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## THE OXFORD CONFERENCE OF EVANGELICAL CHURCHMEN.

*(In continuation of the Cheltenham Conference)*

HELD AT ST. PETER'S HALL, OXFORD, APRIL 13, 14 AND 15.

SUBJECT: THE BASIS OF ANGLICAN DOCTRINE  
AND FELLOWSHIP.

Inaugural Address by the Rev. CHRISTOPHER M. CHAVASSE,  
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**T**HIS is the third year that this conference has met at Oxford, since it moved its venue from Cheltenham; and this is the third year that our discussion has centred round the subject of Reunion.

The fact is at once encouraging and instructive. It is indicative of the paramount place which Reunion holds to-day in the thought of Christendom. Also it reveals that theories about Reunion are giving place to practical steps towards Reunion, which demand our eager and anxious attention.

Last year it was the South India scheme of Reunion and its reception by the approaching Lambeth Conference, which claimed our consideration. This year it is the Lambeth Report regarding Reunion with the Episcopal Churches of the East and West which requires examination. The Anglican Church is a Reformed Church. If, therefore, her union with the sister Churches of the Reformation is chiefly a question of order, her union with unreformed Churches must obviously turn upon matters of doctrine. However passionately we may pray and work for Reunion; however intensely we may believe that progress towards union is to seek to do the Father's will on earth as it is done in heaven, to fulfil the Saviour's high-priestly prayer, and to release limitless power through the fellowship of the Holy Ghost; however thankful our hearts may be for the unexpected and strong desire evinced by the Orthodox Church to draw closer to us; yet we have to remember that there is one thing greater than Reunion—namely, Truth; and we must never dream of gaining any measure of Reunion through false pretences, or, still more, at the expense of truth dearly bought and faithfully maintained. It is, then, in view of actual advances towards Reunion and of practical steps suggested with regard to them, that we have chosen this year as the subject of our conference "The Basis of Anglican Doctrine," with special reference to our fellowship with other Communion.

Bishop Headlam, in his pastoral charge, "The Church of England," has declared that "the fundamental principle of the Church of England is the supremacy of Scripture." It falls, there-

fore, to me in introducing this subject of "the basis of Anglican doctrine," to attempt first a description of what the Church means by the supremacy of Scripture; and then to outline the exercise of its authority in matters of Church doctrine and worship—for Scripture is the basis of Anglican doctrine.

## I.

*First, with regard to the Church and Holy Scripture*:—Two statements are commonly made to-day regarding Scriptural authority. On the one hand, the authority of Scripture is supposed to be weakened because a belief in its verbal infallibility has been abandoned.

On the other hand, it is asserted that the authority of Scripture does not lie in the letter of Scripture but in the mind of Christ which it perfectly reveals. But did the early Reformers who gave us our Articles and Prayer Book hold or teach the verbal infallibility of the Bible? The doctrine was of later development in Protestant churches. The first Fathers of the Reformed Anglican Communion based the supremacy of Scripture upon this very truth which is advocated to-day—namely, that the Bible is the supreme revelation of the mind of Christ, and therefore did they require its authority not only for articles of faith, but also for ordinances of worship.<sup>1</sup> Of course, it would be absurd to suppose that the Reformers in their thought or formularies regarding the Bible could have anticipated the discoveries of four centuries of research and scientific advance, or have foreseen the particular problems of theologians to-day. But this does not mean that the authority of the Bible as the foundation basis of their doctrine has shifted or been weakened in the slightest degree.

There are no grounds whatsoever for arguing that because the verbal infallibility of the Bible is no longer accepted—that therefore a broader sanction than the Bible is required, and that Church doctrine may be enlarged by tradition. My strong contention is that, in broad outline, the view of the Bible held by the early Reformers is the same as is generally accepted to-day; and that it was in fulfilment of such a view that the doctrine of the Church of England was formulated, and the same non-scriptural traditions (for which authority is now sought in some quarters), were rejected. That is to say—the supremacy of Scripture is as much the fundamental principle of the Church of England in this year of grace 1931 as ever it was; and nothing has happened since the Reformation to impair its authority, but rather the reverse.

To substantiate this statement I must venture a few steps into dangerous territory. The inspiration of Holy Scripture is a difficult question in which it is far more easy to err in what one denies than in what one affirms. The inspiration of the Bible is unquestioned,

<sup>1</sup> "If it is asked why this (*the supremacy of Holy Scripture*) is and must be so, the answer is . . . . because Scripture embodies the revelation of God to the world as the source of authority. The revelation of the Person of Christ is found in Holy Scripture in its clearest, fullest, and purest form." (Dr. Griffith-Thomas in *The Principles of Theology*, p. 123).

and I wish we could be content to leave it at that. It is when with an over-bold curiosity we seek to define the precise mode, process, and mechanism of inspiration that schools of thought become sharply divided, and rival theories only make confusion worse confounded. It is the same with the doctrine of the Atonement and the conveyance of Sacramental Grace ; with regard to all three God has not vouchsafed to reveal the exact working of His effectual love. Neither can our finite understanding ever hope to comprehend more than in part the operation of Divine mysteries, which nevertheless may be accepted and appropriated to the full. And this demand for intellectual comprehension regarding the precise mode and method of spiritual activities seems to be a feature of modern times, and is not characteristic of the Reformation age. The exact process by which holy men of old spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost is a question which for the early Reformers did not arise. They took over a belief in the inspiration of Scripture from the medieval Church, and from the early Church before that. They never thought to define inspiration, but only to affirm it and to witness to its truth and its effects.

To-day we are called upon to decide—generally speaking—between two definitions of Inspiration. There is the verbal infallibility of mechanical inspiration—according to which the human writer is an automaton recording direct dictation. And there is the plenary perfection of dynamical inspiration, according to which (as Bishop Chavasse was wont to quote) the human writers are not the pens but the penmen of God. Though as we have seen the specific question of Inspiration did not arise for the early Reformers, yet in effect they were confronted with much the same choice ; and they affirmed the dynamical inspiration of the Bible *writers* as opposed to the verbal infallibility of the Bible *writings*, which was held by the Roman Church. The Reformers found a Bible made of none effect through the traditional teaching of the schoolmen. Medieval theologians claimed to base all Church teaching upon Scriptures verbally infallible. But as they regarded the Bible as a mass of isolated sentences all verbally inspired, they sought for hidden meanings even in such unpromising material as genealogies. They therefore declared that the Church and the Church alone possessed the divine insight to explain Scripture with allegorical and mystical interpretations. And thereby, in effect, they established the Church with its traditions as the supreme authority of doctrine ; while the Bible became a useful depository of proof texts, any of which could be used apart from its context to substantiate any doctrine whatsoever. The Reformers, equipped with the new learning of the Renaissance, rediscovered the Bible by treating it historically and as one connected whole. To quote Erasmus they “ struck boldly down through the layers of mystic, allegoric, scholastic, traditional lore, which had been accumulating for ages over the holy volume, and laid open the vein of pure gold beneath—the plain, obvious, literal meaning of the Apostolic writings.”

In so doing they established the two principles which have ever since constituted the Bible as the supreme authority of Reformed doctrine. First, their own experience convinced them that the Bible treated as an historic unity explained itself to the intelligence even of the common man, and required no special interpretation by the Church. Secondly, they discovered (again by personal experience) that the voice of the living God spoke to them from its pages, and that a study of them brought them into immediate fellowship with Christ Himself. Perhaps I may be allowed to illustrate my point by re-interpreting an analogy employed by Irenaeus when arguing against Gnostic heresy. Irenaeus likened Scripture to a portrait in mosaic; and affirmed that the key to the correct arrangement of its many fragments was to be found in the body of catechetical teaching, not in the arbitrary plan affected by the Gnostics of piecing together verses in defiance of their contextual meaning. Like Irenaeus, the Reformers saw the Bible as a portrait—but as a finished production which conveyed its own truth; not as the jigsaw puzzle of mosaic fragments which required a key before the portrait could appear, and then perhaps be wrong. To them all portions of Scripture were not of the same relative value—as with fragments of mosaic; but in the one portrait some portions depicted the central figure—which they called “the Gospel,” others formed the background and were not of such intrinsic value though equally necessary to make up the whole. And then as they studied the portrait, the wonder happened; the figure came to life, and through Scripture they found Christ.

So, indeed, does Professor W. P. Paterson of Edinburgh sum up the position in his book *The Rule of Faith*. “The Reformers,” he writes, “proclaimed the Scriptures to be the supreme standard, yet the authority which they practically acknowledged was not that of the *whole* Bible, but the Bible *as a whole* interpreted from its centre.” And it is this truth of the essential unity of Scripture which the 20th Article affirms against the allegorical interpretations of the Schoolmen, when it forbids the Church so to expound one place of Scripture that it be repugnant to another.

The attitude of the Reformers to the Bible has been elucidated most ably both by Dr. Lindsay<sup>1</sup> in his *History of the Reformation*, and by Mr. Sydney Carter in his book *The Reformers and Holy Scripture*. I speak merely as their disciple, and I find that their conclusions agree together on all essentials.

I am, however, more than a little doubtful whether Mr. Carter is quite justified in suggesting that while continental Reformers held a belief in the dynamical and plenary inspiration of Scripture, the views of English Reformers inclined more nearly to a view of mechanical and verbal inspiration. The Zurich letters show that the early Reformers themselves were unconscious of any such distinction between them, but that they regarded the Reformation

<sup>1</sup> “All this Reformation Doctrine is ably stated in Lindsay, *The History of the Reformation*, Vol. I, pp. 453-467. (Note by Dr. Griffiths-Thomas in *The Principles of Theology*, p. 287.)

as an international movement in which all were agreed upon fundamentals. And this view is strikingly confirmed by the *Harmony of Protestant Confessions* published in 1586, for which Cranmer himself worked hard in 1551.

It is, also, dangerous to press too far the affirmations of early Reformers (often pictorially expressed) concerning Inspiration into precise definitions of the mode of Inspiration, which as we have seen was not then a matter of inquiry.

And in any case the fact remains that there is no suggestion of the verbal infallibility of Scripture in any of their formularies—either in the Articles of Religion or in the authoritative Confession drawn up by Bishop Jewell for the Protestant Harmony on behalf of the Church of England. The phrase in the 20th Article “Gods word written” quite obviously does not mean “written by God,” but is a Reformation formula contrasting the Bible with the “unwritten word” of Church tradition—and is so employed by Cardinal Bellarmine in his work, *De Verbum Dei*. He writes—“All necessary doctrine concerning faith and morals is not necessarily contained in Scripture, and consequently beside the Written Word is needed an unwritten one, whereas they [the Reformers] teach that in Scripture all such necessary doctrine is contained and consequently there is no need of an unwritten word.”

Neither do I quite follow Mr. Carter in refusing Dr. Lindsay's distinction between “the Word of God” and “the Scriptures” as held by the early Reformers. Dr. Lindsay means, I take it, that the Reformers experienced a living voice speaking to their hearts from pages which heretofore had been but a dead letter. Also, that they found in Scripture a kernel and central content which explained all the rest and to which all the rest pointed. This central content I have ventured to liken to the figure in a portrait. The Reformers called it “the Gospel,” and, possessing it, Luther was rashly willing to scrap the remainder. And it is this Gospel to which the 6th Article refers when it declares that “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation.”

There is no need to be frightened at this good Reformation word “contain” which is also employed in the Homily on Holy Scripture—“in it is *contained* God's true word setting forth His glory and man's duty.” It has no derogatory significance as if the Bible contained also other matter not necessarily inspired. As used by the Reformers Scripture *contained* the Word of God as a material body contains a living soul, and so *was* the Word of God. Only, as Dr. Lindsay warns us, when we affirm that the Bible is the Word of God we must not exaggerate the copula “is” to denote complete identity, “but some relation as can be more exactly rendered by *contains, presents, conveys, records*—all of which phrases are used in the writings of Reformers or in the creeds of the Reformation Churches.”

If, therefore, Holy Scripture has been the supreme authority in the Church of England since the Reformation—this is not because the early Reformers held a doctrine of Inspiration which is

untenable to-day, nor does that authority rest in any degree upon a belief in mechanical inspiration or of verbal infallibility. And I wish very much that we would be content to copy the early Reformers in affirming from our own experience what the Bible effects as the Word of God, rather than to spread doubt and dissension by a barren speculation as to what exactly Inspiration means. Bishop Jewell's Confession regarding the canonical Scriptures, which he drew up on behalf of the Church of England, is most illuminating in its affirmations in contrast with the endless definitions over which we quarrel to-day. To Jewell the Scriptures were the heavenly voices whereby God hath opened to us His will ; in them can be abundantly and fully comprehended all things whatsoever we need for our help ; they were the foundations of the prophets and apostles whereupon is built the Church of God—and therefore they are the very sure and infallible rule, whereby may be tried whether the Church do swerve or err, and whereunto all ecclesiastical doctrine ought to be called to account ; and against the Scriptures neither law nor ordinance nor any custom ought to be heard.

What is this but to affirm from experience that in the Scriptures, as nowhere else, is perfectly revealed the mind of Christ Himself? Accepting this premise with the Reformers, we must also accept their conclusion—namely that Scripture is the supreme authority for church doctrine. And, as a matter of fact, has any doctrine or cult of worship unknown to the Reformers been discovered since their time which might make us hesitate to affirm with them that “ Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation ” ?

## II.

I pass from the supremacy of Holy Scripture to the other part of my subject—namely the exercise of the authority of Scripture in church doctrine and worship.

The question is of first-rate importance, for in our negotiations with other Churches it would be fatal to allow as the official teaching of the Church of England any belief or practise which is ruled out by its “ fundamental principle.” And I would underline the phrase “ *official teaching*.” It is one thing to allow a wide latitude to the private opinions of individual members of a Church. It is quite another matter to construe such rightful toleration into what the Church allows to be officially taught or practised.

Four of the Articles of Religion—Articles 6, 20, 21 and 34—define more particularly the authority of Scripture and exemplify its working.

According to these Articles, the sanction of Scriptural authority is of two kinds—positive and negative. Positively, there is the warranty of Scripture—namely what is contained therein or may be proved thereby. And negatively, there is the silence of Scripture—namely what is not contrary to Scripture though it cannot be proved from it.

According to these Articles, again, the ordinances of the Church (all of which require Scriptural authority) fall into two categories—doctrine and worship. And according to these Articles, once

more, all *Church doctrine* requires both sanctions—it must be proved by the express warranty of Scripture as well as not being contrary to it; but the *Rites and Ceremonies* of worship require the latter sanction only—they must not be repugnant to the Word of God.

It is necessary, therefore, to be quite clear as to the difference between doctrine and the less important rites and ceremonies. A *rite* means the form of words used in the services of the Church, and a *ceremony* is any accompanying action, such as the use of the ring in marriage; even as the title page of the Prayer Book speaks of the “administration of the Sacraments, and *other Rites and Ceremonies* of the Church.” Now the 20th and 34th Articles declare quite definitely that particular Churches have power and authority to decree Rites or Ceremonies, so that nothing be ordained against God’s Word. Does this mean that the official prayers and practices of Church worship do not require the express warranty of Scripture, but that the silence of Scripture is itself sufficient sanction, as long as they cannot be shown to be forbidden by its teaching? It was, you will remember, upon this crucial point that controversy centred regarding the Revised Prayer Book; and the question is again raised in an acute form in negotiations on Reunion.

It is then of the greatest consequence to observe that the compilers of the Prayer Book drew a clear distinction between the Sacraments “ordained by Christ Himself,” and other Rites and Ceremonies “ordained only by man’s authority.” The distinction is made not only, as we have seen on the title page of the Prayer Book, but also in those Articles which treat of the Sacraments and the Traditions of the Church.

And the practical effect of the distinction is that the Sacraments (in that they are “generally necessary for salvation”—as the Catechism puts it) rank with articles of faith in requiring the express warranty of Scripture as the authority of their rites and ceremonies. Thus while the 34th Article affirms that ceremonies or rites ordained only by man’s authority can be ordained, changed, and abolished by particular Churches, so that nothing be ordained against God’s Word; the 25th and 28th Articles forbid the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper to be gazed upon, or carried about, or reserved, or lifted up, or worshipped because, though Scripture does not specifically forbid such practices, they do not possess the sanction of Christ’s ordinance.

As practically all discussion regarding Prayer Book revision, and all negotiations regarding Reunion with other Episcopal Churches, is concerned with the office of Holy Communion, it is essential to know that, as long as the Church of England is true to herself and her principles, she cannot authorize, or assent to, any kind of Eucharistic worship which does not possess the express warranty of Scripture. But more than this the principle followed by the Reformers in framing the service and ritual of Holy Communion reveals a further principle which regulates all other rites and ceremonies of the Church—namely that, although rites and ceremonies themselves require only not to be contrary to Scripture, the doctrine



behind them which they express must possess the clear warranty of Scripture in addition.

This principle is affirmed by the Lambeth Conference Report on the Unity of the Church, when the Delegation of the Orthodox Church was informed that "if there were any ambiguity in the Thirty-nine Articles, they should be interpreted by what the Prayer Book itself said." A statement which was accepted by the Delegation as satisfactory to the Orthodox. That statement at the top of page 135 of the Lambeth Report will justify, in the eyes of all, the opposition that many of us felt compelled to maintain against the controversial portions of the Revised Prayer Book. Historically, of course, the statement cannot be true. The Thirty-nine Articles were intended to interpret the Prayer Book not the Prayer Book the Thirty-nine Articles. Much of the devotional language and forms of pre-reformation Service Books were conserved by the Reformers and incorporated into the Prayer Book, because they had become dear to worshippers by long use. But the risk of misconception in so doing was avoided by the formulation of the Thirty-nine Articles, to which all clergy were required to subscribe. That is to say—the Reformation teaching of the Articles is the interpreter of all in the Prayer Book that is borrowed from non-reformation sources, and not vice-versa.

At the same time I do not seriously quarrel with the statement if considered as an ideal at which to aim. Certainly the Prayer Book and the Articles of Religion of a Church should be complementary and should explain and express each other. As was strongly urged during the Prayer Book controversy, the Book of Common Prayer is not simply a collection of Prayers but a People's Book of Doctrine—"Lex orandi, lex credendi." And the doctrine expressed by all rites and ceremonies should be approved by the clear warranty of Holy Scripture.

Such was certainly the working principle of those who gave us both the Prayer Book and the Articles. When in the Second Act of Uniformity Archbishop Cranmer described his First Prayer Book as "a very godly order . . . agreeable to the Word of God," he referred to the book in general not to every particular prayer, and he declared what had been the sincere intention of a first "tentative and provisional" effort. He condemned as "Mistakers" those who had sought to interpret Reformed doctrine by the prayers of his Common Service, and he was careful to make the Second Prayer Book "fully perfect" by removing all errors and ambiguities which experience had discovered in the First Book. This he effected (as the result shows) by subjecting the First Prayer Book to the bar of Scripture and removing from it whatever could not be proved thereby—and so producing that Second Prayer Book which, to all intents and purposes, is the one which enshrines to-day the doctrine of the Church of England. If then both the Articles and the Prayer Book reveal the express sanction of Scripture as the basis of Anglican doctrine, the "supremacy of Scripture" must ever remain as the basis of any fellowship with other Communion.