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The Danger of Modern Controversy.

WITHIN recent years a considerable amount of attention has been given to the actual condition of affairs within the Church of Christ. The wave of unrest which has disturbed the social and political world has invaded the Christian community, and has introduced a period of unsettlement, not only in the practical activities of the Church, but also in the traditional beliefs which have been handed down from days of old. The controversies which have been raised have been fraught with unhappy consequences. In the minds of many educated laymen, controversy suggests uncertainty, and they have preferred to withhold their active support pending the settlement of the questions which are under discussion. When the theologians disagree, the wisdom of suspending judgment commends itself to the lay mind. Moreover, the differences of opinion have often resulted in the display of an unchristian spirit, which has widened the gulf between those who ought to be united in the closest bonds of brotherhood and love.

I.

The appeal to antiquity exercises a strange fascination over a type of mind which loves to idealize a past age; yet the value of such an appeal can be very differently appreciated; and the resistance to any attempt to set up the beliefs and practices of a past generation either as a standard of judgment or as the model for our imitation would be uncompromising and severe. Some acquaintance with the Liberal movement is needful if we are to rightly appreciate the forces at work in the present controversies. "There is remarkable unity," writes Professor E. C. Moore, "in the history of Protestant thought from the Reformation to the end of the eighteenth century. There is a still more surprising unity of thought in this period with the thought of the mediæval and ancient Church. The basis and methods are the same. Upon many points the conclusions are

identical. There was nothing in which the Protestant scholastics were more proud than of their agreement with the Fathers of the Early Church."[1] The prevailing spirit of the last century was impatient of such limitations. The altered views of history, of Nature, and of man, were "characteristics of the nineteenth century. They would naturally issue in an interpretation of Christianity in the general context of the life and thought of that century."[2] Consequently the appeal to antiquity as the final authority in the settlement of modern controversies would be questioned by those whose outlook upon life tallied with this description, and any attempt to enforce the result of such an appeal would be provocative of greater disorders than those which already exist. The disciples of Liberal Theology would rally to resist what would be in their eyes an encroachment upon freedom of thought.

It is often assumed that the primitive Church was a perfect Church, but the description in the New Testament does not bear out this assumption. The members lived nearer to the fountain-head of Christianity, and were fired with the enthusiasm which a new religious movement was certain to arouse. The conflict between the Church and the world was more keenly felt than it is to-day, and the fires of persecution served to keep outside the Church all who were not sincere. The severity of the sufferings which Christians were called upon to endure purified the Church and strengthened the bond of union between the members. "Persecution," writes Canon Hobhouse in his Bampton Lectures, "always acted as a winnowing fan and separated the wheat from the chaff. In a time of persecution no one became a Christian who was not in earnest, and the nominal or half-hearted Christians who had crept in already were weeded out and denied their faith."[3] Those early days were the purest days of Christianity, but it does not necessarily follow that the Church of those days was either perfect or infallible. The writer already referred to goes on to say:

[1] Caldwell, "Christian Thought since Kant," p. 2.
[2] Hobhouse, "Church and World," p. 67.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

"We may well keep ever before us the warning not to idealize Ante-Nicene Christianity overmuch. The imperfections which we traced in the Apostolic Church were always there, and, with the spread of the Church, love, as we have seen, was more apt to grow cold, and faction to become schism and weakness apostasy." In a footnote he adds that the canons of the Synod of Elvira in Spain (A.D. 305-306) supply one of the most striking evidences of the degeneration of Christianity before the time of Constantine. "These canons show a very low state of sexual morality, and a prevalent tendency to relapse into idolatry."[1]

The Apostles themselves would have been the last to prefer any claim to infallibility for the New Testament Church, and their writings suggest that matters did not always run smoothly in these primitive communities. In fact, for them the Golden Age lay neither in the past nor in the present, but in the future. They looked forward to the time when Christ should come again and establish His Kingdom, and the eschatological hope occupied a prominent place in their presentation of Christianity.

On the other hand, no adequate conception of Christianity is possible without an appeal to antiquity, yet such an appeal must be made upon the right grounds. Throughout the history of Christianity there have been certain fundamental principles and leading ideas which remained persistent in the midst of change. Their expression or interpretation has varied according to the conditions of each succeeding age or the environment in which they were placed, or the personality of the individual through whom they operated. The discovery of these fundamentals requires a careful investigation of primitive Christianity, and especially of the New Testament literature. Only it must be borne in mind that the object of search is not precedents,

[1] Hobhouse, "Church and World," p. 79: "In the first generation of Christianity every man became a Christian at his peril. The converts were adults, and each conversion represented an act of individual deliberation and resolve. . . ." "There were as yet no hereditary and conventional Christians; even at the end of the second century Tertullian could say, 'Fiunt non nascuntur Christiani' (p. 66)."

but principles; not so much a model for our exact imitation, as the source of a religious experience which has always accompanied the sincere acceptance of the Christian Faith. The practical counsels of the New Testament are valid for all time, but the administrative policy was developed to meet existing needs. The existence of any special form or custom at a given period, even in the earliest days, cannot be taken as sufficient justification for the assertion that it is essential to the preservation of the Christian Faith.

The bearing of these considerations upon modern controversies may not be at first apparent. The growth of the Christian Church brought in its train a series of practical difficulties which very largely grew out of existing social conditions, and which had to be settled by those in authority. These difficulties may have differed widely from those which distress the Church to-day, yet if we can ascertain the spirit in which the Apostles approached the settlement of the various disputes as they arose, if we can ascertain the ruling principles which regulated their methods and guided their activity, we shall have at our disposal information of the highest value when we are brought face to face with the unhappy controversies of the present day.

II.

The Epistles of St. Paul contain many references to the presence of disturbing elements in the various Churches with which he was brought in contact. In the Church at Corinth there were practical disorders which threatened to break up the unity of the Church. The development of a strong party spirit had gone on side by side with extraordinary laxity in the administration of discipline. Heinous sin was openly tolerated, and there appears to have been no clear conception of the gravity of the issues which such a compromise with evil must involve. It needed a stern reproof from the Apostle to stay that Church in her downward path. The toleration of sin was

an open scandal to the Christian name.[1] The petty jealousies and mutual recriminations were breeding a schism which would impair the life of the Church.[2]

The Epistle to the Colossians was addressed to a Church where the danger was of a different kind. Influences had been at work to corrupt the purity of the Christian Faith, and the prevailing spirit had fostered an undue interest in curious and vain speculations. The three neighbouring cities of Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colosse were important commercial centres in Asia Minor. Laodicea was the capital of the province, while Hierapolis was not only the centre of a busy trade, but was also a favourite health-resort on account of the medicinal qualities of the waters in that locality.[3] The population included a large number of foreigners who had been attracted from other parts of the empire, and had made their home in one or other of these cities. Then, as now, the people flocked to the large towns, seeking wealth and prosperity in the busy centres of industry. Now, these people would bring with them their special religious beliefs which they were accustomed to practise, in addition to the national and civic religious rites. Consequently, within the borders of these towns there would be representatives of the various types of religious belief, and the conditions were favourable to the formation of religious communities. Hierapolis has been described as "the chief centre of the passionate mystical devotion of ancient Phrygia."[4]

The Christian Church grew and flourished in this circle of ideas, and it would be surprising had it escaped altogether the syncretistic influences of these pagan cults. Many members of the Christian communities had at one time belonged to one or other of these religious brotherhoods, and certain resemblances might lead them to suppose that the likeness between the new and old faith extended much farther than was actually the case. The introduction of familiar ideas, and the attempt to combine them with the Gospel which they had received, becomes intel-

[1] 1 Cor. v., vi. 19, 20. [2] 1 Cor. iii. 1-9, xii., xiii.
[3] See Lightfoot, "Colossians," pp. 7-11. [4] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

ligible in the light of these considerations. Moreover, the desire to extend the Christian Faith would itself prove to be a strong temptation to accommodate that Faith and bring it more into line with contemporary ideas. Many more would be won if Christianity could be shown to possess a close affinity with accustomed beliefs and practices. The tendency at work here was *to add* to the Faith. To some the additions would have seemed harmless and relatively unimportant. The significance of the changes could be easily overlooked.

Such, in brief, is a description of two of the situations which St. Paul was called upon to face—the practical disorders at Corinth, and the speculative tendencies in the neighbourhood of Colosse. Both had their own special dangers, and the position required very careful handling. In both cases St. Paul finds the key to the situation in the Gospel of Christ. He reminds the Corinthian Christians of their baptism into Christ. He takes the fact of their union with Christ as the reason for their union with one another. "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?"[1] With penetrating insight he diagnosed the state of affairs in Colosse. These extra beliefs could not be sheltered under the cloak of Christianity without destroying the essential truth. Jesus Christ was the one and only Mediator between God and man. He does not attempt to discuss the value of the speculations, but rather lays his finger upon the root-cause of all the mischief—they are not "holding fast the Head,"[2] even Christ. Their indulgence in speculations had weakened their grasp upon essentials. The exalted conception of the Person of Christ, which is one of the characteristic features of this Epistle, was framed to serve as a corrective to the type of teaching which, by peopling the supernatural world with a host of intermediary beings, was raising an unnecessary barrier to the fulness of the communion between God and man.

The Apostle was fully alive to the pressing danger which the controversy had created, and he sought to avert the danger

[1] See 1 Cor. i. 12, 13. [2] Col. ii. 19.

by a return to the first principles of discipleship. Whether he was called upon to meet the opposition of the Jews, who sought to combine the legal system of the Old Testament with the Gospel, or whether he was dealing with an attempt to incorporate pagan ideas into the Faith of the Church, he insisted with all the force at his command upon the completeness and perfection of the work of Christ. When he was called upon to find a remedy for practical disorders within a local Church, he sought to apply the same truth to the immediate needs. The relation of the individual to Christ would determine his relations with his fellow-Christians. The great facts of the Incarnation and Atonement were central; from them radiated forth the solution of every difficulty, whether practical or speculative, which the Church was called upon to face.

III.

The troubles which distressed the Church at Corinth are in many respects similar to those with which we are familiar to-day, but the speculative spirit which manifested itself in the neighbourhood of Colosse belongs to an age and temperament very different from our own. The Western mind is more practical than the Eastern, and our own tastes do not lie in the direction of speculation. We have our own problems to solve, and we approach them along the lines of experience, making ascertained facts the basis for further progress. The idea of the Divine Immanence appeals to such a habit of mind, and we have learned to trace the hand of God in the course of history and in the natural phenomena of the physical world.

The marked change in our outlook upon life apparently justifies the assumption that the ancient and modern world have little in common; yet the far-reaching changes have not altered the sad fact that controversies still rage with increasing force around the faith and practice of the Church. The most sacred things are dragged into the arena of conflict, and the display of an unchristian spirit over details in worship and ceremonial, or

the nature and extent of revelation or Biblical inspiration, and other subjects of a kindred nature, has been in many cases a stumbling-block to the acceptance of the Christian Faith. Doubtless there must be protests against false teaching. Unlimited tolerance is incompatible with genuine Christianity, and St. Paul himself never hesitated to condemn perversions of the Gospel he was commissioned to proclaim. Controversies are inevitable; and the interchange of opinions can easily become fruitful of good results, and one of these is the creation of a better understanding between those who approach the same subject from different points of view. At the same time the existing conditions within the Church, and the lamentable loss of spiritual power directly caused by the ill-feeling and mutual suspicion which those engaged in the controversy so often exhibit, should serve to remind us of the danger, which is as real to-day as it was in the days of St. Paul. It is fatally easy to be so obsessed with accidentals that we weaken our hold upon essentials. The Person of Christ, His Incarnation, His Cross, are the central fundamental facts, and only in the light of this revelation can we hope to arrive at a satisfactory solution of the manifold problems which distress the Church.

IV.

A brief reference to one of the most urgent problems of the day will help to illustrate the main contention of the foregoing argument.

In the *Realm of Faith*, controversy centres around the Person of Christ. If at one time the tendency was to believe too much, at the present day the tendency is to believe too little. Beneath the surface of a great deal of conventional Christianity there lurks a latent scepticism, and it is now fashionable to take exception to the traditional doctrines contained in the Creed. The hesitation to make the venture of faith, and to cross the line of actual human experience, is one of the most serious factors with which the Church of to-day has

to reckon. In some respects the movement represents the reaction from the excessive dogmatism of a past generation, and is not wholly attributable to an irreligious spirit; the reluctance to accept the traditional formula may spring from intellectual honesty which will not profess to accept any statement which is not sincerely believed. Such a state of mind is preferable to the easy and formal repetition of the Creed by one who seldom troubles to think out the significance of the doctrines he professes to believe and constantly denies his creed by his life.

We cannot, it is true, alter and accommodate the Creed to the sceptical mind unless we are prepared to allow Christianity to degenerate into a nebulous theism, but we can and ought to express our creed in terms of life and experience, and indicate the bearing of those truths upon the practical problems of the day.

It is through the deepening of personal religion that we shall prove the reality of our faith. The revival of spiritual life and power which will accompany the renewal of our fellowship with Christ will do more to dispel our doubts and solve our difficulties than the study of apologetics—important as such a study is. "Nothing, I suppose," writes the present Bishop of Oxford in his Bampton Lectures, "can keep the Christianity of a theoretical student from deterioration save the constant exercise of prayer."[1] Through communion with God in Christ, man receives the assurance that the Divinity of Christ is not a fiction, but a reality. Then, while the supernatural elements must remain a mystery, they will no longer be a stumbling-block to faith. It was an experience of this kind which led the inhabitants of the Samaritan village to say: "Now we believe, not because of thy speaking; for we have heard for ourselves and know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world."[2]

W. Escott Bloss.

[1] Gore, "Incarnation," p. 5.

[2] John iv. 42 (R.V.).