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STUDIES IN TEXTS.

Suggestions for Sermons from Current Literature.

BY THE REV. HARRINGTON C. LEES, M.A.

VII. EARLY CHURCHMANSHIP.

Text.—"And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts ii. 42, R.V.).

[Book of the Month : THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH AND CHRISTIAN REUNION,¹ by Headlam = H. Other reff., *Hastings' Dictionaries, of the Bible, of Christ and the Gospels, and of the Apostolic Church* = respectively DB, DCG, and DAC. Hort's *Christian Ecclesia* = CE. Forsyth's *Church and the Sacraments* = F.]

The Lambeth Conference has been discussing Church questions. Let us think of some elements of Primitive Churchmanship, germs of the organism we see to-day.

"The earliest period in the history of the Christian Church is described in the first five chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. It was mainly, although not entirely, confined to Jerusalem. It is represented to us as a period of spiritual enthusiasm, of brotherly unity, of miraculous power and popular favour. The Church was as yet confined entirely to Jews. It was a new sect" (H. 50). "Whether they at once began to speak of themselves as the Church we cannot say. They were called 'the believers,' 'those who are being saved,' 'the brethren.' They were probably known to outsiders as the sect of the Nazarenes" (H. 50-1). "What He declared that He would build was in one sense old, and in another new. It had a true continuity with the Ecclesia of the Old Covenant; the building of it would be a rebuilding. Cf. Acts xv. 16, where James quotes Amos ix. 11" (CE. II). "The name 'Church' is in itself strong evidence of the connexion between the Old Covenant and the New. In the Old Testament, two different words are used to denote gatherings of the chosen people, or their representatives—'*ēdhāh* (R.V. 'congregation') and *qāhāl* (R.V. 'assembly'). In the LXX *sunagoge* is the usual translation of '*ēdhāh*, while *qāhāl* is commonly

¹ The Bampton Lectures for 1920 by Dr. A. C. Headlam, Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford. Perhaps the most discussed book of the day on the subject of Reunion.

rendered *ecclesia* " (DAC. I. 204). " We do not know who so happily adopted the word for Christian use. It is not impossible that Christ Himself may have used it, for He sometimes spoke Greek " (DAC. I. 204).

What are the five main elements of Primitive Church life? Even so pronounced an Independent as Dr. Forsyth writes: " No form is sacrosanct. But also to discard form is suicidal. If an imperial Church is mischievous, sporadic Churches are futile. For a Church to live anyhow is to die " (F. 74). F. incidentally speaks more strongly on sacramental questions than many Churchmen (see his book). H. turns to Acts ii. 41, 42, for a picture of primitive churchmanship: " They were received into the number of the believers by Baptism. The Apostles were their teachers and leaders. They were bound together in unity of life and fellowship, in the sacramental rite of the breaking of bread and in common worship " (H. 51). " The author of the Acts of the Apostles lived at a time when there were certainly presbyters and perhaps bishops, and when the diaconate was a regular institution. He was strongly influenced by the thought and ideas of St. Paul. But he does not read any of these things back into the account of this oldest Christian community. The life is early and unformed. The doctrine is simple and undeveloped. The organization is embryonic " (H. 55). " But although this is true, it is also true that the principles that are required to account for the later ecclesiastical development are already present " (H. 55).

I. THERE WAS A PRIMITIVE INITIATION.—" The condition of receiving the promise of salvation was repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah. The external sign of the reception of that promise and of incorporation into the community was Baptism " (H. 51). " From the beginning Baptism is clearly a normal and necessary Christian institution, and the author of the Acts having once clearly indicated this does not refer to it again except for special reasons " (H. 51). At the same time " The Church " means more than a mere Baptismal Roll. " The Church, like the individual Christian, is regarded as being that which it is becoming " (DCG. I. 326). In the New Testament the " Church " " refers neither to dead nor living Christians, but to an indefinite body of members belonging to no time, present, past, or future, because it is a timeless, ideal conception " (DB. I. 425).

II. THERE WAS A PRIMITIVE RULE OF FAITH.—“ The community is represented as under the rule and guidance of the Apostles. The believers ‘ continued in the Apostles’ teaching.’ It is the Apostles who take the lead on all occasions ” (H. 51). “ They had been the companions of our Lord during His life, they had received His last commands. They were the witnesses of the Resurrection. They with the other disciples had received power by the coming of the Holy Spirit ” (H. 52). “ In the absence of authoritative records the testimony of the Apostles to the words and deeds of Jesus naturally formed the basis of the common faith ” (H. 52). “ A position of special prominence is held by St. Peter. On all occasions he takes the initiative ” (H. 52). “ Not as one apart from, but as one joined with, the Apostolic body, as chief among them, not as a ruler over them ” (H. 52).

III. THERE WAS A PRIMITIVE HARMONY.—It is called “ fellowship or communion. This it is stated was in an especial sense exhibited by the fact that they had all things in common. We need not now examine in detail the vexed question what exactly this primitive communism implied economically. On the religious side it meant that the unity and fellowship of the life of the primitive community was shown by, a singular generosity which almost amounted to a practical communism. The believers were as one family ” (H. 52-3). “ The self-sacrifice, unity and generosity which should be always characteristic of the Christian, were realized for a short time in a manner that, as the community grew, became impossible in practice, although always possible in spirit ” (H. 53). “ The meetings of the Church must have been in houses, and none in Jerusalem can possibly have contained all the disciples ; but no importance is attached to the place of meeting, nor are house congregations ever spoken of or alluded to as separate units of Church life ” (DCG. I. 326). “ The whole body of disciples is the only unit ” (DCG. I. 326). “ ‘ An isolated Christian ’ is a contradiction, for every Christian is a member of Christ’s body ” (DAC. I. 205).

IV. THERE WAS A PRIMITIVE RELIGIOUS CEREMONY.—It is called “ the breaking of bread.” “ A meal was intended, for it is added, ‘ they did take their food with gladness and singleness of heart,’ yet the context in each case implies that the meal was also a religious act ; in the first passage it is coupled with ‘ the prayers,’ in the second with the daily visit to the Temple. The phrase ‘ breaking

bread' is used in all the accounts of the Last Supper" (H. 53). "Here we have a religious rite, identical with what was afterwards called the Eucharist" (H. 53). "It was celebrated privately in the home of believers and was thus distinguished from the assemblies in the Temple courts. There was the ordinary evening meal, but there was more. The special accompaniment was the praise of God; it was a glad and happy festival, in fact a Eucharist, a feast of thanksgiving" (H. 54). "It is true that it is impossible to prove any connexion between Acts ii. 42 and the 'Last Supper,' but that there was a religious significance attached to the former seems clear from the way in which it is mentioned" (DAC. I. 374). And see Acts xx. 7-II, for an obvious parallel.

V. THERE WAS A PRIMITIVE WORSHIP.—"The Prayers." "The meetings for prayer seem to have been of two kinds, in the Temple and in private houses. The body of believers were constant in their attendance in the Temple, not only as individual Israelites, but in a corporate capacity. To the Western, and especially to an English reader, accustomed to the orderliness and dignity of our public services, this would imply taking part in an organized system of public worship. Yet this is probably the very last thing that is meant. The wide and spacious porticoes of the Temple would, as in the case of the modern mosque, form admirable places for religious meetings" (H. 54). "They met at the stated hours of prayer, for common worship and to receive the instruction of the Apostles" (H. 54).

So to sum up: "All that was required for the growth of the Church was there" (H. 55). "The Catholic Church life must have had a beginning, and here are all the elements out of which it might arise. The Church grew up with a ministry, sacraments, a common creed, and a common worship. Here we have all these, but in an undeveloped form, and these again grow naturally out of elements in the Gospels" (H. 56).
