

The Church of the Scriptures

W. Kelly.

Dear -,

I am really obliged by your sending me "the Church of the Scriptures,"* which I have read with interest and attention. In much, though the ground and character differ widely, I agree, e.g., as to the unity of God's Church, the error of mere detached and voluntary societies, and in some respects even as to the order which God set up, and in a certain sense as to perpetuity also. But the accompanying brief paper on the Anglican Establishment† will explain some of the reasons which satisfy me that the institution, containing (I doubt not) many christian men and ministers, has no just claim to be considered the (or a) Church of God. The Athenaeum Club numbers in its ranks many members of both Houses, but it is not therefore the Parliament of the country. In fact, it was some of the principles contended for in the tract (especially that of the Church's unity) which drove me out of the National Body and which hindered my joining any form or shade of Dissent: for I am profoundly convinced that Dissent can never afford an adequate resting-place to a spirit that is awakened to feel what the Church was intended to be.

* London: G. Bell, 186, Fleet Street.

† "Is the Anglican Establishment a Church of God?"

One thing which struck me as unsatisfactory in the Tract is that it looks at England merely. This is too narrow a line for truth, and I am sorry to say that it is necessary to the writer's reasonings. For the same arguments which move him to belong to the Anglican body in England, would lead him, if born in Russia, to be of the Greek communion, and in Italy to be of the Romish system. And yet these three bodies have no inter-communion, but contrariwise oppose and anathematize each other. That is to say, the one visible Catholic Church of the author is a mere dream: it does not exist save on paper. The rivalry, the factions of the English, Romish, and Greek Churches in Jerusalem, for instance, (omitting all notice of Dissenting missionaries,) are the standing proof that the writer is, unintentionally, deluding himself and those who receive his statements. Each particular body has, of course, a unity of its own, but the Church of God, as a whole, has lost the unity on earth it once possessed — nay, the least semblance of it.

Some years ago it pleased the Lord to open my eyes in a little measure to the chaos and confusions of Christendom. To Rome I could not go, unless prepared, blindfold, to follow a tradition which nullifies the Word of God, and a systematic exclusion of the Holy Ghost from that action in the Church which Scripture describes in unmistakable terms. The Anglican communion was so evidently the mere religious system of a particular nation, and the prey of the secular power, that I soon felt it too absurd to attempt a serious defence of its constitution and condition. Strange as it may sound, it was Hooker's "Ecclesiastical Polity" which proved to me how indefensible my position therein was. But you must not therefore suppose that I in the least coincide with the puritan adversaries of that day, any more than with modern Dissenters. For while the Anglican body seems to me essentially at variance with Scripture in confounding the world and the Church together through a misuse of the sacraments and an almost entire disuse of discipline, (in the face of one of the homilies, which declares this last to be one of the three notes of a true Church,) I believe the Dissenters to be fundamentally opposed to the New Testament in forming religious societies, some consisting of Christians only, some of a more mixed

calibre, but all characterized by their points of difference and governed mostly by congregationally chosen presidents. These things, I am satisfied, contradict Holy Scripture, make man, not God, the founder of the Church and the disposer of ministry, destroying, of necessity, all practical manifestation of the "one body and one Spirit." As to this I may be permitted to name one simple fact, which flows from these convictions, that I stand entirely aloof from those religious societies, platforms, etc., wherein evangelical Churchmen and Dissenters alike join. And I have ever experienced more bitterness and less sympathy from Baptists, Independents, Wesleyans, etc., than from godly Anglicans.

What, then, was to be done? What step was a Christian to take, who was assured that professing Christendom is in a state of rebellion? Not surely to return to that Romanism, which, as I believe, with the Homilies, is "drowned in abominable idolatries;" not surely to abide in a communion which permits a sceptical premier to destroy or erect bishoprics at will, and which is subject to the decisions of a privy council in matters of fundamental doctrine and discipline; not surely to join sects which abandon every just idea of God's Church and reduce it, even if they were all Christians, to the principle and practice of mere human societies. Was the right course to remain an isolated individual, or to commence some new experiment? Nothing of the sort. All such procedure would be sin and the Christian is never compelled or at liberty to sin.

Suppose a family table deserted by all the sons and daughters. They abandon their father's house, or retire moodily and habitually to their own apartments, and they carelessly or capriciously choose their own company as they list. Two or three of the children begin to feel the dishonour done to their father: they return, confess their grievous wrong and humbly ask his leave (how gladly accorded!) to take their old place at his table. This is what, feeble and ignorant as I am, I have sought to do. As godly persons, slowly but at length, eschewed the Romish communion in the sixteenth century, because their abiding in that fellowship was really to continue in sin against God, on the same principle I am acting as to Protestantism no less than Popery. I am seeking, as God gives me light and grace, to take my stand on "the old paths" — the original and divine ground which God *has never* abandoned, which the Church, the professing body, has abandoned. In order, therefore, to get back to that ground, I must of course leave all that is contrary to it, confessing my own failure with all the rest. It is the guilty bodies (Rome, etc.) which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which we have learned. Such, therefore, I am commanded to avoid. From those who have the form of godliness but deny the power, whether individuals or associations, I am bound to turn away.

On the other hand, the Lord Himself has graciously made provision for those who fear to sanction what He hates by remaining in evil, and who fear to adopt a schismatic remedy. "*Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.*" If I had only this word of the Lord Jesus, (Matt. 18: 20) I trust that I should not be afraid to commit myself in confiding faith, and I should be assured of His presence and blessing, during the present revolutionary condition of Christendom; but, I thank God, it is only one of the many words which His prescient grace has given for the guidance of the faithful in this dark and evil day. The analogy of Israel's history may illustrate the present duty of the Christian. I refer to what followed the breach of their national unity and the subsequent captivity even of Judah. Ezra and Nehemiah show us a little remnant returning to the land where the Lord's eye rested continually. Far more of their brethren remained behind in Babylon, and more still in the lands where the Assyrian conqueror had dispersed them. The shattered unity was never restored as a whole. A poor fraction from the two tribes came back, and infinitely less from the ten tribes. But the one question for those who valued the Lord and His promises to Israel was, What is the will of the Lord about His people? Israel had sinned and been smitten; but is the land still open? Is it open for us and our worship? They had not the ark with the cherubim of glory, nor Urim or Thummim. They had no

Moses to smite their Gentile oppressors with the rod of power. There was no daily manna; there was no miraculous rock to slake their thirst with its unexpected streams. And what more despicable outwardly than this motley crowd of 42,360 persons with their menservants and maids? What more open to foreign scorn than that which they build? "If a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall." Yet these, and these only of all Israel were in the place of obedience and full blessing. Therefore the Lord thus comforts them by Haggai: "My Spirit remaineth among you: fear ye not." In spite of the captivity among the Gentiles, in spite of the dissolution of their own twelve-tribed unity long before, they still held to the relationships, and responsibilities, and hopes of Israel. They sought to put away from themselves, privately and publicly, all that was inconsistent with that position. There was much to remind them of their past sins and of the humiliation which God had put upon them. "Who is left among you that saw this house in her first glory? and how do ye see it now? Is it not in your eyes in comparison of it as nothing?" Nevertheless it was built in its due place at Jerusalem. It was furnished with the golden and silver vessels of God's house, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried to Babylon. The object was the same and the principles the same. The commandments of the Lord their God, and His judgments, and His statutes were owned to be as binding as in the days of King David or of Moses. Circumstances were painfully changed, and the old men justly wept while lighter souls shouted for joy; (Ezra 3;) but it was as deeply resented as ever when the holy seed mingled themselves with the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. If any had taken strange wives, they gave their hands to put them away; and being guilty, they offered a ram of the flock for their trespass. Even if it were of long standing and they had children, still were they separated. Nay, the sin of Solomon was solemnly rehearsed as a warning, and the son-in-law of Sanballat found no shield for evil alliance in his near relationship to the high priest. The portion of the Levites was reviewed with care. The profanation of the Sabbath was stopped notwithstanding all gainsayers, high or low. In a word, great as was the distress and degradation, the law of God abode in all its force and integrity, and their obligations were not relaxed. By that divine standard was their practice tested, no matter how long it existed or how venerable the names that sanctioned it. Far from pleading the weak and broken state of Israel as an excuse for carelessness, the lack of a priest with Urim and Thummim forced them to put away certain, as polluted, from the priesthood, because the register could not be found, *i.e.*, they were compelled to unusual strictness, not laxity.

All this is eminently instructive for us of the heavenly calling. The Church, in her sphere, has suffered an eclipse no less than Israel. The Church has sinned grievously, has rejoiced in and worshipped the work of her own hands, and has gone, by the righteous judgment of God, into another Babylonish captivity. But thanks be unto God, the captives need remain no longer in the land of their bondage, The Holy Ghost has been working variously, and of late more than ever, to bring Christians back to the unchanging Scriptural basis of the Church of God — to own themselves and each other as members of one sole body, Christ's body, and to meet together as at the beginning, in the name of Christ, not in the name of the secular power, which is the degrading Erastianism of the Anglican body, nor in the name of the see of St. Peter, which is the plea of the Romish apostacy, nor in the name of a favourite teacher, dogma, or discipline, which embrace the different and conflicting forms of Dissent. THE NAME OF THE LORD JESUS is the sole and sufficient centre of His own people. It is to us what Jerusalem's temple was to the Jew. It is the only name entitled to gather round it all the Church of God. All the members may not gather, for true loyalty of heart is weak, and the difficulties, prejudices, dangers, enemies are many and strong. But the question is, not whether all the members of Christ are likely at cost of all to humble themselves for past lack of allegiance, and to let every association go which is contrary to the Lord's will for His Church, but whether I am ready to follow as He makes it

known by His Word and Spirit. "Far above every name that is named, not only in this world but also in that which is to come," it is the name of Jesus which the Holy Ghost, sent down from heaven, delights to honour. "He shall glorify me: for He shall receive of mine and shall show it unto you." He is seeking to exalt neither Himself, nor much less the Church, but Christ the Lord. I bless the Lord that this which I believe to be God's principle for His Church is through grace mine, viz., the confession of the name of the Lord Jesus Christ as the divine gathering-point for the faithful, even as He is the only Saviour of sinners. The question is one of truth and not of numbers. The principles of God's Word must decide, and not popularity or the reverse. These remarks will explain in some measure how I differ from the tract as regards the actual condition of God's Church. The author writes as if things were substantially in their normal state, at least in our country. I maintain that the rent Christendom of our day proclaims the ruin-state of the Church. Can he deny it honestly? How is it we have the struggles of Romanists, Greeks, Anglicans, Syrians, Armenians, Nestorians, not to speak of the almost numberless sections of Protestants? How is it we read and hear of their solemn denunciations of each other, more especially in the larger systems, but not wanting in the least? I affirm that the Lord intended one communion all over the world, that He sanctions this and nothing else, and that, consequently, the Church of God universally has been unfaithful to her trust and failed in her responsibility. For the Scriptural unity of the Church was not merely the coexistence of many independent bodies, as in the Churches of Rome, Greece, England, etc., even if they were ever so friendly, which they are not and cannot be, and if there were no dissenting communities rising up by their side among them. It was one body, animated and energized by the one Spirit of God — one body, not in theory only, but in practice here below. There were churches of Galatia and of Achaia, there were saints at Rome, there was the church in Jerusalem, in Antioch, in Ephesus; yet was there but one holy catholic church in reality on earth, so that if I were a member of one, I was a member of all, and if a minister at all, I was a minister everywhere. Whereas, in our day, if I belong to the Greek Church, I am therefore not a member of the Church of England, and if I were an English priest or bishop, I should be ipso facto not even a member and much less a clergyman of the Church of Rome. Thus, as regards the earth, (not the counsels of God,) the unity of the Church is gone, alas! as the early dew, and all is divided like our Lord's garments by the Roman soldiers, and the seamless vest is as it were again cast lots for, while meanwhile He Himself hangs exposed and dishonoured, with perhaps a few, feeble faithful ones looking on with tears afar off.

It is easy to extol and natural to justify whatever religious system we have been born and bred in; but this is the order of the flesh, not of the Spirit. Neither is it wise nor safe to take for granted or to evade so serious a question, the glory of the Lord being concerned in the matter. What I desire for myself and for God's people, if it please Him to give it the least weight in the hearts and consciences of any, is, that we may feel more deeply the common sin of the Church, of that which here below bears the name of Christ, that we may confess it to God and to one another, and that we may cease from known evil through His grace, whatever may be the sacrifice. May we be kept from the common but unholy maxim of choosing the lesser of two evils, a procedure on which God never put His seal, and which faith never can accept.

My chief fault, therefore, with the tract, is, not that it goes too far in pleading for a return to "the Church of the Scriptures," but that it does not go far enough in that most true and godly direction. The cause was obvious. The author was merely looking at the English Church so-called and English Dissenters. Now this is no, longer the question. God is raising grave enquiry among His children over the world — in England, France, Switzerland, Germany, nay, in Italy and Rome itself. It is no longer a question between the voluntary principle and an establishment, nor even between Protestantism and Popery, but between Christendom at large and the Word and Spirit of God. As the Lord called His own

outside the camp of Judaism when the Jewish polity, unfaithful to its office, was about to be judged, so I am persuaded all the virgins, wise and foolish, have been slumbering and sleeping, and the midnight cry is now being made, "Behold the Bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet HIM." It is a time for earnest searchings of heart; for the time is short, and the lack of oil, of the unction of the Spirit, is fatal. But you will observe that the parable of the virgins (Matt. 25) teaches us the unfaithfulness of the whole professing body and the deeply interesting truth that they who have the oil leave the quarters where they had been shamefully taking their repose and again go out to meet the Bridegroom; that is, just before the Bridegroom returns in glory, a return by the faithful to the original and only right principles of our calling is intimated.

It would be easy to take to pieces not a few of the statements and reasonings of the tract, particularly of that part which treats of the application of his test to the Anglican body. I must be forgiven if I think that his pre-occupied mind has betrayed him into mistakes of the most palpable kind. But my aim in this letter is not the negative process of exposing a tract or such like views, but rather to state the true question which I believe God to be now raising, and some of the Scriptural principles which must be appreciated and maintained in order to a right decision. Thus I am of opinion that the author's proofs of the visibility of the Anglican body in p. 30* form a marked contrast—I scarce know whether to style it grave or ludicrous, but assuredly a contrast — with the visibility of the Church of the Scriptures. As to the "Church of the Scriptures," the million did not recognize *her*. Her temples, if indeed she had anything but "upper chambers" or similar obscure places, did *not* grace the ancient cities, *nor* beautify their rural valleys, *nor* decorate their fertile hills: if any did then, they were heathen temples. "Parishes" were unknown and "priests" too, save as persecuting the Christians. There were no "prelates," and the "councils of the state" bound, burnt, or crucified those whom even the author would call such. The idea of "a ship's crew being supplied with a chaplain" would have been, in Apostolic days, as novel a phenomenon as the thing and term, "Church of England;" and the scheme of "nationalizing a colony by a bishop" is a wonder reserved for our enlightened age. Not such was the visibility of "*the Church of the Scriptures.*" The difference is in kind, and not in degree only.

*No person can plead in excuse for schism that the Church [i.e., the Establishment] is hidden. The million recognize *her*. Her temples grace our cities, beautify our rural valleys, and decorate our fertile hills. The inhabitants of every parish, whether rich or poor, find a home in her sanctuaries and realize the presence and offices of her priests. Her prelates sit in the councils of the state, her clergy sanctify the seats of learning, chasten our literature, and sustain the moral tone of society. Our ships' crews are incomplete until supplied with a chaplain of the Church of England, nor are our colonies permanently nationalized without a bishop." — ("The Church of the Scriptures," etc., p. 30.)

The alleged *unity* of the Establishment finds its refutation in the discordant tongues of its own spiritual Babel. There is not even that measure of united action, discipline, or doctrine, within its pale, which pervades the various unsatisfactory forms of Dissent. The rival antagonistic and sometimes litigating factions, though in one common religious fraternity, are so notorious as to be a grave and public scandal in Christendom. Where shall I begin, where end in enumerating them? It is enough to name the High Church, Low Church, Broad Church, Tractarian and Evangelical parties, not to speak of a multitude who can scarcely be said to have any distinguishing principle whatever. Its catholicity, again, is contradicted by the very name (Church of England) it assumes. It has a system, more than a local sphere, peculiar to itself. Never in Scripture do we read of the Jerusalem Church at Rome, never of the Thessalonian Church at Colosse or anywhere else beyond Thessalonica. As to speaking of "the whole Church militant," "the Catholic Church," etc., in prayer, thanksgiving, or kindred exercises, the least sect might, and probably does, employ such language, no less than the greatest; but this is far from

proving the universality of either. And what shall I say of the bold assertion that the Church of England is *apostolical* in her constitution and derivation, or that her *perpetuity* is apparent in her past history? Did the Reformation merely get rid of the Papal topstone, leaving the foundations and the edifice as a whole unchanged? Before that event, Popery had prevailed in the land for near a thousand years. But then occurred a revolution so complete, that if it were an *Apostolical* Church during those ten centuries, it was assuredly not *that* Church afterwards; unless a body can give up its distinctive characteristics, yea, can adopt what it used to denounce as schism and heresy, and yet remain the same body still. In short, plain facts overthrow every pretension of the Establishment to be the Church, or consequently a Church, of God.

But I must now close this letter, hoping that I have neither wearied you with undue detail or prolixity, nor grieved you with uncalled-for plainness of speech. However you may regard my convictions, which I feel assured are founded on and according to the ever-living Word of God, believe me to be, dear -,

Very sincerely yours, -.