

Church History and its Lessons

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The real history of Christianity is the history of a great spiritual tradition. The only true apostolical succession is the lives of the saints. Clement of Alexandria compared the Church to a great river, receiving affluents from all sides. The great river sometimes flows impetuously through a narrow channel; sometimes it spreads like a flood; sometimes it divides into several streams; sometimes, for a time, it seems to have been driven underground. But the Holy Spirit has never left Himself without witness; and if we will put aside a great deal of what passes for Church History, and is really a rather unedifying branch of secular history, and follow the course of the religion of the Spirit and the Church of the Spirit, we shall judge very differently of the relative importance of events from those who merely follow the fortunes of institutionalism.'

With these words of Dr. W. R. Inge¹ we may set ourselves to consider some of the lessons to be learned from a bird's eye view of the history of the Christian Church. Naturally, within the limits of one chapter, nothing like a detailed survey of Church history can be attempted; the phases here selected, and the morals drawn from them, probably depend on no better principle than the present writer's interest and caprice, as, for example, in the frequent references to Scottish Church history. For a thorough-going treatment of the whole subject readers are most emphatically recommended to have recourse to *The Pilgrim Church*, by the late E. H. Broadbent,² a book whose character is more exactly indicated by its sub-title: 'Being some account of the continuance through succeeding centuries of churches practising the principles taught and exemplified in the New Testament.'

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These words, 'practising the principles taught and exemplified in the New Testament,' are noteworthy; they enshrine a vital principle frequently recurring in Church history, to which the name Reformation is given. This use of the term 'Reformation' may be illustrated from the following enviable testimonial which John Row, writing about 1640, gave to the Scottish Reformers of the previous century: 'They took not their pattern from any kirk in the world; no, not from Geneva itself; but laying God's Word before them made reformation thereto.'

Reformation according to the Word of God is a principle which constantly needs to be put into operation. We must not imagine that those who stand for the maintenance of the Reformed Faith are simply asserting sixteenth century principles. They stand for the maintenance in every century of the principles which the Reformers of the sixteenth century sought to practise at the risk of their lives—the abiding principles of the divine Word.³ These Reformers themselves were far from claiming finality in their application of these principles; when John Knox and his friends published the *Scots Confession* of 1560, they begged that any

¹ *Things New and Old* (1933), pages 57 f.

² London: Pickering & Inglis. First published 1931. It is most gratifying to know that a new edition has appeared (1946).

³ The related term 'Protestant' is also commonly misunderstood; it does not primarily denote one who protests against something, but (in the etymological sense of Latin *protestatur*) one who *bears witness* for the truth of Scripture. If this were borne in mind, it would do away with the well-meant objections to being so described, sometimes made by Christians who earnestly desire to bear witness to the truth of Scripture.

deviation therein from Scriptural principles might be pointed out to them, so that their Reformation according to the Word of God might be yet more complete.

When the term 'Reformation' is thus understood in its full sense, its perpetual necessity will be better recognized. For if Church history teaches one thing more than another, it is that there is a constant tendency to deterioration in ecclesiastical as much as in all human affairs. The price of Liberty, here as elsewhere, is eternal vigilance; and such vigilance can best be maintained by unceasing reference to the Magna Charta of our faith, the Holy Scriptures. Thus Reformation according to the Word of God is no harking back to the dead past, whether of the first or sixteenth century; the Word of God is living and powerful to-day as ever, and speaks to our condition in the twentieth century as much as in the centuries gone by. We can still prove the truth of John Robinson's

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words spoken over three hundred years ago to the Pilgrim Fathers at Delft Haven: 'I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of His Holy Word.' The lessons to be learned from that Word are not yet exhausted. And one way of viewing Church history is to see it as the record of constant departure from, and as constant returning to, the principles of Holy Scripture considered as the only rule of faith and obedience.

We propose, then, to consider historically how 'Reformation according to the Word of God' affects (a) the Form and Ministry of the Church; (b) the Relation between church and State; and (c) the Church's Mission in the World.

THE FORM AND MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH

When the Reformers of the sixteenth century found it necessary to re-state the meaning of the term 'Church,' they did so by reference to the Scriptures. For, as Bishop Pearson rightly saw at a later date,⁴ 'the only way to attain unto the knowledge of the true notion of the Church, is to search into the New Testament, and from the places there which mention it, to conclude what is the nature of it.' So they found that the Church Universal,⁵ in its widest scope, consists of the whole company of God's elect, of all realms and all ages; so far as the local and visible manifestation of the Church Universal was concerned, they recognized it by three outstanding notes—the preaching of the pure Word of God, the right administration of the sacraments according to Christ's ordinance, and the maintenance of godly order by the proper exercise of Church government. These notes certainly distinguished the local churches of New Testament times.

But we cannot read the later books of the New Testament without becoming aware of ominous tendencies within the Apostolic Churches. Paul's warning to the Ephesian elders as early as A.D. 57, that 'grievous wolves' would ravage their flock and that from their own ranks false teachers would rise and lead many astray (Acts 20. 29 f.), prepares us for the developments reflected at a later date in the Johannine writings. Most menacing

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⁴ *An Exposition of the Creed* (1659), Article IX.

⁵ The epithet 'universal' or 'catholic' seems first to have been applied to the Church by Ignatius (c. 115), to whom we owe the epigram: 'Where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church' (*Letter to Smyrnaeans*, 8. 2).

towards the end of the apostolic age was the form of teaching called Docetism which, asserting the inherent evil of the material order, denied the reality of Christ's Incarnation. The apostles themselves had their opponents; in Asia Phygellus and Hermogenes led a revolt against Paul (2 Tim. 1. 15), and Diotrephes, three decades later, refused to receive the delegates sent by John (3 John 9).

How were these tendencies to be dealt with? Paul referred the Ephesian elders to the divine Word (Acts 20. 32); and in 2 Tim. 2. 2 he envisaged a true and spiritual apostolic succession, i.e., a succession of faithful men perpetuating the apostolic teaching. This succession idea, however, soon became stereotyped into something more formal, as is evident as early as about A.D. 115, in the letters which Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, wrote to various churches on his way to Rome to be thrown to the lions. Ignatius, in his anxiety to maintain orthodoxy within the churches and debar heresy, laid great stress on the function of the monarchical bishop, an office which first appears at the beginning of the second century. He insisted that the bishop, or someone delegated by the bishop (presumably someone who saw eye to eye with him in these matters), was the only church official who might conduct a valid baptism or Eucharist.⁶ The bishop or his representatives were thus in a position to refuse the holy ordinances to heretics. The apostolic succession as commonly interpreted in Episcopal Churches thus had its origin in an effort to keep heresy out of the Church.⁷ A bishop who could trace his succession through the previous bishops of his see back to the apostles was in a position to claim apostolic validity for his acts. (This differs in one respect from the later idea of apostolic succession, which lays emphasis on the continuity of episcopal *ordination*; then the emphasis was on the succession of bishops in a particular local see, by whomsoever they had been ordained.)

As time went on, the tendency was to shift the emphasis from

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the actual maintenance of the apostles' teaching and fellowship to the external fact of historic Continuity. Where the Reformation was most thoroughgoing, therefore, the original emphasis was restored at the expense of the latter. 'It is by making Scripture the rule of faith that the Reformed Church stands in the true Apostolic Succession.'⁸

The rise of the monarchical episcopate was historically a development within the elderhood of the local church.⁹ The presiding elder, or an elder who was outstanding among his fellow-elders in experience, personality, or in some other way, might easily pass from being *primus inter pares* to be *primus* pure and simple. We can infer from the New Testament, for example, that James, the brother of our Lord, must, in practice, have played a dominant part among his fellow-elders at Jerusalem; although, to be sure, he and his colleagues and successors in the

⁶ 'Let that be held a valid Eucharist which is under the bishop or one to whom he shall have committed it.... It is not lawful apart from the bishop either to baptize or to hold a love-feast' (*Letter to Smyrnaeans*, 8. 1, 2). 'Six of the seven letters are filled with exaggerated exaltation of the authority and importance of the bishop's office... To Ignatius the monarchical episcopate is an idle fixe' (B. H. Streeter, *The Primitive Church*, 1929; pp. 164, 173). For all that, Ignatius has no thought of any episcopal succession, an idea which first appears later in the second century.

⁷ It was the same concern for the exclusion of heresy that led to the requirement of fairly elaborate credal tests in place of the primitive confession of allegiance to Jesus as Lord.

⁸ D. T. Jenkins, *The Nature of Catholicity* (1942). page 37.

⁹ See, for example, J. B. Lightfoot, *The Christian Ministry* (1868), pp. 23 ff.

first Jerusalem Church, down to the refounding of the city by Hadrian in 135, were in their lifetime not called bishops but simply elders. (This was but natural, as 'elder' has a Jewish background, while 'bishop' has a Gentile background.) It is, indeed, warmly contended by some scholars that monarchical bishops did not arise in this way, but that they were formally the successors of the apostles, appointed by them to continue the apostolic ministry in a local form.¹⁰ This cannot be upheld, however, if only because the New Testament usage of Greek *episkopos* points uniformly in the other direction. In New Testament Greek the *episkopos* (bishop or overseer), and *presbyteros* (elder) are one and the same. (This is reflected in the fact that even to-day a bishop in the Roman Church does not possess *different* Orders from a presbyter or priest, but possesses the *ulness* of the presbyterate to rule a diocese as its chief pastor.) The more thoroughgoing Reformers, therefore, replaced the monarchical episcopate by the Scriptural government of each church by a presbytery or body of elders (1 Tim. 4. 14. 14), none of whom enjoys a superior status to the others.

The restriction of the valid Eucharist to the bishop and his representatives had more serious implications than Ignatius could

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have envisaged. 'The rise of officialdom and formalism,' says Professor Angus, 'must be regarded as a contributory cause to the evolution of sacramentarianism.'¹¹ In the New Testament there is not the slightest hint that the administration of the sacraments is to be restricted to any particular class of Christians. The ministry of the Word is to be exercised by those divinely called to that service, and so with the other ministries; but nothing is said about who should undertake the ministry of the sacraments. This is the more remarkable, as even in very many of the Reformed Churches, where wide liberty is enjoyed in the preaching of the Word, the celebration of the sacraments is conditional on the presence of those who are specially set apart for this purpose. The New Testament implication is that the true ministers, say in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, are the members of the Church themselves. A sense of spiritual fitness would teach that those who lead the congregation in this solemn act of worship should be such as are spiritually fit to do so; but this is a very different matter from restricting valid celebration to a special class of men. This departure early in the second century unfortunately coincided with a tendency for ecclesiastical practice in many Gentile churches to be influenced by the contemporary mystery cults. In these cults the due performance and interpretation of the Mysteries (or sacred dramas) were the province of hierophants, men specially set apart for this purpose. It was at least to some extent under such influences that the Christian minister, as Angus says,¹² 'assumed the office of priest as the dispenser of grace-conferring rituals and as the custodian of the kingdom of heaven entrusted with the dread "power of the keys."' The well-meant injunction of Ignatius thus chimed in only too well with 'the magic fashion of the days when,' to quote the same writer,¹³ 'on the Cessation of the primitive spiritual manifestations, the outward rite was correspondingly highly esteemed, and when the idea from the Mysteries had taken permanent root in Christianity that no member of the brotherhood could be saved or benefit by the grace or blessings of the religion except through participation in its rituals of initiation and rebirth.' To be sure, the extent of the influence of the Mystery Religions on the

¹⁰ This is the thesis, for example, of the symposium *The Apostolic Ministry*, edited by the Bishop of Oxford (1946).

¹¹ S. Angus, *Religious Quests of the Graeco-Roman World* (1929), p. 151.

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 152.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 217.

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Church has often been greatly exaggerated, but some influence from those quarters there certainly was.¹⁴

This tendency naturally obscured the New Testament doctrine of the priesthood of all believers; and the reaffirmation of this truth was one of the most urgent tasks of the Reformers. It is noteworthy that the New Testament writers studiously avoid the use of the Greek word *hierous* (priest) as a title of a Christian minister.¹⁵ The only Christian applications of this word in the New Testament are (a) to the unique High Priesthood of Christ, and (b) to the common priesthood of all believers. All believers are priests, though by no means all are public ministers of the Word. And this is why in the New Testament the priestly acts are not restricted to any one class within the Christian Community. Those Christian bodies which give most practical effect to the priesthood of all believers are in this respect the most truly reformed.

This principle marks a deep cleavage in Christendom, a cleavage which does not always follow denominational boundaries. There are those 'unreformed' communities whose ministers are primarily sacrificing priests, and there are those 'reformed' communities whose ministers are primarily preachers of the Word. This distinction is often reflected even in the architecture of their places of worship, according as the altar or the pulpit occupies the central place.

The truly reformed churches therefore can harbour no proper distinction between clergy and laity. A high esteem of the holy ministry of the Word is right and proper; the Scripture enjoins that elders 'who labour in the Word and in teaching' are to be accounted worthy of special honour (1 Tim. 5. 17).¹⁶ And alongside these are those elders who, while they may not have the gift of public utterance, place the Church under a heavy debt of gratitude by their wise rule and guidance. Church history demonstrates abundantly how disastrous an error it is to think that a church can

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ever dispense with sound government for the due preservation of order and discipline, according to the Scriptural pattern.

CHURCH AND STATE

No lesson can be read more plainly in the records of the Church's history than that the Church must constantly be on her guard against encroachment on her liberties by the State.

¹⁴ See, for example, E. Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church* (Hibbert Lectures, 1888), pp. 283-309.

¹⁵ It is unfortunate that the English word 'priest,' which in the English New Testament represents only Greek *hierous*, a sacrificing priest (Latin *sacerdos*), is used in the Book of Common Prayer and the Ordinal in the sense of Greek *presbyteros*, from which, indeed, it is derived. This verbal ambiguity has probably facilitated the growth of sacerdotalism in the Church of England.

¹⁶ The word 'honour' (Greek *time*) in this verse may include the idea of 'honorarium.' (Cf. W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Vol. II, p. 230.)

The Church and the State are both instituted by God for the accomplishment of His will on the earth. Both are subject to the dominion of Christ, who is not only 'Head over all things to the Church which is His Body' (Eph. 1. 22 f.) but also 'Prince of the kings of the earth' (Rev. 1. 5, quoting Psa. 89. 27). Of the institution of the Church an account is given elsewhere in this volume. Her sphere is clearly prescribed by God. Her weapons are spiritual; her calling is eternal. The civil ruler, on the other hand, exercises a temporal authority; the weapons committed to his hand are material. His divinely appointed duty is the maintenance of justice and order in a fallen community (Rom. 13. 1-7, 1 Pet. 2. 13-17). It is arguable that in an unfallen community the State would be superfluous, but that is beside the practical point. The civil ruler's jurisdiction does not include the regulation of divine worship, although (to quote from the Schedule annexed to an Act of the British Parliament in 1921)¹⁷ it is 'the duty of the nation acting in its corporate capacity to render homage to God, to acknowledge the Lord Jesus Christ to be King over the nations, to obey His laws, to reverence His ordinances, to honour His Church, and to promote in all appropriate ways the Kingdom of God.' The Church exists on earth to bear witness to Christ, her sole Head and King, to proclaim the Word of God, and to confront mankind with the claims of His kingdom and righteousness.

So long as Church and State fulfil their respective functions and do not transgress upon each other's jurisdiction, all is well. But this does not always happen. When the State departs from the justice which it ought to maintain it may well resent the Church's insistent proclamation of the righteousness of God, and attempt to curb the Church's freedom. Or the Church may yield to the temptation to play the political game, and run the risk of discrediting herself and her proper mission in the world.

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Church history shows the undesirable consequences that arise when one of these two tries to dominate the other. The Church's attempt to dominate the State is seen at many times in the record of the Roman Church, supremely in the endeavour to practise the high doctrine of Hildebrand.¹⁸ (It must be conceded that in the history of the Roman Church it is often difficult to disentangle the Christian community from the largely political Papal system which sits on her shoulders like an Old Man of the Sea.) The opposite error, an excessive deference by the Church to the State, has had unhappy results, for example, in the history of German Christianity from the time of Luther onwards. The doctrine (commonly called Erastianism) that a Christian ruler, because of his secular authority, has automatically a ruling voice in the councils of the Church (a doctrine as old as Constantine), is totally wrong. It finds expression in some Lutheran countries where the king as such is Chief Bishop, and it finds expression nearer home as well. A Church which, in practice at any rate, entrusts the appointment of her chief pastors to whoever happens to be Prime Minister for the time being, can hardly substantiate the claim, made emphatically for her by some of her members, to be the most Scriptural Church in the world.

Until Constantine acceded to the supreme power in the Roman Empire, in 312, the Church was faced with a generally hostile State. For longer or shorter periods between the time of Nero (A.D. 54-68) and Galerius (305-311) there might be a lull, but persecution was always liable to break out, and the passage of years did not diminish its fury. The last imperial

¹⁷ Church of Scotland Act, 1921.

¹⁸ He ruled as Pope Gregory VII, from 1073 to 1085; it was he who humiliated the Emperor Henry IV at Canossa in 1077. 'With imperious courage Hildebrand conceived of the world as a single Christian polity governed by an omnipotent and infallible Pope' (H. A. L. Fisher, *History of Europe* [1936], p. 199).

persecution was the fiercest. The root of the trouble was the Christians' refusal to accord to the Emperor (regarded as the sacred incarnation of the Empire) such homage as in their eyes amounted to divine honours. Offering a pinch of incense in his honour, swearing by his genius, giving him the title 'Lord,' which he claimed in a divine sense—such things they refused to do. Some of us to-day might consider them unnecessarily obstinate in refusing to perform such trivial outward acts. It might similarly be argued that Shadrach, Meshach,

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and Abednego ran quite unnecessary risks in refusing to bow before Nebuchadnezzar's image. They might have reasoned thus: 'An idol is nothing in the world; this act is therefore a matter of indifference to us; let us conform outwardly to save trouble.' But they did not; for they saw exactly what was at stake—their witness to the undivided sovereignty of the true God. The early Christians followed their example. The grand phrase, 'The Crown Rights of the Redeemer,' had not been coined in so many words at that time, but they vindicated those Crown Rights full well. Nor is such a predicament as theirs even yet a thing of the past. It is not so long since a very similar crisis confronted the churches in the Japanese Empire, not to mention other parts of the world; and what has happened once can happen again.¹⁹ In this realm, as much as in the political, the surest way to ensure the coming of such undesirable consummations is to say complacently: 'It can't happen here!'

But the tension between Church and State changed its character in the fourth century, and the temptation assumed a more subtle form. Less than fifteen years after the last imperial persecution ended, the Roman Emperor Constantine was found presiding at the Council of Nicæa (325). By what right? Because of his spiritual stature in the Church? No, but because, although then still unbaptized, he was the ruler of the Empire, who had departed from his predecessors' repressive policy and decided to extend his patronage to the Church. The Crown Rights of the Redeemer, maintained for three centuries against the threat of direct persecution, were now confronted by a more insidious but none the less dangerous menace.

We cannot here review the century-long tension between Church and State in the Middle Ages. We can learn some lessons, however, from British history at a later period.

When the Church of England threw off the Papal allegiance in the sixteenth century, it found itself more strictly governed than before, under the rulers of the Tudor dynasty, especially Henry VIII (1509-1547) and his masterful daughter Elizabeth (1558-1603). The royal supremacy in ecclesiastical as well as in political causes was stoutly asserted and exercised. Those Reformers who envisaged

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a more thoroughgoing and Scriptural Reformation were like to be given short shrift. Such men were Robert Browne, author of a *Treatise of Reformation without Tarrying for Anie* (1582), whose strength and spirit were at last broken by repeated imprisonments, so that he

¹⁹ Striking parallels between the situation of Christians under the Roman and Japanese Empires, in both of which Emperor-worship was enjoined by the State, are drawn by Dr. John Foster in his book *Then and Now* (1942), pp. 84-103.

finally conformed to the Elizabethan Settlement; and Henry Barrowe, John Greenwood, and John Penry, all three of whom were hanged in 1593 for stubborn refusal to conform.²⁰

In Scotland, on the other hand, the Reformation of 1560 was carried through against the will of the government. From the outset there was in Scotland a strong insistence on the liberty of the Church from State interference. When James VI of Scotland (1567-1625) desired to enjoy such authority in the Scottish Church as Elizabeth did in the Church of England, he met with strong resistance. This found forceful expression in the words of Andrew Melville, who told the king during an interview with him in 1596: 'And thairfor, sir, as divers tymes befor, sa now again, I mon tell yow, thair is twa Kings and twa kingdomes in Scotland. Thair is Chryst Jesus the King, and his kingdome the Kirk, whase subject King James the Saxt is, and of whase kingdome nocht a king, nor a lord, nor a heid, bot a member!'

The spiritual independence of the Church could not be more explicitly stated, with the corollary that a Christian ruler, so far as his secular status is concerned, is in the Church 'not a king, nor a lord, nor a head, but a member.'

However, James was ultimately able to assert his power and compel some measure of submission to his policy. The episcopal system, as he saw it operating in England, was to his mind better calculated to support the royal authority in the Church—a viewpoint which he summed up in the aphorism: 'No bishop, no king!' When he went to England in 1603 as James I, he found the Anglican leaders more respectful than the leaders of the Kirk. For example, the language of the Epistle Dedicatory 'To the Most High and Mighty Prince James,' prefaced to the Authorized Version of the

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Bible, forms an eloquent contrast to that of Andrew Melville, who plucked him familiarly by the sleeve and called him 'God's sillie vassal' Yet in England, too, there were those who shared Melville's opinion, though they may not have expressed it with Melville's great freedom of speech. Such a man was Thomas Helwys, one of the first English Baptists, who, in 1612, presented Tames with very similar arguments to Melville's in a book entitled *The Mystery of Iniquity*.

But both in Scotland and England blood and tears had to flow before some degree of spiritual liberty was won. The conflict which had to be waged is associated in Scottish history with the memory of the Covenanters, and in English history with such names as those of the Pilgrim Fathers of 1620, the Ejected Ministers of 1662, and the illustrious Tinker of Bedford. These stiff-necked men, as they appeared to many of their contemporaries, might have compounded with the government had they been willing to acknowledge in some small practical way its right to lay down conditions for the Church's life and work. But this was the very issue at stake, and on this they would not compromise.

²⁰ R. W. Dale, *History of English Congregationalism* (1906), pp. 120 ff. Barrowe has left the following definition of a local Church which should not be forgotten: 'A true-planted and rightly-established Church of Christ is a company of faithful people, separated from unbelievers, gathered in the name of Christ, whom they truly worship and readily obey. They are a brotherhood, a communion of saints, each one of them standing in and for their Christian liberty to practise whatsoever God has commanded and revealed unto them in His Holy Word.'

Even after the Revolution of 1688-1689, the various secessions in the Scottish Church, culminating in the Great Disruption of 1843,²¹ were not due (as some ignorantly suppose) to any fissiparous tendency innate in Presbyterianism, but to a resolute contention at all costs for the spiritual independence of the Church. As for the Disruption, while lay patronage of parochial incumbencies was its immediate occasion, its real cause was the persistent over-riding by the State legislature of the Church's own decisions. The rightful cause triumphed at last; whatever our views may be on the general principle of ecclesiastical establishment,²² it is worth noting that the Church of Scotland is probably unique in being at once legally established and yet spiritually free, statutorily subject to no ruler but Christ, in that it 'receives from Him, its divine King and Head, and from Him alone, the right and power

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subject to no civil authority to legislate and adjudicate finally, in all matters of doctrine, worship, government, and discipline in the Church.'²³

For various reasons, English Church history has had to run a different course. Among the less desirable features of the Oxford Movement in England, which was roughly contemporary with the Disruption conflict in Scotland, should be noticed one praiseworthy point at any rate which was common to both, an earnest contention for the Church's freedom from State control. The Erastianism which seems so constantly to accompany Anglican Evangelicalism, and which is none too pleasant to contemplate, may be due in part to misgivings lest the removal of State control should lead to the dominance of the High Church party. Those of us who are free from such embarrassments should thank God, and neither envy nor criticize our Evangelical brethren in the Church of England.

But history shows clearly that it is not to the interest of any Church to be too closely linked to the ruling power. It is obviously undesirable in India, for example, that Christianity should be too closely identified in the popular mind with the late British Raj. It has been suggested that the favour shown to Christian missions in China by Chiang Kai-Shek's government might not be ultimately for the advantage of the Chinese churches if that government were replaced by another. The history of the Russian Church illustrates the point very well. While the Marxian thesis is opposed on principle to all religion, and indeed considers that the purer the religion the more deadly an enemy it is, yet the downfall of the Russian Church after the Revolution of 1917 would have been less easily compassed if that church had not been so hopelessly implicated in the worst features of the Tsarist régime.²⁴

It is a melancholy fact, but one which is worth pondering, that all too often those Christian bodies which have wielded political power or been able to influence the civil rulers have used their influence intolerantly. It is said that C. H. Spurgeon once declared that the Baptists could claim to be the only denomination that had never indulged in religious persecution—adding, when the applause

²¹ Secession takes place when part of the Church severs its relation with the parent body; disruption is the severing of the link between the Church and the State. If the whole Church of Scotland had followed Chalmers in 1843 to form the Free Church this would still have been a Disruption—an even greater Disruption than actually did take place.

²² The leaders of the Disruption firmly believed in the principle of Establishment: 'We quit a vitiated Establishment,' said Chalmers, 'but would rejoice in returning to a pure one.'

²³ Schedule annexed to the Church of Scotland Act, 1921.

²⁴ Things have changed since then, and it is to be hoped that the Russian Church in our day will not repeat the mistake of an earlier age.

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died down, 'because they have never had the chance!' An earlier Baptist wrote to George Washington: 'Religious ministers, when supported by force, are the most dangerous men on earth.' And Jonathan Swift said: never saw, heard, nor read that the clergy were beloved in any country where Christianity was the religion of the country. Nothing can render them popular but some degree of persecution.' The lesson of these quotations needs no pressing.

One further lesson, on the other side, to be learned from the history of relations between Church and State, is that spiritual liberty is more likely to be preserved where the Scriptural principle of the administrative independence of each local church is maintained.²⁵ This is, of course, not at all inconsistent with the utmost Christian fellowship and co-operation between churches. But if the State be adversely disposed it can more easily paralyse a centrally organized corporation than a multitude of unfederated congregations, each independently governed and administered by its own elders and deacons. And it would be well if this consideration were borne in mind when governments try to press some measure of federation upon independent churches, as has happened in recent years in several countries of Europe, as well as in other continents.

THE CHURCH'S MISSION IN THE WORLD

The Church's main function in the world is to bear witness to her Lord and Master, by carrying out faithfully the commission with which He charged her after His resurrection: 'Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you' (Matt. 28. 19 f., R.V.). An impossible task, surely, for such an absurdly small and uninfluential body as the infant Church was to all outward seeming. But the New Testament shows how actively and successfully the infant Church set about this business, undeterred by any discouragement. As time went on the Church found all the might of the Roman Empire stirred up against her, and attempts

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were made in one persecution after another to suppress the Christian name altogether. But such was the Church's survival-power that the last imperial persecution, the severest of all, had barely come to an end when the Empire bowed in acknowledgment of the Church's victory. This, as we have suggested, did not prove an unmixed blessing for the Church, but the wonder of the fact remains.

The Christians of the first three centuries had little, if anything, to aid them in their advance which we have not. We have the Gospel, as they had; we have the Holy Spirit, as they had; and we have a spiritually hungry and disillusioned world around us, as they had. True, in their day the greater part of the civilized world was politically united as it is not to-day, but we have in turn those conveniences of modern civilization which were denied to them.

²⁵ That this is a Scriptural principle has been shown by E. Hatch in *The Organization of the Early Christian Churches* (Bampton Lectures, 1880), and by F. J. A. Hort in *The Christian Ecclesia* (1897), among others.

We are tempted to feel to-day that the tide has set strongly in opposition to Christianity. Not so strongly as in the first three centuries A.D.! A review of Church history is a splendid tonic for despondent hearts. Such a review is afforded by Professor K. S. Latourette in his monumental *History of the Expansion of Christianity*.²⁶ Dr. Latourette portrays the expansion of our faith as a series of alternating advances and recessions.

The first advance lasted from the beginning of the apostles' preaching till nearly A.D. 500. By the end of this period the majority of the subjects of the Roman Empire professed Christianity and the faith had spread outside the Empire—to Ireland on the west, and to Ethiopia, South Arabia, Persia, and India on the south and east. Christianity had begun to influence Imperial Law. It may be questioned in what sense, if any, it is ever right to speak of a Christian nation; but if the spirit of Christianity is written into a nation's laws and constitution, a case may be made for describing such a nation as Christian. At any rate, Christianity has in this way extended its influence down to the present day in all those lands whose laws have been influenced, directly or indirectly, by Roman Law.

During the first recession (c. 500-950) the Christian communities were actually scattered over a wider area than ever; but the solid block of Christendom round the Mediterranean shores was broken

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up. The invaders of the Empire were largely pagan. The Goths had been evangelized before they captured Rome in 410, but such races as the Huns, who ravaged the Empire on the North, and the Vandals, who overran North Africa, were pagan. The recession in North Africa was hastened by the incursion of Islam in the seventh century. The fate of the African churches which had produced such giants as Tertullian and Augustine was a colossal tragedy. But it is not without its lessons. The Christian communities of Egypt and Ethiopia survived, although in an enfeebled condition, because they were indigenous and had the Scriptures in the vernacular, whereas in the Roman province of Africa (corresponding to modern Morocco, Algeria, and Tunis) Christianity seems to have been the religion of the dominant Roman caste, rather than of the native races, and the Bible was read only in Latin. The moral? Indigenous churches and a vernacular Bible are indispensable for lasting Christian work.

On the north-western borders of the Empire, too, many churches were submerged by the pagan tides, first by the Angles and their kindred, and later by the Scandinavians. Yet this period of recession was not lacking in signs of progress. The barbarians were gradually assimilated, if not converted, to Christianity; the Picts and Anglo-Saxons in Britain received the Gospel from Ireland and Rome; the evangelization of the southern Slavs began, and the Nestorian Church carried the Gospel to Central Asia.²⁷

These signs of progress were fulfilled in the second great advance (950-1350). Reforming influences began to operate in the Western European Church with the foundation of the monasteries of Cluny and elsewhere, and other Puritan movements, some of which broke away from the Roman communion. In Northern Europe the Scandinavians were evangelized,

²⁶ 7 vols., Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1939-1946. Dr. Latourette has presented his main thesis in conveniently small compass in *The Unquenchable Light* (1945). See also Dr. John Foster, *World Church* (1945), for a study along similar lines.

²⁷ On the evangelistic activity of the Nestorian Churches of Syria and the East, well into the Middle Ages, see *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise: The Story of a Church on Fire*, by Dr. John Stewart (1928).

not only in their homelands but also in their settlements in Iceland and Greenland. The eastern Slavs (Bohemians, Poles, Wends, and western Russians) and also the Magyars in Hungary received the Gospel. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the Nestorians were active in China, which was also visited by Franciscan missionaries. The Christian Way was followed from Greenland to China.

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This age was followed by a second recession (c. 1350-1500), in which Christianity disappeared from Greenland, while at the other extremity of its extension Nestorian Christianity began to shrink. The Byzantine Empire was crushed by the Muslim Turks, who captured its capital, Constantinople, in 1453. The Roman Church was weakened by inward strife, and corruption was rife within it. The Renaissance brought to many a sceptical attitude towards the traditional beliefs. Yet this age of recession is illuminated by bright spots, such as the names of Wyclif and Hus. And the discovery of the Americas towards the end of this period was the harbinger of a greater expansion than ever. At the end of the fifteenth century, however, Christianity was almost confined to Europe, and even there its condition was none too promising.

But the following 250 years (1500-1750) were marked by the 4 greatest advance yet. In Europe, the Reformation is the great movement which gives character to this advance. The colonization of the Americas carried Christianity beyond the Atlantic; the Gospel spread into East Russia and Siberia, and was carried to the western, southern, and eastern shores of Africa, to South India and Ceylon, South-East Asia, Indonesia, and Japan.

The third recession (1750-1815) was the shortest in duration and the least in extent. In some of the mission fields there was shrinkage, as in South America and Japan; and in Europe there were strong influences inimical to Christianity, such as the rationalist spirit which played so important a part in the French Revolution. But even so, it was this period which saw the rise of the great evangelical and missionary movements associated with the names of the Moravians, Wesley, Carey, and others, which were to blossom so amazingly in the next period of expansion, the fourth advance, during 'The Great Century' from 1815 to 1914, when the influence of Christianity made itself felt throughout the world to a much greater degree than ever before.

The period since 1914, marked by such disastrous war and unrest on a world-wide scale, may possibly be looked upon as the beginning of a fourth recession, though whether a world-view would justify this is doubtful. At all events, a survey of Church history gives us ground for confidence in the future of the Gospel. Dr. Latourette has demonstrated 'that each peak in its effect has

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been higher than the preceding peak, and that each recession has, on the whole, been marked by smaller losses than its predecessor.'²⁸ And within each period of recession can be traced the seeds of the following advance. And the present 'ebb, if ebb there be, is not so pronounced as any of its three major predecessors.... In the past each ebb has been followed by a fresh

²⁸ *Anno Domini: Jesus, History and God* (1940), p. 219.

advance and each advance has set a new high mark for the influence of Jesus in the total life of mankind.'²⁹

This should encourage us to forge ahead with the missionary enterprise committed to us by our Lord, not to sit back in complacent assurance that this pattern of ever greater advances and ever smaller recessions will go on reproducing itself indefinitely with no effort on our part. It does give us confidence that the Lord continually works with those who obey His commission, and grants them accompanying signs. A study of Church history from this angle confirms the truth of His assurance that the gates of Hades shall not prevail against His Church (Matt. 16. 18), and the abiding validity of His promise: 'All authority has been given unto me in heaven and on earth... and lo, I am with you all the days, even unto the consummation of the age' (Matt. 28. 18, 20).

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²⁹ *The Unquenchable Light*, pp. 124 f.