Editorial.

LAODICEAN CHRISTIANITY

"IT is always necessary to guard the eternal Gospel from becoming unduly subordinated to what is transitory, and to-day it is to be seen against a setting of peculiar transitoriness. We cannot and must not do that very thing that will most surely be demanded of us and our refusal to do which will be most deeply resented. We cannot preach as the Gospel that which is not the Gospel. Yet human devices have a way of claiming that they are the Gospel, the essence of the Gospel, the Gospel brought up to date, and this will be no less true of the pale ideology proposed for England than of the full-blooded ideology which took Germany by storm. We shall be expected to preach what is inadequate and sub-Christian, just as the German Church was met with the demand to preach what was arrogant and anti-Christian. Already there are whispers of this. They will become more clamorous."

The quotation is from one of the most striking pamphlets produced recently and one which certainly carries a prophetic message for the Church of to-day.* Its author, Frank Bennett, brings us realistically face to face with the situation with which the Church—and more particularly the Church of England—is confronted in this humanistic and totalitarian age. In doing so he says many things which Evangelical Churchmen have felt for some time, and perhaps increasingly within the last year or so. It is scarcely necessary to remark that the things said are no mere platitudes or pleasantries. They are uncomfortable things—mercilessly honest, deeply disturbing. But they are things which needed to be said and they have been said well by one who has rightly discerned the signs of the times.

Beyond doubt the gravest danger of this hour is that the Church in our land should abandon her God-given mission, and in doing so should compromise her message and lower her standards. The temptation to do so will become increasingly strong in order to gain the approval and blessing of a State which, at the moment, is in a mood to recognize the desirability—and even the necessity—of "religion" of a sort, in order "to bolster up the tottering human fabric." Such "religion" has lately been accorded official approbation as part and parcel of our new educational system. But what is its character and content? Certainly it is not the religion of the New Testament, but something far more mild and colourless. Our author designates it as "British Christianity" and rightly identifies it with Latitudinarianism of a former generation—"Christianity with the Incarnation, the Atonement and the Sacraments left out." It is not, in fact, Christianity at all, but merely a modern substitute for it. Thus the Church in our land will be faced with the same peril as confronted the Church in Nazi Germany—with the differences inherent in our

* *Laodicea in the Twentieth Century* (S.P.C.K., 1/6).

situation—viz. the peril of being wholly dominated, and dictated to, by the State. Mr. Bennett envisages the sort of thing that will happen. "The first attempt will be to take over the Church, and only if and when the Church refuses to be taken over will it be thrown over. Already the demand arises for a Church cut to the measure of twentieth century doubt, attuned to the swan-song of a declining civilization. . . . The demand will be that we become, not Nazis, but Pelagians; that we abandon Paul, not because he was a Jew, but because he was a theologian; that we take into a pantheon, not Woden and Thor, but Buddha and Mohammed and any other founders of religions of whom the Englishman may happen to have heard."

The faith by which the Church lives—and perhaps, more important, the faith for which it lives—is the faith of the New Testament: the faith which is truly Catholic because it is truly Apostolic. There is, as Mr. Bennett says, a crucial distinction between faith in the Incarnate, Crucified and Risen Lord, and a religion that is nothing but high principles and good example. This latter is, in relation to the eternal Gospel, heresy. "For it is based upon a different set of doctrines. It is set over against the faith of the Bible and the Church. We must not base our evangelism upon it, we must not frame our policy upon it, above all we must not see it for what it is not. We must abandon this facile talk of there being 'a lot of religion about.' There are religions and religions, there are false religions, and the question is not whether there is religion, but which religion."

That is the question. Which religion? Vital Christianity is a long way removed from a vague, sentimental humanism, even though it labels itself Christian. Labels count for little in these times. Indeed, it is significant that it is apparently necessary nowadays to append some such adjective as "vital" in speaking of Christianity (as we did above) in order to make clearer what we are talking about. And this lends support to Mr. Bennett's suggestion that the time may have come when it is desirable that we should abandon the use of the very word "Christianity" as having gone beyond recall and lost its real significance. Admittedly few words have been so perverted and abused as this. All manner of sects and systems to-day claim to be "Christian." We have Christian Science, Christian Modernism, Christian Democracy, even Christian Spiritualism, to mention but a few examples; yet what relation, if any, do these bear to the apostolic faith?

The Church must hold fast to the one Gospel and reaffirm, as in Paul's day, that "though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other Gospel unto you than that we have preached unto you, let him be accursed." For the Church to pronounce such an anathema in this age of easy-going tolerance and broad-minded charity will not be easy, and assuredly will not be popular. But we might as well make up our minds that a Church that is loyal will never be popular in the world which we know. The Church has no concern with popularity, only with fidelity. Her business from first to last is to "hold fast" and to "hold forth" the faith of the Gospel as Christ's witness before the world.

What would be the effect if the Church in our own land were " to take a firm, unequivocal, challenging stand upon the elements of the original Gospel "? Mr. Bennett assures us that the result would be " extremely devastating " as far as large sections of the rank and file of our people are concerned. Undoubtedly he is right. It is more than unlikely that by taking such a stand we should immediately gain large numbers of new adherents; what is certain is that we should straightway lose a great many of the old ones. The true Church would become a mere minority among the mass of those who still professed and called themselves Christians, very much like the Confessional Church in Germany. Possibly it would not be persecuted in the same way as the German Church: Mr. Bennett thinks not. He suggests that the loyal minority who are not willing to be " brought up to date " will simply be cold-shouldered by the State—ignored, undermined, whittled away. That is what will make the ordeal so difficult to bear. We shall be provided with no dramatic issue, no opportunity for heroic action. We shall simply be the Church in the wilderness saying " No " to the totalitarian demands of the Nation and refusing to be " planned."

If such be the prospect before us, what is the voice of the Spirit to our Laodicean Church of to-day? Undoubtedly it is, as of old, a call to " be zealous . . . and repent." The Living Christ, whom we have well-nigh banished by our faithlessness and unbelief, must be re-admitted and re-enthroned. " Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me." There alone lies the salvation of the Church in the twentieth-century as in the first. We have made the mistake of thinking in terms of new plans and programmes—of new methods and a new message—when what is required as the prime necessity is a return to the old well-beaten paths and a recovery of the old well-tried faith. The Church must be the Church—and the Gospel must be the Gospel. That is all. Nothing more is needed. But nothing less will suffice.