

The Church of England

by J.C. Philpot

J.C. Philpot critiques the Church of England for its harmful influence on society and true Christianity while highlighting the struggles of genuine believers within its ranks.

Scripture: Proverbs 3:5, Isaiah 5:20, Matthew 23:27, John 8:32, 2 Corinthians 6:14, Galatians 1:10, 2 Timothy 2:15, James 4:4, 1 John 2:15

Topics: "Church Government", "Spiritual Reform"

Description

J.C. Philpot addresses the question of whether the Church of England, despite its acknowledged benefits, does more harm than good to the nation. He criticizes the Church for hindering improvements like education by imposing its doctrines and exerting unfair influence through persecution and favoritism. Philpot highlights the deep-rooted attachment of some to the Church, contrasting it with dissenters who see its errors and corruption. He also discusses the challenges faced by ministers within the Church, urging those with a burdened conscience to seek counsel from the Lord for guidance.

Transcript

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But admitting the necessity of some acknowledged form of Christianity, and allowing certain benefits to spring out of a National Establishment, the question arises--Whether we might not have the benefits without the evils, and whether the Church of England does not do us, as a nation, more harm than good. Religion, as a bond of society, would not perish were there no endowed Establishment to maintain it. Look, for instance, at the United States, where there is no established church. In no country is there more regard paid to the outward observances of religion; no, so much so, that it is hard to tell which is more ardently worshiped--the dollar or the form of godliness.

Humanly speaking, one of the greatest barriers in this country to every improvement is the National Church. As regards, for instance, the great question of the present day--the education of the people, she thwarts in every possible manner a sound and general system of instruction by seeking to thrust upon every school her obnoxious Catechism; by demanding that every schoolmaster should be a bona-fide member of her pale; and by setting up a paramount claim to educate every child in her system and creed. She thus thwarts and defeats every attempt towards a better and more general scheme of education, and

would sooner, like a Chinese mother, that her children should not walk at all, or be cripples for life, than that their infant feet should not be squeezed into her narrow shoes.

Where able, too, she carries on a vast amount of persecution and of unfair influence. The poor, especially in country places, she sometimes buys over by presents of money, coal, and clothing, and sometimes persecutes by excluding them from a share in those favors which should be given indiscriminately. "To keep their church" is, in her eyes, the greatest virtue of the poor, and to attend the meeting the greatest crime. Nor are her power and influence limited to the poor. Those who are by their position independent of her favors, she awes by her lordly frowns; so that there are scarce any to be found above those engaged in trade and manufactures who dare to be anything but Churchmen, on account of the "vulgarity" of dissent in her aristocratical eyes. All this, we know, in the wisdom of God, is for the good of the church of Christ, which is to be despised and persecuted, as was her divine Lord and Master; but this no more diminishes the sin and guilt of the proud aristocratical Establishment than, because Christ was to be rejected of the Jews, they committed less sin in rejecting him.

Such as have never been within her pale, or have not been trained up at the great public schools and Universities of the Church of England, have little or no idea of the deep-rooted, we may say, fanatical attachment which burns in the bosom of her children--a love as blind, but as deep and ardent, as fired the bosom of Paul for the traditions of the Pharisees when he sat at the feet of Gamaliel or held the clothes of the witnesses who stoned to death the martyr Stephen. Those who have been cradled in dissent, their eyes not being blinded by this idolatrous enthusiasm, see, and see truly, her errors and corruptions, her worldly character and domineering spirit. Calmly and coolly comparing her with the scriptural marks of the church of God, they perceive in her scarce one feature of the bride of Christ; and instead of her being a chaste virgin espoused to the Lord the Lamb, they behold her gathering lovers to her embrace as shamelessly and as indiscriminately as Aholab and Aholibah.

Were we to judge merely from what floats on the surface, we might think the National Church was tottering to its fall. The very world is now crying out against the sordid avarice and shameless rapacity of her bishops, and against the miserable evasions and subterfuges which they employ in order to appropriate to themselves large sums beyond their assigned incomes. Puseyism, that twin-sister to abhorred Popery, on one side is eating as a gangrene into the very vitals of Church of Englandism; and Infidelity, on the other, is rapidly infecting the literature of the country and fearfully spreading among the masses. But underneath this apparent weakness she conceals an amazing vitality and strength. Like some aged asthmatics, who seem always dying, but gasp and cough on until ninety, burying two or three crops of hale, hearty youths, the Church of England has been wheezing and panting and seemingly all but expiring again and again, and yet appears to be getting stronger and stronger every year. Churches are rising by hundreds in every district, and the Universities can hardly supply students fast enough to minister in them. Who can solve this enigma, that while, for many just reasons, the Church of England is daily falling into well-merited contempt, her power is increasing?

Without using harsh, unbecoming expressions, we think that the streets of our great towns will afford a solution. There is a miserable class of females who are justly condemned by the virtuous of both sexes, but whose numbers show that their nets are not spread in vain for the vicious. The Scripture compares a false church to a harlot. It is the easy virtue of the National Church which makes her so generally acceptable. So indulgent a mistress suits well the racing lord and fox-hunting squire; and her benignant smiles, if they do sometimes cost the farmer five shillings an acre, or his opulent landlord £50 for a new organ, yet they cheer them with hope of heaven when they die, if they are but constant in their attentions

to her as long as they live.

The attachment, then, of worldly people to a worldly religion is no great mystery; it is no riddle for a Samson to put forth, or requiring a Solomon to solve. There is a greater mystery, a harder enigma than this--how gracious men, servants of the living God, believers in and followers of the Lord Jesus, can remain contentedly in her embrace. Toplady, Romaine, Berridge, Hawker--what burning and shining lights were these! Yet were they members and ministers of the National Church, and never seem to have been troubled with doubts or scruples as to her scriptural character and position. They lived and died honored of God, and their names are embalmed in the hearts of his children. But they are gone, and have left neither son nor heir; for where is there a minister now in the Church of England who is worthy, we will not say to stand in their pulpits, but even to open for them the pulpit door? There are a few who preach the same doctrines; but where is the savor, and power, and, above all, the blessing of God which clothed the ministry of those eminent servants of the Most High? Nor indeed is it to be expected. God has worked, and still, in a spiritual sense, does work miracles; but it is not his ordinary course of action. A man may be found alive under a snow-wreath, or in a tomb; but we do not expect to find many there, or that those thus found should be very warm or very lively. Surrounded with ice and the cold damps of the sepulcher, we need hardly wonder that there are so few living ministers in the Church of England, and that those few manifest so little vitality or strength.

The system is so deadening that, were it possible to extinguish the life of God, there could be no living men in her. Some, once known to ourselves, did appear at one time to possess life, but the event, we fear, has proved that it was not the life of God. Sin, we know, dulls and deadens the conscience, and few sins do this more effectually than what we may call religious sins. Many men, it is to be apprehended, have gone into the ministry of the Establishment with tender consciences, doubting and fearing whether they were acting right in the step they were taking. When the occasional services have come before them for performance, their lips, perhaps, have faltered as they thanked God for regenerating the sprinkled infant, or taking to himself some miserable drunkard.

But by degrees their conscience becomes less sensitive; the words are pronounced, more glibly and boldly; inward checks are less and less felt; and arguments arise, or are suggested by others, to keep quiet that intruding voice which speaks so very uncomfortably. The young curate is presented to a living; a wife is taken; and, in due time, olive branches of greater and less dimensions spread themselves round the vicarage table. Hedge after hedge, wall after wall are built round him as he advances onward into middle life. By degrees he drops his Calvinistic creed, and becomes a more acceptable preacher to the gentry and rich tradespeople. He imbibes a little Puseyism, and talks of "our venerable church" and its "admirable liturgy," is made a rural dean or an archdeacon, and settles down into a thoroughly worldly man, an enemy of God and godliness, a determined hater of all dissent, and, where he can, a persecutor of the saints.

But take another case. Let us reverse the process. In steel engraving, the iron plate is, at one stage of the process, hardened into steel, and at another the steel plate is softened into iron. We have seen how the iron is hardened into steel; let us now see how the steel is softened into iron. Take the case of a man who has entered the ministry of the Establishment, as most do, for a piece of bread, without any breath of divine life in his soul. Let the Lord, sooner or later, commence a work of grace in his heart, and lay judgment to the line and righteousness to the plummet in his conscience. Let him be brought, through convictions of sin and distress of mind, to the Lord Jesus Christ, and have a manifestation of God's mercy and love to his soul. Let him now worship God in spirit and in truth, and walk before him in godly fear, will

not, must not, his eyes be in a measure opened to see and his heart be made to feel what he is surrounded by? Lazarus dead in the sepulcher saw not its darkness, felt not its coldness, smelt not its odor; but Lazarus, living, came forth out of them all. But Lazarus was bound hand and foot with the grave-clothes, and his face was bound about with a napkin, until the liberating word came, "Loose him, and let him go." So we trust there are a few living men, whose hands and feet are bound round with the gown, and their faces swathed about with the surplice, but to whom, in the Lord's own time, the liberating word will come, "Loose him, and let him go."

A man in the Establishment with the grace and fear of God in his heart is in a very trying position. He may not have strength to come out, and yet has a burdened conscience while continuing in. We would desire to sympathize with such; and our desire is, that they would seek counsel of the Lord, and neither on the one hand harden their consciences by doing them continual violence, nor on the other take any step without beforehand well counting the cost. To give them right counsel is most difficult, and well-near impracticable. Suppose, for instance, we say, "Stay in," we should seem to counsel them to continue in wrong doing; and suppose we say, "Come out," unless we can give them grace and faith we might lead them to take a step in the flesh. The Lord alone, the wonderful Counselor, can either show them how to act or enable them to do what his gracious Spirit prompts. Unless rightly brought out, they will have little comfort themselves, and be of little benefit to the Church of God.

Among the many objectionable things in the Prayer Book, there are few, if any, worse than what is called the Catechism. As a compilation of Christian doctrine, it is one of the poorest, most meager skeletons that could well be put together, and, compared with the Articles, Burial Service, and some of the Collects, a disgrace to the Prayer Book. The author of "The Christian Year" speaks of the "soothing influence" of the Prayer Book. Most soothing indeed it is, and it has soothed tens of thousands into the sleep of death! The laudanum of the Catechism is dosed out drop by drop in every parish school; and most soothing it would be to the poor little things who are compelled to take it, were they able to swallow it; but its greatest advantage is, that they cannot understand it. It is with them a mere exercise of verbal memory, and they gabble over their abracadabra as school boys repeat by rote their Latin grammar, or the little cathedral choristers chant the Nicene Creed.

The author of the work before us has drawn his sword very valiantly against this misshapen idol; for, like most heathen idols, which seem worshiped with fervor proportionate to their ugliness, the Catechism is the great idol of the patron and patronesses of parish schools. His language is perhaps a little too strong in places, but he no doubt felt that to root up and hack to pieces such an idol required some vigorous and repeated blows.

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