

The Teaching of the Church of England

RT. REV. LORD BISHOP OF GLOUCESTER, D.D.

A Paper read before the Baptist Board : December 1939.

I MUST begin by thanking you for your kindness in allowing me to have the opportunity of explaining to you to the best of my ability the teaching of the Church of England. I feel sure that discussions such as this will do a great deal to clear away misconceptions. But the task is not an easy one, because, as you are no doubt aware, there are various schools of thought in the Church of England, and although there is, I believe, a much greater underlying unity than is often realized, yet undoubtedly the teaching is presented in great variety, and there is sometimes a tendency to emphasize and exaggerate the differences and to ignore the unity. I will do my best to make clear the points on which there is agreement and to estimate the extent of the differences.

I think that the easiest plan to pursue will be to take as our guide what is called "The Lambeth Quadrilateral." That is an authoritative statement issued by the Lambeth Conference with a view to Christian unity, emphasizing just those things which the Anglican community as a whole and the Church of England look upon as essential. I will read them in the form originally adopted in 1888.

"In the opinion of this Conference, the following articles supply a basis on which approach may be by God's blessing made towards Home Reunion.

"(a) The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as 'containing all things necessary to salvation' and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.

“(b) The Apostles’ Creed, as the Baptismal symbol; and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.

“(c) The two Sacraments ordained by Christ Himself—Baptism and the Supper of the Lord—ministered with un-failing use of Christ’s words of Institution, and of the elements ordained by Him.

“(d) The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called to God into the Unity of its Church.”

THE HOLY SCRIPTURES.

I will begin with the Holy Scriptures, and I think you may take it as certain that the whole Anglican communion accepts the “sufficiency of Scripture” as a fundamental belief. Its belief is stated quite clearly in the Sixth Article, and in somewhat different language in the response in the Ordination of Priests.

The Sixth Article is as follows:

“Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an Article of Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.”

This statement I think you may be confident would be accepted quite universally among us, and we are ready to show that it was the general belief of the undivided Church. But I must point out clearly what it teaches and what it does not. It teaches the sufficiency of Scripture but (1) First, it does not teach any belief in the infallibility or inerrancy of Scripture. There are some in the Church who would believe those things, but they are not taught by any accepted formulary of the Church, nor are they believed by the great majority of thoughtful Christians among us. (2) Secondly, it does not exclude but admits the right use of Christian tradition. Here I am touching upon a more debated point, but I think that what I am going to say represents the opinion of the great majority of our divines. The words speak of two different categories of truth:

(1) those things read in Scripture;

(2) those things that may be proved thereby.

In the second category I would put, to give an instance, the doctrine of the Trinity. It is certainly not stated

explicitly in Scripture. Equally certainly as I believe it may be proved by Scripture, and admirably sums up its teaching, but it is from the teaching of the Christian Church that we learn it.

Christian tradition, as I hold it, implies two principles. The first is that the Christian Faith was preached, and the Christian Church was being built up many years before the New Testament came into existence. The earliest book in the New Testament was not written before the year A.D. 50. There was no New Testament in our sense of the word before the end of the first century. The New Testament was the creation of the Christian Church, it did not create it. Christianity as we know it in writings of the second century was only partially derived from the Bible.

The second principle is that we believe that the Holy Spirit has taught and is teaching the Christian Church, and that therefore the teaching of the Church, especially that of the undivided Church has for us real authority. The Church of England divines have always appealed to the Christian Fathers, and to the authority of the Creeds and Councils of the undivided Church as supporting its position.

If I may sum up briefly what we learn from Christian tradition as thus defined :

(1) We have in the independent witness of Christian tradition strong corroborative evidence of the truth of Christianity as we teach it.

(2) It has given us the proportion of the Christian Faith as contained in the Creeds.

(3) It presents us from the beginning with a Church built up from the beginning on the two Sacraments of the Gospel, whose central act of worship is the Holy Communion.

(4) It presents us from the beginning with a Church, Catholic in its outlook, based on an Apostolic ministry.

To sum up : The Christian Church is built on a double tradition, a written and unwritten tradition. While the unwritten tradition taught the world and us what Christianity is, we know how untrustworthy what is not written is, and we believe that the rule and ultimate standard of the Christian Faith, are the Scriptures, so that nothing should be imposed on any one as necessary for salvation which cannot be proved thereby.

THE CHRISTIAN CREEDS.

The doctrinal teaching of the Church of England is the Christian Faith as contained in the Christian Creeds.

This may be a useful illustration of the value and limitations of tradition.

We accept the Creeds because, as our Articles tell us, "they may be proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture," but it is the Creeds which are based upon Christian tradition that tell us what the Faith is that we teach. The Faith that the Creeds teach is the belief in the Incarnation and the Trinity, and that is and has always been the Christian Faith. It is what all Christians who are orthodox believe. In addition, the Creeds emphasize the belief in the Catholic Church—of that I shall speak later.

Now the importance of the Creeds as giving to us the contents of the Christian Faith, may be seen most clearly by its negative implications. During the Middle Ages there were large additions made to the things that it was required to believe, for example a belief in Transubstantiation was made a necessary dogma. This was still more the case at the Reformation. Every Church enlarged the number of doctrines which must be believed and embodied them in Articles and Confessions; for example, the Decrees of the Council of Trent, the Augsburg Confession, the Formula Concordiæ, the *Confessio Helvetica Prima et Secunda*, the Westminster Confession, the Thirty Nine Articles. These contain dogmatic statements on many subjects, on Justification, on Grace and Election, on the Atonement, on the Sacraments. Now by making the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds the basis of our Faith, we rule out dogmatic statements on all these things as necessarily part of the Christian Faith. We believe that it is our duty to try to form correct opinions on such matters, and that they are a proper subject for Theological thought, but we do not think that dogmatic statements about these matters should be enforced upon anyone as necessary to be believed. What the Christian Faith is, is taught us in Creeds. No Church should add anything to that belief, and in that Faith we might all unite together, for it expresses what, as a matter of fact, we all believe.

It may be asked then what is the position of the Thirty-Nine Articles. The Lambeth Quadrilateral was drawn up by the Lambeth Conference, which contained representatives of

all the different branches of the Anglican Church, and many of them have discarded the Thirty-Nine Articles. As regards the Church of England there are two views. The great majority of clergy and theologians would point out that subscription to the Articles is no longer verbal. A clergyman expresses his belief in the teaching of the Church of England as contained in the Articles, the Prayer Book, and the Ordinal, that the Articles were even originally intended to be Articles of comprehension, that they are susceptible of very various interpretations, and that they deal with questions which were more interesting in the sixteenth century than in the twentieth century. We would, therefore, maintain that they have only a subordinate authority, that their interest is very largely historical, and that we have no desire to impose them on anyone else.

A section of the Evangelicals would lay much greater stress on the Articles, and value them as guaranteeing in their opinion the protestantism of the Church of England. I do not think that they do this very effectually and I think that those who claim to value them lay stress on just the parts that appeal to them, and are inclined to insist on their own particular interpretation.

At any rate this is true. On the Atonement, on Justification, on Election, there is no standard teaching accepted by the Church or imposed by the Church. And I would put it to you that this belief in God, in Jesus Christ the Son of God, who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, in the Holy Ghost, a belief summed up and formulated in the doctrine of the Trinity, represents the teaching on which the whole Church of England is agreed, and which it puts forward as the basis for Christian Unity.

THE SACRAMENTS.

I now pass to what we shall probably consider more difficult questions—those relating to the Sacraments.

I will begin with two general points. The first is the nature of a Sacrament, and with regard to that I will quote from the *Report on the Ministry and Sacraments* of the Committee of Faith and Order. That Report speaks as follows (pp. 24-25) :

- “ 1. It is our Lord Jesus Christ who accomplishes every Sacrament, and the action of the Ministers of the Church is only instrumental.

- “ 2. God is not bound by His Sacraments.
 “ 3. The Sacraments are efficacious, because by means of them, Christ through his Holy Spirit, effects His Grace in the soul.
 “ 4. The Sacraments are celebrated by the Minister not in any right of his own but as the minister of the Church.”

I do not quote these statements as being the doctrine of the Church of England. They are good theology. They represent the theology of all good theologians, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant. There are many in all Churches who make statements about Sacraments inconsistent with them, and they are bad theologians. Most of the attacks which I read on Sacramental teaching are directed against the bad theology which is not the monopoly of any single Church.

The second point I would speak about is the number of the Sacraments. On that point the Church of England has a very clear statement in the Catechism :

How many Sacraments hath Christ ordained in His Church ?

Answer : Two only, as generally necessary to salvation, that is to say, Baptism, and the Supper of the Lord.

This, if taken with the necessary implications, would represent, I think, an agreed statement. The words “ generally necessary to salvation,” may be taken to mean, “ necessary as the normal and proper means by which God gives men salvation,” and must be taken with the limitation that God is not bound by his Sacraments, and the form of the question clearly does not exclude other rites of a Sacramental character. Many theologians of the Church of England would hold that the term Sacrament might be used in an extended sense of other rites, such as Ordination and Confirmation, for in them we believe that Grace is given to us in answer to the prayers of the Church.

The following statement made by the *Report on the Ministry and Sacraments*, which, as a matter of fact, was drawn up by an Hungarian Calvinist, would, I think, express the normal Anglican attitude :

“ The number of the Sacraments largely depends upon the definitions of the term Sacrament as given by the various Churches, and it does not necessarily represent their devotional life: In most of the Protestant Churches there can be found such devotional acts as correspond to the five other Sacraments

which are taught by the Roman, Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches. Thus Confirmation (in some form), Penance or Discipline, Visitation of the Sick (or Sacramental service to the sick), Ordination, and the Blessing of Marriage can be noted as customs of almost every Church. And even though they are not called Sacraments, nevertheless they are regarded as *instituta Dei utilia*, as the Second Helvetic Confession puts it."

While there are some in the Church of England who would dogmatically say there are only two Sacraments, most theologians would say that there are two Sacraments ordained by Christ himself, and other ordinances which may be called Sacraments, for in them Grace is given in answer to the prayers of the Church, and there is an external act or sign.

BAPTISM.

I now pass to the Sacrament of Baptism, and I had better, I think, come directly to the chief point at issue. There can be no doubt at all. The Church of England believes wholeheartedly in Infant Baptism, and that is true of every party in the Church. The only doubt as far as I know which has ever been expressed is, whether it is right to baptize all the infants brought to Baptism in large understaffed Parishes where there is grave doubt whether the children will be brought up in any proper way. We believe that our Lord bid us bring children to him, and baptism is the way appointed by him.

As I understand it, the first objection that is made is that it requires faith to receive the benefits of a Sacrament, and that therefore the only baptism which could be valid would be a believer's baptism. There is, I think, a good deal of confusion of thought in this. It is not our faith which makes a Sacrament valid, it is our faith which makes it effectual for our own spiritual life. The faith is twofold. It is the faith of the Church as represented by those who bring the child to be baptized and the faith of the baptized as his undertaking increases. In response to this we believe that the child becomes, in the words of the Catechism "a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven." He becomes a member of Christ's Church. He therefore grows up under the influences which that implies. He receives the gift of the Spirit, and as he grows in faith and knowledge, he makes the gift

his own. The teaching of prevenient Grace shows that it is believed that God must work in us before we can respond. We believe that the baptized child receives the gift, and his faith is the response to the gift.

The second objection that is, I understand, raised is that the Church is not a Church of believers. That seems to ignore Confirmation. When anyone is confirmed he publicly confesses his belief in Christ, and until he is confirmed—or ready to be confirmed—he is not admitted to communion nor considered a full and responsible member of the Church. We know that for the greater number of those confirmed, confirmation is a very real religious experience, and means a definite resolve to try to be a good Christian.

I would put it to you then, that the rule of the Church of England, which is the rule of the Catholic Church, is one well fitted for the training of the Christian life, and harmonizes with the best Christian theology.

The parents and God-parents bring the new-born child to be received into Christ's Church. We believe that, as we say in the service, Jesus Christ "will favourably receive this present infant: that he will embrace him with the arms of his mercy, that he will give unto him the blessing of eternal life, and make him partaker of his everlasting kingdom." In the Church he will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. He will be taught as he grows older the meaning of his baptism and the obligations of the Christian life. His growing faith will respond to the divine gift and make it effectual for himself, and in due time at his Confirmation he will openly confess his faith, and the Church will pray that he may be strengthened with the Holy Ghost the Comforter and daily increase in the manifold gifts of Grace.

I think that this course of life is a good training for the Christian, and where the system is wisely carried out makes good Christians.

THE HOLY COMMUNION.

The teaching of the Church of England on the Holy Communion is expressed clearly in the Catechism.

"What is the inward part or thing signified?"

The Body and Blood of Christ, which are verily and indeed taken and received by the faithful in the Lord's Supper."

And in the Articles :

“ To such as rightly, worthily and with faith, receive the same, the Bread which we break is a partaking of the Body of Christ ; and likewise the Cup of Blessing is a partaking of the Blood of Christ.”

I think these statements would be accepted by everyone in the Church of England who confessed to its teaching. Where there are differences of belief it is as to the definition of the divine presence. On that there is considerable diversity of teaching—some teach the doctrine of the Real Presence, some hold what are called receptionist theories. The Church of England condemns Transubstantiation and condemns Zwinglianism, but gives no further definition. I think that the intention of the Church is to look upon the words of institution as a sufficient statement, to interpret them spiritually, and if asked for a further statement to say that the gift comes from our Lord, and that the manner we cannot understand and need not enquire into.

What I teach my people is that in the Holy Communion our Lord Jesus Christ gives us the spiritual food of his Body and Blood.

THE MINISTRY.

The fourth point in the Lambeth Quadrilateral, is the Historic Episcopate.

The teaching of the Church of England is contained in the Preface to the Ordinal, which states that it is the intention of the Church of England to continue the ministry of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons as it has existed in the Christian Church from the time of the Apostles. That means that Ordination is by laying on of hands with prayer ; that every Bishop should be consecrated by at least three Bishops, and every Priest and Deacon ordained by a lawfully consecrated Bishop. This is and always has been the rule of the Church from a very early period. It says that no one shall officiate as a Bishop or Priest in the Church of England who is not thus consecrated or ordained. The functions and duties of a Christian Minister may be seen from the Ordinal. Most theologians of the Church of England also believe that it is only on the basis of the Historic Episcopate that any effective Christian union can take place.

This is the teaching of the Church. Now I will come to what is not its teaching, and I would speak of the Apostolic Succession. You will see it stated that the Christian ministry is based upon the Apostolic Succession, that from the time of the Apostles, Bishops have been consecrated and have received the Grace of Orders, that thus as through a golden conduit Grace has been handed down from generation to generation, that all those thus validly consecrated receive the grace of orders, and their Sacraments are valid, that those Churches whose ministers are not Episcopally Ordained have neither Orders nor Sacraments.

Now I believe this teaching to be entirely wrong. In the first place, it is not the teaching of the Church of England. It is not contained in any formulary of the Church. There is no reference to the Apostolic Succession in any such formulary—neither in the Articles nor the Prayer Book. In the second place it is not the theory of Apostolic Succession held in the early Church. That taught that the open succession of Bishops in all the different Churches, but especially in those of Apostolic origin, was a guarantee of the authenticity of the tradition which had handed down the Scriptures, the teaching and the customs of the Church. No theory of Succession by Ordination was known at least to the time of St. Augustine. In the third place it implies an erroneous theology of the Sacraments. At an Ordination it is Jesus Christ himself who Ordains. He himself confers the Grace of Orders and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Bishop is only the instrument. The gift comes from God through Christ in answer to the prayers of the Church and not through any human succession.

I believe, on the other hand, that the Apostolic Succession rightly held is a fact of great value. It is true that there has been a succession of Christian Ministers from the Apostolic times, it is true that they have been ordained and appointed in the Christian Church, according to the rules of the Church. This orderly succession of ministers is a strong guarantee of the unity and continuity of the Church.

The Church of England teaches then that the right form of ministry is the Historic Episcopate, that only on that basis can there be a true Christian unity, but it never condemns the Orders and Sacraments of those religious bodies which do not possess it.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH.

I postponed speaking on the belief in a Catholic Church because it comes I think best at this point in our discourse. When we say the Creeds we express our belief in the Catholic Church. That means that our Lord founded a society to unite together in one body all his followers. That society is called the Church. It is an organic body. It is based on certain great principles—discipleship, brotherhood, ministry, sacraments. It is called in the Creeds Catholic, Apostolic, Holy, One. It is Catholic because it is intended for the whole world. It is Apostolic because it strives to teach the faith of the Apostles. It is spoken of as Holy because that is what it strives to be and is intended to be. It is spoken of as One, because there can be only one Church in the world, and all Christians should be united in it. We believe that this doctrine is an essential part of Christian teaching, and that the failure to grasp it is one of the causes of Christian division.

We may now try and answer the question whether the Church of England is Catholic or Protestant. The answer that I would give is that it is fundamentally Catholic, and incidentally Protestant. It uses the word Catholic in its formularies, it never uses the word Protestant. The word Catholic means that it claims to be an integral part of that Church which our Lord Jesus Christ came to found, and to possess everything that is essential to the Church. It is incidentally Protestant because it is obliged to protest against the improper claims of the Church of Rome. But that is a negative attribute and would cease to be of any value if Rome renounced her errors.

CONCLUSION.

There are many other points that I might discuss, but I think that I have spoken sufficiently. I shall, however, be very glad to answer any questions that you may ask.

I should like in conclusion to sum up shortly what I believe to be the teaching of the Church of England.

First as to Faith. We believe that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, for us men and our salvation, came down from heaven and became man. He was crucified for us. He thus revealed to us the love of God for man, and taught us that love and

sacrifice must be the principles of the Christian life. This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, he founded the Christian Church, that it might be the instrument for spreading this Gospel throughout the world, and gave it a ministry. To the Church he gave the command, Go ye unto all the world and preach the Gospel, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Thirdly, for the individual Christian the Church has laid down a rule of life, according to which through Sacraments and Sacramental ordinances his spiritual life is guided and strengthened, Baptism, Confirmation, the Holy Communion, Penance,¹ the Visitation and Communion of the Sick. We believe this system admirably adapted, if it be properly used, for training good Christians in their spiritual life and preparing them for Christian salvation.

¹ From the exhortation in the Communion Service: "Therefore if there be any of you, who by this means cannot quiet his own conscience herein, but requireth further comfort or counsel, let him come to me, or to some other discreet and learned Minister of God's Word, and open his grief; that by the ministry of God's holy Word he may receive the benefit of absolution, together with ghostly counsel and advice, to the quieting of his conscience, and avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness."