

2152

“THE TRUTH OF THE MATTER”

ABOUT

CLERICAL SUBSCRIPTION,

IN

A LETTER TO THE REV. C. H. SPURGEON.

BY

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS REES.

A *QUONDAM* SUBSCRIBER. — R

“We have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the Word of God deceitfully.”—PAUL.

“Verily, there is nothing so true, that the damps of error have not warped it; Verily, there is nothing so false, that a sparkle of truth is not in it.”—TUPPER.

LONDON:

PASSMORE & ALABASTER, 23, PATERNOSTER ROW.

. 1864.

PRICE ONE PENNY.



LETTER.

MY DEAR FRIEND AND BROTHER,

I DEEM it an honour to be permitted thus to address you. From the beginning I have watched your career with the deepest interest, and throughout, I have loved your character, admired your gifts, and rejoiced in your success. Your recent flank movements, therefore, so vehemently attacking what you believe to be a crying evil—and so seriously affecting both the Church and the world—nay, so gravely impugning my own conduct in the past—these heavy side-blows have awakened my profoundest concern, and attracted my most intense regard. As if a huge mountain were dashed into the sea, causing the affronted waters to boil and rage, and sending out circle after circle of waves, till the coast all round the compass was lashed, so your sermon, cast into the ecclesiastical world, has excited bubbling commotion in the metropolis, and more or less disturbance throughout the land. Under these circumstances, I feel impelled to lay down a buoy here and there, and to erect a beacon on certain headlands that, in this controversy, enquiring minds may be, on the one hand, warned off the shoals of false accusation, and, on the other, the perilous havens of untrue repose. To this end I shall show, first, *wherein I think your charges are unsupported*; and secondly, *wherein they appear to me to be well sustained*.

First, you set out to prove that the Church of England teaches the doctrine of Baptismal Regeneration; and I am persuaded you accomplish your task. In truth, it is perfectly marvellous how any man who reads the Catechism, in connection with the Offices for Baptism and Confirmation, can doubt what is the teaching of the Establishment on this point; but I have a demonstration at hand which you have not touched, and which no one in this controversy, so far as I know, has handled aright. I refer to the Office for Private Baptism, where the out-and-out dogma of *opus operatum* Baptismal Regeneration is laid down, and where, consequently, the Evangelical, hypothetical solution is not—to use Mr. Wills' expression—"precipitated," but annihilated. In this secret service, sureties with their proxy repentance, faith, promises, and vows, are dispensed with, and what is more, the last prop of hypothesis is cut asunder—for *not a single prayer is essential*. True, it is directed in the Rubric, that "the Lord's Prayer be said, and as many of the Collects

appointed to be said before in the form of Public Baptism, as *the time and present exigency* will suffer;” but what if there be no time for any prayer but the Lord’s Prayer, in which there is no shadow of a petition for the child’s regeneration? or what if there be no time for *any prayer at all*? Is the effect of the Baptism hindered in such a case? By no means; for should the infant survive, the Rubric requires that it be brought before the minister and congregation, in order that its claim to a genuine Baptism may be tested, And what is the test? Now mark—the minister is directed to say, “Because some things *ESSENTIAL* to this sacrament may happen to be omitted through fear, and in haste, in such times of extremity, therefore I demand further of you—With what *matter* was this child baptized? With what *words* was this child baptized?” Observe: not what *prayers* were offered, but what *words* were used in the act of baptizing. The satisfying answers to these enquiries are of course, first, that the child was baptized, not with the “matter” of wine, or oil, or any other unlawful liquid, but with the “matter” of water. Second, that the child was baptized with the “words,” “I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” These, then, are the two *essentials*—the minister, the sureties, and the prayers are proper, but not necessary. Yet what is the *effect* of this prayerless, sponsorless Baptism? Let the Rubric answer, “The minister shall receive him (not into the visible Church alone but) as one of the flock of *TRUE* Christian people;” in other words, the child, by the mere *opus operatum* of Baptism is regenerated by the Holy Ghost, and made an inheritor of the kingdom of God.

This simple winnow scatters before the wind three-fourths of the replies to your sermon. But how the teaching of this secret service can be reconciled with the teaching of the Catechism I cannot conceive. “What,” asks the latter, “is *required* of persons to be baptized?” Answer—“Repentance whereby they forsake sin, and faith whereby they stedfastly believe the promises of God made to them in that sacrament.” Question—“Why, then, are infants baptized, when, by reason of their tender age, they cannot perform them?” Answer—“Because they promise them both by their sureties, etc.” Observe narrowly “Why are infants baptized?” “*Because* they promise repentance and faith by their sureties.” Now let *me* ask a question—“Why, then, are infants baptized without any such promise at all?” If regeneration follows prayerless, promiseless Baptism in a sick chamber, why should it not follow prayerless, promiseless Baptism at the font? If repentance and faith are necessary in public, why should they not be necessary in private? If there is not a flat contradiction between the Catechism and the secret office, on this point, I have studied logic in vain. Nevertheless I should feel sincerely obliged to any Churchman if he would point out to me the fallacy of this reasoning.

I conclude, therefore, with you, and with the great majority of the clergy, that the Church of England *does* teach the doctrine of Baptismal Regeneration—nay, I have proved that she teaches the doctrine of absolute *opus operatum* Baptismal Regeneration.*

* Are not the *laity* of the Church as well as, though not as much as the clergy, answerable to God for this error?

I am aware that the decision in the Gorham case has permitted the Evangelical clergy to hold their livings, though they deny Baptismal Regeneration. But, as the Rev. Andrew Jukes, an ex-clergyman, remarks—"Though this case settled a point of civil law, it proved nothing in *foro conscientiæ*. For the question in the matter of subscription is, not what the civil law of England allows, but rather what truth and conscience require respecting certain solemn declarations. As far as I know, a man may tell lies, and yet most legally retain possession of his house, and lands, and property. But would a Christian say, that 'because no civil penalty attaches to the offence, a falsehood is, or can be justifiable. So as to subscription. The question is not, whether after having declared our "assent and consent" to the Prayer Book, we may hold our livings, while yet we disbelieve certain things we have subscribed to—but whether, disbelieving, or at least doubting, certain portions of the Prayer Book, we are honest and true in subscribing to "all and everything in the said Book."

To proceed, having settled this question *for yourself*, you tacitly assume that you have settled it for the Evangelical clergy—and then you advance against them with the charge of "dishonesty," "immorality," and "perjury." But there is a great and strong link missing in this chain. The Evangelical clergy, who deny the doctrine for themselves, deny it also *for their Church*. They affirm, vehemently, that they believe on this point what their Church believes, and that is either *hypothetical*, *spiritual* regeneration, or else absolute *ecclesiastical* regeneration, or something that is *not opus operatum* regeneration. How then can they be charged with perjury, for "swearing one way, and believing another," when they maintain that they swear and believe the *same* way?

You reply that "no process short of violent wresting from their plain meaning, can ever make the words of the Prayer Book say anything else than "Baptismal Regeneration." And I quite agree with you—but recollect that whilst you and I, standing outside of the Establishment, behold the service in this light, the Evangelical clergy standing within, may behold it in quite another—and this they declare they do; nor if you were as well acquainted as I am with the mistiness of the clerical atmosphere, and how injurious that atmosphere is to the clerical vision, would you be so astonished at clerical subscription. An unsound eye cannot distinguish "a hawk from a hand-saw," and a mystified conscience cannot discern between good and evil, between reasoning and sophistry.

I subscribed to the Prayer Book a quarter of a century ago—and yet, I neither believed in Baptismal Regeneration nor was conscious of perjury. My mind was muddled with an interpretation of the offices by the Articles—with hypothesis—and above all, with the example of good men.* Not that I justify this sort of subscription—on the contrary, I vehemently condemn it—and, from my present outside point of view. I see clearly that *I ought never to have done it*. I confess, with humiliation, that I *ought* to have seen the opposition between what I believed and what I subscribed. I own that it was *logical* perjury, and I admit

* Good men in the Church, little know how much evil they do by their example.

that it was an action which could not be justified before God. I have, therefore, often repented of it since—but I maintain, that this fault, grievous as it was, cannot justly be characterized as “taking an oath that I sincerely assented to a doctrine which I did not believe,” much less “as one of the grossest pieces of immorality perpetrated in England.” If indeed I had felt what Mr. Leonard Strong confesses that he felt, when he subscribed, I should, as he does, bow down in shame beneath your withering rebuke—but speaking for myself, and many other *quondam* subscribers, I must insist on the radical difference between deliberate conscious perjury, and unconscious *constructive* perjury. I conclude, then, that your sweeping charge against *all* the Evangelical clergy is not supported; and I know you well enough to be sure, that if you see the matter in this light, you will retract your condemnation of those *who do not condemn themselves*. “Hast thou faith? have it to thyself before God. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth. And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.” (Rom. xiv. 22, 23.)

Secondly—I shall show you wherein I think your charge is well sustained. All the clergy of Mr. Strong’s class—namely, those who consciously dissent, while they deliberately subscribe—or who either alter or omit portions of the Prayer Book, *because* they disapprove of them;* all these subscribers, whatever their religious or irreligious pretexts—are guilty of perjury in its most heinous form; for they have solemnly sworn that they “unfeignedly assent and consent to all and everything contained in and prescribed by the Book, entitled “The Book of Common Prayer.” I suspect, however, and hope, that this class is not very large. But what shall we say of the four thousand revisionists? I protest that if when I was in the Establishment, I had omitted or altered any portion of the Prayer Book, *because* I disapproved of it—or if I had signed any petition to Government, praying that such an alteration or omission might be authoritatively made, *because* my conscience was troubled at the present form—then I should have been self-convicted of perjury, and self-condemned—then I should, with shame, accept your rebuke for my past conduct. For what is the position of a Revisionist?† Why, that his oath of assent and consent to the Prayer Book is *still* binding upon his conscience—every day of his life he reiterates it before the law—on the ground of this reiteration, he continues to eat the Church-bread, and yet, all the while, he wishes and prays that the said book might be seriously, if not radically altered. He enters into a compact with the State, whose provisions are, that so long as he unfeignedly approves of the entire Prayer Book, he may legitimately

* See Mr. Strong’s “Personal Testimony to the truth of Mr. Spurgeon’s Charges, etc.”

† When the Royal Commissioners of 1689 were engaged in their proposed emendations of the Prayer Book, the Bishop of Rochester, one of the Commissioners, urged “that he could not see how they could enter upon such matters, *having given assent and consent to them*. Dr. Jane, the Dean of Gloster, stood up, and said, that what the Bishop of Rochester said, convinced him.” See “Alteration of the Book of Common Prayer, etc.,”—ordered by the House of Commons to be printed in 1854.

enjoy his living—but when he has been inducted into the living, he violates the agreement by openly expressing his dissent from what he has subscribed, and yet continues to receive the benefits of the said agreement, just as if all its conditions were fulfilled. Now apply this sort of conduct to mercantile transactions, and what would be thought of mercantile honour? This view of the case is so severe, that I shall confirm it by additional testimony—I shall call up Dr. Parker of Manchester. Listen, then, to an extract from his admirable volume, entitled “Church Questions.” Having quoted Dr. Vaughan, the Vicar of Doncaster’s words on clerical subscription, he thus proceeds—“These are his words, and certainly I know of no words in which the sanctity of an oath is so *flippanly interpreted*. . . . The candidates subscribe the book *ex-animo*, with their heart, mind, conscience, soul, purpose, and affection; but Dr. Vaughan assures them that ‘though they have thrice pledged their souls, they merely signify that they prefer the Prayer Book to any other book or document used in the various Christian Communions in this Country.’ . . . I would particularly fasten your attention on this view of the case, because, if men are to *say one thing and mean another* . . . then it is too clear that language is the disguise of intention, and an oath, but the CANT OF MORALITY.”

Again: “All clergymen have given their unfeigned assent and consent to all and everything contained in the Book of Common Prayer;” yet, so recently as June, 1851, nearly four thousand of these very men petitioned the archbishops and bishops to devise some effectual remedy in the matter of the ‘Order for the Burial of the Dead,’ because, to use their own words, “it imposes a heavy burden upon the conscience of the clergy, and is the occasion of a grievous scandal to many Christian people.” . . . What is the duty of these men, on whose consciences the ‘heavy burden’ rests? Nothing can be clearer to me than that their duty is to make full recantation of their vows, and instantly to rise from the table of the Established Church, and not to live longer on her bread. . . . Had I accepted a book with heart, soul, mind, and resolution, and then implored my primate to alter a part of it, which is ‘a heavy burden on my conscience’—and were I, all the time, enjoying the advantages of the *consent*, while cherishing the scruples of the *dissent*, I should consider myself morally bound either to quit the Church, or to submit, *in ignominious silence, to the charge of perjury*.”

Now you will see, my dear friend, that Dr. Parker limits this terrible censure to those clergymen who have openly expressed their dissent from the Prayer Book—he does not judge those who, *in his view*, merely contradict the Prayer Book by their teaching.

This is what you have done; and you did it because you assumed that *they saw* the contradiction. I am fully persuaded that they *ought* to see it; but so long as they affirm that they do not, we are bound to leave them to the judgment of God. “But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.” (Rom. xiv. 10.)

In all candour, however, let me confess that I cannot help believing that your heavy rebuke falls justly on many more heads than those of the *avowed* revisionists—for it is not to be supposed that every non-content clergyman in the world set his hand to the above-named petition:

may, the late Bishop of Norwich astonished the House of Lords by declaring, "*That he had never met with a single clergyman who could calmly look him in the face, and say he sincerely believed the whole Prayer Book.*" I quote from Dr. Parker. If the bishop really said this, then he out-Spurgeon Spurgeon in the charge of clerical dishonesty; and I own that I think you have been one-sided in your accusation—for if the Evangelicals who deny Baptismal Regeneration "swear one way and believe another," are the thousands of High-Church and Broad-Church clergymen who, in flat contradiction to the XVIIth Article, deny the doctrines of grace, less guilty of this offence? Are the Essayists less guilty of it? The fact is, that the Prayer Book contradicts itself; and, therefore, all who subscribe to it, set their hand to a contradiction—since, too, no man can hold contradictory views at one and the same time, *all* subscribers must forswear themselves; but this need only be *logical*, not *moral*, perjury: the latter is committed when the contradiction is *seen*.

For myself, I heartily thank God that the burden of subscription is removed from my conscience; and I verily believe, that if circumstances over which they had no control, were to force the Evangelical clergy—nay, the great majority of the clergy of all classes—from their present ecclesiastical stand-point, their mental vision would be wonderfully cleared: they would see the contrariety of the Prayer Book, both to itself and to every homogenous creed, and would bless God for cancelling their subscription, in spite of themselves.

Your sermon, my dear friend, notwithstanding the drawbacks which I have ventured to point out, will, I am bold to hope, arouse many stupified consciences, enlighten many blind eyes—

"So thick a drop serene hath quenched their orb"—

lead forth large numbers of God's ministers from a worse than Egyptian bondage, and prepare the way for a general exodus of saints from the World-Churches of Christendom.

I am, my dear friend,

Yours affectionately in Christ,

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS REES.

* It is well known that these different sections of the clergy charge each other with dishonesty—"Manasseh Ephraim, and Ephraim Manasseh, and both together against Judah"—so that your charge is certainly nothing new.

3 FE65