

The Visible Church, Letter Iv

by J.H. Newman

The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding God's ways and relying on Scripture, rather than trying to reconcile the exuberance of God's mercy with the placing of it in its fullness in the Catholic Church.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 16:7, Isaiah 55:8, Matthew 7:1, Romans 14:4, Ephesians 4:4

Topics: "Church Unity", "Gods Mercy"

Description

J.H. Newman addresses the misconception that advocating for the doctrine of the Church Catholic and Apostolic excludes Dissenters from salvation. He emphasizes the importance of recognizing the piety and faithfulness found among individuals in various sects, cautioning against hasty judgments based on labels. Newman challenges the notion of easily categorizing people's beliefs and highlights the need to acknowledge the diversity within the Christian family. He encourages a deeper understanding of God's mercy and the different ways in which Divine Providence may work in reconciling His favor among different groups. Newman concludes by emphasizing the importance of preaching the whole counsel of God fearlessly, trusting in the wisdom and sovereignty of Christ.

Transcript

I AM sorry my delay has been so considerable in answering your remarks on my Letters on the Church. Indeed it has been ungrateful in me, for you have given me an attention unusual with the multitude of religious persons; who, instead of receiving the arguments of others in simplicity and candour, seem to have a certain number of types, or measures of professing Christians, set up in their minds, to one or other of which they consider every one they meet with belongs, and who, accordingly, directly they hear an opinion advanced, begin to consider whether the speaker be a No. 1, 2, or 3, and having rapidly determined this, treat his views with consideration or disregard, as it may be. I am far from saying our knowledge of a person's character and principles should not influence our judgment of his arguments; certainly it should have great weight. I consider the cry "measures not men," to be one of the many mistakes of the day. At the same time there is surely a contrary extreme, the fault of fancying we can easily look through men, and understand what each individual is; an arbitrary classing of the whole Christian family under but two or three countenances, and mistaking one man's doctrine for another's. You at least have not called me an Arminian, or a high Churchman, or a Borderer, or one of this or that school, and so dismissed me. To pass from this subject. You tell me that in my zeal in advocating the doctrine of the Church Catholic and Apostolic, I "use expressions and make assumptions which imply that the Dissenters are without the pale of salvation." So let me explain myself on these points.

You say that my doctrine of the one Catholic Church in effect excludes Dissenters, nay, Presbyterians, from salvation. Far from it. Do not think of me as of one who makes theories for himself in his closet, who governs himself by book-maxims, and who, as being secluded from the world, has no temptation to let his sympathies for individuals rise against his abstract positions, and can afford to be hard-hearted, and to condemn by wholesale the multitudes in various sects and parties whom he never saw. I have known those among Presbyterians whose piety, resignation, cheerfulness, and affection, under trying circumstances, have been such, as to make me say to myself, on the thoughts of my own higher privileges, "Woe unto thee Chorazin, woe unto thee Bethsaida! "Where little is given, little will be required; and that return, though little, has its own peculiar loveliness, as an acceptable sacrifice to Him who singled out for praise the widow's two mites. Was not Israel apostate from the days of Jeroboam; yet were there not even in the reign of Ahab, seven thousand souls who were "reserved," an elect remnant? Does any Churchman wish to place the Presbyterians, where, as in Scotland, their form of Christianity is in occupation, in a worse condition under the Gospel than Ephraim held under the Law? Had not the ten tribes the schools of the Prophets, and has not Scotland at least the word of God? Yet what would be thought of the Jew who had maintained that Jeroboam and his kingdom were in no guilt? and shall we from a false charity, from a fear of condemning the elect seven thousand, scruple to say that Presbyterianism has severed itself from our temple privileges, and undervalue the line of Levi and the house of Aaron? Consider our Saviour's discourse with the woman of Samaria. While by conversing with her He tacitly condemned the Jews' conduct in refusing to hold intercourse with the Samaritans, yet He plainly declared that "salvation was of the Jews." "Ye worship ye know not what;" He says, "we know what we worship." Can we conceive His making light of the differences between Jew and Samaritan?

Further, if to whom much is given, of him much will be required, how is it safe for us to make light of our privileges, if we have them? is not this to reject the birth-right? to hide our talent under a napkin? When we say that God has done more for us than for the Presbyterians, this indeed may be connected with feelings of spiritual pride; but it need not. We may, by so saying, provoke ourselves to jealousy; for we dare not deny that, in spite of our peculiar privileges of communion with Christ, yet even higher saints may lie hid (to our great shame) among those who have not themselves the certainty of our especial approaches to His glorious majesty. Was not Elijah sent to a widow of Sarepta? did not Elisha cure Naaman? and are not these instances set for ward by our Lord Himself as warnings to us "not to be high minded but to fear;" and, again, as a gracious consolation when we think of our less favoured brethren? Where is the narrowness of view and feeling which you impute to me? Why may I not speak out, in order at once to admonish myself, and to attempt to reclaim to a more excellent way those who are at present severed from the true Church.

And what has here been said of an established Presbyterianism, is true (in its degree) of dissent, when it has become hereditary, and embodied in institutions.

Further, it is surely parallel with the order of Divine Providence that there should be a variety, a sort of graduated scale, in His method of dispensing His favour in Christ. So far from its being a strange thing that Protestant sects are not "in Christ," in the same fulness that we are, it is more accordant to the scheme of the world that they should lie between us and heathenism. It would be strange if there were but two states, one absolutely of favour, one of disfavour. Take the world at large, one form of paganism is better than another. The North American Indians are theists, and as such more privileged than polytheists. Mahometanism is a better religion than Hindooism. Judaism is better than Mahometanism. One may believe that long established dissent affords to such as are born and bred in it a sort of pretext, and is

attended with a portion of blessing, (where there is no means of knowing better,) which docs not attach to those who cause divisions, found sects, or wantonly wander from the Church to the Meeting House;Â--that what is called an orthodox sect has n share of Divine favour, which is utterly withheld from heresy. I am not speaking of the next world, where we shall all find our selves as individuals, and where there will be but two states, but of existing bodies or societies. On the other hand, why should the corruptions of Rome lead us to deny her Divine privileges, when even the idolatry of Judah did not forfeit hers, annul her temple-sacrifice, or level her to Israel?

I say all this, merely for the purpose of suggesting to those who are "weak" some idea of possible modes in which Eternal Wisdom may reconcile the exuberance of His mercy in Christ to the whole race of man, with the placing of it in its fulness in a certain ordained society and ministry. For myself I prefer to rely upon the simple word of truth, of which Scripture is the depository, and since Christ has told me to preach the whole counsel of God, to do so fearlessly and without doubting; not being careful to find ways of smoothing strange appearances in His counsels, and of obviating difficulties, being aware on the one hand that His thoughts are not our thoughts, nor our ways His ways, and on the other, that He is ever justified in His sayings, and overcomes when He is judged.

OXFORD,

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