter's Pentecostal sermon about 3000 souls were added to the original company of 120 and later by reason of the witness of this body we read ; " The Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved," ⁹ so that here too the word ' Church ' is given to those who had come to the point of allegiance to Christ. Certainly we must add that they " continued daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house " ¹⁰ which implies at least some kind of order, but it is plain that here ' Order ' is not a synonym of ' Faith ' but a consequence of it.

It is in the Acts that we begin to see the use of the term ' Church ' in two senses, first in a universal sense which corresponds with the idea of the Faithful Remnant, and then of the company of such believers in a particular locality, but it is always the first usage which is stressed as primary. Thus St. Paul in his charge to the Ephesian elders says ; " Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, in the which the Holy Ghost hath made you bishops, to feed the Church of God, which He purchased with His own blood." ¹¹

These men here called bishops, *i.e.*, ' overseers '—(ἐπίσκοποι) were appointed by St. Paul (whose own office was derived immediately from God and not mediately through any man) to serve the church in Ephesus, yet at the same time their responsibility was not to the church of Ephesus as locally conceived, but to the Church of God. Hugh Martin quotes P. T. Forsyth as saying ; " The local church was the outcrop there of the total and continuous Church, one everywhere." ¹² It is in his desire to give full weight to this conception that the author of I Clement runs the risk of pedantry when he says : " The Church of God which sojourns in Rome greets the Church of God which sojourns in Corinth." It is plain that the sum of Christians everywhere, on earth and beyond, is the Church in the primary meaning of the word both in the New Testament and in sub-Apostolic days. It is not a federation of local congregations for in

the New Testament there are not many churches, but the one Church in many places. The local congregation is the local expression of the one great universal community in heaven and on earth.

Moreover it was evidently possible for a member of the local congregation not to be in fact a member of the Church of God and this possibility has never disappeared, though on the other hand we find in the New Testament no traces of that essentially modern phenomenon—a Christian with no local church membership. That is made clear in the Epistles not only in references too many to collate but also in their general trend and presuppositions. St. Paul can speak of the Church in such terms as these; "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave Himself up for it; that He might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word, that He might present the Church to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish." ¹³ Yet at the same time he can write in condemnatory fashion to the church which is in Corinth deploring its schisms and passing stern judgment on its erring members and he can say to the church in Galatia; "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you?" ¹⁴

When therefore we speak of the Church we are departing both from the spirit and the letter of the New Testament if we think merely of local expression or of denomination. The local church is not of necessity in all its members part of the Church of God having neither spot or wrinkle—in other words, organization is not the synonym of inward loyalty to the Head.

If we had asked the apostle the question "Are the churches of the Methodists and the Presbyterians churches in the same sense as the Church of England?" St. Paul would have found the answer very easy, and it would have been an unequivocal "yes," and it is gratuitous to assume that an extended reply from the apostle would have been wholly in favour of the Anglican. They all are churches but none may lay claim to being The Church for the constitutive fact for membership therein is allegiance to the Head, which prerogative is tied to no denomination.

That leads us on naturally to the subject of church organisation and we shall find little if anything specific on that subject in the New Testament, for the interest of the writers lies elsewhere. Hugh Martin quotes the saying of Dr. Carnegie Simpson about his book "The Evangelical Church Catholic" where he says he is concerned "with spiritual biology, not ecclesiastical anatomy." The same might be said of the New Testament writers. Organisation there must be, and must always have been, but it is the *expression* of the life of the Church and not the creator of it. It is significant that it is Ignatius who first uses the term "Catholic Church." We all know he insisted upon episcopacy to an almost fanatical extent, yet when he writes to the Smyrnans and first uses the word "Catholic" he does not say "where-ever the bishop is," but "where-ever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church." The Augsburg Confession of 1540 would seem to be in the nature of commentary both on what Ignatius said and on what he might have been expected to say when it declares;

“ The Church *has* an organisation, but it is the congregation of those who believe and obey Christ. ”

The Church is therefore a divine creation. It is ‘ given ’ for its highest title is the Body of Christ. It is not made by likeminded men coming together to create a convenient organisation for the furtherance of common interests or denominational predilections, though we might add that such is very often the popular conception of the folk outside the Church—a conception for which we must ourselves bear much of the blame. In “ The Church and its function in Society ” Dr. Visser ‘ t Hooft quotes a definition of the Church which he says was once offered in the House of Commons ; “ A voluntary association for providing religious services on Sunday for that section of the population which chooses to take advantage of them. ” Against that we say with the New Testament that God’s love creates the Church and brings it into being, yet there is a Church only when men and women respond to the call of God in faith and obedience. Only when Peter says “ Thou art the Christ, ” can the Lord say “ Upon this rock I will build My Church. ” It is the acknowledgment of the Lordship of Christ with all that it implies that is constitutive of the Church.

Now if that is so, we have the right to expect within the pages of the New Testament some genesis at least of organisation, if any particular conception is of the *esse* of the Church—but we find none. To be sure, it is claimed by some that our own threefold ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons existed in the mind of Christ, but the onus is on the shoulders of the sponsors of such an idea to show their evidence, for it is surely a wondrous combination of wishful thinking and of reading history backwards. In an essay of this dimension it is not possible to give the matter of organisation the attention it deserves, but at least it can be said that the dictum of Dr. Hort has never been refuted on any adequate grounds. He says categorically ; “ There is no trace in Scripture of a formal commission of government by Christ Himself. ”¹⁵ This downright statement has been very vaguely criticised as one of “ those subtle super-refinements which occasionally detract from the value of Dr. Hort’s work ” but support in the shape of evidence for the criticism is lacking. Some support is sometimes claimed on the basis of the isolated text “ that ye may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel ”¹⁶ together with its Matthean parallel, but in the words of Dr. Newton Flew ; “ as it stands it does not convey a formal commission of authority for government. ”¹⁷ He adds a footnote concerning the criticism directed to Dr. Headlam for neglecting this saying in his Bampton Lectures on “ The Doctrine of the Church and Christian Reunion ” and notes the bishop’s reply ; “ On the one side I pointed out that in no case is authority given specifically to the Apostles or to the Twelve as such—it is given to the disciples ; on the other hand that warnings are given specifically to the Twelve against the assumption of anything in the nature of authority. ”

That, of course, is plain from the pages of the Gospels and there is nothing in other New Testament writings to show that any such authority was taken to themselves by the Twelve. Thus Dr. Flew

says ; " They made no attempt, so far as our knowledge goes, to ' exercise lordship ' over the community. But they certainly exercised ' an ill-defined but lofty authority in matters of administration and government ' and this was directly due to the moral authority with which they were clothed by the commission given to them by Christ to be His witnesses. It is only in the Church in Judæa that we have clear evidence of their leadership in administration. How far was the authority of the Twelve acknowledged in the communities beyond? . . . What would have happened if the Jerusalem leaders had refused to recognise Paul? " ¹⁸ " The answer can scarcely be in doubt, he who had received from God Himself both his Gospel and his commission to preach it was not likely now to disobey God at the dictates of man. . . . Fortunately the " authorities " dealt more wisely with Paul than their successors dealt with Luther and Wesley " ¹⁹

Now if there is no trace of commission of government and organisation committed to the Twelve where else can we reasonably expect to find it? The truth is surely that we cannot find it at all. The society of faithful men which Jesus founded did in fact grow and develop into the Christian Church but He left it to organise itself, and history plainly shows that its forms of organisation have varied greatly, and did in fact so vary not only in different places in the days of the Early Church but also in the same place from time to time. Bishop Headlam points out that if the Lord had definitely ordered the shape of the Church it " would have become stereotyped, and, as society became different, the world would have been under the rule of a dead hand. But there is no dead hand in the Christian Church, there is only a living Christ. "

Organisation there must be, and must always have been, but the crux must be found where the first Christians found it—in the Living Christ. The report on Doctrine in the Church of England says in this connection ; " Some such forms are essential for the perpetuation of the Christian society in the process of history, though at the same time no one particular system of such forms is to be taken as being of necessity constitutive of the fundamental idea of the Church. That idea . . . hinges essentially upon the unity of mankind as redeemed in Christ, and as in Him finding fellowship with the Father and thereby also with one another. " ²⁰ That has the obvious sanction of the New Testament for the lists of offices given by St. Paul indicate some kind of permanent ministry and organisation, but we notice that the stress is laid on the giver of the offices rather than on the offices themselves. So we read ; " And God hath set some in the Church, first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helps, governments, divers kinds of tongues, " ²¹ and again ; " And He gave some to be apostles ; and some, prophets ; and some, evangelists ; and some, pastors and teachers ; for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ. " ²² The highly significant thing is that both these lists are mentioned in the closest possible conjunction with the Holy Spirit, and further, that the offices are defined by their functions. The manifestation of the Spirit shown by a man in any of the ways indicated made him a prophet or a teacher, etc. ; it was not the conferring of the *Office* upon him that made

him capable of the *Function*; the order is the Spirit, the man, the office, rather than the office, the man, the Spirit. We cannot find any basis of a quasi-material transmission of the gifts from any organisation or its representatives, since those gifts in the very nature of things flow only from the Spirit Himself. Consequently the basic fact is the Spirit's choice of a man, which view is endorsed by the Ordinal of the Church of England when the first question it asks of the deacon is ; " Do you trust that you are inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost to take upon you this office and ministration, to serve God, for the promoting of His glory, and the edifying of His people ? " while the first question addressed to the priest is similar ; " Do you think in your heart, that you be truly called, according to the will of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Order of this Church of England, to the Order and Ministry of Priesthood ? "

The call of the Spirit is primary above all, and as it was so powerfully felt in the earliest days of the Church, and manifested itself in so many different ways, we are guilty of the most abominable spiritual pride if we refuse to recognise as the fruit of the Spirit *now*, those ministries in the days of the Early Church which today would be called Presbyterian, Congregational, Independent, etc. Space forbids the development of the various ways in which the Church in different parts did in fact organise itself, and the reader must be referred to the whole substance of Dr. Streeter's " The Primitive Church, " a book the argument of which seems never to have been adequately refuted, and to take this general quotation from it ; " For four hundred years theologians of rival churches have armed themselves to battle on the question of the Primitive Church. However great their reverence for scientific truth and historic fact, they have at least *hoped* that the result of their investigations would be to vindicate Apostolic authority for the type of Church Order to which they were themselves attached. The Episcopalian has sought to find episcopacy, the Presbyterian presbyterianism, and the Independent a system of independency, to be the form of Church government in New Testament times. But while each party to the dispute has been able to make out a case for his own view, he has never succeeded in demolishing the case of his opponent. The explanation of this deadlock, I have come to believe, is quite simple. It is the uncriticised assumption, made by all parties to the controversy, that in the first century there existed a single type of Church Order. Approach the evidence without making that assumption and two conclusions come into sight : (1) In the New Testament itself there can be traced an evolution in Church Order, comparable to the development in theological reflection detected by the scholarship of the last century.

(2) The most natural interpretation of the other evidence is that, at the end of the first century A.D. there existed, in different provinces of the Roman Empire, different systems of Church government. Among these, the Episcopalian, the Presbyterian, and the Independent can each discover the prototype of the system to which he himself adheres." ²³

As we know, by the middle of the second century episcopacy seemed to have been in general use throughout Christendom, and the evidence suggests that it was thus arrived at as being the most convenient

method of Church Government calculated to give united testimony to the Faith, as a bulwark against the inroads of heresy and error, and to witness to the assured continuity of the Faith. It was thus called into being by circumstances and emergencies, it never was of the 'esse' of the Church, but it became the means of the 'bene esse.' It emerged as a satisfactory and workable method in the face of schism from within and persecution from without the Church, and it found its personnel not from the apostles by localisation but from the presbyterate by elevation. The bishop thus became (and still is), not an apostle writ small but a presbyter writ large. It is interesting to note that the most fanatical reverence for the episcopacy comes not so much from the accredited Fathers of the Church as from the heretical writings which abounded in the sub-apostolic period not less than they do now, and particularly in the Clementine Romances, where among other things St. Peter, as he moves from place to place, ordains bishops everywhere as though this were the crowning act of his missionary labours, but if we are forced to find our history and our roots therein we are in sorry plight indeed.

The whole question of Church and Ministry with its attendant themes of Order and Validity are burning topics today, and have been thrust before our minds with an insistence which cannot be ignored by events in South India and the amazing variety of opinion which the proposed scheme of Union has evoked. Yet it will have an effect far beyond the confines of India, and is the beginning of an expression of deeply-felt tragedy by countless Christian people, at the disunity and weakness by lack of cohesion which so hampers the work and witness of all who own the Lordship of Christ. The purpose of this article is to attempt in some measure to distinguish between the essence of the Holy Catholic Church and what have well been called its 'glosses.' The essential questions at stake are ; do we equate Faith with Order ? Are we to make organisation synonymous with inspiration ? Are we to dictate to the Holy Spirit the terms on which we will accept His pleading to be allowed to make us at one ?

The following words were written in another context but they are equally relevant here ; " We have the promise that the Holy Spirit will lead us to all truth. But if we never come to grips with any issue, because we never dare to risk mistakes in action, we reveal nothing save lack of faith in Him who made that promise. We are to act in fulness of love, not of knowledge. We shall never have full knowledge of anything under the sun. We know in part, and we therefore act by faith. We can bind together the living present and the living past, but we cannot bind the future. It seems from our present hesitancy that we would bind that, too, before we declare ourselves. Must we have a guarantee from God that our present institutions and ecclesiastical systems suffer no drastic change, before we create any new situation by action ? " ²⁴

Is it not plain that the crying need of the whole Church today is not to imitate the forms of the Primitive Church, but by the grace of God to capture its spirit ? Order there must be, but what is order without the Spirit ?—and where the Spirit is, and there alone, is liberty. The Lord prayed that His Church might be one ; so long as we are not one, we are not merely improvident but sinful ; we are not merely un-

