

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

ART. II.—THE USE AND MISUSE OF RITUAL IN
CHRISTIAN WORSHIP.

PART III.

THERE is yet another word to be said concerning the use and misuse of Christian ritual.

There are certain facts, obvious and notorious, which, in the light of Christian common-sense, should serve to show us the true place of ritual in the service of the Christian Church, and to point out the danger of its being allowed to take a place which does not belong to it in the energies and exercises of the Church's spiritual life.

The fact can hardly be too strongly emphasized that throughout the whole of the New Testament there is not one word of instruction concerning Christian ritual, not one word of direction as to its use, not one word to encourage its careful cultivation, not one word to indicate that in times to come its elaboration should be diligently aimed at, not one word of rebuke for its neglect, not one word of regret for its absence, or reproach for want of due attention to its details.

The sayings of our blessed Lord which have sometimes been made much of—such as the word concerning the bringing of “the gift to the altar”—are evidently precepts which take their shape and form as adapted to the ritual of the Old Testament then in force—to the service of the Jews, as Jews, in their Temple at Jerusalem.

The injunction of St. Paul that all things should be done “decently and in order” (*εὐσχημόνως καὶ κατὰ τάξιν*—1 Cor. xiv. 40) when appealed to (as it is) for evidence of a ritual precept, testifying to the importance of Christian ceremonial, needs but to be read in connection with its context. It will then be seen clearly how utterly it falls short of reaching any such goal as that for the purpose of which it is quoted. Indeed, the very fact of this text being quoted at all for such a purpose can only be regarded as evidence of the hopelessness of the search for any injunction in the New Testament that really will avail to serve the purpose of those who would fain bring evidence from Scripture for the importance of Church ceremonial.

Equally vain is the appeal to the symbolism of the Apocalypse,¹ in the vision of the worship of heaven, as if this were revealed for a pattern to be followed in the worship of the Church upon earth. Viewed in relation to the marked absence of all ritual observance and ritual instruction in the

¹ See Dr. Rock's “Hierurgia,” p. 188, second edition, and “Lord's Day and the Holy Eucharist,” pp. 53, 56.

writings of the New Testament, it can but serve to give emphasis to the very significant fact that, with such glories set before its *faith*, the Church of the living God—the Church of the New Covenant—has no mandate (as the Church of the Old Covenant had) to fashion a ceremonial service for *sight*, after a pattern shown in the mount.

In the face, then, of this proposition—that, in the sacred Canon of the New Testament Scriptures, with instructions for the future from our blessed Lord Himself, with Apostolic admonitions addressed to bishops and presbyters, with long epistles of doctrine and warning and directions to various Churches, we find nothing but a marked silence as regards Christian ritual—an entire absence of any sort of provision for the ceremonial of the Christian Church—we can hardly fail to be led on to make the inquiry, “How is this to be accounted for?” And all the more—when we mark the contrast with the ordinances of Divine service given to God’s people before—all the more we are constrained to ask, “Why is this?” “Surely,” we say, “some cause for this there must be. How is this very remarkable absence in the writings of the New Testament to be accounted for?”

And when we learn that attempts have been made to account for it by those who maintain the religious importance of Christian ceremonial and the sacred character of the Church’s ritual, and would have us persuaded that in this silence of Scripture there is nothing that militates at all with their high view of the Divine symbolism and the glorious magnificence rightly pertaining to the due celebration of the Christian mysteries, we can hardly do otherwise than inquire with some interested and expectant inquiry, “What are the causes alleged as accounting for the phenomenon we have in view? And are they sufficient to satisfy the demand of Christian common-sense?”

Let us look at them for a few moments, and endeavour fairly to estimate the value of the arguments which can be urged in their favour.

I. We know that during the great forty days before the Ascension, our blessed Lord charged His Apostles to teach the baptized to observe all things whatsoever He had commanded them (Matt. xxviii. 20). And in the Acts of the Apostles we are distinctly told that in the course of this period He was appearing unto His Apostles, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God (Acts i. 3).

“What, then,” it may be asked, “more natural than to suppose that He was then giving instructions to His Apostles concerning the ordering of all things pertaining to the order and discipline, the worship and ritual, as well as the govern-

ment¹ of His Church? And how can we suppose that directions as to the important details of ceremonial were omitted?"

There is much which at first sight is attractive and plausible

¹ Thus, it has been said: "To the faithful it becomes abundantly clear that the order and discipline of the Church, no less than its doctrine, were instituted by Christ Himself—were part of the deposit committed by Him to the Apostles" ("The Lord's Day and the Holy Eucharist," p. 61).

To this theory has sometimes been superadded a strange parasitical conception, according to which the sacred *deposit* committed to the Apostles is viewed as a germ out of which future regulations for the Church were to be developed. Thus, Father Clarke, S.J., writes: "In this passage it [the kingdom of God] has *reference* to the Church on earth. *It informs us* that our Lord instructed His disciples on the nature of the Church which He had come to found on earth, its *constitution*, its *government*, its *discipline*, its Sacraments, and, above all, on the sacred doctrines which it was commissioned to teach mankind. . . . Hence it follows that every dogma that has been defined from then till now is a part of this inviolable and exclusive body of doctrine. Every decree of Councils, every infallible utterance of Popes, is but the *unfolding* of some further portion of this body of doctrine which had *not been previously unfolded*" (quoted from *The News*, March 9, 1900, p. 286). If we understand this aright, we seem driven to the conclusion that the decisions of the Church and of the Pope are not the outcome of *what is or was known* to be contained in the deposit; but that what is contained in the deposit is *to be known* by the decrees of the Church (see Wordsworth on Apocalypse, p. 132). And it follows that the changes in the religion of Western Christianity—so changed from that of Apostolic times—are due to that which was indeed *in* the deposit, but which was *not known* to be in it till a Council or a Pope determined and decreed that so it should be. In the light of Christian common-sense, is not this a specious but very subtle form of teaching for doctrines the commandments of men? How was a similar process in the earlier dispensation dealt with in the Word of the Lord by His prophet? "How do ye say, We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us? But, behold, the false pen of the scribes hath wrought falsely" (Jer. viii. 8, R.V.); or, rather, "Verily, lo! the lying pen of the Scribes hath made it—the law—into a lie." See Dean Payne Smith, *in loc.*, and additional note, pp. 381, 382, in "Speaker's Commentary."

Compare the following: "For this reason, the text cited [1 Cor. xi. 24] is not found to be quoted by the earlier Fathers as proof of the doctrine of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. It remained for the divines of a later age to find in it a strong corroborative proof of the current doctrine of the Church concerning the Blessed Sacrament. Nor is it any argument against this interpretation of the text to say that it is not primitive, since in every word of our Lord is hidden a depth of meaning which is only fully revealed in the course of ages" (Rev. Provost Ball, preaching on Festival of C.B.S. at St. Alban's, Holborn, as reported in *Church Times*, June 12, 1896, p. 687).

How will this theory of the unfolding in the course of ages of hidden truths unknown to Christian antiquity, but now to be held as *de fide*, agree with the teaching of Holy Scripture? How can it be made consistent with a rule of "quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus"? How can it be made to stand beside the truth of the "ONE FAITH" "once for all delivered unto the saints"?

in this plea. But when it is further urged that to admit this is to admit that which makes all written direction superfluous, and therefore sufficiently accounts for the silence of the New Testament Scriptures, we are brought face to face with a very serious difficulty.

We are constrained to ask, Is it in accordance with what we should expect?—much rather, Is it in accordance with what we know of the Divine dealings in relation to man, that important precepts and ordinances to be observed by all as of Divine authority should be, not committed to writing, but simply trusted to a human tradition secretly committed by word of mouth to a select few?

Let this question be examined in the light which may be shed upon it from the history of the Old Testament, and from the sayings of our Lord concerning traditions in the New, and we can hardly believe that the answer will be doubtful.

But the fatal blow to any such claim will be found in this—that the assertion of such a tradition has to meet the opposition of tradition itself. The time *did* come when for certain ritual practices it was claimed that they had their origin in primitive tradition. Now, what was meant by this primitive tradition? The claim which this tradition commonly made was the claim, not of directly Divine precept, not of the ordering of the Saviour Himself, but the claim of simply *Apostolic* authority—the claim of having been ordered by the authority or power committed to the Apostles of Christ.¹

II. And what shall we say, then, of *this* claim? It is the claim which is most strongly insisted on, and it is no novelty of modern Roman invention. The germ of it, at least, must in fairness be acknowledged to be of ancient days. But here, again, in the light of Christian common-sense, we are of necessity called to ask certain questions before allowing ourselves to be led to a definite conclusion.

1. First, we naturally ask how far any evidence for or against this theory may be taken out of Holy Scripture.

And, not to make too much of incidental allusions, it must be acknowledged that, as regards Apostolic practice, there is, to say the least, nothing suggestive of ornate ritual or ceremonial service in what we read of the Apostolic Christians continuing steadfast in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in the breaking of the bread and in prayers.

¹ Not, indeed, without exceptions. Such statements, however, as that of Dionysius Barsalibi, that the Liturgy of St. James, as it existed in the twelfth century, had been received by the Apostle James from the lips of our Lord Himself (see Renandot, "Lit. O. Collectio," tom. ii., p. 74), are scarcely worthy of being taken into serious account.

Shall we think that in those days of the early freshness of joyful Christian faith, when holy men were seen breaking bread from house to house, they took with them wherever they went that which should serve to give outward magnificence and glory to the service of their Eucharists?

But to pass this by, what shall we say of the view which is set before us of the practice in the Corinthian Church, and of the Apostle's method of dealing with its errors?

Not many, I think, will be disposed to maintain that much ritual was in use when the Christians at Corinth met together to receive the Lord's Supper. The Apostle's rebuke was sharp and severe. Can we wonder? They met together, not for the better, but for the worse. They came to eat and to drink. It was a breaking of bread, but the supper was not the Supper of the Lord. The rebuke was severe; but in the word of rebuke there is nothing found of reproach for the absence of ordained or suitable ritual. In the word of correction, is there anything to be found in the way of injunction to add in future some magnificence of ceremonial to their service of memorial? Mark well what it is which the Apostle *does* rebuke, and what it is that he *does* enjoin, and then say—Is it conceivable that this could have been accounted an adequate mode of dealing with the irregularities in the practice of the Corinthian Church, if the desire and purpose of the Apostles had been to surround the Eucharistic service with anything like the ordinances pertaining to the ceremonial law?

On such a hypothesis, some ceremonial details might well indeed have been left to be regulated among the things which the Apostle would "set in order" at his next visit to Corinth. But the injunction of *some* ritual adornments would have been a matter of very urgent and immediate and pressing necessity.

2. But not to press further the Scriptural argument—which, however, is certainly of great weight in the scales of Christian common-sense—let us turn to regard this claim of a traditional ritual handed down from Apostolic ordinance in the light which is shed upon it from tradition itself.

Let it be admitted that in early times certain customs and practices, which may be classed under the broad sense of ritual, and which became prevalent and perhaps Catholic, being not mentioned at all in Holy Scripture, were defended or maintained as having descended by unwritten tradition from the times of the Apostles. In some cases this plea was certainly a mistake; in other cases the claim may well be questioned. But anyhow, as regards this matter of ritual accessories of glory to the Eucharistic Service of the Christian Church, there are some important questions to be asked, the

answers to which may be given by the known facts of history, and by the testimony of tradition itself.

Let us begin with asking, Was anything like the Missal Service of the Church of Rome, with its adjuncts of ceremonial grandeur, known in the Church in its Apostolic and primitive days?

In answer, we may take the witness of ancient Romish liturgical writers, who will tell us when and by whom various parts of the Romish liturgical service were added in the course of ages. But we also receive abundant testimony from history and from tradition as to the simplicity of the Eucharistic Service in the Apostolic days of the Christian Church.

We can take witness, not only from various liturgical writers of lesser note, but from Popes of high esteem, to the tradition that the Apostles were wont to celebrate the Lord's Supper simply by the recitation of the Lord's Prayer.

But, further we can take witness from ancient times. And one of our witnesses shall be one who is relied upon for the claim of ritual customs derived from Apostolic tradition—a witness to the fact that this simplicity of the Church's sacramental services was not to be regarded as a temporary and deplorable accident inseparable from the low estate of the Church in those days, but was to be regarded—as in contrast with the pomps of non-Christian worship—was to be regarded (I say) as that which the Christian Church not only preferred, but accepted, and accepted as that which was most fitting, as *the* suitable accompaniment of Christian Sacraments.

Further still, we can question tradition as to the first beginnings of Christian ritual, and we shall find, in answer, discordant statements. We shall hear witness after witness testifying to different traditions as to the ritual of early times, which can never by any ingenuity be reconciled one with another.¹ Can we believe that these are Apostolical ordinances? We leave it for Christian common-sense to answer the question.

N. DIMOCK.

¹ For evidence of the statements in the text I must be allowed to refer to a recent publication of the National Protestant Church Union entitled "Light from History on Christian Ritual."

(*To be continued.*)

