The Evangelical Doctrine of the Church

By The Bishop of Bradford[1]

" Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping."

STRANGE to begin a paper on the Church with this famous couplet from Rupert Brooke's poem *Peace* ! Yet not so strange if you look at the lines more closely, and think. For God has been gracious to His Church in the last few decades, in that He has vouchsafed to the Church a re-discovery of the doctrine of the Church. And He has done this just at that point in human history where man's supreme need was for that truth above all else. Both these points need brief elaboration.

(1) In the course of human history certain great truths tend to get lost and then to be re-discovered. Examples spring readily to mind. The Middle Ages almost lost the truth of justification by faith, until it was re-discovered by the Reformers ; a later age tended to forget the doctrine of Scriptural holiness until the Wesleys and others rediscovered it ; and so on. The doctrine of the Church—its nature and function—was slipping into the background of theological thought until a few decades ago. It has been the main contribution of the theological toil of our day to labour at this great doctrine in the workshops of theological thinking in our Universities, and in the great Conferences of ecumenical activity. Few, I think, would debate the fact that the re-discovery of the Biblical doctrine of the Church is *the* theological achievement of our day, or, to put it better, the divine provision for the need of our day.

In a remarkable article in the July issue of *Theology* last year, Dr. J. R. H. Moorman produced a study of " Archbishop Davidson and the Church ". He holds that the Archbishop, for nearly sixty years " took an immense interest in the affairs of the Church, but it is doubtful if he ever paused to think what the Church was, or even what message of hope was entrusted to its keeping by Christ ". " To him the Church was primarily the guardian of morality." He does not " speak of the Church as the sphere in which man finds redemption, or as the vehicle of man's praise and adoration, or as the purveyor of grace through Word and Sacrament ". So Davidson, according to Moorman. And so many others of Davidson's day. But it was not to remain so. Much, and we may thank God for it, has happened in the last three decades, and the theological atmosphere is very different to-day.

In this, as in so many other matters of theological moment, Sir Edwyn Hoskyns pointed the way. He began his memorable contribution to *Essays Catholic and Critical* (first published in 1926) with these words : " For the Catholic Church . . . ' What think ye of the

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Church ? ' is not merely as pertinent a question as ' What think ye of the Christ ? ' : it is but the same question differently formulated ". He continued : " The problem is this : What is the relation between the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth and the Christ of St. Paul, of St. John, and of Catholic piety ? And further, what is the relation between the little group of disciples called by Jesus from among the Galilean fishermen and the *Corpus Christi* of St. Paul or the *Civitas Dei* of St. Augustine ? " These questions have been to the forefront of theological thinking in recent years, and we have come to see that, so far from the Church being a kind of optional subject to be taken by those who are inclined that way, it is part of the very Gospel of God.

It is thus that God catches our youth, and wakens us from sleeping. Here, indeed, is the miracle of the Church and, perhaps, the greatest proof of its divine nature. It has a wondrous capacity for being born again when it is old. It is strangely like the bush which burned yet was not consumed (cp. Daniel T. Jenkins : *The Strangeness of the Church*, p. 14). Just when one part of it seems well nigh extinct, or aspects of its nature and function seem well nigh forgotten, then there is a touch of the Wind of the Spirit, and the flame burns anew.

(2) Secondly, God has " matched " this re-discovery of the doctrine of the Church " with His Hour ". Our God is still the God of History, even when the chaos around us bids us doubt it. He has not abdicated. He is still on the Throne. He sees the needs of His world, of the men whom He has created in His own image. And He has a particular message to match that need. It is the message of a full and deep Biblical doctrine of the Church.

What, then, we may ask, are the particular basic needs of men at this time ? What are the things which men *lack* to-day in a way in which they did not lack them in previous generations ? I am not referring here to those needs which affect men in every era of the world's history—the need for personal holiness, for an antidote to sin, for victory over moral temptation, and so on. These recur because man is man, and will recur so long as human history lasts. I refer to those particular pressing needs which the special circumstances of the present day force upon modern man. I mention two :

(i) *Community.* In the England of the days prior to the Industrial Revolution at least, there was community in the normal village life of the country. It centred, as often as not, in the village Church with its preaching, its sacraments, its drama and so forth. Everybody knew everybody else. In a very real sense, they together constituted a body corporate. In contrast to this, the loneliness of modern man is a comparatively new phenomenon, and it is a serious one. " It is not good that man should be alone " (Genesis ii. 18). This idea, basic as it is to the institution of the family, is basic also for the larger community life of man. If he is to flourish, he will not do so in isolation. And yet, again and again, modern civilization robs him of precisely that element of community which he needs for the full development of his personality and for the making of his full contribution to the life of the world of which he is by birth a part. Modern civilization makes him live in a vast city (would Plato or Aristotle ever have dignified

London with the name πόλις? I doubt it !*) He probably does not know the neighbour next to whom he has lived for years. His sense of community is hardly helped by the physical pressures exerted on him in the rush hour on the Underground, nor by the cocktail-parties which, to our great loss, have usurped the place of the more leisurely dinner parties, with their intelligent conversation, of former days. No! Underground railways, cocktail-parties, cinemas, television—none of these things greatly help to create community. And as for the new housing areas, splendid attempts though they be to deal with the curse of the slums, they nevertheless often leave men and women up-rooted, high and dry, with no sense of *belonging*, no sense of being part of a body corporate. The occupier of a house on such an estate only too often is *alone*, and it is *not good*, even though he be the owner of a washing-machine, a television set, and, best of all, a strip of garden.

(ii) *Creativity*. It was the *Creator* God Who said, "Let us make man in our image after our likeness" (Genesis i. 26). It was in the Mind of God that His creatures should in some measure partake of His creativity. He Who lived the most creative life ever lived on this earth said: "My Father worketh hitherto and I work" (St. John v. 17). There is a glory in creative work, for in doing it man shares in the continuous activity of God.

But modern civilization has only too often robbed man of that very activity for, in putting him to work in factories, it has taken from him very largely the joy of creative craftsmanship. The man who, labouring at his last, made by his own skill a pair of shoes, got a satisfaction from the labour which a factory-hand to-day can never get when all he has to do is to operate some piece of machinery in a long mechanical process. Examples could be multiplied and will readily spring to mind. The musician, the artist, the writer, the preacher—the door is still open to them for creative craftsmanship. But they are the comparatively few. The majority of our fellowmen and women suffer from being parts of a great machine in a highly mechanized age. They are largely robbed of the joy of creativity.

How does the re-discovery of the doctrine of the Church help to meet these needs? Let us look to the New Testament for our answers.

(i) *Community*. J. S. Whale was quite right when he wrote: "The thought of the New Testament about redemption is as much corporate and communal as it is individual and personal" (*Christian Doctrine*, p. 127). Again: "Christian experience is always ecclesiastical experience" (*op. cit.*, p. 128). Again: "The Christian life is not accidentally but necessarily corporate, always and everywhere" (*op. cit.*, page 129). It has been the glory of Evangelicals down the years to stress the need for individual conversion and personal faith. When we cease to do that, we shall cease to be of much use to the Church. But that truth is most powerful when it is held in tension with another truth equally clear in the pages of the New Testament, namely, the truth of the Church as the Body of Christ, the Building of which all faithful people are constituent parts, the Bride of Christ. This venerable mystery, going back to the days of Abraham, re-created and

* "The city was invented to preserve life; it exists to preserve the good life" (*Politics*, I, 2, 8).

re-fashioned by the great events of the Ministry of Jesus, of the Cross, and of the empty tomb, and made at Pentecost into a veritable Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, this venerable mystery, I say, is the answer of God to restless modern man's rootlessness. Here is home. Here is forgiveness. Here is re-instatement—justification by faith indeed. Here is food of Word and Sacrament for his hungry soul. Here is the company of God's faithful people, for " it is not good that man should be alone ". Here is the "togetherness" created by the Holy Spirit of which Anderson Scott used to love to write. Here is the new, " third race," which God is creating, so that St. Paul can speak of Jews, Greeks, and the Church of God (I Corinthians x. 32).

We need to ponder long and prayerfully on that virtual identification of the Body of Christ with Christ Himself which is a feature of New Testament writing, so much so that we hear the voice from heaven saying to Saul, " why persecutest thou "—not the Church but—" *Me* " (Acts ix. 4) ; so much so that one can be " baptized into one *body* " (I Corinthians xii. 13) *or* be " baptized into *Christ* " (Romans vi. 3) ; so much so that St. Paul can write : " As the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are yet one body, so also is "—not the *Church* but—" Christ " (I Corinthians xii. 12). On which Calvin comments : " He calls the Church Christ " ; and Thomas Aquinas, less daringly says, " Christ and Christians are *quasi una persona mystica* ". And having pondered long and prayerfully, we need to do some energetic practical work in *translating that doctrine of community into action* !

(ii) *Creativity*. " God has chosen us to be co-creators with Him in finishing His creation, in the continuing work of the redemption of men, and in the task of building all men into community." So Dr. James A. Pike has recently written (*Doing the Truth* : *a summary of Christian Ethics*). " Co-creators with Him "—here is God's answer to the second problem which I outlined earlier in this paper. The Creator God is still at work, as indeed St. John records Jesus as saying that He is. He is, as St. Paul teaches in the Epistle to the Ephesians, forming a new humanity out of divergent and, on the human level, irreconcilable elements, reconciling and making peace through the Cross (ii. 13ff.). To every man in Christ, in the Body of Christ, to all in whom the new creation has taken place and is taking place, is given a share in the creative activity of God, in the reconciling redemptive task which is the Church's task because it is Christ's task. Here is creativity indeed ! And not for the wise man, the mighty and the noble alone ; " for God has chosen the foolish things of the world . . . the weak . . . the base . . . the despised, yea, and things which are not . . . " (I Corinthians i. 26-28). Evangelistic activity, redemptive co-creativity with God, is for all to share.

What have I to say to those who are in the thick of the battle ? Two things :

(i) I bid you think prayerfully over what I have tried to say, seeing for yourselves " whether these things be so ". If you find that they are true, if it be fact that God is waking us from sleeping, catching the ever-new youthfulness of His Church and matching the re-discovered

doctrine of the Church with His hour, and in that truth meeting the particular needs of this our day—if that be so, then *lift up your hearts* ! God is not dead ! The Church, rent and torn though it may be, is still the instrument of the purpose of God and the bearer of the Spirit of God, Who Himself is Lord and Life-Giver. It is not by accident that in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds belief in the Holy Spirit and in the Church are in close juxta-position. With her God has made His new covenant, sealed with the blood of His dear Son ! It is Christ Who is building her, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against her ! Be of good cheer. Lift up your hearts in praise to God, as you work out in your parish, community and creativity in 1957.

(ii) I bid you go back to your New Testaments and note once again those Apostolic marks which must always characterize the Church if she is to *be* the Church. " They continued," says St. Luke of the Jerusalem Christians, " in the teaching of the Apostles " (Acts ii. 42). They were not foolish enough to say that it did not matter what you believed so long as you were sincere. They knew that Christianity was not a vague cult based on general goodwill all round, but a faith based on very definite apostolic teaching, which itself sprang from an irrevocable committal to Christ.

" They continued in . . . the fellowship," in that deep community of love and creative service which gave birth to a burning evangelism. They were not a mutual congratulation society of like-minded nonentities, but an army with banners. Their motto was not, " The more we are together the merrier we shall be," but, " Woe is me if I preach not the Gospel ".

" They continued in . . . the breaking of the bread." They knew, right at the start, that Christianity is a sacramental religion. They did not, as some unwise Anglicans later were to do, play off Word against Sacrament or Sacrament against Word. They knew that *both* were proclamations of the mighty acts of God in Christ.

" They continued in . . . the prayers." Prayer was basic. No doubt organization had to follow (though it is not mentioned here). But *holiness* was essential, and you cannot have holiness without prayer.

Apostolic teaching : fellowship : sacrament : prayer. That was the Jerusalem quadrilateral. That was the divine quadrilateral. It still is.