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The Central Superstition of Christendom.

A SERMON

ON THE PERVERSION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER,

PREACHED AT

EATON CHAPEL, EATON-SQUARE.

BY THE

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PREFACE.

THE purpose of the following Sermon was not to show the depth of error into which any particular Church has fallen, or to maintain the comparative purity of any other Church: it was to guard the minds of those who were addressed, against the superstitious views of our Lord's dying ordinance, which have prevailed so extensively throughout Christendom, and from which, though undoubtedly reaching their fullest development in the Church of Rome, very few Churches indeed are wholly free. The alarming spread of such views in our own Church invests the subject with peculiar importance to us at the present moment. We should have little to fear from the direct assaults of Rome, but for the predisposition to her errors which is created by the Romish teaching and practices of so many of our own clergy, the undue exaltation of the Church and her Sacraments by a still greater number, who are otherwise sincere Protestants, and the natural reluctance which all must feel openly to oppose those who are associated with them as ministers of the same Church.

Controversy can never be pleasant. Sensitive minds shrink from antagonism, indolent minds from thought; while the careless and indifferent cannot bear being reminded that there is any religious truth worth contending for, and that it makes any practical difference whether men believe truth or error. But controversy is nevertheless necessary. All experience

proves how idle it is to think that we can guard against error by merely asserting the truth which it denies. As well might a man expect to secure himself against a prevailing epidemic by merely taking wholesome food. That is essential, no doubt ; perhaps the most essential thing of all : but it is not enough. If he is wise, he will take special precautions, even though he be as yet untouched by it himself. He will avoid everything that might predispose him to the disease, and, if necessary, fortify himself beforehand with antidotes. The Christian pastor, therefore, who abstains from controversy for fear of offending those who would have him always "speaking smooth things," acts like a physician who tries to please his patient by ordering him a soothing cordial; or even the best of food, when he really needs bitter medicine, whether for prevention or for cure.

Such was not Paul's method. We are told (Acts xix.) that when he was at Ephesus "he went into the synagogue, and spake boldly for the space of three months, *disputing* and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God." But this was not all ; for "when divers were hardened, and believed not, but spake evil of that way before the multitude,"—what did he do ? Give up the controversy ? No ; "he departed from them, and separated the disciples, *disputing daily* in the school of one Tyrannus ; and this continued by the space of *two years.*" Two years of incessant controversy ! And what was the result ? The next words inform us, "So that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks."

May the Spirit of God bless this effort to contend for a portion of the faith once for all delivered unto the saints, which has been most grievously obscured and corrupted by the traditions of men !

A SERMON,

ETC.

“ And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body, which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me. Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you.”—LUKE XXII. 19, 20.

THE extreme simplicity of the two symbolic ordinances, which Christ appointed for His Church, sufficiently indicates how little of outward form and ceremony is required by, or is congenial with, the spirit of Christianity: and should have taught the Church to be very much on her guard against anything like pomp and parade in her public worship. We do not maintain, that by the fact of these two symbols only being appointed, all others are prohibited; but the experience of 1800 years has proved, that the closer we keep to them the better, and that any little advantage which may possibly be derived from human inventions, whether as accessory to these prescribed ceremonies, or distinct from them, is as nothing compared with the imminent danger of their becoming objects of superstitious regard. Superstition has been the bane of the Church in all ages: it has been Satan's grand instrument for hiding, and for corrupting, the truth,—either by fixing men's attention so exclusively on the outward sign, that the thing signified has not been thought of at all, or by presenting such a distorted view of the truth, as practically turns it into a positive falsehood. “ Seeking after wisdom ” is an occasional evil, at periods when the human intellect is stirred to an unusual degree of activity; “ requiring a sign ” is a chronic disease. There is not always any considerable number of persons within the Church, intellectual enough to fall into the one snare; there is never any lack of those sensuous enough to be caught by the other.

Superstition is groundless belief. Mariolatry would be superstitious, even though no form or ceremony were connected with it; and the sacraments may be superstitiously regarded, while administered in the simplest form. But this is seldom the case. Superstitious feeling generally leads to corresponding rites of man's invention; as, on the other hand, unauthorized rites have a strong tendency to create superstitious feeling.

How wonderfully true is this, with regard to the monstrous system of superstition, which has been developed from the Lord's Supper. If all the corruptions and falsehoods, that have grown up within the visible Church, could be presented in one tableau before the eye, the central figure would undoubtedly be that, which claims to be the ordinance instituted by Christ at the last Passover. So much so, that the comparative purity of any particular Church may generally be known, from the degree of simplicity with which it views and administers that ordinance. The nearer its mode of administration approaches the original model, making allowance of course for altered circumstances, and the more manifestly its doctrine is in harmony with the words "This do in remembrance of me," the more Scriptural and Apostolic in its general character will that Church probably be found.

Before considering the actual perversions, by which the very nature of the ordinance has been changed, let us notice the strong presumption that its importance has been exaggerated, which arises from the very rare mention of it in the Apostolic Epistles. Out of the twenty-one extant, there is only one which makes the slightest allusion to it. Was that because the writers thought it an indifferent matter? By no means. The early Christians communicated so habitually and universally, that it was perfectly needless to warn them against its neglect. Some absented themselves from public worship altogether, and were reprovèd for it; but not a hint is given in the New Testament, that any persons joined in one part of the Church's worship, and refused to join in the other part. It was apparently the whole of the 3,000 recently baptized persons who "were constant in their attendance upon the Apostles' instruction, and the almsgiving, *and the breaking of the bread*, and the prayers." (Acts ii. 42.) But while this is quite sufficient to account for the comparative silence of the inspired writers, on any sober view of the ordinance, it is impossible to conceive that they would have said so little, if they had attached such importance to

it, as the Church at large has done almost ever since their time. In this, as in so many other things, how marked is the difference between the Apostles and even their immediate followers ! The great Architect of evil began at once to lay the foundation for that huge system of superstition, which he had already designed. What he had to work upon, was man's natural desire for the external in religion, his proneness to "require a sign"; and the unconscious agents which he employed were some of God's holiest saints. The first step was merely exaggerating its importance. Regarding it as, what it was meant to be, an aid to our faith, men began to lean too much upon it, and unduly to exalt it above other means of grace. Strong figures of speech were used to describe the benefits resulting from it, which to the popular mind conveyed far more than was intended. And so it grew, by such a long gradual process, that it is impossible to say when the transition was made from exaggerated views of its importance to false views of its nature; from depending too much upon it for the strengthening of our faith, to regarding it as the actual communication of Christ to the soul. This brings us to that twofold perversion of the ordinance, which it is our main business to examine.

If those who were present at its first institution, had tried to conceive, how it could be perverted, so as to become as unlike the original as possible, while nominally preserving its identity, would any of them, by the utmost stretch of his imagination, have been able to guess what has actually occurred ?

I. Could they possibly have imagined that multitudes would be persuaded to believe—that the piece of bread, which they saw held in their Master's hands, was His actual body; and that therefore He must either have possessed at least two distinct bodies, or that what appeared to be His body must have been an optical illusion, the piece of bread being that which was really speaking to them: that while one disciple was eating His Master's body, that same body was reproduced from another piece of bread, for the same process to be repeated with another disciple: * that the cup, of which he bade them drink, contained

* It is true, that the bread represents Christ's body in its risen glorified state, *after* having been "broken" by death. But, as Jesus was not yet glorified, when the Supper was instituted, the only body of which the disciples could then have eaten the *substance*, was the body in which He was present with them. In fact, besides all the arguments against the possibility of transubstantiation *now*, there is this additional argument against

the very blood, which had *not* yet been “shed” for them: and that when it was completed, there was the very body they had all been eating, still reclining at the table, whole and entire, with the blood they had just been drinking still flowing in His veins: nay more, that even after the Lord had ascended up on high, and while he was sitting at the right hand of the Father, the same body and blood are reproduced on earth, to be literally eaten and drunk, whenever the Lord’s Supper is received? Yet this has been believed by a large portion of Christendom for many centuries; and it was mainly for denying this, that our Reformers perished at the stake.

It is hard to say which of the two beliefs involved in this theory is the greater superstition. The belief, on no ground whatever, that what looks and tastes like bread and wine, is a human body and human blood,—or the belief, that, if it were so, we could derive the smallest spiritual benefit from eating and drinking it.

We say, that Scripture affords not the shadow of a pretext for believing the fact.

1. The words “This is my body,” gives no more ground for understanding our Lord to mean that it was the *substance* of His body, than would be given by the words “This is my father,” spoken of a portrait held in the hand, for understanding the speaker to mean that it was the *substance* of his father: even if such a perverse unnatural interpretation of them were not rendered impossible by St. Luke’s version of the words spoken while giving the cup, “This cup is the New Testament in my blood.”

2. The words “Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you,” could not mean, Except ye receive the Lord’s Supper,—inasmuch as it had not then been instituted; even if our Lord had not distinctly explained them, in the same discourse, to mean “*believing*” on Him. (John vi.)

3. The words “Not discerning the Lord’s body” cannot possibly mean—not discerning it to be the substance of the Lord’s body; because, in the very same context, that which is eaten is called bread, “As often as ye eat this *bread*,” and “So let him eat of that *bread*.” (1 Cor. xi.)

it then,—that the body, represented by the bread, was not yet in existence, and the blood, represented by the cup *as shed*, still formed part of His “natural body.”

4. And the whole argument, which St. Paul illustrates by reference to the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor. x. 15—21, plainly shows, that by "communion of the body, and blood, of Christ," he means outward Church fellowship, the public profession of Christianity. Do not be present, he says, at idol worship; because, whether you believe in the idol or not, you are openly committing yourself to it, making yourself one of its avowed worshippers; just as, by partaking of the Lord's Supper, you are declaring your belief, and claiming a participation, in the efficacy of Christ's death and resurrection, whether you really believe in it, and derive any benefit from it, or not.

Yet these are the only passages that can be adduced to sustain a theory, which is as inherently impossible as, if it were true, it would be utterly useless.

We say—utterly useless. For could the power of superstition further go, than to believe, that a sinner's recovery from ruin, his reconciliation to God, his restoration to the image of God, his attaining to glory and honour and immortality, could be in the slightest degree affected by the material process of receiving into the substance of his own body the substance of Christ's glorified body, now at the right hand of the Father, together with the substance of the blood, that flowed from the body of His humiliation, as it hung upon the cross? "The corruption of the best becomes the worst." Countless millions of heathen do really believe, that they can get some good by worshipping gods of their own making: have any yet been found, who believe that they can get any good by eating them? Probably not. Only the corruption of so exalted an ordinance as the Lord's Supper could sink to such a depth of degradation.*

* The language of the Council of Trent is as follows:—

"If any one shall deny that in the most holy sacrament of the Eucharist there are truly, really, and substantially contained the body and the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, together with his soul *and divinity*, and consequently Christ entire; but shall affirm that He is present therein only in a sign and figure, or by His power; let him be accursed.

"If any one shall affirm, that in the most holy sacrament of the Eucharist there remains the substance of the bread and wine, together with the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ; and shall deny that wonderful and peculiar conversion of the whole substance of the bread into His body, and of the whole substance of the wine into His blood, the appearances only of bread and wine remaining, which conversion the Catholic Church most fitly terms 'transubstantiation;' let him be accursed.

"If any one shall affirm that Christ, as exhibited in the Eucharist, is eaten in a spiritual manner only, and not also sacramentally and really; let him be accursed."

But the materialising of men's minds was not the only evil of this perversion. It placed the laity absolutely at the mercy of the clergy. For, while the Supper was only regarded as a means of grace, however highly valued, it *could* be dispensed with; if a Christian could not obtain it, he could do without it. But when the bread and wine came to be regarded as *Christ Himself*, and men were told that except they eat the flesh of Christ *in that sacrament* they had no life in them, then they *must* have it, by any means, at any cost. And where were they to get it? Behold the bread and the wine; but of what use are they without a priest to change them into the substance of Christ's body and blood? It is he who has possession of Christ, who holds Christ literally in his hands, to dispense or withhold as he pleases. And here is the great secret of the design. Priesthood was Satan's special device for nullifying Christianity—the very glory of which is that it gives a repenting sinner free access to his reconciled Father in Christ Jesus.

II. This, however, brings us to the second perversion of the Lord's Supper; which was evidently planned to complete the idea of a priesthood within the Church. For a priest is a mediator between God and man; who has something to offer from God to man, and from man to God. To possess the power of producing the substance of Christ's body and blood from a little bread and wine, and of giving it to the worshipper for the salvation of his soul, would not be sufficient to constitute the possessor of it a full priest. He must be able to offer some sacrifice to God from the worshipper, which the worshipper would not be able to offer of himself. And where, within the limits of nominal Christianity, could such a sacrifice be found? Christ has already offered up on the Cross, and is continually presenting before the Father, the only sacrifice that could take away sins—Himself; and now all believers in Him are constituted a "royal priesthood," to present to God the only other sacrifice that He requires—themselves. If a separate order of priests was to be established within the Church, what were they to offer?

Had Paul been told that the so-called successors of the Elders, whom he ordained in every city, would be turned into sacrificing priests, he would have been sorely perplexed to imagine what would be their sacrifices. Probably he would have conjectured that the Jewish sacrifices would be continued, with a retrospective, instead of a prospective, aspect. One thing we may be quite sure would never have occurred to him,

—that the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper would be made a sacrifice, the table on which it was placed be called an altar, and the ministering elder, who, as representing the congregation, was the natural person to ask a blessing upon it, believed to be therein offering up Christ Himself as a propitiatory sacrifice to the Father. Yet this is the mass; the central act of worship in the Church of Rome, and condemned in our Article as a "blasphemous fable and dangerous deceit."*

Its chief value, in the eyes of Romanists and Romanisers, is that it necessarily establishes priesthood in the Church. But, within the Roman pale, it also answers the secondary, though by no means unimportant, purpose of opening up to the clergy a mine of wealth. For these "Masses" can be "said," that is, Christ can be offered up as a sacrifice to the Father, either for the benefit of the Church at large, or for that of any particular person living or dead, according to the "intention" of the priest; and the priests undertake to do this as often as they may be paid for it. What wonder that persons, who believe in their efficacy, should leave large sums of money to shorten their detention in purgatory, by the multiplicity of the sacrifices that are offered up for them on earth; or that their surviving friends should contribute liberally for the same benevolent purpose?

These then are the two perversions of Christ's ordinance, which, in their combination, constitute, it is no exaggeration to say, the central superstition of Christendom. We say, of Christendom; for, although they have undoubtedly reached their lowest depth in the Church of Rome, yet they have more

* The Council of Trent speaks thus:

"If any one shall say, that a true and proper sacrifice is not offered to God in the Mass; or that what is to be offered is nothing else than giving Christ to us to eat; let him be accursed.

"If any one shall say, that by these words, 'Do this for a commemoration of me,' Christ did not appoint His apostles priests, or did not ordain that they and other priests should offer His body and blood; let him be accursed.

"If any one shall say, that the Mass is only a service of praise and thanksgiving or a bare commemoration of the sacrifice made on the Cross, and not a propitiatory offering; or that it only benefits him who receives it, and ought not to be offered for the living and the dead, for sins, punishments, satisfactions, and other necessities; let him be accursed.

"If any one shall say, that to celebrate masses in honour of the saints, and in order to obtain their intercession with God, according to the intention of the Church, is an imposture; let him be accursed."

or less affected the views of multitudes of Christians in other Churches. It is the zealous effort now being made to introduce them, in the most demonstrative manner, into our own Church, that is producing so much excitement throughout the country, and that renders it necessary for every faithful clergyman of the Church of England to "cry aloud and spare not."

It is true that even the most Romanising clergy amongst us would not probably accept the gross statements of the Church of Rome ; but the essential perversion of the ordinance remains the same.

1. As to the "Real Presence." They do not believe, that the bread and wine cease to retain their former substance after consecration, and that therefore the senses of sight, and touch, and taste are wholly deceived. They admit that the worshipper eats bread and drinks wine ; but they assert that the person of Christ becomes also present there as soon as the words of consecration have been pronounced ; and therefore they prostrate themselves in bodily adoration, just as if Christ were visibly standing before them.

Now the one is as pure a fiction as the other. We are told that "while we are present in the body we are *absent* from the Lord." Spiritually, He is present "wherever two or three are gathered together in His name ;" nay, He is ever present in the heart of every true believer, according to His own promise, "We will make our abode with him," and Paul's prayer, "that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith." But bodily, the "Real Presence" is in heaven, and nowhere else ; as it is written, "Whom the heaven must receive until the times of the restitution of all things." Furthermore, it is contrary to the essential conditions of a body, that it should be in more places than one at the same time.

2. As to the "Eucharistic Sacrifice." They are careful to explain, that it is not a *repetition* of the sacrifice made on Calvary, but a *re-presenting* it to God as an offering for sin.

This view has been stated with remarkable clearness in a sermon lately published by a clergyman of our own Church.* The writer states that he has been induced to publish it "because, amidst much that has been ably written upon the subject of late, to set forth the authority of the Church of England's law, as well as ancient usage throughout universal Christendom,

* "The Scriptural Rationale of Eucharistic Vestments." By the Hon. and Rev. Robert Liddell, M.A.

nothing, so far as the author has seen or heard, has been said upon the *Scriptural grounds* for the use of the Eucharistic vestments." His argument is this: Our Lord appeared to St. John (Rev. i.) clothed in high-priestly vestments; from which we may infer that He actually wears such vestments now, while making intercession for us with the Father; and therefore, inasmuch as "we offer upon the Church's altars on earth the very counterpart of what Christ offers in the courts of Heaven," the custom of "wearing a separate and distinctive dress" by "each priest who officiates at the altar," is "based upon the authority of Holy Scripture."

Now, with regard to the inference from St. John's vision, it would manifestly be just as reasonable to conclude that our Lord still stands before the throne, in the form of "a lamb as it had been slain," according to the Evangelist's subsequent vision. But this is a secondary matter. The vital question is whether, in administering the Lord's Supper, we *are* doing what Christ Himself is doing in Heaven—that is, presenting to the Father the sacrifice which was made on Calvary. And we unhesitatingly assert, that for this fiction there is even less pretence of Scripture authority than for the grosser one of Transubstantiation. For if there could be any possible doubt as to the meaning of the words, "Do this in remembrance of me," it would be at once removed by St. Paul's interpretation of them, "As often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come;" the word rendered "shew" being, literally, proclaim, or preach; which includes the twofold purpose of the ordinance, namely, to remind both ourselves and others of the benefits resulting from union with Christ,—to be an aid to our faith, and a public declaration of it. This is the "remembrance" of Christ for which we are to eat that bread and drink that cup.

But it may be said that the Lord's Supper takes the place of the Jewish Passover, which was a sacrifice. This is one of the most interesting and important points of view from which the subject can be regarded. The Lord's Supper is undoubtedly related to the Paschal Supper. But was that a sacrifice, or the re-presenting to God a sacrifice that had been already offered? No such thing. The sacrifice consisted in killing the lamb; the presenting it to God was by sprinkling its blood upon the door; and then the feeding upon its flesh within the house was to remind and assure the inmates of the perfect security they en-

joyed from the fact of their door being thus sprinkled with the blood. The Lord's Supper fulfils the same purpose to the Christian believer, with regard to the security which he derives from having applied to himself by faith the atoning blood of Christ. It is a memorial feast, not a memorial sacrifice. And this makes all the difference ; for to the latter a priest is essential, but not to the former.

It is just this matter of priesthood, as all earnest men on both sides admit, that gives most of its importance to the Ritualistic controversy now raging in the Church of England. Those who cannot see below the surface, and who regard all these vestments and elaborate ceremonies as mere folly or eccentricity, are very fond of telling us that the movement may safely be left to the good sense of the British public. But this shows utter ignorance of the whole matter. It is not a conflict between folly and common sense, but between priesthood and pure Christianity. And the belief in priesthood is so deep a disease, and withal so dangerous from the popular craving for a sign, the desire for what is outward and visible rather than for what is inward and spiritual, that it is pure infatuation to treat it lightly. Nor will it be found sufficient merely to repress by authority its outward manifestations, important as that is on account of their effect upon the popular mind ; the great thing needed is to give simple, intelligible views of the ordinance which Christ Himself instituted, and to scatter the mists of superstition, that have gathered so thickly around it, by the clear light of God's own Word.

One reason of the hesitating ambiguous tone observable in some defenders of the faith, is their nervous dread of appearing to contradict some statement, or some inference from a statement, in the formularies of their own Church. None of those formularies are perfect, and therefore none of them afford safe ground for a controversialist to take his stand upon. Happily, the Lord's Supper having been one of the great matters of controversy between Rome and the Reformers, our own formularies are on this point remarkably pure. We may wish to alter some doubtful or exaggerated expressions ; but the principle on which they are to be interpreted is so distinctly and decisively laid down in the 28th Article, that there is no room left for any possible doubt as to the doctrine of the Church of England on this sacrament. "The mean, whereby the body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper, is faith." There is

the conclusion of the whole matter. If faith is the mean by which Christ is received in the Supper, it is obvious that the only benefit which the Supper can confer upon us is the strengthening of that faith. Beyond being a witness for the truth, and a term of communion in the visible Church, the whole thing is purely subjective ; its value as a mean of grace to the recipient depending entirely on the effect produced by it upon his mind. It is certainly our duty, as well as our privilege, to believe that it will produce a far greater effect upon our minds than in itself it might seem directly calculated to produce,—because it has been divinely appointed for the purpose. Only let us beware of going to it for what it was never intended to give, and then imagining that, because we have received the Lord's Supper, we have therefore received the Lord Himself. If it has helped us to realise our union with Him and with one another, to see more clearly, and value more highly, the benefits in possession and in prospect resulting to every member of His body from His incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension, it has done all that it can do for us ; if it has not done that, it has done nothing for us whatever.

Let us then draw near in faith, and take that holy sacrament to our comfort. Let us pray that it may be blessed to the strengthening and refreshing of our souls, by helping us to feed upon Christ in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving ; remembering that unless we spiritually eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink His blood, we have no life in us.

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