

Innovation

W. Kelly.

Dear Brother,

Isolation is not the only snare for the Christian in the present anomalous condition of Christendom. Innovation is another resource of unbelief, suited to a different order of mind, but no less a dishonour to God and a danger for man.

Tradition, even in the baseless sense which Romanism conceives, is less offensive to a pious mind. For it assumes to have ever ruled, though unwritten, from the beginning of the church; it claims till our day the maintenance of God's authority intact. The authentic and authoritative doctrine of the Council of Trent is, that in their communion, and in theirs only, is preserved the precise and full truth and discipline from Christ's lips received through the Holy Spirit from the apostles. Council. Trident. Sess. iv. They add, what is a foolish impossibility, that no one may dare to interpret scripture itself contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers. For, though this may sound fair to such as know little beyond a compendium of controversial theology, those at all familiar with the Fathers must be aware of their differences as to almost every truth of scripture they discuss. Nor this only; for they ignore not only the most fundamental blessings of the gospel for the Christian, but the highest and most characteristic privileges of the church. The theory however is that theirs is the truth held uninterruptedly from the first.

Now it is true that in receiving Christ the Christian has the truth. He, not the church, is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14). The Father of His own will begot believers by the word of truth (James 1: 18). The truth, the Son, makes the disciple free (John 8: 32-36). But, if the babes are declared to have unction from the Holy One and to know all things (1 John 2: 20), scripture, every scripture, not only the O.T. but still more the N.T., is the special safeguard as well as means, divinely inspired, and profitable, for teaching, for conviction, for correction, for instruction. Thus only can the man of God be complete, fully fitted to every good work; as the church, having God's final as well as first word, is in both privilege and responsibility the truth's pillar and basement. In no other body here below, Jewish or Gentile, is this found. If Christ is the truth, God's assembly or church is bound to hold it forth legibly and unshaken.

So we know that Christ walked, our only perfect example. Never did any so honour God's word, as the Eternal Word here when He became flesh. See Him, even as a child of twelve, sitting in the midst of the teachers, hearing them, and asking them questions; and all who heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers. He was Lord of all, but came to obey, and learnt obedience (being used to command) from the things which He suffered. When tempted by the devil, it was not otherwise: even when hungry after forty days' abstinence in the wilderness, He would not convert a stone into a loaf without a word from God. Still less would He do homage save to Jehovah, Israel's God, for all the kingdoms of the habitable earth; Him only did Christ serve. Nor would He put God or His promises to the test, as if He were not sure of His fidelity, but here as always stood on "It is written"; and if Satan misused it, He corrected and defeated him by "It is written again." He was always dependent and obedient. So He ever met the weakness, the prejudices, or the self-will of friends, the opposition, hypocrisy, and hatred of enemies: every class, Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians; priests, rulers, scribes, lawyers, He met with the word of God. If the officials owned, as all but the most wanton and wicked must, that no man spoke as this Man, He Himself set as the highest testimony God's written word, even

Moses' writings, beyond His spoken words (John 5: 45-47).

As in life, so in death He inflexibly obeyed and put honour on scripture. In His deepest suffering He expressed His sense of abandonment in the words written by His Spirit in David a thousand years before, as He commended His spirit to the Father in the language of another Psalm. Just before departing, and knowing that all things were now finished that the scripture might be fulfilled, He said, I thirst. Then a sponge full of vinegar and with hyssop round it was put to His mouth; whereon He said, It is finished, and bowing His head He delivered up His spirit: words never used of another, only proper to Him Who, though true man, was very God. Even so what care to prove the divine value of the written word! Not a bone of Him should be broken, proclaimed one scripture, as another predicted, They shall look on Him Whom they pierced.

Now we who believe are sanctified by the Spirit to the obedience, no less than to the blood-sprinkling, of Jesus (1 Peter 1: 2). We are not under law like Jews; we are called to obey like Himself, in the conscious relationship of sons of God. His word is a law of liberty to us, as partakers of a divine nature; for Christ is our life. Hence God's word is our directory and chart; as Christ is the true object, and the Holy Spirit is the power. Thus has God provided for His children, for His servants, for His church, in all possible wants, difficulties, and dangers. He reveals every truth; He prescribes every service that is good. Not an evil doctrine, not a devious way, is overlooked. There is a "commandment" for the beginner; there is the "word" for the more mature. Examples and warnings abound. The walk and the worship that please Him, being alone due to Him, are clearly set before us. For as our life in love upwards or downwards is also one of obedience in the Spirit, so it necessarily requires His word, that all may be the doing of His will.

So the Lord told Saul of Tarsus (who asks on his conversion what His will was), Rise up and go to Damascus; and there it shall be told thee of all things which it is appointed thee to do. Whatever his place and power might be, Paul gives a blessed pattern of obedience to the Christian, and charged the saints to imitate him, as he also did Christ (1 Cor. 11: 1). Again, John urges the same principle in 1 John 2. Obedience is the first and most peremptory exercise of life, as we read in vers. 3-6. Love is essential, but justly follows in vers. 7-11; for the first-fruits are ever due to God. And if this be not so, we cannot love aright, and it might even become a peril and delusion.

This we had learnt to be the saving principle in the present ruin of Christendom. This was sought and taught in being gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus. Others, whether avowing it or not, had departed from God's word and believed not in the presence of His Spirit, for subjection to Him. There is always danger of swerving for personal or party objects; which, when yielded to, adds another sect. Let us consider the apostles when they met to decide the great question of imposing the law on the Gentiles who believed (Acts 15). Not Peter nor Paul, but James pointed to "the words of the prophets," as agreeing with what God had now wrought in taking out of the nations a people for His name. Inspired men though they were, they thus rested on God's written word. As we have the final mind of God in the N.T., what infatuation it would be to turn to any device of men from His will now given in full for our guidance! It is not only that scripture is sufficient, but that thereby the man of God may be complete: the chief safeguard in these last and perilous days.

Where Christ is not thus the centre, nor God's word the absolute authority by the Spirit, it is not surprising that saints should legislate, either to evade a danger or to enlarge their borders. But "scripture cannot be broken." It really is to give up the divine for the human, to turn from faith to sight. Innovation is a departure fatal to any such stand as God insists on for the church or for the Lord's service.

For the first time had the retort come from within that those gathered to the Lord's name should be the last to complain of innovation, since *they* are the greatest of all innovators. A more perverse and unworthy utterance never was made. For our entire position is a return to the Lord's will individually and collectively. Every change that now prevails in great or little societies of Christendom we have renounced, in order to obey the word, relying on the Spirit's presence and action to glorify the Lord. That the adversaries of Christian obedience should try to defame recurrence to God's word is intelligible. They naturally assume that things as they are in their own company is the right thing; and they claim power to make as many new plans as they consider expedient. Next they venture to stigmatize those who go back to the beginning, in order to do God's will as He revealed it to His apostles, not because the charge is just, but because they regard it as most offensive to those who desire to be faithful, and as likely to please the multitude who judge by appearance and prefer present ease.

But is it not a humbling and afflicting fact, yet significant, that any one who ever took the place of being gathered to the Lord's name should have so completely forgotten the truth as to adopt the language of enemies? For the retort is not only to the last degree unintelligent and false; but it abandons God's word and substitutes the actual state of Christendom as the standard to judge by. For this poor gibe means, that it is innovation to leave Romanists and Anglicans, Presbyterians and Congregationalists, and that such ought not to complain of fresh innovation. Where is faith, where the obedience we owe our God, in such vain efforts to mislead? To follow the Lord and His apostles is the very reverse of innovation; and the adoption of such a reproach betrays an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.

In a similar spirit is the application one has lately heard of Gamaliel's advice to the high priest and the council who sought to kill the apostles. "Refrain from these men and let them alone: because if this counsel or this work be of men, it will be overthrown; but if it be of God, ye will not be able to overthrow them, lest haply ye be found even fighting against God" (Acts 5: 38, 39). It was the common sense, and perhaps the conscience, of an unbelieving Rabbi warning his fellows blinded by fury; but he and they in the dark as to God's mind. For we know too well how the grossest departures from the truth, like Romanism and many other evil systems, may last for ages and outwardly flourish, instead of being soon overthrown. Think of Christians fallen so low as to cite what scripture tells us of God's providential care in thus working among those without to restrain the residue of man's fury, even if it be not yet made to praise Him, as it shall be! Think of perverting it to hinder the inalienable and imperative obligation of God's children, in refusing any service which lacks His authority in precept, example, or principle! What He wills is revealed; what is not revealed, as being outside faith, has no claim on obedience. It is human and lawless; and lawlessness is sin.

Yours ever in Christ, W.K.