

THE PERMANENCE OF PRIMITIVE CHRISTIAN INSTITUTIONS.

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Developed religion is very complex. Essentially it is an inward spiritual experience, and might perhaps be defined as the soul's consciousness of its relation to God. The ideal is that of full, mutual, unbroken, and unclouded communion between the spiritual Father and His spiritual children. This implies an absence not only of all estrangement due to sin, but also the absence of all obstructions due to the limitations of our material earthly existence. Men in such a state would need no aids to devotion, no assistance from the spiritual vision of other men, no stimulus from the piety and worship of others. This is the ideal which man's soul would realize, the goal and consummation to which we believe God's children are hastening when in beatific vision they shall see Him face to face and know fully even as they are fully known.

But now they see in a mirror darkly; even those with keenest spiritual vision know but in part and they can prophesy but in part. The conditions of our present existence draw a veil over the refulgent splendors of the spiritual world until they are but dimly seen and realized. Man is a spiritual and immortal soul, but he is also a material animal being. He is in touch with two worlds, having affinities for both, but fully cognizant of neither. Sin has thickened the veil that hangs for him over the spiritual and hence the dimness of his apprehension of spiritual realities, his indifference to them, his doubts and uncertainties concerning them. Hence, also, the necessity which each individual feels for gaining all possible aid from the piety, worship, visions and experiences of others. It is this inability to see clearly and fully for ourselves which makes the Bible a revelation to us, social

worship an inspiration and spiritual uplift, fellowship in spiritual things necessary to religious vigor and happiness.

Christianity is a spiritual religion. It proposes in a unique way so to renovate the weak and wicked souls of men that they shall be fitted and prepared for an eternal, unbroken, and unclouded communion with all holy souls and with the Father of all spirits. Nay, it goes further, beyond all other religions, and proposes to spiritualize and save even the body. It teaches that the body is even now the temple of the Holy Spirit of God and shall be raised a spiritual, incorruptible body, fitted for the spiritual glories of a spiritual heaven. Religion is primarily an experience of God here and now, a spiritual communion between the soul and Him. But the Founder of Christianity recognized the impossibility of a purely personal and spiritual religion even after the full revelation of God made by Himself and with the rich experience ministered by Him. Man is a social being and needs the presence and help of other like-minded men in worship and service. His spiritual experiences and aspirations need the support of some external and visible symbols and ceremonies. Accordingly Jesus instituted or recognized and approved certain external institutions intended to be aids to personal religion and also to the service expected of citizens of His kingdom. They were intended to express, conserve and propagate the spiritual realities of that kingdom. They were at least four; a *Church* or society of men and women who believed in God as revealed by Jesus Christ and engaged to realize as far as possible in themselves and others the will of God in the propagation of His kingdom; the ministry or the *officials* of this society who were a body of men called of God and their brethren, because of the possession of special gifts of nature and grace, to a special service. This grace and authority is rather personal than official, and the service expected does not differ in kind from that incumbent on

all Christians. These officers are simply ministers among their brethren. The third is *baptism* which is the immersion of a believer in the name of the Trinity in the common element of water as a symbol of spiritual burial with Christ who died and was buried, and of spiritual resurrection with Christ who rose again triumphant over death and the grave. It is a pictorial confession of faith in the triune God, in the central fact in the plan of redemption and the historic earthly existence of Jesus, and a solemn proclamation to the world of a spiritual change in oneself so profound that it can be adequately symbolized by nothing else than the burial of an old self and the resurrection of a new and transfigured self. The fourth institution is the *supper*. It is a joint participation in two of the elements of a common meal by the spiritual children of the heavenly Father as a perpetual and oft repeated reminder and proclamation of the death of Christ, His broken body and poured out blood. If this brief statement is a correct interpretation of the sources, these are the simple and yet profoundly significant institutions of primitive Christianity ordained or approved by Jesus while in the flesh. And our task is to enquire into the possibility and desirability of their perpetuation and permanence in their original primitive forms and meaning. The inquiry is of deepest significance for us Baptists because we believe we now hold and practice these institutions in their primitive form and significance, and further believe that it is our peculiar task, not only to reproduce original Christianity as a sect or denomination, but if possible to bring all men everywhere to an acceptance of these views. In other words we believe in the permanent and universal validity and value of primitive Christianity with all its institutions, and regard any serious departure from these institutions as a serious loss to the spiritual riches of the kingdom of God. Is it desirable to perpetuate these institutions in their primitive form and meaning among all races and

conditions of men? If not, our distinctive position and work are an impertinence. We should cease our polemics, accept the popular verdict and take life a little easier than we sometimes find it. Is it possible to perpetuate them, gradually approaching a universality of acceptance which may ultimately become complete? If not our task is so far a hopeless one. Have these institutions with their primitive form and significance permanent value for all men in the kingdom of God? Do they serve the spiritual more effectually than the Christian institutions held and practiced by any other body of Christian people? Unless we can answer this last question in the affirmative and demonstrate by actual experiment in competition with other conceptions that the primitive conception is most effective we are following a forlorn hope. It is not sufficient for most men to show that they are biblical, that they were instituted by Christ, that they were valid nineteen hundred years ago. We must show that they still have supreme value. The standard of judgment applied by most thoughtful men is the ability to serve the spiritual *now*, and the ultimate test of divine origin and approval is efficiency in doing what God wants done in the world *now*. These institutions were not instituted and do not exist for themselves. They have no sacredness or value in themselves. They are to be judged in their relation to man. If they have already ceased, or in the future shall cease, to minister to the spiritual welfare of man it is most certain that it will be the will of Christ to abolish them. They were made for man and when they no longer serve man they have ceased to exist except as encumbrances of the ground which should be cleared for the sowing of spiritual seed whose life is to be nourished in some other way. It is impossible to preserve our faith in Christ and at the same time believe that He instituted anything not dictated by the highest wisdom, or that He could desire the perpetuation of an institution which

failed of its purpose or had served its end and thereby ceased to be useful. We must plant ourselves squarely and fearlessly on this ground or we shall have no basis for effective appeal to the age in which we live. Gradually men are coming to value *men* more than *institutions*, to see that it is man who is served, the object of God's love and care. Hourly the institution is called upon to justify its existence by the test of its value to man. "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath." The same principle applies with equal right and force to every other institution sacred and secular, ecclesiastical, social and civil. Nothing could be more just or more hopeful for the race. And I may add that in my opinion nothing could be more hopeful for the future of primitive Christian ordinances. We must come to the point where our polemics rise into the realm of apologetics, where our polemic is an apologetic for Christ, for man and for the eternal unchanging relations between the two. Can we then justify our position on this broad spiritual basis?

At the very threshold of the discussion we are met by the contention that Christianity is purely personal and spiritual, "a private matter," that institutions in any form are a positive hindrance to the spiritual interests of the spiritual kingdom of God. It is pointed out with truth that the institutions of Christianity have been and are still the chief causes of division, strife, animosity and even bloodshed among Christians, that while all parties are largely agreed on the great spiritual realities and the Christian view of life they are at each others' throats over the institutions. It is still further pointed out that there is ground for fear that multitudes of Christians are relying for salvation upon the institutions rather than on the Christ; the material and external have usurped the place of the inward and spiritual. To avoid these dangers and abuses, it is claimed, we should abolish institutions altogether. What shall we say to these alle-

gations? Is there danger in the institutions of Christianity? We are compelled to answer emphatically that there is. It can not be denied that they are a menace to the life of the spirit. The history of Christianity abundantly shows that men exalt them to a place where they obscure the spiritual, where the personal divine Christ fades behind more or less human institutions. They in themselves become holy and sacred, the objects of God's love and care, until at last they are regarded as if man were made for them and not they for man. The husk has absorbed and devoured the kernel. Men and women seek cleansing and salvation in the church, in the ordinances, in the mummeries and flummeries of an official priesthood of supposed divine powers and prerogatives rather than in the love of the crucified Redeemer and the grace of the living God. In this experience Christianity is not isolated. The history of all religions is marked by the growth of institutionalism and the tendency to displace the spiritual by the external and material. Jesus Himself lived in the midst of religious conditions of this nature. The glorious days of spiritual freedom and direct vision when the prophet spoke out of the fulness of his own spiritual experience had given place to the priest, the scribe and the Pharisee. They made void the ancient word of God by their traditions. They strained out the gnats and swallowed the camels; they gave tithes of their garden herbs and omitted the weightier matters of the law,—love, mercy and justice; they cleansed the outside of the cup and the platter until they were as beautiful as whitened sepulchres while within they were full of all uncleanness. Even long before the coming of Christ the prophets had been compelled to declare that God hated the feasts and solemn assemblies even though they had been instituted at His own command. What the people needed to do was to let righteousness roll down as a river while now it melted away as a morning cloud. This condition was due to the usurpation of the material, the insti-

tutional, until the spiritual which these institutions were meant to conserve and foster, had lost its significance and almost its existence. It was this institutional religion which offered the most malignant and relentless opposition to the spiritual and practical programme of Jesus and which at last crucified Him. The Lord of the Sabbath must be killed because He was in their thought guilty of an infraction of the Sabbath in serving man. The institution of the Sabbath was as they thought more important than man. They stood without the door of Pilate's palace lest they be defiled and thereby prevented from celebrating the Passover, one of their institutions; but they stood there crying for the blood of an innocent and harmless Man. They clamored until the Roman governor felt compelled to proceed to the brutal cruelty of breaking the legs of the agonizing criminals on the cross that they might die a little earlier and thus avoid defiling the high day of the morrow, one of their institutions. The institution was everything, man in his innocence, his anguish, his need, is nothing. Such is the dangerous tendency of institutions in religion. And Jesus knew this to be so. Moreover we are compelled to believe that He foresaw how these institutions which He was confirming would cause division, strife, bloodshed, would be perverted, hardened and exalted until they would almost displace Himself. And yet with these personal experiences of what institutions of divine origin had grown into in His day and with the prevision of what His own institutions would become, He nevertheless established them. Could anything more forcibly emphasize His conception of the necessity of such institutions to the existence of spiritual life and activity? His own aims and ideals were supremely spiritual. "The kingdom of God is within you;" it is spiritual, its truth must be spiritually discerned. And yet knowing the danger, being Himself about to be crucified by institutional religion, having purely spiritual ends in view, He ordains or ap-

proves these institutions. The conclusion is irresistible that they have a supreme value for the spiritual life, a value so great as to warrant the risk, nay the perversion and misuse which He must have foreseen. On no other supposition can one believe that they had their beginning and perpetuation with His approval.

But by others it is claimed that if not actually hurtful these institutions, some or all of them, are at least useless for the more developed Christians. Baptism and church membership, for example, may be of value to the average or weak Christian, but no longer minister, so it is claimed, to the needs of the cultured and developed and therefore are not incumbent as an obligation resting upon them. It is no doubt true that the ideal state would be a society so thoroughly Christianized that every individual would be an independent and persistent Christian unit. No organization or ceremony for purposes of propaganda would then be necessary, because all would be Christian. But we are still, even in the best communities, far from this goal. Christians form but a part of the community as a whole, and vigorous propaganda is still necessary. Moreover in the nature of the case this must always be so, since men are not born Christians except in name and in a political sense. When Tertullian cried out, "Men are by nature Christians," he meant only that they are naturally monotheists. If the whole world were genuinely Christian to-day it would be necessary to take up the work of propagation again to-morrow. It is a task that can never be finished as long as men are being born into the world. Hence organization, the church and its ministry, will always be necessary. It is conceivable that some university professor, literary man or saint of another calling, could live a life as genuinely religious and as truly serviceable apart from other Christians as if he were a member of one of these organizations. But it is extremely doubtful and experience does not recommend the plan. The independent individ-

ual Christian is usually inactive and ineffective. Christian service is social service. Christian worship is social worship, and both can best be performed in a society where men touch elbows and hearts with their fellows. Christianity is preeminently social and fraternal, and whatever binds men together into a harmonious brotherhood of service, with similar aims, ideals and aspirations, must be of the highest value to the individual.

The one extensive effort to hold and propagate a purely spiritual and personal Christianity was that made by George Fox and the Quakers. He supplanted "the church" by a "society of friends," without a recognized ministry and without ordinances; with no formal services, no consecrated buildings, "steeple houses" as he temptuously called them. The "inner light" of a personal illumination was so emphasized as almost to make the Bible secondary. None of the usual aids to worship and service were employed. Institutional Christianity was abolished. And with what results? It must be admitted that it produced a rather high type of man so far as probity and philanthropy are concerned. But he was odd, narrow and isolated. He did not deeply influence the community in which he lived. The result as a whole was rather negative than positive. The impulse given to the movement by the fiery zeal of the founder soon died away; Quakerism ceased to grow and is now largely negligible. The total results have not been such as to recommend a non-institutional Christianity, since even the Quakers themselves have felt compelled to restore some of the elements of Christian institutions. The men who maintain the uselessness of Christian institutions have not sufficiently studied the comparative failure of this movement nor have they considered the need of institutions as revealed by religious psychology. The institutions not only obey a divine command given nearly 1900 years ago and conceivably temporary; in that case they might possibly be neglected; but they also must pre-

sent human needs. They not only contain and express religious truths and facts, they impress and strengthen human nature. Men organize in order to carry forward every great human undertaking. Shall they not organize to push forward the supreme enterprise of human history, the kingdom of God? All fraternal orders know the value of rites of initiation and ceremonies expressive of the fraternal relations and other ideals and aims of the order. Shall the great universal fraternity be stripped of all such helps? It is contrary to reason and sound judgment. A Christianity without organization, social worship, ordinances or trained teachers and leaders would rapidly fall into decay and superstition and might disappear altogether. The strength and vigor of a religion, its hold upon the popular heart, is usually in direct proportion to the number and efficiency of its teachers. Christianity has found little power of resistance in those religions which were poorly supplied with teachers and other institutions, while those with enthusiastic and effective teachers, as Judaism and Mohammedanism, have proven so far unconquerable. The religions of the Roman world and those of the rest of Europe in the early Christian centuries were largely non-institutional and they went down before Christianity almost without a struggle. It was not wholly the superior truth, the higher conception of God, presented by Christianity which carried it so rapidly to victory. Its superior organization, its institutions, its propaganda through trained teachers were large factors in its success. To have been without institutions would have doomed it to extinction in those early years. What was absolutely necessary then can not be wholly without value now. If some superior spirit regards himself as above the need of external institutions let him consider the needs of the common man, and himself learn humility by submitting to the helps so necessary to his brother. He may find that they are not without value to himself. There is here a liberalism that

thinks well of itself and doubtless values spiritual religion, but which is nevertheless most dangerous to the success of the kingdom of God. Institutions have their danger, but to abandon them is to court extinction. The religious nature of man is such that the permanence of religion demands the permanence of religious institutions.

But the position of the great body of both Catholics and Protestants is different from the above. Agreeing that spiritual religion demands the support of institutions it is claimed that the primitive form and significance are either unimportant or impossible of permanence and preservation. By some it is asserted that to the Church were promised the continual presence and guidance of the Spirit and that under that guidance the institutions as they now exist have been evolved. They, therefore, have the approval of God. What existed in germ has been warmed into life by the divine Spirit. The primitive institutions were the seeds, the present institutions are the legitimate flower and fruitage. To prefer the primitive institutions is to prefer the seed to the full grown plant, and to attempt to return to primitive conditions, so it is claimed, is to reverse the course of nature. It is impossible, it is claimed, and undesirable. Of course there are large bodies of Protestants who strive to maintain that Baptists have not correctly interpreted their sources, that they themselves and not the Baptists hold these institutions in their primitive purity. But it is not presumptuous to assert that the scholarship of the world which is free from all ecclesiastical shackles is singularly united in its agreement with Baptists as to the form and significance of primitive Christian institutions. The method of some Protestants in justifying their practices which vary from New Testament teaching is to assert the unimportance of form or the inevitableness of evolution. In proof of these contentions an appeal is made to history. It is pointed out that change and adjustment

began almost immediately, that the process was universal and unceasing, or almost so, and that it has continued through the centuries; and finally that of the five hundred millions of Christians in the world to-day not more than ten millions or one-fiftieth of the whole number preserve anything like the primitive institutions. Does not an evolution which is so nearly complete and absolute present a powerful presumptive argument for its inevitableness and justification? The claim is all the more plausible when it is remembered that our effort at reversion to type is comparatively quite recent and so far as it has been successful is of conscious and heroic endeavor. Is it possible, it is asked, that such an evolution could have taken place without there being in the nature of things some powerful reason for it?

Let us admit frankly that the case against us, when put in this form, is a very strong one; that the testimony of history is rather staggering. Whether one admits that for centuries Scriptural institutions in their purity ceased altogether or is bold enough to claim that he can trace an attenuated line of succession through the centuries, the problem of Providence is almost equally great. Did the world slip beyond the Lord's control or was it His will that this evolution should take place? Can it be shown that it is possible and important to perpetuate primitive Christian institutions in face of these facts?

Beyond question it is not possible to present such considerations as shall convince our opponents, at least within any measurable time. But is it possible to convince ourselves? To most of us, no doubt, the fact of Scriptural command is sufficient proof. But when we come to consider the matter closely we find that many divinely ordained institutions were temporary, and were changed or passed away altogether in the course of time. Did the Lord intend Christian institutions to change? It is pointed out that primitive institutions have not been permanent or final, and it is claimed that they must adapt

themselves to their environment, else they would make no appeal to men. To these contentions have we any adequate reply, at least a reply that will convince and satisfy ourselves? For our usefulness and service in the world this is a most important inquiry. If we are beset by doubts as to our position we are shorn of our strength; if we regard our task as useless or hopeless we had better quit. It may be very heroic to lead a forlorn hope, but we shall find it difficult to persuade many other men to share our high adventure. They want to do something which is worth while and which offers some hope of success.

What can we say, therefore, in reply to the above arguments? In the first place we assert our deep faith in the supreme wisdom of Christ. We believe that nothing else would have served men and the kingdom of God in the first century of the Christian era as well as the institutions which He ordained, in the form and with the significance which He gave to them. This we are compelled to believe if we accept Him as divine Lord and Master. Now if they were the embodiment and expression of divine wisdom in the first century it is manifestly impossible that men should have so changed as to need something totally different by the end of the fourth century when the institutions were already greatly changed. God and the gospel are permanent and unvarying. It is only man that could change. But history knows of no radical change in men in this period. Men were essentially the same in all the great characteristics of the race in the fourth century as in the first. Hence the change was not simply an adaptation but a perversion. What was divine wisdom for man in the first century would have been divine wisdom in every century.

Again, perhaps no one would admit that all which has been evolved in the course of the centuries is an expression of the will of God. Certainly no Protestant could make any such admission. If now a part of the product

of this evolution is a perversion of truth, who shall decide what part? Shall we question the patriarch of Constantinople, or the pope of Rome, or Luther, or Calvin, or Cranmer or Wesley? Manifestly there is no standard of judgment and no means of reaching the truth or knowing what the will of God is if once we accept the process of evolution as a justification of what now is. Then we must fall back upon the Church as the only means of authenticating the truth—a Catholic principle which we shall be slow to adopt.

In the next place we decline to admit that the changes of the past were a natural and inevitable development due to a failure of Christian institutions to fit regenerated human nature and properly express gospel truth. These institutions were not evolved into something else through the development of germs contained in themselves, but were changed through the absorption of elements from preexistent institutions, political, social and religious, with which Christianity came in contact. The changes were due to external and extraneous influences and were therefore of the nature of corruptions. They unfit Christianity to be a universal and permanent religion. As time passes they must be eliminated by such cataclysmic struggles as the Reformation. They rise up as serious barriers to missionary progress in non-Christian lands. At bottom the question is one of psychology. Are there universal and permanent elements of human nature found in every race, age and clime, upon which Christian institutions have been built? That there are important variations among men is evident, but science, history and religion declare that all men are brothers, that the fundamental elements of their nature are everywhere the same.

The only other inquiry is as to whether primitive Christian institutions were based upon these universal elements which would give them permanence and universality. As to whether Christ did actually do so is of

course a matter of opinion; but it seems almost impossible to believe otherwise when we consider that He was founding a religion which He intended to be at the same time permanent and universal. What is to be permanent and universal must rest upon the permanent and universal elements of human nature. In contending, therefore, for the primitive form and significance of these Christian institutions we believe we are building upon the only foundation which can make Christianity universal, united and triumphant. Variations there will be and must be in non-essentials according to race, antecedents, culture, age and clime, but these simple institutions express essential, vital truth and will fit every people. They express and keep alive the essentials of Christianity as nothing else can. The simple democracy of its organization is a beautiful recognition of the spirit of brotherhood which is the Christian view of human relations. Its officials are not lords or priests, exercising mighty heaven-granted functions which are denied to ordinary mortals, but ministers, servants, leaders of their brethren in every good word and work. Its beautiful ordinance of baptism impressively sets forth, in dramatic and striking symbol, on the one hand the burial (presupposing the death) and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and on the other the regeneration (the spiritual resurrection) of the individual. It is perhaps not too much to say that these are the fundamental facts of Christianity. "If Christ hath not been raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins." It is impossible to overestimate the importance of Christ's resurrection. That it is vital to Christianity is shown by the ingenuity which has been displayed in attempts to explain it away or divest it of all reality by opponents within and without the Church from the days of Celsus to the latest attack. While the resurrection is believed all else is secure. If the anchor holds here the ship can ride out any storm. Scriptural baptism is a pictorial confession of faith in that great fact. No other

form can symbolize or pretends to symbolize it. It is sometimes said that a spoonful of water is as good as an ocean. Quite true if it is to work some magical spiritual transformation. But if it is to set forth some great fact the modification of the symbol is the destruction of its value. Better than the Apostles' Creed is this simple confession of that fact upon which all our hope is based. But the other significance of baptism is scarcely less important. Men are not born in or into the kingdom of God, they are not trained into it; they are born again, born from above, a spiritual shock as profound as death and resurrection. But this is a truth that is constantly falling into obscurity. It requires spiritual discernment, personal experience and the teaching of Scripture and the ordinances to keep it clear. Bible baptism sets this forth with a solemnity and profundity that could be no greater. "We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life." In the light of its profound significance on its human as well as on its divine side how vastly significant the form of baptism is seen to be. How inexcusable and almost criminal the modifications when the truths it was meant to proclaim are so important and yet the objects of such virulent attack to-day!

Again the elements of the supper are not the spiritual and glorified body of Christ, nor do they contain that body and blood, nor are they appropriated in some spiritual and mystical way. They are the simple and impressive symbols of the very real and painful sufferings of the man Christ Jesus. "As often as ye eat this bread, and drink the cup, ye proclaim the Lord's death till he come." In solemn symbol they proclaim that it is not His teaching, nor His example, important as these are, but His sufferings, which avail for us—a truth that needs constant proclamation, for "the offense of the cross" is

still great—"to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness." Every celebration of the symbolic supper proclaims the cross and its agonies as central in the Christian faith.

No, the form and significance of these primitive institutions are not unimportant. The very essence of Christianity itself is bound up with the maintenance of their purity. As a matter of fact as they were changed in the process of the centuries the very nature of Christianity was revolutionized. They have never been changed while Christianity remained pure. It is true that the Reformation went far toward the reestablishment of spiritual religion without restoring them to their original form and meaning. But spiritual religion has suffered as a consequence, for the institutions have sometimes obscured rather than proclaimed the essential facts of our religion.

Our contention, then, is not unimportant. We are not contending for something that is apart from and useless to spiritual truth, but something that is bound up in the most intimate and vital way with the very essence of Christianity itself. If Christianity is to be universal, consistent and harmonious it must be supported by Christian institutions in their original simple beauty and profound significance.