

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. VII.—THE MONTH.

THE election, confirmation, and enthronement of the new Archbishop of Canterbury have followed his designation with commendable promptitude—a promptitude which is in conspicuous contrast with the unwonted and strange delay in filling up the other important posts in the Church which are vacant. The Archbishop is thus able to meet the opening of Parliament and of Convocation in full possession of his prerogatives, and his best powers will at once be called upon to deal with the problems that are awaiting him. At Canterbury he made two considerable speeches: one at his reception by the Mayor and the civil authorities, the other at the luncheon after his enthronement. Of the former, it is not necessary to say anything; but the latter was worthy of the occasion and of himself, and will confirm the hopes with which his appointment has been received. Its most important passage was a clear indication of the position he holds in relation to the two main parties in the Church. He said that “the Church has at present to steer her course between those—and there are not a few, apparently—who look back to the sixteenth century, and, with strange ignorance of history, strive to make out that everything in the Church of England depends upon that, and those on the other side who, with equal deficiency of historical insight, try to make out that what happened in the sixteenth century was a melancholy interlude, a lamentable blunder in Church life. To neither of those contradictory voices are those present likely to give ready ear, but it is vital to the true life of the Church that her leaders should endeavour to steer her course upon the line which her Master would have her follow.” This has no doubt been correctly understood as an intimation that the Archbishop’s sympathies are with the *via media*, and that his support will be given to the control party in the Church. This is satisfactory in itself, and is what would have been expected in Dr. Davidson. But it may be well to observe that, in his reference to what may be called the Protestant wing of the Church, the Archbishop fails to do justice to one important motive by which its members are inspired. We doubt, indeed, if there are any persons so ignorant as to suppose that “everything in the Church of England depends upon” the sixteenth century. But we are quite sure that a large number of those to whom the Archbishop seems to refer, while they cherish the principles asserted in the sixteenth century, value them chiefly as the reassertion of a venerable and a more ancient ideal. They have historical

knowledge enough to look behind the sixteenth century to the primitive Church, and it is to the truths and the practices of that Church that their deepest allegiance is given. The Protestant party in the English Church are not ignorant of Bishop Jewel's "Apology," and of his bold appeal from the medieval Church to the Church of the first six centuries. To them the true and only test of Catholicity is to be found in the beliefs and practices of the early centuries; and their complaint of the self-styled Catholic party in our Church at the present day is that its tests and symbols of Catholicity are taken from the most uncatholic period of the Church, the period of Roman exclusiveness and obscurantism. The Archbishop will mistake the strength of the Protestant school in the Church unless he recognises that an earnest desire to maintain the principles and practices of the purest ages is what chiefly and ultimately animates them. It was always the pride of English divines, until the last forty years or so, to believe that the sober order of the Church of England, which till then prevailed, was the nearest approach to the simplicity and truth of the primitive Church which had anywhere been seen since those ages themselves. If by steering a middle course the Archbishop's intention is to bring both extremes to unite around that standard, he will find that the great mass of the laity and a large majority of the clergy will heartily and gratefully support him. But a middle course which would mean a compromise between primitive truth and medieval error, would satisfy no one, and would leave the Church as much distracted as it is at the present moment.

It is much to be feared, however, that the most difficult problem with which the Archbishop may have to deal will not be the differences between the High and the Low Church parties, but the growth of a school of opinion which claims a position within the Church of England, and even in the ranks of the clergy, while openly withholding assent from beliefs which are not only plainly asserted in our formularies, but have been regarded by the Church from the earliest ages as essential parts of the Christian Creed. The correspondence columns of even the *Guardian*, in the number which reaches us as we go to press, contain letters from able and earnest men who claim to treat the Virgin birth of our Lord as not a necessary article of belief, either to an English clergyman or to a Christian. It seems a small matter to these writers that, as one of them expresses it, the evidence for the Virgin birth is "slight"—that is, that the explicit narratives in St. Matthew's and St. Luke's Gospels are of "slight" value, and that the authority of the Gospels as inspired writings is thus

destroyed. When a Bishop of our Church writes a volume like the Bishop of Ripon's "Introduction to the Temple Bible," and admits to the citadel of the faith, hardly concealed in a cloud of words, critical views which are completely subversive of the authority and historic truth of the Old Testament; when another Bishop, at Rochester, tolerates without public protest the continuance in one of the canonries of his cathedral of a writer like Professor Cheyne, who disseminates, in the encyclopædia he edits, articles by Dutch Rationalists which deny the Divinity of our Lord—when *pudet hæc opprobria nobis et dici potuisse et non potuisse refelli*, it is not, perhaps, surprising that a mere denial of the credibility of an Evangelist, in one of the most sacred and mysterious parts of his narrative, should be admitted without scruple. But it does seem surprising that men should deliberately claim a place in the Church and its ministry who deny a belief like that of the Virgin birth, which is explicitly asserted in the Apostles' Creed, which is expressly reaffirmed in our Articles, and which no one can deny to have been the belief of the Church from the earliest time of which we have any record. Sooner or later—and we must hope soon—the Archbishop will have to make it plain to all whom it may concern whether, in his view, a direct denial of prominent doctrines of this kind is compatible with ministerial office in the Church of England, or even with lay loyalty to her teaching. We are approaching a division in our Church which threatens to be more momentous and more dangerous than any other—a division between those who accept the Scriptures and the Creeds in the sense in which, generally speaking, the Church has always received them, and those who treat the Scriptures as only partially trustworthy, and who think themselves justified in rejecting—or at least treating with agnosticism—any Article which does not harmonize with their views of modern science and criticism. The extent to which the authority of the Scriptures has been weakened among us, and in which vital doctrines of the Creed are held to be mere matters of opinion, is, perhaps, not generally appreciated; but, unless a reaction sets in, the day cannot be far off when the Christian Church in England will be regarded by the mass of the people as built upon sand; and when that time arrives it will fall, and great will be the fall of it. This, we are persuaded, is the greatest of all the dangers the new Archbishop has to face, and we can only pray that he may be given the spiritual wisdom and strength and charity to deal with it effectually.