

On Arguing Concerning the Apostolical Succession. on Reluctance to Confess the Apostolical Succession

by J.H. Newman

J.H. Newman discusses the importance of Apostolical Succession and the reluctance of clergy to confess it amidst doubts and societal pressures.

Scripture: Judges 8:23, Matthew 23:23, 1 Corinthians 1:25, 1 Timothy 5:22, Hebrews 12:16

Topics: "Apostolic Succession", "Church Authority"

Description

J.H. Newman preaches about the importance of upholding the Apostolic Succession in the Church, emphasizing the duty to carefully examine and understand this doctrine, even if faced with doubts or ridicule, as it may involve a significant talent entrusted by God. He warns against the temptation to dismiss or downplay this doctrine due to fear of controversy or desire to focus on what is perceived as more essential, reminding that all aspects of the Gospel are important and should not be neglected.

Transcript

Men are sometimes disappointed with the proofs offered in behalf of some important doctrines of our religion; such especially as the necessity of Episcopal Ordination, in order to constitute a Minister of Christ. They consider these proofs to be not so strong as they expected, or as they think desirable. Now such persons should be asked, whether these arguments they speak of are in their estimation weak as a guide to their own practice, or weak in controversy with hardheaded and subtle disputants. Surely, as Bishop Butler has convincingly shown, the faintest probabilities are strong enough to determine our conduct in a matter of duty. If there be but a reasonable likelihood of our pleasing Christ more by keeping than by not keeping to the fellowship of the Apostolic Ministry, this of course ought to be enough to lead those, who think themselves moved to undertake the Sacred Office, to seek for a license to do so from it.

It is necessary to keep this truth distinctly in view, because of the great temptation, that exists among us, to put it out of sight. I do not mean the temptation, which results from pride,-hardness of heart,-a profane disregard of the details and lesser commandments of the Divine Law,-and other such like bad principles of our nature, which are in the way of our honestly confessing it. Besides these, there is a still more subtle temptation to slight it, which will bear insisting on here, arising from an over-desire to convince others, or, in other words a desire to out-argue others, a fear of seeming inconclusive and confused in our own

nations and arguments. Nothing, certainly, is more natural, when we hold a truth strongly, than to wish to persuade others to embrace it also. Nay, without reference to persuasion, nothing is more natural than to be dissatisfied in all cases with our own convictions of a principle or opinion, nay suspicious of it, till we are able to set it down clearly in words. We know, that, in all matters of thought, to write down our meaning is one important means of clearing our minds. Till we do so, we often do not know what we really hold and what we do not hold. And a cautious and accurate reasoner, when he has succeeded in bringing the truth of any subject home to his mind, next begins to look round about the view he has adopted, to consider what others will say to it, and to try to make it unexceptionable. At least we are led thus to fortify our opinion, when it is actually attacked; and if we find we cannot recommend it to the judgment of the assailant, at any rate we endeavour to make him feel that it is to be respected. It is painful to be thought a weak reasoner, even though we are sure in our minds that we are not such.

Now, observe how these feelings will affect us, as regards such arguments as were alluded to above; viz. such as are open to exception, though they are sufficiently strong to determine our conduct. A Friend, who differs from us asks for our reasons for our own view. We state them, and he sifts them. He observes, that our conclusions do not necessarily flow from our premises. E. g. to take the argument for the Apostolical Succession derived from the ordination of St. Paul and St. Barnabas (Acts xiii. 2, 3), he will argue, that their ordination might have been an accidental rite, intended merely to commission them for their Missionary journey, which followed it, in Asia Minor; again, that St. Paul's direction to Timothy (1 Tim. v. 22), to "lay hands suddenly on no man," may refer to confirmation, not ordination.

We should reply, (and most reasonably, too,) that, considering the undeniable fact that ordination has ever been thought necessary in the Church for the Ministerial Commission, our interpretation is the most probably one, and therefore the safest to act upon; on which our friend will think awhile, then shake his head, and say, that "at all events this is an unsatisfactory mode of reasoning, that it does not convince him, that he is desirous of clearer light," &c.

Now what is the consequence of such a discussion as this on ourselves? not to make us give up the doctrine, but to make us afraid of urging it. We grow lukewarm about it; and with an appearance of judgment and caution, (as the world will call it,) confess that "to rest the claims of our Clergy on an Apostolical Descent is an unsafe and inexpedient line of argument; that it will not convince men, the evidence not being sufficient; that it is not a practical way of acting to insist upon it," &c-whereas the utmost that need be admitted is, that it is out of place to make it the subject of a speculative dispute, and to argue about it on that abstract logical platform which virtually excludes a reference to conduct and duty. And indeed, it would be no unwise caution to bear about us, wherever we go, that our first business, as Christians, is to address men as responsible servants of CHRIST, not as antagonists; and that it is but a secondary duty (though a duty) to "refute the gainsayers."

And, as on the one hand it continually happens, that those who are most skilled in debate are deficient in sound practical piety, so on the other it may be profitable to us to reflect, that doctrine, which we believe to be most true, and which are received as such by the most profound and enlarged intellects, and which rest upon the most irrefragable proofs, yet may be above our disputative powers, and can be treated by us only with reference to our conduct. And in this way, as in others, is fulfilled the saying of the Apostle, that "the preaching of the Cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us who are saved, it is the power of GOD... Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not GOD made foolish the wisdom of this world?... The foolishness of GOD is wise than men; and the weakness of GOD is stronger than men."

ON RELUCTANCE TO CONFESS THE APOSTOLICAL SUCCESSION.

If a Clergyman is quite convinced that the Apostolical Succession is lost, then of course he is at liberty to turn his mind from the subject. But if he is not quite sure of this, it surely is his duty seriously to examine the question, and to make up his mind carefully and deliberately. For if there be a chance of its being preserved to us, there is a chance of his having had a momentous talent committed to him, which he is burying in the earth.

It cannot be supposed that any serious man would treat the subject scoffingly. If any one is tempted to do so, let him remember the tearful words of the Apostle: "Esau, a profane person, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright."

If any are afraid, that to insist on their commission will bring upon them ridicule, and diminish their usefulness, let them ask themselves, whether it be not cowardice to refuse to leave the event to GOD. It was the reproach of the men of Ephraim that, though they were "harnessed and carried bows," they "turned themselves back in the day of battle."

And if any there be, who take upon them to contrast one doctrine of the Gospel with another, and preach those only which they consider more essential, let them consider our SAVIOUR'S words, "These things ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone."

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