

AUTHORITY AND INFALLIBILITY.

THE Christian Church has passed through many periods of controversy, but it is doubtful if any controversy which has arisen in her midst was more anxious or more vital than that which divided Christian from Christian in the days of St. Paul. As we review the circumstances we find it hard, indeed, to take much interest in the question at issue, for it seems to be one to which the answer was quite plain. Is circumcision an essential preliminary for one who would share the graces and the hopes of the Christian Gospel? The question seems absurd to us who look back from the vantage ground of history. Certainly, we say, St. Paul was right and his opponents were narrow-minded persons whose bigotry would have made of Christianity a mere sect of Judaism. For his largeheartedness we give God thanks, while we wonder that any Christian could ever have been found so unconscious of the implications of his creed as to imagine that this Jewish ordinance was of perpetual and universal obligation.

And yet the problem was not so simple. In the decision of the practical question of circumcision a great principle seemed to be at stake—a principle so momentous that we need not be surprised at the hesitation which was felt in its adoption. For St. Paul's opponents urged that the licence which he was willing to concede was inconsistent with the plainest teaching of their inspired Scripture. "Do you really propose—we can hear them asking the question—to repeal the ordinance which is the centre of the law? This is to make little of the Scripture, which *cannot be broken*. The enactment is quite clear. *He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised, and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. The uncircumcised male . . . shall be cut*

*off from his people.*<sup>1</sup> To discredit this is to despise the sacred law. What security have we for the permanent value of other Scriptures if this is to be disregarded? To refuse to be bound by this enactment is to undermine the authority of the books in which it has pleased God that His will should be revealed." And yet this reasoning was not accepted by the Church. St. Paul in opposing it was but following the teaching of his Master, who bade men look for the principles underlying the precepts of the Old Testament and find in them the permanent and essential truths of revelation. This was really to fulfil the law, although it seemed to destroy it. And St. Paul prevailed, and the freedom of the gospel was asserted once for all. Nor were the forebodings of the prophets of evil verified. They were wrong, for the authority of the Old Testament remained unimpaired; and by this sore controversy the Christian Church learnt something of the true purpose and place of that authority.

History does not repeat itself, although the proverb says so; but as human nature remains the same, the same questions as to the meaning of authority, the binding force of tradition, the relation between authority and infallibility continually recur. And it is worth our while to observe how these questions presented themselves many centuries afterwards at the great awakening of Europe in the sixteenth century. For, at the Reformation the objections which were urged against a breach with the Papacy were not altogether dissimilar to the objections which St. Paul's opponents presented to his policy of faith and courage.

The situation of any thoughtful and pious Christian at the beginning of the Reformation struggle was a difficult one. On the one hand the dawn of the new learning was illuminating the mind of Europe. Not only science, but literature also was revealing its treasures to those who had

<sup>1</sup> Gen. xvii. 13, 14.

eyes to see. The art of printing made it possible for the first time in history for knowledge to be diffused widely ; books were brought within the reach of simple and learned alike. For a religious man to neglect the new light that was being shed from every quarter upon the great topics of religion—God and the world and the soul and their relations one to the other—was to be a traitor to the truth. And yet this new knowledge was hard to co-ordinate with the scholastic traditions upon which former generations had been nourished. It became clearer every day that the teaching of the mediæval Church about matters of science and history was not consistent with what the learned men of the day were expounding to the world. Which was an honest man to choose? For the Church with whose instruction all his most sacred memories were associated met him with her *Anathema sit*. He had been taught that she was practically infallible; and he *knew* that in her bosom he had found rest, that in her ordinances he had received the grace of Christ, that in her guidance he had found his truest safety. There was much, indeed, in her practice which he could not reconcile to his conscience, as there was much in her teaching which he could no longer believe. And yet was she not, after all, the instrument chosen by God, for the recovery of the world from sin? Was she not, despite her mistakes and her shortcomings, the one witness for Jesus Christ? It was a great dilemma, and we cannot wonder that men's hearts failed them for fear, and for the things which were coming upon the earth.

Again, we look back from the vantage point of time, and we see that the difficulty which proved too much for many earnest souls was not unlike the difficulty which was felt by the Pharisees of St. Paul's time. They identified the authority of the Church with her infallibility. They feared that they could not retain the distinctive graces and hopes

of the Christian faith if they admitted any modification of the traditions with which it had been surrounded in the lapse of years. The Church which they had trusted as infallible stood to them for Christianity itself. They could not admit that she had ever been mistaken, or that any of her ordinances were only of temporary value, without losing their confidence in the eternal truths of which she had been the minister.

And to the present moment, the most effective argument which Rome offers in support of her imperious claims is exactly this. If you abandon me, you abandon Christianity. There is no *via media*. Either the Church is God's infallible minister or else there is no voice which can speak with authority upon the mysteries of human life. No other section of Christendom claims infallibility, and you cannot have authority without it. This is no imaginary picture. It is by this process of thought that in fact men are led at times to seek a refuge from intellectual perplexity in the subordination of their reason to this imperious and intolerant mistress. And the root of their mistake—the cause of their misfortune—is the confusion of authority with infallibility. They make the same blunder which the Pharisees of Jerusalem made, and the answer which we give them must still be the answer of St. Paul; “Do we then destroy the law? Nay we establish it.” We place the authority of the Church upon a firmer, because a truer, basis, when we admit that, like all other teachers, she may make mistakes.

For it is no principle of the Reformation to despise authority. No society of men, whether political or religious, can continue without the recognition of authority in some form. To put it on the lowest ground, the Church's authority in matters of doctrine is the authority which attaches itself to the formulated verdicts of the Christian consciousness reflecting devoutly on the revelation which

God has given us in Christ. To try to start afresh for ourselves, as if no one had ever heard of the gospel before us, is to throw away the garnered wisdom of the ages. It is to disregard the spiritual experience of the best and saintliest of our race for 1800 years. To pass by as of no interest for us or of no personal application, beliefs which may be truly described as Catholic, that is, as common to every part of Christendom at every time, would be presumptuous folly. The recognition of the Church's ministerial authority to frame her own laws is a dictate of common sense; and it is a dictate of modesty also to treat with respect the doctrinal statements which she has fashioned for herself out of the revelation which she has received, and by the aid of the Spirit which is ever guiding her into the truth. That she is God's authoritative minister to us we must certainly believe; but that she has been endowed with the gift of infallibility at any given moment of history is contradicted by the plainest facts.

But some one may say, "That is not the solution of the Reformation problem. The Reformers certainly rejected the infallible authority of the Church, but they did so because they went back to the infallible authority of the Bible. It was not the distinction between Infallibility and Authority on which they laid stress, but the distinction between the Church and the Bible. And the great service which the Reformers did was to recall men to this primitive fountain of truth, that they might drink of the water of life at its source, before it had been poisoned by the polluted streams which mingled with it in its fertilizing progress." There is a truth in this, and an important truth, but it is not the whole truth. Undoubtedly, there were those among the leaders of the Reformation who wished not only to break the yoke of the Papacy, but to cut themselves off from historical Christianity; there were those among them who scouted the idea of authority in any form, who went so far

as to belittle the Catholic creeds. They were the precursors of modern individualism in their dream that each man was intended by God to work out his creed from the Bible by himself, without human aid, paying no deference to the opinions of the past, yielding no respect to the experience of fifty generations of Christian life. Such individualism is not unknown even among ourselves. One need not stay to indicate its inconsistency with the teaching of St. Paul about the solidarity of mankind and the graces of the Church which is Christ's Body. But what is relevant here to observe is that such individualism was not the avowed principle of the English Reformation, whatever may have been true of Germany. It was not the principle of Cranmer, or Jewel, or Hooker, or Pearson, the masters of our Reformed theology. At the Reformation it was laid down (and which of us would gainsay it?) that ecclesiastical traditions are not of equal authority with what is revealed or recorded in the New Testament; it was urged that the ultimate appeal must be to Scripture as the test of doctrine. This was the Church's charter, and even the ancient creeds derive their binding force from their congruity with it. But it was also maintained that the Church is entrusted with the responsibility of teaching, and that her official teaching has for her members a higher authority than private speculation. She is not infallible—not infallible even in her interpretation of Scripture—but her authority is to be reckoned with, nevertheless. To think otherwise were to deny that she has any mission from above. Undoubtedly, the distinction of the idea of authority from the idea of infallibility is one of the fundamental tenets of the English Reformation.

This point of history has perhaps a useful application to our own perplexities. Once again the foundations of belief are being examined. More particularly is the problem as to the authority of the Bible being anxiously discussed.

And if we are alive to the lessons of the past, if we really wish to be faithful to the example of St. Paul, and to defend the teaching of the Reformation, there are three great principles which we must be ready to maintain.

(1) Traditions must not be allowed to usurp the place of the Bible. Traditions about the Bible itself must not be permitted to supersede its own witness. St. Paul refused to allow prophets of evil to frighten him from this position by their gloomy anticipations of consequence if the fence about the law were removed. It is not too much to say that some at least of the modern traditions about the Bible, to which many good people are sincerely attached, are so far from being corroborated by Scripture that they are contradicted by Scripture when closely examined. Let us go back to the Bible; but—let us remember—that is not necessarily to go back to what our forefathers with their lesser opportunities and fainter light believed about it. To do that may be to make void the word of God through our traditions.

(2) We must recognize that the authority of the Bible is a different conception from its infallibility. The authority of the Old Testament was not destroyed by St. Paul when he refused to submit to its precepts about circumcision; it was not destroyed by our Lord when He declared that its moral teaching was imperfect in certain particulars. Whatever conclusions may be reached about its inerrancy as to science or history (and in truth I do not know why we should suppose that it was meant to teach us either) its authority as a guide to Christ remains unshaken. To rest the authority of those sacred volumes on their absolute inerrancy in every passing historical note or scientific speculation is to incur the gravest kind of responsibility.

(3) And, thirdly, there is one form of authority which no man who has inherited the spirit of the Renaissance and the Reformation can think of discrediting, and that is the

authority of knowledge. Year by year the Church is learning better that she cannot dispense with that title to authority. The day is gone when controversies could be determined by a Bull of excommunication. But if the tyranny of Church Councils or Papal pronouncements is no longer to be feared, there is a danger in a democratic age of the tyranny of popular clamour or of ignorant prejudice. The leaders of the Reformation were the true sons of the Renaissance. They appealed to the verdict of history, to the court of learning; and their appeal won for us our priceless inheritance of orders and freedom. And we are false to the first principles of the Reformation if we appeal to any other court or submit to any other arbiters. There is an authority of ancient tradition—a grave and reverend authority—which we shall not discard lightly, although it be not equal to the authority of Scripture. Scripture has a supreme authority for us who believe it to contain a Divine message for man, although we may not be able to call it infallible in matters outside its sacred province. But we must not be afraid of letting in upon its dark places light from every quarter; and we must have welcome and not reproach, blessing and not cursing, for those who in the Name of Christ are trying to tell us more about it than we knew before. We shall test and try what they bring us; we shall compare it with the first principles of the Church's creeds as well as with the spiritual experience of the Church in every age. But we shall remember that "things true are not always things accustomed" and that loyalty to truth is—must be—loyalty to Christ whose servants we fain would be.

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