

THE CHURCH AND THE MINISTRY IN THE EARLY CENTURIES

*The Eighteenth Series of
The Cunningham Lectures*

by

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Hodder and Stoughton
London
1903

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And Dedicated to
My Wife and My Children:
Stephanie
Claire, Samantha,
Loukas, and Duncan

MCMXCIX

PREFACE

THE aim of these Lectures is to pourtray the organized life of the Christian Society as that was lived in the thousands of little communities formed by the proclamation of the Gospel of our Lord during the first three centuries.

The method of description has been to select writings which seemed to reveal that life most clearly, and to group round the central sources of information illustrative evidence, contemporary or other. The principle of selection has been to take, as the central authorities, those writings which, when carefully examined, reveal the greatest number of details. Thus, the Epistles of St. Paul, especially the First Epistle to the Corinthians, have been chosen as furnishing the greatest number of facts going to form a picture of the life of the Christian Society during the first century, and the material derived from the other canonical writings such as the Acts of the Apostles, the Apocalypse and the Pastoral Epistles, have been arranged around them. Similarly the *Didache*, the *Sources of the Apostolic Canons* and the *Epistles of Ignatius* have been selected for the light they throw on the life and work of the Church during the second century. The *Canons of Hippolytus*, supplemented by the writings of Irenaeus and of Tertullian, have furnished the basis for the description of the organization during the first, and the *Epistles of Cyprian* of Carthage for that of the second half of the third century.

The method used has the disadvantage of making necessary some repetitions, which the form of Lectures rendered the more inevitable; but it puts the reader in possession of the contemporary evidence in the simplest way.

Quotations from the original authorities have been given in English for the most part, and, as a rule, the translations have been taken from well known versions—from the Ante-Nicene Library, from the late Bishop Lightfoot's translations of Clement of Rome and of Ignatius, and from Messrs. Hitchcock and Brown's version of the *Didache*. This has been done after consultation with friends whose advice seemed to be too valuable to be neglected.

Dr. Moberly, in his eminently suggestive book, *Ministerial Priesthood*, has warned all students of early Church History to beware of mental presuppositions, unchallenged assumptions, hypotheses or postulates. The warning has been taken with all seriousness, even when the perusal of his book has suggested the thought that mental presuppositions, like sins, are more readily recognized in our neighbours than in ourselves. I feel bound to admit that three assumptions or postulates may be found underlying these lectures. Whether they are right or wrong the reader must judge.

My first postulate is this. I devoutly believe that there is a Visible Catholic Church of Christ consisting of all those throughout the world who visibly worship the same God and Father, profess their faith in the same Saviour, and are taught by the same Holy Spirit; but I do not see any Scriptural or even primitive warrant for insisting that catholicity *must* find visible expression in a uniformity of organization, of ritual of worship, or even of formulated creed. This visible Church Catholic of Christ has had a life in the world historically continuous; but

the ground of this historical continuity does not necessarily exist in any one method of selecting and setting apart office-bearers who rule in the Church; its basis is the real succession of the generations of faithful followers of their Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. It is with devout thankfulness that I can make this assumption with perfect honesty of heart and of head, because it relieves me from the necessity—sad, stern and even hateful it must seem to many pious souls who feel themselves under its power—of unchurching and of excluding from the “covenanted” mercies of God, all who do not accept that form of Church government which, to my mind, is truest to scriptural principles and most akin to the ecclesiastical organization of the early centuries.

My second postulate concerns the ministry: There is and must be a valid ministry of some sort in the churches which are branches of this one Visible Catholic Church of Christ; but I do not think that the fact that the Church possesses an authority which is a direct gift from God necessarily means that the authority must exist in a class or caste of superior office-bearers endowed with a grace and therefore with a power “specific, exclusive and efficient,” and that it *cannot* be delegated to the ministry by the Christian people. I do not see why the thought that the authority comes from “above,” a dogmatic truth, need in any way interfere with the conception that all official ecclesiastical power is representative and delegated to the officials by the membership and that it has its divine source in the presence of Christ promised and bestowed upon His people and diffused through the membership of the Churches. Therefore when the question is put: “Must ministerial character be in all cases conferred from above, or may it sometimes, and with equal validity, be evolved from below?” it appears to me that a fallacy

lurks in the antithesis. "From below" is used in the sense "from the membership of the Church," and the inference suggested by the contrast is that what comes "from below," i.e. from the membership of the Church, cannot come "from above," i.e. cannot be of divine origin, warrant and authority. Why not? May the Holy Spirit not use the membership of the Church as His instrument? Is there no real abiding presence of Christ among His people? Is not this promised Presence something which belongs to the sphere of God and may it not be the source of an authority which is "from above"? The fallacious antithesis has apparently given birth to a formula,—that no valid ministry can be evolved from the membership of the Christian congregation; and this formula has been treated as expressing a dogmatic truth which has been compared with the truth of the dogma of the Incarnation, and which has been used as a guiding principle in the interpretation of the references in the New Testament writings and in other early Christian literature to the origin and growth of the Christian ministry. Fortified by this supposed dogmatic truth one Anglican divine can contentedly rest the Scriptural warrant for the theory of "Apostolic Succession" and all the sad and stern practical consequences he deduces from it, on an hypothesis and on a detail in a parable, and another can find evidence for the same "gigantic figment" in a statement of Clement of Rome which describes the earliest missionaries of the Christian Church doing what missionaries of all kinds, from those of the Church of England to those of the Society of Friends, have done in all generations to secure the well-being and continuance of the communities of believers who have been converted to the faith of Jesus.

My third postulate belongs to an entirely different sphere from

the two already mentioned, but it has been so much in my mind that it ought to be mentioned. It is that analogies in organization illustrative of the life of the primitive Christian communities can be more easily and more safely found on the mission fields of our common Christianity than among the details of the organized life of the long established Churches of Christian Europe. In the early centuries and on the Mission field we are studying origins. It was my good fortune some years ago to spend twelve months in India, examining there the methods, work and results of the Missions of the various branches of the Church of Christ. One seemed at times to be transported back to the early centuries, to hear and to see what the earliest writers had recounted and described. Portions of the *Didache*, of the *Sources of the Apostolic Canons*, of the *Canons of Hippolytus* were living practices there. One lived among scenes described by Tertullian and by Clement of Alexandria. The *Arabian Nights* tell us of the fortunate possessor of a magic carpet who, when seated on his treasure, had only to wish it to be carried anywhere in space he desired. Historians might long to be owners of a similar mat to carry them anywhen backwards and forwards throughout the past centuries. A visit to the Mission field, especially to one among a people of ancient civilization who have inherited those original speculations which were the fertile soil out of which sprang the earliest Christian Gnosticism, is the magic carpet which transports one back to the times of primitive Christianity. The visitor sees the simple meaning of many a statement which seemed so hard to understand with nothing but the ancient literary record to guide him. He learns to distrust some of the hard and fast canons of modern historical criticism, and to grow somewhat sceptical about the worth of many of those "subjective pictures" which some modern critics first construct and then use to estimate the

date, authorship and intention of ancient documents. He learns that the modern western mind cannot so easily gauge the oriental ways of thought as it persistently imagines. Modern missionary work appears to me to be full of helpful illustrations of the life and organization of the early centuries:

These Lectures are the fruit of long, careful, and, I trust, reverent study of the literary remains of the early Christian centuries. The last quarter of a century has brought many ancient documents to light which were formerly unknown, and these have not been passed over. The extent of my obligations to others may be seen in the notes; but the debt owed to such writers as Bishop Lightfoot, Professor Harnack and Dr. Hort far exceeds what can be acknowledged in such a way:

I have to express my sense of the great assistance given to me by my old friend, the Rev. A. O. Johnston, D.D., who read the lectures in MS., and who has also gone over the proofs with great care. The book owes much to his labour and to his criticisms.

THOMAS M. LINDSAY;

EXTRACT DECLARATION OF TRUST.

MARCH 1, 1862.

I, WILLIAM BINNY WEBSTER, late Surgeon in the H.E.I.C.S., presently residing in Edinburgh,—Considering that I feel deeply interested in the success of the Free Church College, Edinburgh, and am desirous of advancing the Theological Literature of Scotland, and for this end to establish a Lectureship similar to those of a like kind connected with the Church of England and the Congregational body in England, and that I have made over to the General Trustees of the Free Church of Scotland the sum of £2,000 sterling, in trust, for the purpose of founding a Lectureship in memory of the late Reverend William Cunningham, D.D., Principal of the Free Church College, Edinburgh, and Professor of Divinity and Church History therein, and under the following conditions, namely,—*First*, The Lectureship shall bear the name, and be called, ‘The Cunningham Lectureship.’ *Second*, The Lecturer shall be a Minister or Professor of the Free Church of Scotland, and shall hold the appointment for not less than two years, nor more than three years, and be entitled for the period of his holding the appointment to the income of the endowment as declared by the General Trustees, it being understood that the Council after referred to may occasionally appoint a Minister or Professor from other denominations, provided this be approved of by not fewer than Eight Members of the Council, and it being further understood that the Council are to regulate the terms of payment of the Lecturer. *Third*, The Lecturer shall be at liberty to choose his own subject within the range of Apologetical, Doctrinal, Controversial, Exegetical, Pastoral, or Historical Theology, including what bears on Missions, Home and Foreign, subject to the consent of the Council. *Fourth*, The Lecturer shall be bound to deliver publicly at Edinburgh a Course of Lectures on the subjects thus chosen at some time immediately preceding the expiry of his appointment, and during the Session of the New College, Edinburgh; the Lectures to be not fewer than six in number, and to be delivered in presence of the Professors and Students under such arrangements as the Council may appoint; the Lecturer shall be bound also to print and publish, at his own risk, not fewer than

750 copies of the Lectures within a year after their delivery, and to deposit three copies of the same in the Library of the New College; the form of the publication shall be regulated by the Council. *Fifth*, A Council shall be constituted, consisting of (first) Two Members of their own body, to be chosen annually in the month of March, by the Senatus of the New College, other than the Principal; (second) Five Members to be chosen annually by the General Assembly, in addition to the Moderator of the said Free Church of Scotland; together with (third) the Principal of the said New College for the time being, the Moderator of the said General Assembly for the time being, the Procurator or Law Adviser of the Church, and myself the said William Binny Webster, or such person as I may nominate to be my successor: the Principal of the said College to be Convener of the Council, and any Five Members duly convened to be entitled to act notwithstanding the non-election of others. *Sixth*, The duties of the Council shall be the following:—(first), To appoint the Lecturer and determine the period of his holding the appointment, the appointment to be made before the close of the Session of College immediately preceding the termination of the previous Lecturer's engagement; (second), To arrange details as to the delivery of the Lectures, and to take charge of any additional income and expenditure of an incidental kind that may be connected therewith, it being understood that the obligation upon the Lecturer is simply to deliver the Course of Lectures free of expense to himself. *Seventh*, The Council shall be at liberty, on the expiry of five years, to make any alteration that experience may suggest as desirable in the details of this plan, provided such alterations shall be approved of by not fewer than Eight Members of the Council.

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