"*THE CHURCH IN THE HOUSE.*"

THE present writer has been a reader of the EXPOSITOR for thirty years, and an occasional contributor to its pages for twenty. In the former capacity he trusts it may not be impertinent in him to express the gratitude he feels that religious controversy has been so carefully and tactfully banished from its covers. Possibly some reader glancing at the heading of the present article might fear the introduction of this unhappy feature. It will not be so, although, the pity of it, the moment the word Church or The Church be named, the figure of the spirit of controversy, ugly, ominous, is not very far off, the foe to truth and peace, the ally to passion and prejudice. But if one more tribute may be paid to this periodical it will be that controversy by the nature of the case finds itself shut out. Its one object is the exposition of the Holy Scriptures. Given intelligence, sincerity, and devoutness, given that writers and readers can declare with Huxley, "I hold no opinion which I will not exchange for the Truth," then controversy has already received its congé. Something still more hopeful remains. Christian people talk about "unhappy divisions," they make blind and painful efforts after reunion, but reunion remains on the far distant horizon. Bishop Westcott once declared that such reunion need not be a matter of despair if only the teaching of the four Gospels was at once fully known and laid to heart. But there is no need to narrow such teaching to the Evangelic record. Wherever a body of Christian people is found with a passionate and devout love of Holy Scriptures, whenever lives are spent in their study, whenever the linguistic, the critical and historical faculties are dedicated to the service of the Master,—in other words, when sacred study and its fruits are crowned by the work of the

Holy Spirit of God, then in such a body or bodies will be found a harmony half conscious, but ringing true, like the music of the spheres.

Controversy is on occasion a necessary evil. When such a melancholy crisis arises, then the only fit controversialist is the man who hates the controversial spirit. Such a man was our own Richard Hooker. Students of the Fifth Book of the Laws of *Ecclesiastical Polity* will remember how he proposes to deal with the question of the Eucharist, an issue upon which controversy was at least as acute in his day as in the present. He entreats with a pathetic insistence that his readers shall drop all contention as to how Christ may be there present, and to rest in the happiness of grace therein received. "Take," says he, "that upon which different bodies in the Church are agreed," ignore the issue on which they differ.

"Let no other cogitation fill the heart of the communicant but this: O my God, Thou art true; O my soul, thou art happy." It was a wish right nobly expressed, but, alas, three hundred years are passed and it awaits fulfilment.

Richard Hooker's language may not unfittingly be applied to the present subject. Let us see then certain great facts about the title "Church" wherein there is a general agreement among all Christian people. There is the Church visible, militant here on earth; there is the Church invisible, at rest. If the Church visible is, as again will be accepted by Christians, "The blessed company of all faithful people," it follows that it is universal, and all-embracing. As St. Paul would assure us in and through Him Who is the Head of the Church there is within it no limitation or separation possible of nationality, of caste, of sex.[1]

The primary meaning of the Church according to the New Testament is the great comprehensive company of believers,

[1] Col i. 24.

the Spirit-bearing body,[1] knowing no limit either of time or space, remaining one in one Lord, possessing one Faith, sharing in one sacrament of initiation, or membership, not indeed losing this characteristic and inherent unity because she is seen now and again down the ages to be convulsed with divisions, the schisms which rend her asunder and the heresies which distress her being actual tokens of efforts on the part of the faithful ever being made to preserve and realize her unity.[2]

This great and comprehensive meaning of the term Church primary in the New Testament is one which it is of the first importance to hold in these days. To throw doubt upon the inherent oneness of the Church is to imperil her true headship by Christ. To throw doubt upon her universal character is to go back to the position of those Judaizers whom the great Apostle of the Gentiles so strictly rebuked. It is indeed difficult to realize these august conceptions because the dust of controversies blurs their outlines; but just as political feuds and parties do not crush out our single national life and Spirit, so neither do our unhappy divisions destroy or obliterate these marks of the Church. The grand conception of her oneness and catholicity survives the attempts to divide the former and to limit the latter. According to the New Testament generally, and to Pauline teaching in particular, the first—the inalienable meaning of the Church is that one and universal body wherein believers recognize and find their communion with their Lord its Head.

There is no contradiction to this primary conception in the fact that there are Churches within the one Church.[3] Seven of St. Paul's Epistles are addressed to local Churches, most of which he had himself founded.

[1] Gal. iii. 28. [2] 1 Cor. xi. 19.
[3] 1 Cor. iv. 17.

Thessalonica,
Colossae,
Ephesus,
Corinth,
Philippi,

and last but not least, Rome, were cities in which the gospel had been preached by the Apostle or his colleagues, and where the new Churches deserved and received St. Paul's tender solicitude in his absence. Galatia, whatever view be taken of its geographical extent, was a country which must anyhow have had four or five Christian settlements. This is also in all probability the case with Ephesus, because the letter to the Ephesians is now generally regarded as a cyclical letter,[1] and not one addressed merely to the converts in the city which worshipped Artemis.

The same geographical sense of the word Church is of course emphasized in the Apocalypse. The message to the President of each of the seven Churches was a written one.[2] Of these seven, two—Ephesus certainly, and Laodicea probably,[3] had been addressed by St. Paul in letters; with the others he was familiar in his travels excepting perhaps Sardis. Companies of Christian converts, whether in a country or city or even village, became local Churches, constituent parts of the Catholic whole, preserving their independence without loss of union, maintaining that union by mutual love and generous service. It may be that it was for the sake of preserving intact the conception of the one Church that St. Paul's normal address at the beginning of his letters is not to the local Church, but rather to the believers that constitute it, under such titles as saints,[4] faithful,[5] brethren,[6] and so forth. The same

[1] Eph. i. 1. B omits ἐν Ἐφέσῳ.
[2] Apoc. i. 11. [3] Col. ii. 15, 16. [4] Rom. i. 7.
[5] Eph. i. 1. [6] Col. i. 2.

wish may have prompted the Apostle to employ the plural number[1] when referring to the Church of a district or country, although the singular is at times explicitly used. It is enough to say that the New Testament adds to the great primary meaning of the Church another meaning, only narrower because it is applied locally, whether to the Churches of a vast area like Asia Minor or Galatia, to the Churches of great cities like Rome and Corinth or to the Church of a little town like Cenchrea. There remains a third application in the New Testament of the term Church which forms the subject of the present inquiry, viz., the Church in the House. Just as the family is the real unit of Society so the Church in the House is the unit of the Church universal. The narrative of the Acts of the Apostles indicates that Christians first met for common worship in a dwelling-house. The choice of such a centre would be, from the nature of the case in the Apostolic age, limited. The house must be of sufficient size to contain a room large enough to accommodate the Christian community. Such a house would be that of Mary, the mother of John Mark; the room large enough to hold a considerable number of worshippers would, in Jerusalem, be the upper room.[2] Mary was probably a woman of substance who devoted such a room for the local Christian ecclesia. The situation is not without modern parallels, when women exhibiting the rare conjunction of social distinction with spiritual instincts open their salons for philanthropic or religious gatherings. What Mary did at Jerusalem was doubtless done by Prisca[3] at Rome and elsewhere; while her name, coming as it does before that of her husband Aquila, at least indicates that she was the leader in this Christian enterprise. But both may be assumed from the narrative of the Acts as

[1] Gal. i. 3. [2] Acts xii. 12.
[3] Acts xviii. 2, 26; Rom. xvi. 3, 5; 1 Cor. xvi. 19.

heads of a business firm to have been able to receive in their house the Christian community. A like religious hospitality must have been extended to Laodicea by the otherwise unknown lady, Nympha.[1]

To such a list of women—good, if not great—may be added that of Apphia,[2] specially described as "the sister," and with less certainty the forbears on the female side of Timothy, Lois and Eunice. The Church in their houses would include their family and dependents, while Christian neighbours would also find there a central point for common worship. One may conclude therefore that in great cities such as Ephesus, or Rome, or Corinth there would be several meeting-houses of the kind, and that the credit of arrangement and organization was largely due to women marked off not only by their goodness but by social status. Nor does it seem true to history to regard the Church in the house as a merely temporary expedient. Consecrated buildings do not appear to have come into existence within the area of the Roman Empire before the third century. Meanwhile for some hundred years at least, owing to suspicion on the part of the imperial authorities breaking out from time to time into actual persecutions, the common worship of Christians was confined to the "Church in the House."

At this point recent archaeological investigations both here and in America offer an interesting contribution to the question. It seems unlikely that the upper room which was a peculiarity of Syrian architecture had any relation to the house out of whose form sprang the outline of the earliest Church building.

Professor Lowrie, of Princetown, N.J.,[3] has demonstrated that the form of the basilica was not derived from the

[1] Col. iv. 15.
[2] Philemon 2. The best attested reading.
[3] In *Christian Art and Architecture*.

school building, still less from heathen temples, but that its general place was determined by the early custom of worship in the private house. The general characteristics of the basilica exhibit "an oblong rectangular ground plan divided longitudinally into aisles by pillars supporting a wooden roof. Sometimes, though not invariably, there would be a transept, and the basilica would terminate eastward by a circular presbytery or sanctuary surmounted by an apse." All these main features, the Professor holds, are derived from the chief ground chamber, or hall of a large Roman house or villa. Again, the transition from the Church of the house to a consecrated building would be all the simpler from the custom, as may be almost certainly concluded, of the gradual reservation of the large room in the former wholly to sacred purposes; just as in many private houses in England there is felt to be a gain in reverence when a room is specially dedicated for family prayers.

Of the nature of the common worship in the Church in the house it is not the purpose of the present writer to speak. It is enough to say that the celebrating of the Lord's Supper at least on the Sunday must have been its most significant feature.[1] Psalmody,[2] Hymnody,[3] the recitation in its simplest form of a Christian creed (for few students deny its presence in germ in the New Testament), lections from the Old Testament, the recitation of Apostolic letters and commissions,[4] collections for the poor,[5] would be the common features of worship. Extempore addresses, and prayers duly regulated by authority[6] would be given and made. A devout simplicity must have characterized the gathering, and such an unity as only can be experienced when all the worshippers are known to one another. As

[1] 1 Cor. xiv. 26. [2] Eph. v. 19. [3] Cp. Acts xvi. 25; Col iii. 16.
[4] Col. iv. 16. [5] 1 Cor. xvi. 2. [6] 1 Cor. xiv. 40.

the little congregation dispersed, often not without fear of insult or attack, it must have experienced more than we can experience in these softer days, the fulfilment of the Lord's promise: "Where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them."

The "Church in the house" in the Apostolic and sub-Apostolic age has certainly some lessons for the present. Not only in our Colonies, but in many country districts in our own land, there are places where access to Churches is difficult for the very young, the aged, the infirm. There it would often be a worthy Christian enterprise if well-to-do laymen in the exercise of their just privileges, and without encroachment upon ministerial authority, provided and furnished some oratory, and, as far as it might be, conducted its services. By so doing in many places the lamp of the Faith would burn clearly, if not splendidly, where now it is going out.

Lastly we are told, with a melancholy insistence, recalling the famous utterance of Bishop Butler, of the decay of religion and of prevalent indifference to things spiritual. May this not largely be due to the fact that Religion and the Home are to-day so often strangers? The very title "Church in the house" shows that at the beginning of the Christian era the two were regarded as inseparable. As it is now the fires of the domestic altar are rarely kept burning, and the family life receives no consecration. Not until Christians can make Joshua's bold assertion, "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord," can they expect the choicest blessings of home life, or set a serviceable example to the world around.

B. WHITEFOORD.