

## OXFORD CONFERENCE OF EVANGELICAL CHURCHMEN.

**General Subject : "The Bible and the Reformation in England."**

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### **The Bible and Doctrine in the Church of England.**

**T**HE fact that the Church of England stands to-day at a parting of the ways gives a note of urgency to the celebration of the fourth centenary of the Reformation and the English Bible.

In the near future the Church must declare her mind regarding two momentous Reports—that on Church and State, and that of the Commission on Christian Doctrine. Her attitude to these two documents must, inevitably, either accelerate the return to medievalism, characteristic of the past century, which would end in the National Church becoming a disestablished Anglo-Catholic sect unrepresentative of English religion ; or else consolidate the reaction of the last fifteen years or so, which seeks to re-affirm those Reformation principles which have made our country what it is. I would, therefore, ask this Conference to view the Quato-centenary Commemoration, which we are discussing, against the background of these two roads ; and pray that this national Bible celebration may prove, under God, the deciding factor as the Church chooses her path.

*Look first at the Church and State Report of 1936.*

It arose directly out of the Prayer Book controversy, ten years ago ; and it contained two "Interim Proposals" which seem likely to take practical shape.

1. The first is a definition of "lawful-authority," to which every ordained minister swears obedience in the conduct of Church worship, though no one knows in whom it resides. The Report rightly holds that "lawful authority" should be the Bishop, acting constitutionally in conjunction with both houses of Convocation and the laity in the National Assembly, and (most important of all) within the limits of the 1662 Prayer Book. Such "lawful authority" would immediately regularize a whole host of customary deviations consistent with Anglican formularies ; and thereby, incidentally, deprive flagrant illegalities in worship from entrenching themselves any longer behind a presumed state of general anarchy. At the same time such an agreed definition of "lawful authority" would, very properly, allow the Church to alter her worship without constant recourse to Parliament—though not beyond the doctrinal standards of the present Prayer Book.

*But here two difficulties arise :*

(a) The Roumanian Report, and the Report of the Doctrinal Commission (p. 9), both consider that the doctrinal standards of the Church of England are to be found rather in the Prayer Book than in the Thirty-nine Articles. This is exactly the reverse of what we were told when the Prayer Book was being revised. And it means that in future every proposed new phrase in the formularies of Church of England worship must satisfy a searching doctrinal test, and be proof against the perverted genius of a Cardinal Newman. There is a good illustration of what I mean on pp. 215 and 216 of the Doctrinal Report. Though it is notorious that Cranmer rigorously excluded all Prayers for the Departed in his Second Prayer Book, the late Archbishops Temple and Maclagan are quoted as holding "that the words in the Prayer of Oblation include the Church Expectant, when prayer is made that 'we and all thy whole Church may obtain remission of our sins.'" I take it that the Church Expectant is the same as the Church Triumphant for whom we praise God in the Prayer for the Church Militant. If so, is it Scriptural, and is it sense, to assert that God's servants departed this life in His faith and fear have not yet received remission of their sins ?

(b) The other difficulty regarding the working of "lawful authority" in the Church, is that of deciding what are the doctrinal limits set by the 1662 Prayer Book. You will remember that all the controversial portions of the Revised Prayer Book of 1928 were declared to be consistent with the old Book, and to represent at most a change of *emphasis*—that convenient word ! May I anticipate the conclusion of this paper by suggesting that the Sixth Article of Religion must be scrupulously enforced ; and that nothing in the faith and worship of the Church can receive "lawful authority" unless it possesses the express warrant of Holy Scripture. In this way the fourth centenary of the English Bible will re-affirm the central principle of the Reformation which gave us our present Prayer Book.

2. The other Interim Proposal of the Church and State Report, which is of present importance, is the formation of a Round Table Conference to ascertain what measure of general agreement can be reached with regard to alterations in Church worship. It is obviously important that both Church and State should know beforehand the nature of the deviations that would be regularized by "lawful authority." But it is equally obvious that a Round Table Conference must concern itself, ultimately, with controversial as well as with uncontroversial proposals ; and discover whether in the last ten years the Church has evolved a more united mind. Once more, it is essential that the Sixth Article, "Of the sufficiency of Holy Scripture" should be regarded as authoritative in all such deliberations.

This brings me to a consideration of the second document now before the Church, the recently issued Report on *Doctrine in the Church of England*. The pronouncements of the Commission on Christian Doctrine are bound to have effect both on a Round Table Conference in particular, and upon Prayer Book Revision in general.

*The calling of a Round Table Conference* would have been premature before the Commission on Doctrine had reported: seeing that both have the same objects in view—namely (to quote from the Commission's terms of reference in 1922), of "demonstrating the extent of existing agreement within the Church of England and . . . investigating how far it is possible to remove or diminish existing differences."

Then, also, the Doctrinal Report offers just that theological basis which should precede *Prayer Book Revision*. The fatal error which doomed the New Prayer Book of 1928 was its origin—namely, the Report of the Royal Commission of 1906 on disorder in the Church. The primary object of Prayer Book Revision became, therefore, not the enrichment of worship, but the restoration of order in the Church by liturgical compromise. If God is not to be dishonoured, the Church must first agree on the truth of its doctrine, and then (and not till then) express that truth in worship with all the fervour and beauty of which we are capable.

Unfortunately it is not possible to accept the Report on Christian Doctrine, as it stands, either as the basis for a Round Table Conference or as a standard for Prayer Book Revision.

The reason is indicated by the title of the Report—namely, "Doctrine *in* the Church of England," not "The Doctrine *of* the Church of England." This careful title explains the apparent, and otherwise surprising, agreement reached by the Report. The agreement is entirely illusionary, and simply means that on controversial questions which imperil the unity of the Church the members of the Commission agreed to differ. But, thereby, the Commission seems to enunciate a new principle for the Church of England, which extends our boasted comprehensiveness to limits of absurdity. According to their Report every sort of doctrine which had the support of a member of the Commission was accepted as legitimate, however violently the other members disagreed with it.

The cause of this over-charitable inclusiveness is not far to seek. In reading the Report it is most noticeable that though the Bible is given its proper place as the supreme authority in matters of doctrine; that authority is never once invoked to settle any questions upon which there is controversy in the Church.

*Let me, then, consider with you, in greater detail, the Doctrinal Report in relation to the Bible:*

On the one hand the statements of the Report with regard to the Bible and its position in the Church of England are wholly admirable. As the Archbishop of York writes in the Introduction, he and his colleagues on the Commission "fully acknowledge the supremacy of Scripture as supplying the standard of doctrine" (p. 8).

"The Church," the Report affirms, "has always claimed that its doctrine is based on Scripture" (p. 27); for "the Bible is unique, as being the inspired record of a unique revelation" (p. 28). Thus, the Report declares, "The Bible has been, and is, for the Christian Church the primary criterion of its teaching and the chief source of guidance for its religious life" (p. 31); and "when all allowance is made for possible divergencies between the records . . . it remains true that the

religious and moral teaching of the Gospels conveys faithfully the impress made upon the Apostolic Church by the mind and personality of Jesus, and thus possesses supreme authority" (p. 33).

Indeed, the following impressive passage excellently summarizes the teaching of the Commission—"The Church is constituted by the acts of God, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit has accepted the Scriptures as being inspired witness to those acts; the Scriptures therefore take priority over all other standards of faith and doctrine" (p. 113).

As will be seen the Report on Doctrine is in no danger of diminishing the authority of Holy Scripture as set forth in the Sixth Article of Religion; and its well-chosen words fully justify the celebration of the fourth centenary of the Reformation and the English Bible. Moreover, we can accept Dr. Temple's warning (which only reflects the caution of Article Twenty) that "our attention must be fastened on the trend of Scripture as a whole" (p. 8); as, also, his opinion that in the interpretation of Scripture "our best guide is the continuous stream of universal Christian tradition" (p. 9)—insofar (we might add) as that stream does genuinely trace its source back to the Bible itself.

Then why, on the other hand, does not the Commission put this precept into practice, and loyally apply the criterion of Holy Scripture to all doctrine on which, at present, there is disagreement among Church people?

The non-controversial sections of the Report, such as those on the Holy Spirit, the Church, and the idea of Sacrifice, are evidently built up on Scripture, and afford a real contribution to theology for which we cannot be too grateful. But equally evident is the fact that the Word of God is silent or ignored in the controversial sections of the Report. I cannot but believe the reason to be that if Scripture had been invoked, it would have decided such questions; and that in a way unpalatable to many on the Commission, and those whom they represent.

*For convenience sake we will divide the controversial sections of the Report into those which concern the Creeds and those which concern Worship.*

*As regards the Creeds*, it will be generally agreed that it is neither right nor necessary to enquire too closely into the private interpretations of Church people as they recite the confession of their faith. But the case is different with the authorized teachers of the Church; and some members of the Commission would press "the obligation resting on all who hold office in the Church to believe and to teach the traditional doctrine of the Church" (p. 39). Dr. Temple, in view of his own responsibility in the Church, feels constrained to affirm for himself that "I wholeheartedly accept as historical facts the Birth of our Lord from a Virgin Mother and the Resurrection of His physical body from death and the tomb" (p. 12). But what would be manifestly incongruous in an Archbishop, applies equally to all who have Congregations committed to their charge. Instead of allowing it to be legitimate in the Church of England to cut the miraculous out of the Gospel record, and for the Cradle at Bethlehem and the Empty Tomb to be explained away as symbols merely; it would (to my mind) have been far better

to have sacrificed a false unanimity, and for the Commission to have affirmed as the doctrine of the Church what the inspired writings of the New Testament believe and teach beyond all shadow of doubt.

*When we pass on to Worship*, there is a like disinclination to apply the authority of Scripture to the Commission's findings on Holy Communion and the Communion of Saints.

*As regards Holy Communion*, it should not be expected that all sections of the Church should agree in their sacramental doctrine. But we may all unite in one sacramental worship. Indeed, we should be far happier if we followed the example of the first eight hundred years of Christendom when, as the Report reminds us (p. 163), "questions of speculative theology remained in the background" and were "quite subordinate to a thankful recognition of the (sacramental) Gift itself." But if we are to retain the privilege of uniting in one common Eucharistic worship, it must be entirely Scriptural in character. With such a principle the Commission seems to agree. "The form of this act of corporate and individual worship," they affirm, "is determined by the record of the Last Supper"; and they are unanimous in holding that this record, as we find it in the New Testament, is true (p. 160). They insist, moreover, that such words as "This is my Body," "cannot bear a meaning inconsistent with that of their first utterance" (p. 167).

And yet, in defiance of such a Scriptural criterion, the Commission considers that the Church should regard as legitimate the practice of elevating the consecrated elements, whether as "a representation before the Father of the actual sacrifice of the Cross," or according to "the doctrine of the Heavenly Altar, at which we join in the perpetual offering by Christ of Himself" (p. 162). Now, such a dramatic presentation of the Body and Blood of Christ to His Father can claim no authority from our Lord's command, which instituted the Breaking of Bread to be a reminder to men (an "anamnesis," cf. Heb. x. 3) not a memorial to God (a "mnemosunon," cf. Acts x. 4) of the sacrifice of the Cross. It involves, moreover, a gross mistranslation of St. Paul's declaration (1 Cor. xi. 26), that at Holy Communion "Ye proclaim (downwards to men, it cannot mean upwards to God) the Lord's death till he come."

Furthermore, though the members of the Communion "do not regard the phrase 'we have an altar' in Heb. xiii. as containing any direct reference to the Eucharist" (p. 150), they accept what they call "the doctrine of the Heavenly Altar." Yet Bishop Westcott is emphatic that neither the ritual of the Day of Atonement as described in Leviticus, nor the teaching thereon as given in the Epistle to the Hebrews, countenance any idea of Christ, our Great High Priest, pleading his sacrifice before the Throne of Grace. Undoubtedly, as the Epistle states, the Ascended Saviour "ever liveth to make intercession" for us (Heb. vii. 25); even as he made supplication for Simon Peter when he was on earth (Luke xxii. 32). But Scripture nowhere portrays him as pleading a sacrifice that has for ever rent the Veil and "opened the gate of heaven to all believers." Indeed, the whole conception "of placating an angry God" (as the Commission maintains elsewhere) "is definitely unchristian"; and dishonours the love of a Heavenly

Father, whom (as the Commission again reminds us) does not require to be reconciled to us, but we to him (p. 146).

The same disturbing inconsistency between Scriptural principle and its application explains the refusal of the Report to give guidance even on the question of Reservation for purposes of Devotion. The Commission is clear "that the special sacramental Presence of the Lord is to be sought only within the context of those sacramental acts with which the original promise of it was associated" (p. 185). And yet they cannot agree whether or not the application of that principle provides a sufficient theological justification for the practice of "Devotions," either at the Eucharist itself or before the Reserved Sacrament. But this is special pleading, due to preconceived ideas. It is evident from Scripture that the Lord Jesus in the same night in which he was betrayed blessed Bread and Wine for purposes of communion only; and that, in the words of the Twenty-eighth Article of Religion, "the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper was not *by Christ's ordinance* reserved, carried about, lifted up, or worshipped."

*With regard to the Communion of Saints*, the Commission warns us, very beautifully, that "the way of truth and safety is to remember that our fellowship with the departed is a fellowship in prayer and worship." "The only way," it explains, "to come closer to those who are departed in the faith of Christ is to draw near to God, and to draw near to Him is, *eo ipso*, to come closer to them" (p. 214). And yet the Commission can speak with seeming approval of the practice of the Eastern Church in which "prayers are offered by the Church on earth even for the Mother of our Lord, and the prayers of friends lately departed in the faith of Christ are asked on behalf of those who seek this help" (p. 214). The Commission prefers to leave even the Invocation of Saints an open question. But does Scripture? If God intended us to use this way of fellowship, assuredly the Church of the Acts and Epistles would have craved the prayers of John Baptist; and the Apostles, whose prayers their Master asked in the Garden of Gethsemane, would have overheard him also invoking the intercessions of the two Old Testament Saints they had glimpsed holding communion with him on the Mount of Transfiguration. If we follow the teaching of Scripture, rather than the example of unreformed Churches, we shall continue faithfully to practise what the Report so emphatically enjoins, when it says, "The vital point to be at all costs secured is that God alone is the object of our worship, and that our fellowship with the departed is in and *through* Him" (p. 215).

The "Note" of the Commission on "Prayer for Departed" is entirely characteristic. It begins with the acknowledgement that no trace of the practice is found in Scripture except in the Apocrypha (p. 216). It concludes with the statement that "there is no theological objection in principle to Prayer for the Departed" (p. 216). This is not the place to discuss in general the difficult question of Intercession for the Departed, as distinct from Remembrance of them in our prayers. Suffice it to say that it would be possible to find, and to frame, careful prayers of thanksgiving, commemoration, and commendation, on behalf of the Departed, which would be at once utterly loyal to the

silence of Scripture, and at the same time perfectly satisfying to hearts that mourn. I would also add that because (as we must believe) by the guidance and inspiration of God the Holy Spirit, neither the invocation of Saints nor petition for the Departed is taught or countenanced in Holy Scripture ; we must not suppose that the Church of England might not greatly enrich and warm her worship, both corporate and individual, by a far intenser realization of the Communion of Saints, such as the Commission so admirably advocates.

Let me conclude the whole matter by pointing you to that most beautiful and satisfying phrase, "the Sufficiency of Holy Scripture." By our celebration of the fourth centenary of the Reformation and the English Bible, we reaffirm with the Commission on Doctrine the inspired decision of the Reformers to make Holy Scripture the sufficient and supreme authority for the Church.

There are three reasons for exalting the Word of God to this unique position.

1. In the first place, in the Bible, as nowhere else, we are brought into closest contact with the Mind of Christ. Neither the Doctrinal Commission nor indeed any section of the Church believes the Bible to be infallible. There is only one infallible authority—namely, the Mind of Christ ; if only we can learn it. And we discover the Mind of Christ most intimately and truly as we search the Scripture.

2. The second reason is our belief in the Holy Spirit and in his active guidance and inspiration. The departing Master promised the coming of the Comforter at once to inspire the writers of the New Testament, even as he had spoken of old time through the prophets (John xiv. 26) ; and also to guide the Church into all the truth (John xvi. 13). If we believe this, then we know that the voice of the Holy Spirit in the Church cannot contradict the voice of the Holy Spirit in Scripture. The two voices must speak as one if they are the utterance of the one and self-same Spirit. And the whole history of Christendom is proof that where the Church has spoken with her own voice alone, there she has erred and died in superstition ; but that where the Church has attuned her voice to that of Scripture, there she has exhibited a true and living witness to her Master.

3. Finally, there is the Character of God and his eternal purpose to reveal himself to his children.

When René Descartes, "the Father of Modern Philosophy," was searching for philosophical certainty in an age of flux and upheaval, he laid down the foundation truth that God being perfect cannot deceive. "I recognize it to be impossible," he declared, "that God should ever deceive me ; for in all fraud and deception some imperfection is to be found." If, therefore, as we all acknowledge, God intended to reveal his nature and his will to man through the inspired Scriptures ; it follows that he gave his revelation truthfully and even plainly. That is, God's character is the guarantee to us of the truth and sufficiency of God's Word.

Few can fail to be impressed by Dr. Temple's words in the Introduction of the Doctrinal Report, as he reviews the result of the Commission's fourteen years of labour. Looking back, he is conscious

of a transition from a pre-war theology of the Incarnation to a post-war theology of the Atonement. The Cross, and the old teaching about the Cross, is increasingly becoming a reality to a generation living in days of fear and challenge and denial of Christ. "In all this," says Dr. Temple, "we shall be coming closer to the New Testament" (p. 16). Then why should we not always keep close to the Scriptures, and thereby view life and salvation with the eternal eyes of Almighty God, the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever; instead of suffering the circumstances of our times, or passing movements in the Church, to dictate our theology and frame our worship?

Future generations will acclaim this anniversary year with thankfulness, if the commemoration of the fourth centenary of the Reformation and the English Bible results in the reaffirmation of the central principle of the Reformation, and in the resolve to allow in the faith and worship of the Church of England only what possesses the warrant of God's most holy Word.

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THAT THEY GO FORWARD. By Eric Fenn. *Student Christian Movement Press*. 2s. net.

Mr. Eric Fenn was the Assistant Secretary General of the Oxford Conference and he describes his book as "An Impression of the Oxford Conference on Church, Community and State." His main purpose is to make some of the findings of the Conference held last July available in short and simple form, and cheap, to younger people, and especially those preparing for the International Conference of Christian Youth in 1939. It was no easy task to survey the many and complicated problems considered at Oxford and to present a useful résumé of them in concise form, but Mr. Fenn has adequately performed it, and we commend this summary of the Conference to readers of all ages who desire to gain an insight into the work done. It is Mr. Fenn's hope that he may lead readers on to the further study of the official report written by Dr. J. H. Oldham: *The Churches Survey Their Task*.

The main task of the Conference was to face the fact that it is no longer possible to speak of the Christian West. There has been a steady move away from Christianity, until now the conception of the totalitarian state has set up "a society which is all-embracing and self-sufficient, for which God does not exist." In face of this menace the Churches are divided and their witness is rendered to a large extent ineffective. The message of the Conference was the need of unity and "the source of unity is not the consenting movement of men's wills; it is Jesus Christ whose one life flows through the Body and subdues the many wills to His." The various forms of the challenge to Christianity are considered, and the elements in them incompatible with Christian truth are set out. Exaggerated Nationalism is the source of many of the difficulties and the true relationship of Church and State must be asserted and maintained. The explanation of these points and many others render this book a useful guide to the most pressing questions which have to be answered in our time.