

Evangelical Catholicity.

BY THE REV. W. LEATHEM.

IN his "Religious Essays" (described in the sub-title as "a supplement" to his better known "The Idea of the Holy"), Rudolf Otto speaks of "the shrinkage of the world arena" and of "the coming nearer and coming together of realms hitherto far apart." That this is true, a moment's reflection will make plain whether we think in terms of accelerated speed or dissemination of news by wireless. The Orient and the Occident are no longer mutual irrelevencies. What had its rise in scientific invention comes home to us as political necessity. For good or ill we are enmeshed in the inevitable world shrinkage.

The past three or four decades has given birth to a similar idea within the Christian consciousness, the idea of a world Church. This has expressed itself in the great Œcumenical Movement of the present century, wherein as the result of penitence and prayer and careful study, Christians have discovered that their age-long differences are really scars and not the original features in the countenance of Christ's Church. It is within this context that we are met to consider our position as Evangelicals and Catholics. For such a task, much preparation of mind and heart is required. As a minimum may I suggest two things (1) a determination to be ruthless in our self-judgment, (2) a generous appreciation of those who are persuaded otherwise. This does not mean that we should blunt the sword of truth in the pursuit of a charity that is sub-Christian, but only that we should extend to others the courtesy we would expect ourselves.

But for the particular problem we wish to discuss to-day, *i.e.*, how to realise the spiritual unity which already exists in God, the most urgent need and our most obvious lack is an adequate doctrine of the Church. Because of this lack, we are talking largely at cross purposes. The nature of the Church, her origin and destiny in the purposes of God, her character as partaking of the Divine nature and expressing it midst the concrete situations of time and space, her pristine splendour as the Bride and Body of Christ, and how she may thus be distinguished in her humble garments of earth from the many societies that have their beginnings in merely human impulse, in a better understanding of this truth we may hope to find a key to locked doors—locked against brethren in the same household of faith.

In attempting to resolve this problem, it will be well for us to possess not only some grasp of the doctrine itself, but also an acquaintance with its history. Thus we may be saved from the mistakes of those who have preceded us. In the past, two methods of discussion have prevailed. These we may distinguish as (1) the Approach of the Practical Mind, and (2) the Approach of the Traditional Mind. In the one we have an idea intoxicated by the dream of Freedom from external authority, and in the other, a mind denied the right to a large spiritual freedom by an exaggerated respect for the Authority

of Tradition. I would suggest a third method which may be named the Theological Approach. In this I profess to find what each of the others seek in wrong directions : (1) For the so-called Practical Mind, Freedom, not from external authority, but Freedom in the Spirit, and (2) For the Traditional Mind, Authority, not in the letter of Tradition, but in Christ. Let us first consider :

1. The Practical Approach to the doctrine. Historically this is the standpoint of liberal Protestantism and of Evangelicalism of a certain—or uncertain!—brand. The liberal theologian starts with the unwarranted assumption that our Lord did not found a Church, and so allies Himself with that figment of His own imagination, “the historical Jesus” against the “ecclesiasticism” of Paul and the early Church. The twentieth century Evangelical on the other hand accepts our Lord’s founding of the Church but is apt to deny (perhaps implicitly rather than explicitly) that its marks or notes are rooted in revelation. The former, in the interests of modernistic thought, subjects the Church to the test of expediency—“What will be agreeable to the greatest number on the easiest possible terms?” The latter in commendable enthusiasm for the establishment of the Kingdom brings the doctrine to the utilitarian test of “What will prove most serviceable to the need of the moment?” In either case, the doctrine of the Church is treated as being almost endlessly elastic. It can be stretched to suit the prevailing mood, and can be shaped to any utilitarian end. The Church in this view resembles a misshapen sorbo ball which can be bounced in any direction at the whim of each player in turn. This easy “coming to terms” arises from a faulty conception of the Church. It assumes that the Church is nothing more than “the body of Christians,” a religious association of like-minded people. This loose conception sets aside what both Old and New Testaments alike reveal concerning the Church’s calling as the People of the Presence, as the Creation of the Holy Spirit, and as the Body of Christ. It fails equally to do justice to the historic apprehension of the Christian faith as enshrined in her creeds. In the two great creeds there are only two Articles of Faith (1) in the Holy Trinity, and (2) the Holy Catholic Church. All that follows is but exposition of the doctrine of the Church—(a) the earthly home of the saints, (b) the place where forgiveness is preached and received, (c) where life and immortality is brought to light through the Gospel. She so embraces Christian experience that a great Congregational High Churchman can write “Christian experience is always ecclesiastical experience.”

In this light the Church can no longer be bandied about as a “utility article” but must be recognised as “an article of faith.” It is essential that we regain the lost note of confidence, “I believe in the Holy Catholic Church.” Protestantism refuses to treat the visible Church seriously, and as a consequence that party, which should hold the key to the situation as sharing with the Reformed Church the blessings of the Reformation, and sharing with historic Catholicism the liturgical riches of the whole Church, finds itself passed by in every serious discussion on re-union.

We have spent much time on a criticism which is largely directed against our own position as 20th century Evangelicals. Perhaps

it will not be without reward, for just as diagnosis precedes treatment, so self-criticism may lead to reformation.

2. The Traditional Approach. Our second criticism is levelled at the Traditional Mind, and it is here that we need to remind ourselves afresh of the most excellent gift of charity. Let us pay a compliment before we enter upon criticism. As to the compliment—it is our plain duty to acknowledge our indebtedness, however much we may disagree with their interpretation, to the Tractarians for their restored emphasis on a “high” conception of the Church. For long years it lay a forgotten truth in Continental and Anglican Protestantism. If considered at all it was looked upon as an “extra” to personal faith or as an “optional subject” for those who possessed the “herd instinct.” The Tractarians restored the emphasis, however much they distorted the doctrine. To admit this, is not to retreat from following the Reformers, for they were great Churchmen.

But, in the intervening years, the Tractarians have shifted their ground. They have forsaken the broad front of the doctrine of the Church for a shorter line of defence, and have dug themselves in on the doctrine of the Ministry. They have taken up positions on this shortened front in the hope of fighting a more effective delaying action. In doing so they make their stand on a truth of temporary significance and evacuate from one of eternal validity. For the ministry itself, and consequently any doctrine of it, possesses only a secondary value. St. Paul says it is “for the perfecting of the saints . . . till we all attain unto the unity of the faith.” Note well the little word “till.” It marks the terminus ad quem of the ministry. There will be no need for it when the Church is perfected in glory, and from this we may conclude that, whilst there will be a Church in Heaven, there will be no Bishops, Priests, or Deacons—that is in their official capacity! Thus it would seem that the position is unworthy of the cost of defending it.

Further, “catholicity,” a much bandied word, refers primarily to the Church and not to the Ministry. The truly Catholic Church has, by that very fact alone, a valid ministry, and that ministry will make potent its claim by producing what is the essence of Catholicity, the Apostolic Gospel. This is crucial in the whole argument—the ministry is only part of the Church. This will be the better understood if the essential position of the Minister in the Church is seen to be that of servant and not that of “prince of the Church.” As servant he does not give validity to the status of the household of faith, but derives his own status from his connection with it and its Head.

Let us change the metaphor to pursue the point. On what does a business house stake its claim to acceptance with the public? Ultimately on the quality of its goods. It will not be sufficient to proclaim “established over 100 years.” To maintain its hold, it must produce the same high quality of wares on which it built its reputation. In the same way every claim to catholicity must be substantiated by the test of apostolicity. Nothing is truly catholic that is not first truly apostolic. And nothing can be denied catholicity that bears the obvious marks of apostolicity. Ultimately it is apostolicity, not catholicity, in some undefined sense, that is the determinative

principle. "Catholicity" has little value unless closely associated with, and interpreted by, "apostolicity."

To proceed one step further. We have seen that apostolicity determines catholicity. What in turn determines apostolicity? Surely it is the possession of "the truth as it is in Jesus." The dismembered apostolate was restored by the election of one who had first hand knowledge of the facts from the baptism of John until the day that Christ was taken up into Heaven, and could thus bear witness to the Resurrection. St. John based his claim to be heard on the same ground; "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, of the Word of Life . . . That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you that ye may have fellowship with us, and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." Here the apostolic succession consists in the possession of apostolic witness and catholicity is fellowship on the basis of that witness. It is therefore primarily a succession of truth, not of persons. Its nature is theological rather than historical. In this is seen its immeasurable superiority, for its validity depends, not on uncertain historical succession, but is derived immediately from Christ. Thus, in the highest sense it is "from above" and not "from below." For this good reason we discard the Traditional Approach.

But having criticised others and counted them unworthy, have we anything better to offer in their place? Can Evangelicals formulate a worthy conception of the Church that will, in theory and experience, be worthy of the name "Catholic?" If we have nothing constructive to bring forward, we had at least better cease being destructive. Let us open our final section of this paper with two questions which may enable us to answer those immediately preceding. (1) What do we consider an adequate expression of Catholicity? (2) How far do we Evangelicals approximate to it?

What is an adequate expression of Catholicity? or to put it in another way—What are the Theological marks of a truly Catholic Church? I persist in emphasising the word "theological" because it is borne in on me that nothing else ultimately matters. To speak of a thing's theological significance is to speak of its significance in revelation, in God. This restored emphasis on the Theological is due to the fact that men are beginning to see (i) that everything must ultimately be judged in relation to God; (ii) that every other judgment is partial and to that extent untrue.

So far as this question is directed towards the Church's Catholicity, the true answer will be found in most Reformed Confessions of Faith, these are (i) The Word of God preached, (ii) The Sacraments duly administered, (iii) The Discipline of Christ given adequate expression. Should this third mark be neglected it will result in the loss of the other two, and create the chaos it was given to offset.

1. THE WORD OF GOD PREACHED. At once someone will say "Surely if any party in the Church has this mark of Catholicity, it is the Evangelical." Superficially this may be true, actually I have grave doubts. Perhaps we should enquire diligently what "preaching the Word of God" means. It means at least three things, that preaching must be at once (i) Objective, (ii) Pertinent, (iii) Extensive.

(i) *Objective.* It is primarily the Word of Another we are to preach. The Word of God is given to us in the acts of God culminating in and deriving meaning from the supreme act of God in Christ. Hence the Word of God is a Fact, *the* Fact, and expresses itself in an Event, *the* Event—the Word was made flesh, the Son was made sin. Thus it is strongly objective in character. But much Evangelical preaching has lost this objectiveness. Indeed, it is dangerously subjective. Instead of Christ as He is set forth in the Word of God, it is the very different Christ mirrored in the religious consciousness, and this is frequently a very distorted picture and a very emaciated Christ. These are subtle analyses and expressions of the preacher's own none-too-robust religious life, and are frequently admired as "devotional" and "spiritual," but the quality proceeds from its affinity to the spirit of man and not from the Holy Spirit of God. This type of preaching has no abiding reality. It is but a vapour that rises out of the earth and is of the earth, earthy. It has its roots in the "devotional self"—no less "self" because of the adjective. Such preaching can never represent the message of the Catholic Church as it confronts the world with the Word of God.

(ii) *Pertinent.* But this Word of God in all its "givenness" must be adequately expressed. Men must certainly recognise its note of authority, but they must also understand the language in which it is spoken. The everlasting Gospel has ever new emphasis and expressions. The Church's spokesman must be alive to the situation. A Church truly Catholic must ever be reforming the expression of its unchanging and unchangeable faith. She must not be in shackles to either the 5th century or the 16th. Herein lies a challenge to those of us who live in this interim period.

(iii) *Extensive.* The scope of this preaching must be wide and deep. It must enter into the whole structure of life. It must be relevant to the situation that exists. It must be as deep as, and deeper than, every problem of man. It must speak to the nation as well as to the individual. It will penetrate to the centre of the political situation and yet will not degenerate into a political address. It will diagnose the social structure unerringly, and yet will never be mistaken for a lecture on social problems. It will always bear the stamp of its Divine origin. Truly Catholic preaching will see to it that no sphere of life lies outside the judgment of the Word of God.

To what extent does Evangelical preaching approximate to these ideals?

2. THE SACRAMENTS DULY ADMINISTERED. In considering this second mark of a Catholic Church Evangelicals as a whole are less sure of themselves. In discussing sacraments there is observed a certain hesitancy and reserve which betrays uncertainty. In this the Evangelical has developed a decided limp. He puts his sacramental foot to the ground with a wariness that suggests it might hurt. This shows itself in a number of little ways. *First, on the emphasis he throws on the conjunction*—Word *and* Sacraments, often with the suggestion that it comes between them rather than unites them. Surely it is better to emphasise the oneness of their witness to the Gospel. We should recognise their affinity. We require the Reformers' confidence when they asserted that the preaching of the Word was the

Word Audible whilst the Sacraments were the Word Visible. *In the second place this uncertainty is expressed in Evangelical readiness to lapse into negative rather than positive statement concerning the Sacrament—in denying the error more than in declaring the truth.* In Catholic doctrine, positive truth must predominate. *A third indication of this apparent timidity* is seen in the practical use of the Lord's Supper in worship. Perhaps some may argue that the increasing use of the Holy Communion is an indication that this fear is being overcome. But a better test than that of frequency of use would surely be prominence in use. Are we quite sure that, in a special sense it is "the Lord's own service?" In practice we use it either at an hour when few are present, or tack it on to the end of one of the other services. The Church of the early centuries did not so treat it. Neither did the Reformers who brought it back to its original position at the centre of the Church's worship. The Word and Sacrament were united in the principal Sunday Service. I believe there is room for heart-searching among Evangelicals on this matter.

But to return to our main enquiry: What positive elements can Evangelicals bring to the Catholic doctrine of the Sacraments? I believe there are two closely related emphases that may well be lost sight of if we do not supply them, and in giving expression to them I would acknowledge my indebtedness to some lectures of Dr. Carnegie Simpson.

First, there is need to emphasise *the Divine "givenness" in the Sacraments.* The essential thing is not what we do and say, but what God in Christ does and says. We must rid our minds of Anthropocentric ideas and make them Theocentric or Christocentric. The human element or the ethical response is real but secondary. Failure to recognise this is more obviously true of sacerdotally inclined Christians, but may be more insidiously true in evangelical circles. Any suggestion that the Lord's Supper is for an inner circle of the devout, for those who are in some vague way the spiritually élite—thoughts not wholly unknown among Evangelicals—is a denial of the "givenness" of the Gospel, for it suggests that we bring something to it.

The use of the word "Gospel" brings us to our second main emphasis in the Evangelical contribution to a Catholic doctrine of the Sacraments. The Sacraments of the Church are *essentially Gospel Sacraments.* They are offered to saints who are still sinners. The Church where they are administered is the refuge of sinners even as it is the home of saints. The Sacraments come to us not as men, but as sinners. They are related to redemption, not to creation. The "sacramental principle" may have its legitimate place in art, but it is dangerous in theology. It may obscure the true nature of the Gospel. If everything good and beautiful is sacramental, then the distinctiveness of the Evangel as good news coming down from God to man may become blurred. The great error of the sacramental principle is that it argues from beneath—man discovers and judges of the fitness of the symbolism. In the Gospel sacraments the argument proceeds from above. God gives the symbols: "He took bread . . . He took the cup." They stress what man is eager to avoid, that he is not only a creature, but he is a sinner. Surely this is a major contribution to any Catholic doctrine of the Sacraments.

3. THE DISCIPLINE OF THE CHURCH. This subject brings us into a less rarified atmosphere. We descend from the Evangelical Mount to the Ethical Plain, from the realms of spiritual ideas to a sinful world, from the harmony of the Divine Will to the discords of human contradictions. But it is on this plane that the service of the Church to the Head of the Church is to be rendered. Ability to bring order out of chaos and to disentangle truth from error, will be the credentials of the reality of the presence of the Spirit in our midst. For God is not the God of confusion but of order.

Lack of this has been the measure of the Church of England's inability to take her proper part in the matter we are here to discuss—Evangelical Catholicity. Our Church is powerless to speak, not because she has lost her voice—there are noises many and voices many—but because she cannot speak with one voice. Her condition resembles Israel in the period of the Judges when “every man did what was right in his own eyes.” Here we see the most motley of crews—Plymouth Brethren once removed, jostling for places with those equally closely related to Roman Catholicism, whilst Pelagians and Unitarians regard themselves as the New Orthodoxy. In all this, we have developed a marked likeness to Mars Hill and Marble Arch.

What is true of the Church of England in general is true of the Evangelical party in particular. Our schisms have become a by-word. Our whole genius has been prostituted towards internal disruption. The Corinthian evil of partisanship has left us immeasurably weak. It is unnecessary to name the Evangelical successors of the “Paul . . . Peter . . . Apollos” spirit. They are cliques rather than persons in most cases. It is enough that we recognise these Squander-bugs of our inheritance. We need to pay attention to what our Presbyterian Brethren call “the Godly Order of the Kirk.”

In all this unseemliness and disorder there is no room for the Lord of the Church to speak. No one of Pauline stature has arisen to say “And the rest will I set in order when I come.” Christocratic Government has given place to democratic rabble-law. The Christ who appeared in the midst of the Churches as judge is absent from her assemblies. There seems to be no keen desire to know what the Spirit saith unto the Churches. “Christ is no longer Lord in His own Household.”

The relation between this, and a true conception of the Church is obvious. We are not in a position or condition to co-operate with anybody. To join with others at present would be to sin against them. We would only spread the infection of our own unhappy divisions. Can anything be done to put right this wrong? We are all acquainted with the remedies, or expedients that more serious Evangelicals have tried in the past. There is the legal weapon much in favour in the 19th century, but which broke in the hands of its users. It has only brought humiliation to the cause, and an easy-won martyr's palm for the other side. Whilst we may respect the sincerity that would go so far in the interest of Church discipline, we cannot but recognise its unwisdom. Spiritual warfare cannot be waged with carnal weapons.

Or again, there is the problem of *Establishment*. The Evangelical party has shown more enthusiasm for it than most others. In this

it appears to be inconsistent with its character. It has always drawn a sharp line between the spiritual and the secular. In spirit it seems to be on the side of a "gathered Church" idea, but in practice it denies it. Apart from the rights and wrongs of Establishment, it must be considered an unworthy expedient to support it mainly for the maintenance of our own position. Must we lean on the arm of flesh? Do we really believe the Ark of God can take care of itself—or that God will take care of it?

There are other aspects that would come under consideration of Church discipline, but these are mentioned, not to exhaust the list, but to indicate their seriousness.

The writer does not presume to offer a cut-and-dried solution as to how this "godly union and concord" is to be realised, though he would express the conviction that it lies in the direction of internal reformation based on spiritual principles. Such principles can only become operative in an atmosphere of understanding and mutual respect, and this in turn can only be achieved when we learn something of the meaning of New Testament *koinonia*, and can affirm as a living article of faith: "I believe in the Communion of Saints." The primitive Church was shot through with an infectious sense of its oneness in Christ which expressed itself in a community of worship, service and goods. "They had all things common." In that living fellowship they possessed an environment wherein the deepest problems of life were solved, and the most divergent issues discussed and reconciled. In no other way can we solve our problems. Ultimately "the Church as it is" will become "the Church that it ought to be" only by a baptism of repentance and the pouring out of the Spirit from on High, and when we cease from our individualism and congregationalism and denominationalism to catch the meaning of "the unity of the Spirit" in a vision of the one, Catholic and Apostolic Church wherein the crown rights of the Redeemer are unquestionably acknowledged.