

APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION AS AN HISTORICAL TRUTH.

BY THE EDITOR.

THE doctrine of uninterrupted Apostolic Succession is purely historical in its nature, and we may state at the start that though the majority of the Episcopalian clergy deem it to be an essential article of faith of their Church, it possesses a theoretical value only, and its solution, be it in the affirmative or the negative, will have no serious results whatever. The respect in which Episcopalian ministers are held is naturally personal, and will always remain such in exact proportion to their personal accomplishments. How dispensable for Episcopalian clergymen is belief in the doctrine of Apostolic Succession, appears from the fact that Bishop Brooks, than whom no Episcopalian clergyman is more recognised as truly inspired, did not believe in it.

Alexander V. G. Allen, a professor in the Theological School in Cambridge, quotes Brooks as saying :

"I, for one, and I think that I am speaking for multitudes in this congregation this morning, do not believe in the doctrine of Apostolic Succession in any such sense as many receive it. I do not believe in the exclusive prerogative which gives to the Church which receives it any such absolute right of Christian faith."

Again, in a sermon discussing the proposed change of the name of the Protestant Episcopal Church to "The American Church," Bishop Brooks says :

"It was evident therefore that the change of name must be justified on another ground,—that the Episcopal Church, even though one of the smaller Christian bodies, had a distinct and absolute right, through a divine commission from Christ and the Apostles not possessed by other Churches, and entitling her, therefore, to claim for herself, and to be known as, the only true apostolic, Catholic Church in America. If the Episcopal Church did indeed possess such an exclusive commission, then she would have the right to the name, 'The Church in the United States' or the American Church."

Our authority for the preceding quotation continues:

"Upon this point Bishop Brooks remarked that there was not a line in the Prayer Book which declares any such theory. It was simply a theory held by individuals,—a theory which many both of the clergy and laity did not believe. He avowed for himself that he rejected the theory and would not consent to it for a single day."

As to the truth of Apostolic Succession, it is obviously an historical problem, and its solution depends upon historical evidences which for believers in it are extremely unsatisfactory. It would assume that the method of blessing the bishops at their ordination by an imposition of hands comes down in uninterrupted succession from Jesus through the apostles to the Roman Church, and from the Roman Church to the Anglican Churches. Now, it is well known that the presence of St. Peter in Rome is, to say the least, very doubtful. It is considered a symptom of reactionary spirit in Harnack that he should regard St. Peter's having been in Rome as not true, but merely possible; and certainly a *mere possibility* is all that can be claimed for it since the fact is very improbable if we bear in mind the actual conditions of the primitive Christians at Jerusalem, and consider that St. Peter was a Jew who (leaving aside the miracle of tongues at Jerusalem) spoke presumably only Aramaic, the language of the Jews of his day, that he did not eat with Gentiles, and remained a thorough Jew even after having been apprised of St. Paul's success among the Gentiles, which was highly appreciated by the apostles at Jerusalem, not wholly on account of the recognition which their beloved master received in the world of the Gentiles, but also for very good substantial reason that collections were made by St. Paul among the Gentile Christians for the "saints at Jerusalem."

The Christianity of Paul was by no means the same as that of Peter, and when they fell out on the subject they made a special stipulation, according to which they divided the world between them, so that Peter should have the field among the Jews for himself and his conception of Christianity, while the propagation of the new religion among the Gentiles should be Paul's share.

Suppose Peter had gone to Rome, he would have done so only in palpable violation of his contract with Paul and in infringement upon Paul's field. He had no moral right to do so and Paul would have been entitled to drive him out of the place. From a purely human standpoint it seems very unlikely that Peter, with his narrow national Judaism, should have been able to conduct a Christian Church in Gentile Rome, even if he had only been the

leader of the Jew-Christians there. The Jews of the diaspora differed as much from the Jews in Jerusalem as an American Jew differs from a Polish Jew; and we might as well expect the Chicago Synod to place a rabbi from the interior of Poland in charge of their leading synagogue as that Peter of Galilee should have been installed in Rome. Roman Jews would never have understood Peter's language, nor would they have been satisfied with his Palestinian views, because the Jews at Rome must have modified considerably their attitude toward the Gentiles in their Gentile surroundings at Rome. If Peter would not have suited the Roman Jews, still less would he have been acceptable to the Roman Christians. Thus, it seems to me that for any one who looks at the problem from the simple attitude of an historical inquirer, the probability of Peter's having gone to Rome in defiance of his compact with Paul is extremely slight, and can be explained only by constantly calling to aid special divine interference and miracles, such as that of the miracle of tongues at Pentecost. At any rate, the belief of Peter's having reached Rome is not supported by New Testament evidence, if only for the reason that according to unequivocal documentary evidence he was restricted by special agreement with his fellow-apostle, Paul, to the Jewish world.

Obviously, the bishops and other leaders of the Gentile Christian world were installed by Paul, and Peter recognised the establishment of Christian churches among the Gentiles; and no word is mentioned of making the legality of the offices in the Gentile Church founded by St. Paul dependent upon the uninterrupted Apostolic succession in the sense in which many members of the Episcopal Church (and among them men in leading positions) accept the word. Paul certainly claims that he was called by Christ himself, and did not receive his office from any one of the apostles. His case, however, is the most flagrant contradiction to Apostolic Succession, for since he never met Jesus in the flesh, his Apostolic Succession is of a purely spiritual nature, and there was never any tactual contact established between him and his master through a laying on of hands. In our opinion, humanly speaking, this settles the problem, and it is difficult to understand how Episcopalians can continue laying so much stress upon a doctrine which is based on the same slender grounds as the claim of the Bishop of Rome, of holding the keys of St. Peter.

Now, we would suggest that our brethren of the Episcopal Church should take the standpoint of the actualities of to-day, instead of pinning their faith to a doubtful solution of an historical

problem. The Episcopal Church does not stand or fall with the doctrine of Apostolic Succession; but the doctrine as held by the Church is a characteristic feature of the spirit in which it treats religious traditions. I should say that a true Episcopalian is a man who is faithful to the spirit of reverence for historical tradition. The Episcopal Church is more conservative than any other Protestant Church. The leaders of the Church cherish tradition; they love ritual; they are sticklers for good form and an artistic mode of worship. Such are the facts of to-day, and they are a desideratum of religious people in many quarters. A certain class of people are attracted to the Church, not by the dogma of Apostolic Succession, but by this spirit of reverence for the past and the observance of decorum.

Mutatis mutandis we can apply the same principle generally to all denominations. The several denominations are not different in dogma, or if they are the members of the churches care very little about it, and are frequently utterly ignorant of the peculiar tenets of their churches. They differ, however, in method, viz., in the mode of dealing with religion, in preaching, and in forms of worship. Whether or not baptism in olden times was actual immersion, is of no importance for the Baptists to-day, but their habit of immersion testifies to their mode of performing a rite with the thoroughness of fulfilment to the letter. It indicates a strong zeal, and this zeal characterises the Baptist.

As to Apostolic Succession by tactual contact, we may illustrate the case by saying that we may be very proud of having shaken hands with a great man. We may enjoy the idea that there is an uninterrupted connexion of the laying on of hands from Jesus down to every clergyman of the Episcopal Church; but what does it signify? Does the ministry of these men really depend upon actual contact? Is this not a very external and gross, materialistically gross, conception of the divinity of the ministry, which stands in flat contradiction to the ideal proposed by Jesus when he says: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Shall Christianity be outdone by Buddhism where a parallel idea is mentioned in the Mahâparinibbâna Suttanta, the Book of the Great Decease? When the inhabitants of the place crowd around the couch of the dying Buddha, he says: "He who does not do what I command sees me in vain; this brings no profit. Whilst he who lives far off from where I am, yet walks righteously, is ever near me."

The method of ordaining a bishop is by the laying on of hands, but that is a symbol only to indicate the transference of authority by blessing. Spirit is not transferred by bodily contact. Let, therefore, our brethren of the Episcopal Church not take their stand upon the dead past, but let them adhere to the spirit of their organisation and live in the living present.