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Our Present Need

BY THE RT. REV. THE BISHOP OF WARRINGTON.

WE are much indebted to the Joint Committee for the time and thought they have given to the production of their Schedule on "Confirmation To-day", and more particularly for the candour with which they have drawn attention to the situation created in the Church by the decline in attendance at the Holy Communion. The position is one which should cause us grave anxiety; for whereas a certain number of parishes, by virtue of long tradition and good leadership, have sustained their attendance, the falling away in many cases, it is to be feared, has been very disquieting. The defect of the Report is that it offers a way of recovery by the too facile remedy of fresh administration, rather than by going to the heart of the trouble.

"Why was the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper ordained?" Why is it that down the centuries the Christian Church has held to this particular ordinance with such tenacity? Why must we always keep it central in our corporate life? The Holy Communion is rich in influences of many and varied kinds; but it is with a sure touch that our Church comes to the essential answer. It was ordained "for the continual remembrance of the sacrifice of the death of Christ and of the benefits which we receive thereby." It was ordained that we may ever and again present to our own consciences and to God Himself that wonderful Atonement which He in His infinite mercy has made for our redemption. Yet such has been the unaccountable attitude of the modern mind to this central glory of our faith that during the last thirty years, if the average person has even heard the Atonement preached in Church, it has only been to hear it explained away!

Here is the first cause, as I see it, of the present trouble. The "acids of modernity" have so eaten into the religious thought of our generation that the whole conception of the destructiveness and of the guilt of sin has been impaired. The pressing need of a divine atonement has appeared to fade from present consciousness; and as an inevitable consequence that Sacrament, designed by our blessed Lord to enshrine his supreme provision for man, has lost its place of priority in Christian worship.

The second ground for the present situation is to be found, I fear, in a defective post-Confirmation shepherding. A generation ago the most vital organisation in a "live" parish was that of the Communicants' Guild. At Confirmation all boys and girls found themselves incorporated, *ipso facto*, into a new and warm association; bound together, it is true, by varied interests and recreations, but centring all the time upon a regular attendance at the Lord's Table. It involved an immensity of work: it meant book-keeping: it meant organisation: it meant visiting: it meant personal friendship: but every bit of it was rewarded by the results achieved. What I wonder is, whether amid all the embarrassing pressure of recent years, an adequate

pastoral supervision has been offered to our young Communicant life, or whether the Youth Group which has now, I gather, largely supplanted the old Communicants' Guild has made the Holy Communion sufficiently central in its aims.

The Joint Committee in their Schedule, in Chapter 5, offer three possible ways of dealing with the present situation. 1. The maintenance of the *status quo*. 2. The separation of Confirmation from the Ratification of Vows. 3. The separation of Confirmation from admission to Holy Communion. It is this third proposal which I trust the Oxford Conference may view with grave apprehension. Let us be quick to perceive that if this suggestion is accepted it means an end of Confirmation as we have come to know and value it in the Church of England. To admit children to Communion at a tender age will, I fear, fail to produce that permanent attendance which we all desire, for the simple reason that child-habit seems so rarely to survive the menace of the school-leaving upheaval. To-day the "years of discretion" in young life are really those years of freedom that follow upon school-leaving; and this is why the decision to be confirmed, and to come to Communion at the age of fourteen to seventeen is found in experience under wise shepherding to produce the most enduring results. Moreover, the more a child might make good in Communion attendance prior to Confirmation, the less would Confirmation seem intelligible at, say, the age of nineteen either to the child or to its parents. And, except in a very few cases, Confirmation would become a rare event.

To separate Confirmation from the Vows seems wholly unreasonable, because it is only as we pledge ourselves to repentance and faith and obedience that the Gift of the Spirit can come.

I trust therefore that the Oxford Conference will look long and carefully at this Schedule before giving it their approbation. Our way of hope, as I have said above, lies not so much along the line of fresh administration but rather of renewed pastoral zeal. Far more, I believe recovery is ours now, as in all ages, through a wise and fearless upholding of the Cross of Christ as the supreme need of man. The soil on many sides I believe is ready. The pathetic thing is that what is really lacking is the good seed itself. Human society to-day calls for nothing so much as for a revival of Evangelical faith.