

The English appeal to the primitive centuries

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THE ENGLISH APPEAL TO THE PRIMITIVE CENTURIES.

At the Church Congress held at Bristol in 1903, and again at a meeting of London clergy at a later date, Dean Wace revived the Appeal which the Church of England has always made to the Primitive Centuries "as the true test of Catholicity in doctrine and practice for faithful sons of the Church of England, and as affording a fair and liberal standard by which to judge of the admissibility of the innovations through which, during the last fifty years, the peace of the Church has been disturbed." Dean Wace's proposal was formulated on the famous challenge of Bp. Jewel, delivered in a sermon preached in 1660 at St Paul's Cross, in which the Bishop boldly promised that if any one of fifteen points of modern Roman doctrine, which he designated by name, could be proved by any sufficient authority of Scriptures, doctors or councils during the first 600 years of the Church's life he would acknowledge himself defeated and yield to his opponent's arguments. Dean Wace, in imitation of Bishop Jewel proposed as a *modus vivendi* for the divergent schools within the Church of England that, in the absence of any direct statutory or canonical injunction, whatever could be proved to have been Church doctrine and practice in the first six centuries should be tolerated, provided that nothing which originated later should be insisted upon, and claimed as being catholic.

It is a question amongst English theologians whether we should regard the Primitive Church as constituted by the first five centuries or the first six centuries. Bishops Andrewes and Cosin are for five centuries; Bishop Jewel, Dr Cranthorpe for six. "Bishop Cosin," writes Canon Meyrick, "in his

Catholic Religion of the Realm of England, after declaring Holy Scripture to be our rule of faith and religion, proceeds to name the three creeds, the four first councils, the five first centuries, and the Catholic Fathers of that period as in our minds invested with authority, for, he says, 'in them the primal faith once delivered to the Saints, ancient, pure, and unclouded, free from the corruptions and novel additions of men, is found and set out'. He goes on to say that we acknowledge only that theology of later ages which is in accordance with the earlier faith. The reason why we pay especial respect to the Fathers of the first five centuries, he says, is, (1) because they were men of learning and piety, whose testimony was sealed in many cases by their blood; and (2) because being nearer to the times of the Apostles, it is reasonable to suppose that they better understood the Christian faith and were able to expound it better in their commentaries on Holy Scripture. Cosin takes care, as Dean Wace has also done, not to allow it to be thought that he holds that everyone of the Fathers in the period named is to be followed in his opinions or statements. On the contrary he says that whatever anyone has laid down without the authority of Holy Scripture and the general agreement of the Church, however holy or learned he may be, though he be bishop, confessor or martyr, must be regarded as his private opinion, and that it is only the consent or general agreement of the Church which gives a sanction to a doctrine; and this consent, he says, can be learnt first from the creeds and those confessions of the Primitive Councils which have been received by the rest of the Church, and then by statements not peculiar to one teacher or another but accepted by all alike.

Bishop Andrewes in like manner adopts 500 years as the limit within which we may expect primitive purity to have been preserved. Replying to one of Bellarmine's arguments he says 'All this is magisterial enough, but which of the Fathers said it? Where are the 500 years?' (*Resp. ad Bell.*, p. 252.)

On the other hand, Bishop Jewel, as we have seen, extends his challenge to the end of the sixth century, and in this is followed by D^r Crakanthorpe in his *Defensio Ecclesiæ Anglicanæ*. The sixth century was one of the most unlearned centuries in the history of the Church. The energy of ecclesiastics was for the most part confined to the task of gathering within the fold

the Barbarians who had burst into the Roman world. With the questionable exception of Gregory I. and Isidore, it is hard to find one really learned man in the whole century. If we carefully guard ourselves, like Bishop Cosin, against being supposed to endorse the opinions of individuals, and demand with Jewel, "a sufficient authority of doctors or councils", the subtraction or addition of this century will not make much difference in our estimate of primitive teaching." (*Appeal*, &c.)

This difference then is of no great importance, as the sixth century contains little, or no teaching, resting upon a sufficient authority of doctors or councils.

But when Mr Athelstan Riley, one of Lord Halifax' lieutenants, extends the limits of the Appeal to 1054, it is a different matter, and when the *Church Times* would just as soon take the six last as the six first centuries as the area of the Appeal, it becomes, as it was intended to become, absurd.

Canon Meyrick took up Dean Wace's appeal and applied the test of the first six centuries to the ceremonies, practices and doctrines of the Ritualists. The ceremonies that they insist upon are Vestments, Eastward Position, Incense, Lights, Mixed Cup, Wafer Bread. The practices are Adoration of the Sacrament, Elevation, Non-communicating Attendance, Reservation, Children's Eucharists, High Celebration, Daily or excessively multiplied Eucharists, Pictures and images in churches. The doctrines are the objective Presence of Christ in *the Elements* after consecration, the doctrine of the Mass, the necessity of fasting before Communion, the necessity of auricular confession, Invocation or worship of saints and angels, seven sacraments, the primacy of the Pope over christendom, denial of the rights of a national or particular Church.

On all these points Canon Meyrick has proved that the Ritualist demands are not in harmony with the ceremonies, practices and doctrines of the Primitive Church, though he has allowed that some question may be raised in respect to the use of the alb and the stole, for which the Anglican Church has substituted the surplice and scarf or stole, and with regard to Reservation for the sick; and he admits that the mixed cup was used, but denies that the mixture was made a liturgical ceremony. He allows also that Eucharistic celebrations began to be multiplied in the period. In arguing against the

septenary number of the sacraments he quotes the eighth article of agreement concluded at the Bonn Conference in 1874 as follows: "The number of the sacraments was fixed at seven first in the twelfth century, and then it was received into the general teaching of the Church, not as a tradition coming down from the apostles or from the earliest times, but as the result of a theological speculation."

In making such an arraignment of the tenets and practices of the Ritualist party it was only to be expected that Canon Meyrick should raise against himself a violent feeling of antagonism on the part of those who maintained or supported them. Leading articles have appeared both in the *Guardian* and in the *Church Times*, the first courteous and hesitating in its disapproval, the second discourteous and of studied rudeness. The *Guardian* accepts the principle of appeal to the Primitive ages, but is not prepared to accept Canon Meyrick's application of the test on all points. The point of difference which it finds in particular is the doctrine of the objective Presence in the Elements, which it considers to have been a tenet held within the first six centuries. To this Canon Meyrick has replied that we must distinguish between the Objective Presence of Christ in the Holy Communion, which is a spiritual presence, and the objective bodily presence of Christ in the Elements which cannot but be material. He allows that the Objective Presence of Christ in the Holy Communion was a doctrine of the Primitive Church, and states that it is a doctrine held within the Church of England, but he denies that the doctrine of the Objective Presence *in the Elements* was the teaching of the Primitive Church, or is admissible in the Church of England. Correspondents of the *Guardian* have controverted this latter statement quoting passages from the Fathers in which the Bread is spoken of as the Body of Christ, while ignoring other passages written by the same authors in which it is spoken of as the sign of His Body; which passages must show the meaning of the others, because, as S^t Augustine teaches, we may call a thing which is the sign of another thing by the name of that which is signified by it, but this does not hold *vice versa*.

As an unfair way of dealing with the Fathers Canon Meyrick points to a quotation made by one of the correspond-

ents of the *Guardian* from S^t Ignatius as follows: "I desire the Bread of God which is the Flesh of Christ, and His Blood I desire to drink". This is brought forward to prove that Ignatius taught the objective Presence in the elements. But the concluding words of the passage, declaring that the Blood of Christ, which he desires to drink, is "Love incorruptible", are omitted; and no reference is made to that other passage of Ignatius: "Renew yourselves in faith, which is the Flesh, and in love, which is the Blood of Jesus Christ" (Trall. 8.). These passages prove that S^t Ignatius meant, by eating and drinking the Flesh and Blood of Christ, being made one with Christ through faith and love; which is a very different thing from his teaching a bodily Presence of Christ in the elements.

When Canon Meyrick pointed this out, the correspondent in question ventured on no reply, substituting a little cheap abuse for argument.

But the *Guardian* and its correspondents are courteous and fair, as compared with the *Church Times*, which is the organ of the extreme and violent party among the Ritualists and aims at being what the *Univers* was under M. Louis Veuillot. It professed to point out twelve historical errors made by Canon Meyrick. But in every case it failed, and had recourse first to insulting language and then to refusing admission to a refutation of its charges. One instance will be sufficient to illustrate its method. Canon Meyrick referred to the Edict issued by Trajan in 110, forbidding evening meetings and subscription suppers, and pointed out the effect that it must have had on the Agape, and the probable transference of the Eucharist in consequence of it to the fore-noon service. The Editor had never heard of Trajan's Edict, and thinking that Pliny's well-known letter to Trajan respecting the persecution of the Christians must be meant, he quoted it at length, to show that there was nothing in it about evening meetings, and that Canon Meyrick had therefore "interpolated leading words into the sense of documents". For three weeks the Editor sought in vain to discover what Trajan's Edict was, and when Canon Meyrick quoted three passages from Lightfoot's notes on the Ignatian Epistles, speaking of it, the Editor replied that it was his "painful duty to declare that they did not exist", and when at length he found them, he made

no apology, but wrapped up his mistake in a cloud of irrelevant and insulting language, and declined to publish Canon Meyrick's exposure of his ignorance. It is not likely that Canon Meyrick will prosecute the matter further, because it is understood that nothing more is meant by violence and insult employed by the *Church Times* than that it feels itself very hard hit.

Meantime the Appeal has been made, and it remains to be seen what the effect of it will be. It is difficult to be sanguine on the subject, for as Canon Meyrick recognised at the beginning of the discussion: "However clearly it may be shown that certain mediæval practices are excluded by not having been Primitive, we may be sure that they will be continued by the more extreme representatives of the Ritualist school, just as though no such proof had been offered." Nevertheless the vast central body of English Churchmen will have had the opportunity of seeing that the ceremonies, practices and doctrines of the Romanizing party are not Primitive, and can in no proper sense of the word, be called Catholic.

The number of the English clergy who have signed a Declaration of approval of Dean Wace's Appeal amounts at the time of my writing to three thousand. The list consists, as might be expected, of moderate and sound Churchmen, excluding Ritualists on one side and Ultra-Protestants on the other, Ritualists objecting to the proof offered by Canon Meyrick that their practices are uncatholic, and Ultra-Protestants shrinking from the recognition of the authority of the Primitive Church.

Dean Wace quotes the following from Bishop Beveridge's dedication to Archbishop Suncroft, in 1678, of his edition of the Apostolical Canons: "How great is the harmony between the Primitive Church and that over which you preside is not unknown to anyone who is but moderately versed in their respective dogmas and rites, least of all to one so fully acquainted with them as yourself. It is indeed so great that almost the only distinction between the two Churches is that of time. In both there is the same order of government, the same Faith, the same number of Sacraments, and the same form of administering them; there are, moreover, the same Rites, the same Laws, the same Feasts and Fasts; in short, all things in the two Churches are held, established, and preached in such identity, that the Anglican Church may

justly and deservedly be regarded as the Primitive Church revived in these last times.”

The appeal on the part of the reasonable members of the Church of England to the Primitive Centuries is essentially the same as that of the Old Catholics (though there may be a difference as to the limits of the Primitive Church), and for this reason it must, I am sure, rouse the interest and enlist the sympathy of your readers, especially of those that have followed the very able expositions of the teaching of the Early Fathers which have appeared in your columns.

The title of the pamphlet which has originated this movement is “An Appeal from the New to the True Catholics; or, The faith and practice of the first six centuries. By Henry Wace, D. D., Dean of Canterbury, and Frederick Meyrick, M. A., Non-residentiary Canon of Lincoln” (London, C. Murray & Co., 11, Ludgate Square, E. C.).

ANGLICANUS.
