

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

Bishop Gore's Open Letter.

BY THE REV. W. H. GRIFFITH THOMAS, D.D.

IT is not surprising that the Bishop of Oxford's Open Letter to his Diocese on *The Basis of Anglican Fellowship* should have called forth widespread and profound attention. Bishop Gore is recognized as the leader of the school of thought to which he belongs, and his utterances are invariably marked by frankness and fearlessness, as well as by a clear understanding of the issues at stake. When he was Canon Gore he told the English Church Union that the proper policy was to "squeeze the Bishops," and his subsequent utterances, whether in books, pamphlets, or Diocesan Letters, have not been wanting in a determination to impress his views on the Church at large. This makes it the more incumbent upon Evangelical Churchmen to examine his Open Letter, and with due respect for his position and scholarship, to let him understand with a frankness equal to his own the essential and fundamental differences that separate them from him. It is impossible, without writing almost at as great length as the Bishop, to take up all the various points of his Letter; it must suffice to call attention to some of the more important elements of his position.

He complains that Churchpeople have of recent years shown an anxiety to avoid questions of principle and to let themselves drift, relying upon the alleged English habit of "muddling through," if we may use a phrase associated with some military blunders and "regrettable incidents." But everything depends upon what we are to understand by principles; for while the Bishop remarks that in the seventeenth century, and again in the Tractarian Movement, a love of principles characterized our Church, it does not seem accurate to say that "of late years we have shrunk from the labour of examining and expounding principles." On the contrary, it would be easy to show that as the outcome of the Tractarian Movement, and in particular

during the last ten years, Churchmen have become increasingly aware of certain vital principles which tend to separate into two entirely opposite camps those who are united merely by the bond of membership in the Anglican Communion.

The Bishop thinks that the Church of England has stood among the religious communities of Europe since the Reformation for what can be "best described as a liberal or scriptural Catholicism." By this is meant the maintenance of the ancient fundamental faith, as expressed in the Creeds and Councils; "the ancient structure of the Church," as seen in episcopal succession; and "the ministration of the ancient sacraments and rites of the Church." On this basis the Bishop believes that our Church, while claiming to stand as part of the Catholic Church, has also been associated with Protestants in their protest against medievalism, and their appeal to the primitive Church, and especially to the Scriptures, "as the sole, final testing-ground of dogmatic requirement." Of course, in this, everything turns upon the definition of the word "Catholic," because, if Scripture is supreme, according to Article VI., it certainly "qualifies the Catholicism of the Anglican Church" (p. 5), and involves an interpretation of it far different from that given by Bishop Gore.

These fundamental principles of the Church are now said to be imperilled among us in three directions: first, by recent criticism; secondly, by a movement towards fellowship among Protestants; and lastly, by the tendency of some Churchpeople to approximate towards Rome. These movements, according to the Bishop, are in danger of dividing our Church, and he thinks that the great body of people "have been strangely blind or indifferent to what has been going on." Here, again, it is impossible to accept without qualification the Bishop's diagnosis, for not a few Churchpeople have been perfectly well aware of all three tendencies; and Evangelicals, in particular, while believing that there is undoubted peril in the first and third, are of opinion that the second, so far from being perilous, is calculated to exercise the very best influence upon the present and future of

our Church. It is much to be regretted that the Bishop seems unable to distinguish between Evangelical orthodox Protestantism and the rationalistic Protestantism now so prevalent on the Continent, for when he speaks of "the amazingly rapid disintegration of the distinctive Creeds of Protestantism," he fails to realize that Evangelical Protestantism is as firm as ever in its adherence to the fundamental Creed of Christendom. At the same time it is possible for Evangelical Churchmen to join with the Bishop, although for very different reasons, in feeling thankful to the Bishop of Zanzibar for bringing into prominence some of the essential features of the present situation.

I.

With regard to Bishop Gore's attitude towards the advanced school of Biblical Criticism, it is pretty certain that Evangelicals, as a whole, will be in entire agreement with him in deprecating the way in which the truths of the Virgin Birth and the physical Resurrection are questioned and often rejected to-day. But although Evangelicals tenaciously and heartily adhere to the "old paths" on these subjects, there are weighty reasons why their opposition to all such criticism must be maintained quite apart from the Bishop of Oxford. They agree with him in his position, but they are unable for other reasons, which shall be forthcoming, to ally themselves with him in his opposition to the critics.

The Bishop has a strange idea as to what is implied in the present obligation of the clergy in regard to the Prayer-Book and Articles. He thinks that a profound and fundamental change was made in 1865 by the substitution of the old endorsement of the Articles for the present declaration of general assent. But, as the Bishop of Manchester pointed out in the *Times* some months ago when the Bishop of Oxford wrote on this subject, the change made in 1865 does not affect the primary and fundamental attitude of the clergy. Bishop Gore seems to think that since that date some new view of our Church formularies has been permissible, while in reality the

alteration was only from a specific and detailed obligation to a general one, the latter being as much as ever in harmony with the historical position of our Church laid down at the Reformation. It is curious that Bishop Gore cannot see the fallacy involved in his contention; indeed, it is only by arguing for an entire change in 1865, of which there is not the faintest proof in anything that was done, that his precise view of the Church of England can be brought within the possibility of argument.

Another reason why Evangelicals are unable to unite with Bishop Gore in his opposition to extreme criticism is his evident readiness to allow liberty of criticism in regard to the Old Testament, while he insists upon keeping the New Testament almost sacrosanct. This is an absolutely illogical and untenable line, as several writers have already pointed out. Indeed, the very men, like Wellhausen, who have been applying criticism to the Old Testament for the last twenty years, are now engaged upon precisely similar work in connection with the New, and it is simply impossible to draw any line of demarcation between the two parts of Holy Scripture.

A curious illustration of Bishop Gore's attitude is seen in his reference to the Athanasian Creed, in the public recitation of which he himself desires some change, though adding that the Convocation of Canterbury has explicitly "glossed" the clause in verse 2 with an interpretation which is intended to leave sincere doubt uncondemned. Like other modern writers of his school, the Bishop seems to think that Convocation represents "the Church of our province," though he must know that that body has no representation of the laity, and is altogether without legal authority. While we rightly pay careful attention to any opinion of Convocation, it is fallacious and misleading to speak of its decisions as those of "the Church of our province." Then, too, the reference to the question asked of the Deacon about "unfeignedly believing" all the canonical Scriptures is interpreted in the light of a proposal which still has to pass into law. This is an unusual method of procedure.

The Bishop is particularly perturbed by the *tu quoque* argument, which charges him with being a "heretic," and therefore not a person to complain of heresy in others. And notwithstanding his almost indignant denial and his attempted vindication, it must still be said that he ought to be almost the last person to complain of criticism, because he himself is certainly responsible for a great deal of it from the days of "Lux Mundi." Indeed, even subsequently, when he was Bishop of Birmingham, he frankly admitted that the Virgin Birth could not be regarded as part of the faith. Then, too, he speaks of the Second Epistle of Peter as "pseudonymous," and says that "there are discrepancies and errors of detail in the narratives of the New Testament," while he bases his particular view of divorce on a pronouncedly critical treatment of the familiar passage in St. Matthew. All this, and more that could be said, goes far to justify those who maintain that the Bishop's present position on criticism is contradictory. In fact, he is prepared to criticize until he finds critical conclusions opposed to his ecclesiastical views, and then he stops short and reveals an illogical position. We remember that the first number of a weekly publication, the *Speaker*, in reviewing "Lux Mundi," said that as modern criticism had apparently turned Dr. Gore's position on the Old Testament, he must not be surprised if it turned his ecclesiastical position as well. This forecast has come to pass. It is simply impossible to insist upon the infallibility of the Creeds while plainly rejecting the infallibility of the Bible, from which the Creeds are admittedly derived. As Professor Gwatkin's reply to the Bishop's letter rightly says, the Creeds have no independent authority, and are only accepted because they may be "proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture."

While, therefore, the position of Evangelical Churchmen in regard to the views of modern criticism of the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection is substantially in agreement with that of Bishop Gore, their attitude is the only logical one of refusing to accept any criticism, whether of the Old or New Testament, which is plainly subversive of the authority of "God's Word

written," as it has been handed down to us. To allow perfect freedom of criticism of the Old Testament, to speak of "discrepancies and errors" in the New Testament, to criticize the statement of St. Matthew on divorce because it does not happen to agree with preconceived ideas of marriage, and to call the Second Epistle of Peter "pseudonymous," is not essentially different, except in degree, from the position of the critics opposed by Bishop Gore. Then, too, it is to be noted that the references to Holy Scripture in the Bishop's letter appear to be made altogether apart from a belief in their Divine inspiration. Surely the work of the Holy Spirit counts for something. All this prevents Evangelicals from endorsing the Bishop's position, which they are bound to say does not seem substantially different from that of those whom he condemns.

II.

When we pass to the consideration of Protestant Federation, especially in the mission field, as discussed by the Bishop of Oxford, Evangelicals find themselves in still more serious disagreement. Dr. Gore says that he does not know what is "the conception of the basis of authority among those Evangelicals who cannot stand any longer upon the bare idea of the infallibility of the Bible." Evangelicals stand precisely where they have always stood, in their insistence upon Article VI., and they refuse to take the Bishop's interpretation of "the infallibility of the Bible" as expressive of their own. On all matters of faith and practice Evangelicals are still ready to appeal "to the law and to the testimony," and to insist upon what the Bishop himself says about Scripture as "the sole, final testing-ground of dogmatic requirement" (p. 4). Surely this "conception of the basis of authority" is clear and ample for all practical purposes.

It must be added that the Bishop's interpretation of the New Testament cannot possibly be accepted by Evangelical Churchmen. While it is true that our Lord instituted a visible Church, yet the visibility was in no sense that for which Bishop Gore stands. It is an entire and, indeed, a ludicrous mistake to

suppose that because Evangelicals insist upon spirituality as the essential feature of the Church they therefore disregard visibility. On the contrary, they only demand that the visibility shall be true to New Testament expression, and not dominated by any preconceived idea derived from ecclesiastical history. The description of the Church and Ministry in this letter (p. 29) is almost as full of assumptions as the fuller treatment of the same subjects in the Bishop's "Orders and Unity." At nearly every stage definition is necessary, especially on such points as "body," "visible," "catholic," and "recognized ministry." Above all, the assumption of the continuity of the ministry by succession or transmission of authority begs the entire question, and the best modern scholarship takes a view diametrically opposed to that for which the Bishop contends. In spite of his strong assertion that recent historical scholarship has not tended to weaken the position which he favours, there is no doubt that all that is known (as distinct from that which is assumed) about the second century, goes to support Lightfoot's contention that Episcopacy arose by evolution from the Presbyterate, and did not descend by devolution from the Apostolate. This is the fundamental question at issue which no recent researches have invalidated.

In particular it is astonishing that Bishop Gore can believe it is an established proposition that there is "no other way to become a member of Christ but by becoming a member of the Church." This is essentially the Roman Catholic position, namely, through the Church to Christ, instead of that which is plainly written in the New Testament, through Christ to the Church. Another illustration of the way in which Bishop Gore stops short of accepting the full, clear teaching of the New Testament when it contravenes his own ecclesiastical tendencies is seen in his statement about a ministry of Divine authority "entrusted by Jesus Christ to His twelve Apostles, with others, perhaps, who were not of the number of the Twelve, and by them transmitted." Let anyone consider the clear implication of this word "perhaps" in the light of the obvious teaching of the New

Testament, and the Bishop's impossible attitude will be seen. This is one of the points where the New Testament plainly clashes with the Bishop's ecclesiastical position. The fact is that what is called Apostolic Succession fails at the outset, because there is no proof in history that the Apostles appointed successors as the guarantee of a valid ministry of the Word and Sacraments. What the Bishop calls "this principle of devolution" is an assumption, not a principle, and one that will not bear examination in the light of what we possess of the history of the second century. It is amazing that, at this time of day, the Bishop should use Ignatius to uphold his own particular view of Episcopacy. It is well known that the episcopacy of Ignatius was, as Dr. Sanday well says, more like the position of the rector of a Mother Church, and was congregational, not diocesan.

Of course, the Bishop frequently uses the term "validity," but never seems to explain its meaning, or to define that for which the ministry was intended to be "valid." In spite of his contention, we maintain that his insistence upon his "precise condition of a valid Eucharist" or a "valid Ordination" is "totally unreasonable," and rightly "exasperates people" (p. 32).

It is a matter of great surprise that the Bishop, with his historical scholarship, can allow himself to say that "the root-principle of the Reformation movement on the Continent was the repudiation of the principle of any necessary succession in the ministry" (p. 33). Surely the contention was not that all succession in the ministry was to be repudiated, but only that view of it which insisted upon a particular succession as essential for grace. This repudiation characterized the Reformation, not only on the Continent, but in England itself. It is absolutely untrue to say that our Church took a totally different line, and the Bishop's interpretation of the Preface to the Ordinal does not in any way prove his points. The very man who wrote that Preface and spoke as he did of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons, as having existed from the earliest time, and, therefore, to be continued in our Church, was in constant and close association with non-episcopal Reformers, and was ready to welcome them to offices in our Church without reordination.

In confirmation of this view of the Ordinal, reference may be made to a valuable article in the current number of the *Constructive Quarterly* on "Anglicanism and Reunion," by Canon Simpson. And the history of our Church between 1552 and 1662 supports this contention, when it is remembered that Presbyterian ministers were permitted to hold office and perform all ministerial functions without Episcopal ordination. Keble, in his preface to Hooker's Works, frankly admits this. It is, therefore, incorrect to say that "if you hold the Lutheran or Calvinist theory of the ministry you naturally desire to recognize practically the essential indifference of all forms of ministry." Nothing could be more untrue in fact, or more unfair to Lutherans and Calvinists, than this statement, when it is known that both Churches have always insisted upon the importance of ministry. What the Bishop cannot see is that the Reformation position absolutely refuses to make the ministry a guarantee of the spiritual efficacy of the Sacraments. On this point there can be no compromise.

The Bishop's view of Confirmation is that it is "the appointed means for the conveyance to the baptized Christian of the full endowment of the Holy Ghost" (p. 36). It must suffice to say that this view is not that of the New Testament, or even of our Prayer-Book, for in the Confirmation service the only reference to the laying-on of hands is a statement of the example of Christ's Apostles, "to certify them (by this sign) of Thy favour and gracious goodness toward them." It follows from this that Bishop Gore's interpretation of the rubric at the end of the Confirmation Office is unwarranted by all that we know of its history. The original idea dates from the time of Archbishop Peckham, when there was, of course, no question of any other Church but one. From that time to the beginning of the Tractarian Movement, the rubric was understood to apply inclusively to our own people alone, and Bishop Gore's interpretation has been rejected by some of the most important High Churchmen during the last twenty years.

When the Bishop proceeds to apply his principles to the mission field it is again seen that everything turns upon the

interpretation of the phrase, "Catholic principles." He is, of course, compelled to admit that no confession of faith in the necessity of Episcopacy is required of Evangelicals, though he believes that action is required of them which involves the necessity of Episcopacy for the existence of the Church. But here, again, the Bishop is only giving expression to the very narrow view of the Church of England, and of Episcopacy in particular, which has become prevalent through the influence of the Oxford Movement. If Cranmer and Ridley did not find it incompatible with their own Episcopacy to welcome and associate themselves closely with non-Episcopal reformers, it ought not to be impossible to do likewise to-day in the mission field. This is the more important when we ponder what the Bishop calls "the abundant and splendid fruits of frankly Protestant missions." It is simply astounding that here and in his book, "Orders and Unity," he can pay such tributes to non-Episcopal Churches, and yet speak of them as "rebels" against the law of God. Most people will naturally wonder how "rebels" can be permitted to produce and enjoy such manifest results of the Holy Spirit's presence in their midst.

In the closing words of this part of the Bishop's Open Letter he once again expresses with characteristic frankness his thought about Evangelicals when he says, "I do not think that my Evangelical friends will find it easy to formulate a theory of the essentials of a Christian ministry other than the Catholic theory" (p. 40). In reply to this, the Bishop need have no concern for Evangelicals, and may rest assured that they have no difficulty whatever in formulating a theory of the ministry "other than the Catholic theory," because they take their view straight from the New Testament, and refuse to regard what the Bishop calls the "Catholic theory" as really in harmony with primitive teaching. They find that the ministry of the New Testament is absolutely non-sacerdotal, and they know that this feature was continued during the whole of the second century without a single trace of the opposite. And, moreover, following Bishop Lightfoot, they see in Cyprian the person and

the period of degeneration from the pastoral ministry of the New Testament to the sacerdotal ministry which became dominant in the Middle Ages, and which is the characteristic feature of Bishop Gore's view. The Bishop should therefore disabuse his mind of any hesitation or fear about the Evangelical ability to state and maintain an essential ministry with "a firm and intelligible theory." In this respect they believe they are as bold as St. Paul, whom Dr. Gore rightly describes as never having "moved a step without a theory—without looking before and after, and knowing where he was going."

III.

The third section of the Bishop's Letter is concerned with what he calls "Romanizing in the Church of England," and he believes that those who endorse the Catholic movement "are in danger of drifting into a position which makes it difficult for extreme men to explain why they are not Roman Catholics." With delightful frankness the Bishop says that "we have to convert a Protestant-minded country." This is true, and is a fine testimony to the religious attitude of England, and also to the teaching of the Church as embodied in the Prayer-Book and Articles. We are, indeed, "a Protestant-minded country," and in spite of everything that has been done since the Tractarians commenced the work of "conversion," it is a satisfaction to realize that our land is as "strongly prejudiced" as ever against what it knows to be "sacerdotalism and Romanism."

It is a matter of great surprise that the Bishop interprets the Article about the Bishop of Rome having no jurisdiction in this realm of England as referring only to "secular jurisdiction." This view, so familiar in connection with Bishop Forbes, is entirely opposed to all that is known of the history of the sixteenth century, when Church and State were one, and when "realm" assuredly included both secular and ecclesiastical aspects. Here, again, the Bishop maintains that since 1865 we are only committed to a general assent to Church of England doctrine, just as though this could rule out the

numerous anti-Roman statements of the Articles as no longer obligatory. It is also a cause of wonderment that the Bishop is able to say that "strictly construed the anti-Roman phrases of the Articles are confessedly vague, and partly by reason of date, do not touch the precise statements of Trent, which were themselves reforming statements" (p. 42). It is difficult to understand this in the light of the history of the Articles, and of the plain statements of the Canons of Trent. And he adds that he believes "the vagueness of these Articles was deliberate." We wonder what vagueness there is in such phrases as "The Church of Rome hath erred"; "The Romish doctrine concerning purgatory . . . is a fond thing, vainly invented"; "Transubstantiation . . . is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture . . . and hath given occasion to many superstitions"; "Sacrifices of masses . . . were blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits." These statements are surely plain enough for all practical purposes, and they are certainly regarded in this light by the Church of Rome itself.

The Bishop himself is prepared to endorse what he calls Comprecation of Saints, and believes that our Articles do not condemn all invocation as such. How this position can be maintained in the light of the Bishop of Salisbury's well-known discussion, and the book by Mr. H. F. Stewart, is almost inexplicable. It is another illustration of the impossible effort to be "Catholic" (in Dr. Gore's sense) without being "Roman."

In 1906 the Report of the Royal Commission spoke of certain practices as lying "on the Romeward side of a line of deep cleavage between the Church of England and that of Rome." Bishop Gore, in dealing with this subject, stated in one of his books that there is a line of deep cleavage between a "typical Anglican" teacher and a "typical Roman"; but that if we take the least Protestant types of Anglicanism and the most moderate of Roman types "the line is hardly apparent"; while if we take Romanism at its minimum and extreme Anglicanism at its maximum, "we shall come to the conclusion that no such line of deep cleavage exists at all." Is it not mar-

vellous that a man of Bishop Gore's clear-sightedness cannot see that such admissions destroy his case? Surely it is impossible to take "the least Protestant types" on one side and "the most moderate Roman types" on the other, if we are to come to a right decision. Such an attitude would be impracticable either from the Protestant or the Roman standpoint, while the Bishop himself admits that between "typical" Anglicanism and "typical" Romanism "there is a line of deep cleavage." Evangelicals could not wish for a more convincing proof of what the Bishop calls "Romanizing in the Church of England" than this statement (p. 44).

After all these arguments, which claim for our Church a position not to be found in its history between the Reformation and the Oxford Movement, Bishop Gore is yet able to return to the principle with which he set out: the acceptance of Scripture as limiting the dogmatic requirement. How this can be harmonized with his own views is puzzling and perplexing, for such a position not only rules out what he calls "a whole body of medieval or modern Roman doctrine," but also several of his own distinctive principles of Church and ministry. Indeed, he himself may respectfully be asked to apply to the position here laid down, his own words: "I am quite sure that an Anglican Churchman who wants his beliefs to be rational must not think that he can borrow the system of Roman belief or practice, either leaving out in theory or ignoring in fact the authority of the Pope."

Evangelicals believe that this is exactly what the Bishop himself has done, as his book on "The Roman Claims" clearly shows. The answer of Dom Chapman, in his "Bishop Gore and the Roman Claims," seemed to the present writer conclusive as against the Bishop at almost every distinctive point, and while naturally an Anglican would wish a Bishop of his own Church to be victorious, it was impossible to avoid admitting that the Roman controversialist had the better of the argument. The fact is that it is absolutely impossible, as the Bishop here allows, to borrow and inculcate Roman belief or practice,

while merely denying Mariolatry and Papal Infallibility. Sacerdotalism and the supremacy of the Church constitute the fundamental positions of Roman Catholicism, and these are also the vital requirements of Bishop Gore's type of Churchmanship.

With the Bishop's concluding appeal "for a return to principle all round," Evangelical Churchmen will be in the heartiest possible agreement, though they will still have to inquire what precise principle is to be understood. It is probably true that the Church of England "has a bad time ahead of it," but its perils are not due solely to what the Bishop calls the refusal "to think clearly about principles." On the contrary, Evangelical Churchmen have never wavered in regard to the essential principles of their position, and they know that between this and the Bishop's view there is "a great gulf fixed." The Bishop has now stated his position with all his welcome frankness and fearlessness, and it behoves Evangelicals to do the same on every possible occasion, in order that it may be seen that no compromise is possible between the so-called Catholic and the Evangelical views of the Church. The Bishop stated quite plainly at the Cambridge Church Congress in 1910 that under certain circumstances "the Anglican Communion would certainly be rent in twain" (p. 34). And Evangelicals entirely agree with him in this respect, but they would have no fear even if such a severance occurred, because for some time past it has been growing more and more evident that the Churchmanship for which Bishop Gore stands is absolutely incompatible with that which Evangelicals hold. These cannot both be true, and notwithstanding the serious results that would accrue from the Anglican Communion being "rent in twain," there are loyal Churchmen who consider that even this would in the long run be better than the present hollow union, which is not based on identity of principle but includes two absolutely opposed views of some of the most fundamental realities of New Testament Christianity. It is well, therefore, to recall the well-known words of the prophet of the Old Testament, who complained of those who cried, "Peace, peace, when there is no peace."