

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

ART. III.—CONVOCAATION, SYNODS, AND DIOCESAN
CONFERENCES.

I.

WHEN in future years the historian records the fortunes of the English Church during the Victorian era, four distinctive features will claim inquiry at his hands—viz., internal controversies, Missionary efforts, Church and School extension, and the revival of Diocesan organisation. Of the four it is the last with which this Paper is mainly concerned, and whilst it is being written it is the one which prominently occupies the minds of English Churchmen. Its sounds are everywhere in the air. In the spring of this year thousands of our Easter vestries were summoned, not merely for the due election of fit persons for the time-honoured and well-understood office of churchwardens, but also for the selection of representatives in the Ruridecanal and Diocesan Conferences. Now in the late autumn whilst our November skies glitter with the unusual light of meteoric showers, our Church horizon also gleams with the strange illumination which Diocesan Conferences diffuse in every part of the ecclesiastical firmament. If the clouds drop water the columns of the secular as well as of the religious press overflow with the utterances of Dioceses in Convention. London is the notable exception; but there also the Bishop states, in his recent Charge, that the establishment of an Annual Diocesan Conference is under careful consideration, its adoption having been discussed with considerable favour.¹

Whilst, however, these phenomena will prove matters of interest to the future historian, they demand at the present time most careful consideration on the part of those who have at heart the well-being of the body ecclesiastic, and through it the spiritual interests of Christ's cause. As the movement, of which they are manifestations develops form and gathers strength, it will be seen that the agency is one which for weal or woe will do much to control the immediate future of the Established—and it may be in the more distant future to mould the fortunes of our disestablished—Church. It would be suicidal to the influences of Evangelical truth, and utterly unworthy of a party which justly boasts that the historic lines of the National Church are based on Evangelical principles, if we were to say nothing and to do

¹ Bishop of London's Charge, October, 1879, p. 31.

nothing because we thought nothing, whilst changes, revolutionary in their effects, were being thus enacted before our eyes. All who take a comprehensive view of our religious activities cannot but recognise that, in common with other religious bodies, the Church of England throbs with quickened energies in every part, and is stirred by noble impulses of which she knows not herself the full purport. Like other bodies she recognises her corporate strength, and she longs to "go out as at other times before and shake herself." On the great problems which wait for solution she yearns for occasions of common counsel, and for opportunity for the expression of her deliberate voice.

For those who have not fully studied this outburst of conciliar movements, and who might therefore distrust the estimate here formed as to their potential character, I will quote an extract from the most impartial and best informed organ of public opinion :

Diocesan Conferences are the symptoms of a striking movement by which the Church of England is being affected. Within very recent memory nothing could be less conceivable than such assemblages. The result is that the Church now finds itself provided with the working machinery of an organisation which is capable, if well managed, of bringing all its parts and members into direct relations with each other, of constituting in each Diocese an appreciable public opinion, of compelling each class within the Church to listen to the others, to understand them, and to consult their wishes. These Conferences are still to a great extent in their infancy, but that they or some assemblies like them have a great part to play in the future of the Church cannot be doubted by those who can appreciate the course of current events and the natural tendencies of a great institution. Corporate life is essential to the full vigour of any society of men, and it is now fairly reawakened within the Church of England. The form it may ultimately take may still be obscure, but it can never again be repressed.¹

Such a movement may, under God, be wisely guided, but cannot, with due regard to our common safety be wholly ignored. If the vessel be lost on the rocks surely it is the consolation of a coward that he shirked the responsibility by shunning his turn at the wheel. If the vessel be found at last safely in port, it is the act of a braggart to boast if his help were wanting when the sails were to be set. The motto of a mediæval monk who sought only present ease might well be "*Sinere omnes res eo vadere quo cadent,*" but a great party, such as the Evangelical body, can never divest itself of its responsibility to the master of the ship. Not less to our care than to others its keeping and safe conduct have been entrusted. We know His help will not be wanting, for He has given the compass, and with it all necessary sailing instructions, whilst His Own counsel when sought is never with-

¹ Leading Article *Times* Newspaper, Weekly Edition, Oct. 31st, 1879.

held. In this crisis, then, let us, so far as we are concerned, see to it that our hand is on the helm to steer, our hand on the sail to speed the good ship to the haven where we would have her to be.

I have spoken of "the Revival of Diocesan Organisation," and it will be well to keep in mind that the English Church had in her earliest ages her diocesan, provincial, and national synods. If the Archbishops gathered their suffragans in their provinces, and if the whole body of Bishops with some of the clergy were occasionally called together in national synods by *their* rulers, it is a fact absolutely attested that the Bishops also in their respective dioceses were in the habit of assembling their Presbyters at stated times. The records which have come down to us of all these assemblies are very scanty, but they suffice to prove the independence of the British Church, and to show that for ages the Bishop of Rome had no authority in our ecclesiastical councils. St. Albans, which must always possess a peculiar interest as the traditional scene of our first English martyrdom, and whose grand abbey-church within the last few months constituted the cathedral of a new diocese, is in itself an eloquent illustration how our English Church can bring forth fruit in her old age, claims the additional interest of having, under its older name of Verulam, witnessed the first English Council of which any record survives.¹ There, in 446, according to Matthew of Westminster, in a great gathering of Presbyters and laymen, the heresy taught originally by Pelagius, a British convert, was condemned by the Bishops then assembled.

Interesting, however, as any historical review of conciliar gatherings in our own country would be, it will have more weight if we go back to that sacred soil whence all these movements trace their first roots. In the very earliest days of the Apostolic Church prompt and vigorous action amid circumstances of peril and perplexity, difficulty and danger, was impossible then as now without that guidance which arises from consultation and prayer. In the simple phrase, "the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter,"² we have the germ from which all similar movements in later ages have sprung.

In this preliminary Article I propose to investigate the narratives of Acts xv. and xxi., in search of certain general principles which may thence be deduced. In a future Article I purpose briefly considering the present position of the conciliar assemblies which, under the guise of Convocations, Diocesan Synods, and Diocesan Conferences, seek to gain our suffrages and to enlist our sympathies. And, in the last place, being firmly convinced that a recognition of the due rights of Presbyters, and of

¹ Lathbury's "History of Convocation," chap. i.

² Acts xv. v. 6.

the spiritual character of the laity (points ever dear to the Evangelical section of our Church), lie at the very foundation of a Diocesan Conference, I will urge that, whilst reforming Convocation and letting Diocesan Synods sleep, we should, as Evangelical Churchmen, heartily develop and cordially, though watchfully, support the Diocesan Conference.

The precise title to be assigned to the first general assembly recorded in Acts xv. 1-31 is a matter of dispute; but whether it be called a Council, a Provincial Synod, or a Diocesan Conference, it must rightly take its place as the first in the long series of councils or synods which mark the course of the Church's history, and as "the model of all succeeding ones," says Bishop Wordsworth. From a careful consideration of the narrative the following facts are to be derived in reference to its constitution and character:—

(1) *Presbyters or Elders had their place in its deliberations.*—Their presence, v. 6—their participation in the discussion, v. 7—their hearty assent to the final arrangements, v. 22—the promulgation of the decree in their name as well as in that of the Apostles, v. 23—these are facts beyond dispute. In full accordance with these statements we find that when, seven years later, St. Paul once more arrived at Jerusalem and was received by St. James, "all the Presbyters were present" (Acts xxi. 18) at a meeting, which has been fairly regarded as a true and proper Diocesan Synod. Of this assembly Benedict XIV. testified that it possessed "*speciem quamdam et imaginem synodi.*" It must further be remembered that at this latter gathering the Presbyters "ventured to advise St. Paul, Apostle though he was, to perform a certain ceremonial act in the Temple. So Paul acted on their advice, and evidently did not think that in proffering their suggestion they had encroached on any prerogative that belonged either to him or to St. James." Further, let it be borne in mind that these same Presbyters recalling the former Council seven years before claimed that they had written and concluded the decree on the question of circumcision (Acts xxi. 25). Full justice is rendered to this remarkable claim in the interesting Article in *The Church Quarterly Review*, from which I have just quoted. "We have written and concluded—not simply *ἔπεστειλαμεν* but *ἡμεῖς ἐπεστειλαμεν*. No doubt the *ἡμεῖς* included St. Paul and St. James, but it most certainly includes the Presbyters too. And on referring to the account of that Council we find this statement of theirs fully borne out. Whether the Presbyters of the Church at Jerusalem sat in the Council by right or by privilege, they no doubt sat in it, and sat in it as *bona fide* members of it. 'The Apostles and Presbyters,' not the Apostles only, were the board of reference or court of final appeal, to which the cause of dissension was referred." Nothing can be more satisfactory than this admission, remembering the quarter in

which it is made, but, unhappily, the admission graciously made, is in the course of a few pages as ungraciously withdrawn. "If Presbyters were present (says the same writer) in the Council at Jerusalem, and spoke in it, as most likely some of them did, it was because the Apostles were pleased that it should be so. But to infer from thence that they had the power of voting against the Apostles would be to introduce a principle into Church Government at variance with the Apostolical commission and destructive of Apostolical authority."¹

Without doubt, the fact brought out in reference to the presence and active participation of the Presbyters at the first Church Council must constitute a difficulty to those who, accepting the high views of Cyprian concerning the Episcopal office, regard Bishops as not only indispensable channels of grace, but as indispensable bonds of Christian brotherhood; and who therefore believe that the unity of the Church must consist in the unanimity of the Bishops as appointed directly by God—inspired directly from God and responsible directly to God. The temperate conclusion of Professor Plumptre is one however which will commend itself to all but those who have some special theory to be upheld at all costs. This Council "bore its witness that the government of the Christian society was not to rest in the autocracy of a single will, but in the deliberate decision of those who, directly or indirectly having been appointed by the choice or with the approval of the people, represented the whole community. Presbyters had an equal voice with the Apostles whose position was analogous to that of the later Bishops."²

(2) *Lay Members of the Church had their place in this first Assembly.*—Those who hold that Bishops are the only pastors of the Catholic Church, and that as a consequence every office of the priesthood is but a delegated function when otherwise exercised, will not be very ready to admit that laymen, if present at the first Council, were there in any other capacity than that of simple spectators. The precious ointment that ran down Aaron's beard is not said to have descended lower than the skirts of his priestly garments, and as laymen, according to this theory, have not received the grace, so they cannot share the responsibilities of the priesthood, nor can therefore be expected to be fit advisers concerning those sacred functions that pertain essentially to the priestly office. "There are spiritual questions of exceeding difficulty, and pastoral questions of exceeding delicacy, on which a Bishop would naturally desire to have the opinion of his clergy, but on which the laity from the very nature of the case would be most unfit to give counsel."³ In simple reply to

¹ *Church Quarterly Review*, October, 1879, p. 162.

² Bishop Ellicott's "New Testament Commentary," *in loco*.

³ *Church Quarterly Review*, p. 171.

all this assumption of special fitness on the one hand, and assertion of special unfitness on the other, it may suffice to remark that it is a matter of historic certainty that in the first Council the lay-members not only were present but did exercise some such responsibility. So far as the true rendering of the words in our own version translated "The apostles, and elders, and brethren send greeting" (Acts xv. 23) is concerned, it may readily be conceded that by the variety of readings the exact position of the laity is lost in clouds of textual criticism. The present Bishop of Lincoln in his note on the passage has adduced in a brief compass all that can be advanced in favour of the reading which omits the conjunctive "and" leaving the word "brethren" not to indicate a third constituent portion of the Council, but to comprehensively describe the before-mentioned "apostles and elders." When all has been said that can be advanced, and, without doubt, very much can be said, the weight of authority inclines in favour of the English rendering "and the brethren" as the correct reading. This judgment may, in the opinion of some, be strengthened by the fact that such a rendering as the one advocated by Bishop Wordsworth—viz., "the apostles and elders brethren" is entirely foreign to the usage of the New Testament, and may naturally have originated in a desire to bring the text into harmony with that usage of the Church, whereby the laity had been excluded from all participation in the Synods.¹

It is, however, to be remembered that the settlement of the principle as to the position of the laity in our Church Councils does not depend upon a single phrase. We will omit this passage from our discussion, and it is still claimed that the part taken by the multitude of the disciples in the election of deacons (Acts vi. 2) as well as the expressions employed in reference to the Council "all the multitude kept silence" (Acts xv. 12), "then pleased it the apostles and elders with the whole Church to send chosen men" (v. 22), abundantly justify the conclusion of Canon Norris, "That this Council included the laity is clear for—the whole Church is mentioned as taking part in the consultation with the Apostles and Presbyters" (Key to the Acts of the Apostles, p. 72), and also the fuller statement expressed on the passages, in Bishop Ellicott's

¹ The last opinion given by an expert may here be adduced. "Although *καὶ* *οἱ* is omitted (S, A, B, C, the Vulgate and Armenian versions, Irenæus and Origen, and the *καὶ* by D), I still believe them to be genuine. The diplomatic evidence seems indeed to be against them, the weight of the above uncials, &c., being superior to that of E, G, H, the majority of Cursives, and the Syriac, Coptic, and Æthiopic versions. But objection to the apparent parity assigned to the brethren might have led, even in early days, to their omission, while, if not genuine, it is not easy to see why they should have been inserted."—*Farrar's Life and Work of St. Paul*, v. i. p. 429, Note.

“New Testament Commentary.” “The latter words are important as showing the position occupied by the laity. If they concurred in the letter it must have been submitted to their approval, and the right to approve involves the power to reject, and probably to modify. The exclusion of the laity from all share in Church Synods, though it may be defended as a safeguard against the violence of a barbarous or faithless age, must at any rate be admitted to be at variance with primitive and Apostolic practice.” To those who would sum up the whole duty of a good Lay Churchman in matters ecclesiastical under the two brief tables of “pay” and “obey,” it may conclusively be urged that the old rule “*Illud quod omnes tangit ab omnibus comprobari debet*” is a rule of Scriptural precedent as well as of Canon Law, and of that still more binding authority—viz., common sense.

(3) *The decision of the Council was the result of no immediate revelation.*—This point is one which must be kept in mind by those who might be disposed to object that in this first Council we ought not to look for any principles as precedents, inasmuch as all its members were specially inspired. The decree when sent forth ran in the name of those who were assured that they had been Divinely guided. “It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us” (v. 28), but the decision was finally attained by such exercises of prayer and discussion as are equally available for any gathering among ourselves where opinions are divided on subjects of pressing and vital interest. It is under this conviction that the decrees of Councils have been commonly prefaced by the phrase “*Sancto Spiritu suggerente,*” and that the English Convocation invokes the help of the Holy Spirit on their deliberations in the words “*Concede ut Spiritus tuus, qui concilio olim Apostolico, huic nostro etiam nunc insideat.*” The entire history of the first Council is most worthy of careful study for the light which it sheds on the way and manner in which such assemblies should be conducted. At the very outset, the attendance of St. Paul and St. Barnabas, ascribed as due to revelation by St. Paul himself (Gal. ii. 2), is, in the narrative of St. Luke (Acts xv. 2), represented as due to the determination of the Church at Antioch. Arrived at Jerusalem, St. Paul employed the interval before the assembling of the Council, as he himself informs us, to discuss the vexed question privately with the leading Apostles, a course of conduct which, under similar circumstances, in our own day would be described as a manifest proof of tact and wisdom. It was thus that St. James and St. Peter were convinced that to insist on Gentile Christians being conformed in all respects to orthodox Jews would break up the very foundations of the Christian Church. With the touching appeal on behalf of their own poor, they wholly resign to St. Paul, the mission to the Gentiles, and he enters the Council with the know-

ledge that his purpose would not be shipwrecked by Jewish prejudice, and that he had not run in vain. In the Council itself there is "much disputing" (v. 7), and as in all other similar gatherings of the Church to settle disputed questions, "there would be mutual recriminations and misunderstandings, instances of untenable argument, of inaccurate language, of confused conceptions. The Holy Spirit, indeed, was among them then, as now, in all gatherings of faithful Christian men. But neither then nor now, as we see by the clearest evidence of the New Testament then, and as we see by daily experience now, did this influence work to the miraculous extinction of human differences or obliteration of human imperfections."¹

(4) *Mutual Concession was a distinctive feature of the ultimate decision.*—When on the ground of the logic of facts, relating his own experience in the case of Cornelius, St. Peter had argued the question of the admission of the Gentiles, and Barnabas and Paul had testified how God's blessing had crowned their labours among them with signs and wonders, James, the Apostle of the Circumcision, having reminded the Council how the calling of the Gentiles was in accordance with the teaching of their own prophets, gives his sentence: "For the Jews, whose prophets are read publicly every Sabbath Day, he makes it abundantly clear that there can be no desire to abrogate that Law in which they made their boast: For the Gentiles, on the other hand, it is expressly declared that this same Ceremonial Law shall in no wise further be binding than charitable regard for the prejudices of their Jewish brethren may demand." Some topics are then enumerated on which this restraint of Christian liberty is to be observed. That this Concordat was not intended to be of universal, much less of perpetual, obligation a little consideration will make plain. The decree itself is addressed only to "the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch, and Syria, and Cilicia." The decreed abstinence from things strangled and from blood would entail considerable inconvenience and conspicuous singularity among the Gentiles in days when food thus prepared was in frequent Greek and Roman use, and where, therefore, the disputed questions had not been raised no such obligations are imposed. In his future dealings with the members of the Churches in Corinth and in Rome, St. Paul treats the eating of things offered to idols as an open question to be decided by each man's conscience on principles of Evangelical expediency, and makes no reference to the decree of Jerusalem. Against fornication he urges stronger pleas than those which any Council can furnish in its canons—viz., the eternal decrees that "the will of God is our sanctification," and by reminding his converts that

¹ Farrar's "Life and Work of St. Paul," vol. i. p. 421

their bodies are the temples of the Holy Ghost, and that as they have been bought with a price so they ought to glorify God in their bodies and in their spirits which are His. It is from this decree of the Council at Jerusalem that Hooker, in his "Ecclesiastical Polity," illustrates the truth that though commands be Divine, they are not of necessity perpetually binding, inasmuch as they can only be regarded as of obligation so long as the circumstances continue under which they were originally given.¹

Among those who would promote conciliar action in Church affairs in our own time, are some who would never stir a step without a solemn precedent. There are others who regard all such reverence for precedent as ecclesiastical red tapeism. Whilst to the one we admit that it well befits a great Church to move cautiously and claim with the other that our Church can well afford to make precedents, so that the changes introduced are not contrariant to but based on the lines of great historic principles,—we would say to both that the four lessons which the Council at Jerusalem thus illustrates can never be safely overlooked by those who, through conciliar action, would strengthen the foundations and enlarge the functions of our English Church.

JOHN W. BARDSLEY.

ART. IV.—THE CHRISTIAN SABBATH:

OR,

IS THERE NO SABBATH DAY DIVINELY PROVIDED FOR
CHRISTIANS?

DIFFERING views upon any point cannot, it will be admitted, be all equally near to the truth. One of the points upon which Evangelical Churchmen differ from the Ritualists (not from the Old High Churchmen) and from the Broad Church School, is, regarding the sanctity, under the Divine authority, of one day in every seven for Divine worship. The Ritualists, in particular, would convert the Sunday from a Holy Day into a holiday, after the example of the School of Laud, and of their prototypes in the Church of Rome. The Broad Church School esteem the Sunday as no more sacred by Divine sanction than any other day of the week; only they would observe it on the ground of expediency, though not as of Divine authority. Are either of these parties borne out by Scripture, rightly interpreted? We think not.

¹ See Bishop Ellicott's Commentary on the whole passage.